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Employment: a first lifeline for women amongst the poor

To mobilize the movement in favour of the Employment
Guarantee Scheme in India

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There are a wide range of issues that the ideas and policies related to women's work throw up .. There are questions like, What is work – is domestic work such as child care, cleaning, cooking (the 3 C's) work? Is work which is not paid to be considered as work? Amongst the items of unpaid work if we distinguish what is valuable by separating that which produces monetisable goods and services from that which normally does not have monetary value, does it mean that money determines what is productive work?

A second set of questions, related to the first is who is a worker? and who is entitled to the advantages of labour legislation? A good example is the recent inclusion of home based work.

Third, there are some knotty questions whether when children work and bring income home we should de-recognize them as it is illegal for them to work for a wage?

The illegality of certain types of work is related to the perception of what is legal. Therefore, for example, children and women who are trafficked into the flesh trade are often termed as illegal migrants and do not have any security (See Latest UN World Survey of Women (2004))¹. So too many of those workers who are smuggled illegally to work as domestic workers and often become slaves. There is a huge number of such unprotected workers because their “work” is not recognized as work.

There are other issues such as the liquid boundaries between the informal and the formal economy and so on, and this territory has now been covered fairly well in terms of listing who are those who belong to the informal economy as worker and how does one get protection for them. These questions are important as they are the areas of vulnerability especially for women in data collection, in legislation and in society's perception.

Some of these questions have had classical responses such as the idea of wages for housework or paying for care . These have been suggested for “counting” work but in the South these are not viable solutions. Where there is acute unemployment and no social security cover, is it realistic to ask for wages for housework? When you are in a live or die type of marginal living, to ask for wages for care also looks absurd.

There was one time when Ela Bhatt and I were working closely together when we argued that all women are workers. We even went further to argue for food without work. This was when we found that women amongst the poor were already so heavily drained of energy with the struggles for fetching water, fuel gathering something to feed their family that to ask them to work, so that they may earn food seemed cruel. So we argued for food without work – an atrocious suggestion in these days of economic reasoning (See Women

¹ World Survey on the role of women in development – Report of the Secretary-General, UN General Assembly, A/59/287/Add.1, 30 September 2004

Quest for Power² - landless women in Kaira District. Their hours of labour of 14-16 increased by 2 hours as a result of "Buffalo" on IRDP credit).

Third world women – have dealt with many of these issues showing that home is work place, the dichotomy between private and public domain are not tenable, that equality and social protection are compatible etc.

Feminisation of Work

Data on women's employment in the developing world reveals leaps forward in their absorption into the labour force over the period 1970 to 1990. Some regions like South Asia show a leap from 25 percent to 44 percent, and Latin America from 22 percent to 30 percent, while in the same regions, the male percentage declined from 88 to 78, and 85 to 84, respectively. Most of this addition is in the service sector, but also in the informal economy. The nature of the expansion in employment opportunities globally is such that women are preferred as workers in many of the fast-growing sectors of production and export.³

However research reveals that the flip side to this "absorption" is that the work is usually under the most exploitative, unprotected, underpaid schemas. A UNICEF study of five Asian countries found that often the job slots that emerge for home-based women workers are a result of the retrenchment of men from what is called the low end of the production pyramid. Informal occupations provide the livelihood (paid or otherwise) of more than 80 percent of women in low-income countries and 40 percent of those in middle-income countries; these countries combined account for 85 percent of the world's population.⁴ Yet, it is sought and taken by women, because of their drive to sustain families as we saw in the case of Sonagachi.

A study conducted by the World Bank in Uttar Pradesh, which, with 160 million people, is India's most populous state, reveals that a higher proportion of female workers than male workers is involved in low-paid casual work, primarily in the agriculture sector. Consequently, there has been a *feminisation* of the agricultural workforce, as the relative proportions of both female cultivators and female agricultural labourers have grown. Three-quarters of women's employment days were spent doing agricultural work, as compared to only 40 percent of men's. Women were also three times more likely than men to work as agriculture labourers--work that is backbreaking, insecure, and low status. In contrast to men, women rarely held regular jobs or jobs in the non-farm sector;

² Devaki Jain, *Women's Quest for Power*, (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1980)

³ Devaki Jain, "Are we knowledge Proof? Development as Waste", speech delivered at Lovraj Kumar Memorial, Lecture, New Delhi, 26 September 2003 (Reprinted in *Wastelands News*, Vol. XIX, No. 1, August-October 2003, Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development, New Delhi, pg. 19-30)

⁴ Chen, "Women and the Informal Sector: Realities, Statistics and Policies," paper presented at the Economic Policy Forum, International Center for Research on Women, Washington, D.C., 15 March 1996, as quoted in "Rural Producers: Trends, Issues and Challenges for Socio-Economic Development," in Statistics Division, Economic and Social Department and the Women and Population Division, Sustainable Development Department, FAO, *Filling the Data Gap: Gender-Sensitive Statistics for Agricultural Development* (Rome: FAO, 1999), available online at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/X2785e/X2785e00.htm>; Mehra and Gammage, "Trends, Countertrends, and Gaps in Women's Employment"

these activities were left to the men. When they did obtain such employment, women were again relatively underpaid and confined to unskilled activities.⁵

Further explorations of various other field situations in which women find themselves point to an increasing degree of feminisation of many processes. Illegal migration is being feminised (See note 2). Abortion is being feminised (See note 1). HIV/AIDS is on its way to being feminised (See Note 3). And now certain areas of the labour force are becoming feminised. The term is used not only to point to the increasing proportion of women in various situations, including poverty and work, but also a lowering of standards in that realm of work or that space.

Note 1

Infantile Sex Ratio

We start with the startling information from the Registrar General on the drop in the infantile sex ratio between 1991 and 2001. It is noticed that there is not only an increase in the killing of the female foetus in the traditional killing fields, namely Punjab, Haryana and Salem, but that other supposedly more "equal" societies are adopting this practice. I call it the *bloodstained nails of Mother India*, clawing away at the wombs and dripping blood down to Southwest India. (See maps where the colour red describes areas where the infantile sex ratio drops by more than 50 points.)

Further analysis of this data across class suggests that it is not poverty driven; Haryana and Punjab, where it is intensely prevalent, are relatively better-off States relative to the BIMARU (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) States. Interestingly, the idea has not caught up as much in these states which have the lowest rank in any other set of indicators of progress, such as literacy, infant and maternal mortality, percentage of persons below poverty line, percentage unemployed. Nor is the killing related to proclivity to any religion or caste. Analysis across religions shows that the highest prevalence is amongst the Jains, followed by Sikhs, but that all others Muslims and the SCs are part of this prejudice. This sex-selective abortion of the female homogenizes women as the target for removal: a clear identity.

Note 2

Trafficking in Women

We then move to another area where again none of the usual classifications--whether ideological or social--operate. This is the case of trafficking in women, young girls, or girl children.

A 2003/2004 report on trafficking in women and children prepared by the Institute of Social Sciences in collaboration with the National Human Rights Commission and the UNIFEM interviewed 4,006 persons involved in trafficking. The study presents the following findings under the rubric Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

⁵ Valerie Kozel, and Barbara Parker 'A Profile and Diagnostic of the Poverty in Uttar Pradesh', World Bank, 2001., Paper presented at a Poverty Monitoring and Evaluation Workshop in New Delhi, hosted by the Government's Planning Commission and the World Bank, 11 January, 2002

- 68 percent of the victims were lured by promises of jobs and 16.8 percent by promises of marriage and 70 percent of the victims were from deprived sections of society.
- 198 brothels had 615 girls who were 17-18 years of age, 82 brothels had 245 girls who were less than 16 years of age and the highest demand is for virgins.
- At the time of interviews, 860 children were being exploited in the brothels.

Children make the most money for their exploiters in this profitable business. 44.3 percent of those in brothels started their life there when they were less than 18 years, 22.9 percent when less than 16 years, and 60.6 percent were married as children!

Here is another way of looking at Amartya Sen's "missing women": An average of 22,480 women and 44,476 children are reported missing in India every year, out of which 5,452 women and 11,008 children continue to remain untraced. It is suggested that these are the *people* who are trafficked, as they are sucked into untraceable brothels.

The 2004 UN "World Survey on the Role of Women in Development" says:

"The number of international migrants has risen to about 175 million in 2000, or 2.9 per cent of the world's population, from about 75 million, or 2.5 per cent of the world's population, in 1960. The proportion of women migrants during the same period rose to 49 per cent, from 46.6 per cent. . . . Women may believe that they have legitimate jobs in the new country, only to find that they have been trapped into prostitution, sweatshop work or what are considered other contemporary forms of slavery. The survey notes that "the trafficking of people for prostitution and forced labour is one of the fastest-growing areas of international criminal activity and one that is of increasing concern to the international community."⁶

Like the practice of aborting female fetuses, trafficking in women cuts across caste and religion, as surveys of sex workers show, for example in Sona Gachi in Kolkata.

Note 3

HIV/AIDS

Another area where women are the citizen group that has suffered disproportionately is as contractors of HIV/AIDS. The research of Madhu Bala Nath, former advisor to UNIFEM on HIV/AIDS, helps us see the picture through the lens of gender. In 2000, 36.1m people were living with HIV/AIDS. 16.4m were women and 18.3m were men. Yet more women than men died of the disease that year--9m women as against 8.5m men. The stark reality is that women are finding it harder to survive the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.⁷

⁶ 'International Migration May Empower Women By Providing New Roles, UN Says', UN Weekly Newsletter, Volume 59, Number 51, 18-24 December 2004, United Nations Information Centre, New Delhi, pg. 2

⁷ Looking at HIV/AIDS and Global Governance from the eyes of women of the Third World, A note by Madhu Bala Nath, former Adviser to UNIFEM on HIV/AIDS, 2002

At the turn of the century, 55 percent of all the people living with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa were women, and the global prevalence profile at that time recorded that women formed 47 percent of the people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAs).

The disease hits female children who are sex workers especially hard. Estimates of the number of child prostitutes in Thailand range from an optimistic 100,000 to over 800,000. Fifty to eighty percent of these children, it is estimated, are already infected with HIV. Other evidence suggests that the epidemic is contributing to a downward trend in the age of marriage for young women as men seek younger wives to protect themselves from HIV infection both because virgins cannot already be infected and the myth that penetrating a virgin can "clean" out aids infection. Families seek the economic protection of marrying off their daughters to economically stable men. This phenomenon has far-reaching consequences in terms of access to education by young girls, diminished access to productive resource, and poor reproductive health.

Poverty converges – and women are worst hit

A closer look at "backward" districts and regions would reveal what is now a very well-established connection--the connection between high maternal and infant mortality, poor water and sanitation facilities, low literacy for women, high rates of unemployment, and, most important of all, high proportion of households living in extreme poverty and high fertility. If one shaded India in terms of these "negative" indicators in increasingly dark shades of grey, as the proportions under them increase, and a circle is drawn in the very centre of India, cutting across the four BIMARU states the circle would be black. All "bad" roads lead to this black hole. I once called this configuration of states "**the black heart of Mother India,**" as it was right at the center of the map of India, and data reveals that **women are at the bottom of this black hole.**⁸

In a time-use study I conducted in 6 villages in India, I noticed that while the difference in work participation of men was negligible across land-holding patterns and across geographical regions, the figures reflected a different reality as far as women were concerned. There were almost 50 percent more women at work amongst the landless compared to women in the large landed households, and almost 11 percent more women than men amongst the landless were workers in Rajasthan.⁹

In 1999/2000, A.-M. Lizin, who was appointed special rapporteur by the UN's Commission on Human Rights, sees extreme poverty as a violation of human rights and adds:

"Poverty hits women especially hard and leads to serious violation of their rights. Extreme poverty is linked to prostitution and exploitation, both sexual and physical, of young girls and women. . . . Deep poverty can exclude people from society, placing them in an illegal situation in their own country. Such people perceive social service or police intervention as actions they cannot appeal, since justice is by and large out of their reach. Society should see the poor as people who are capable of thinking, reflecting and having

⁸ Devaki Jain, Enabling poverty and inequality reduction in South Asia, UNFPA Retreat, New York, 30 September – 2 October, 2002

⁹ Devaki Jain, *Valuing Work: Time as a Measure*. Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXXI, No. 43, October 26 1996

something to say about poverty, the world and human rights. A better understanding of poverty and better policies to eradicate it can be developed only by understanding the poor themselves and therefore by working in partnership with them."¹⁰

Employment: a first life line for the poor .

While it is well known and argued that work, employment by itself is not a sufficient condition for redressing the oppression of , discrimination against , women¹¹; that such policies are often instrumentalist, seeing women as means to tangible ends , and not as persons deserving of support systems as an end in itself, - when seen from the location of women and girls who are in extremis, faced by a NO EXIT except into sale and other punishing options, income earning work seems a life line in the first round . The surveys of sex workers as well as victims of disasters like earth quakes and communal conflicts, (SEWAs experience as told by Ela Bhatt to author) seem to indicate that the first need is to access income earning opportunity . It is such a drive that explains why women take on jobs which are cruel, less paid etc which is the story from most of the surveys.

We have lessons like the experience of the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme, which, with all its warts and holes that are now being pointed out by various academics and policy makers, had not only provided a base rural labour but interestingly provided a lifeline to poor rural women. A study done by a research centre, ISST¹², with the cooperation of the late Shri Page, the father of the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra, revealed that participation by women as a proportion of the total participation of labour ranged from 60 percent to 80 percent across the various districts of Maharashtra. A further examination of who comes for the work from these poverty households revealed that it was usually the older women, not men, even though the men may also be unemployed; the men were loath to take on work which was so arduous and yet so underpaid. The late Prof Krishna Bharadwaj had affirmed this finding from studies she had conducted on famine related rural programmes.

Thus women's desperation to earn a livelihood against all odds was not only proven but the MEGS actually enabled them to find that livelihood outside of various forms of slavery. The Human Development Report for Maharashtra showed a more even Gender Development Index (GDI) i.e., disparities between men and women were less due to this wage-earning of women.

Women as a political identity A constant reminder that challenges the identity “woman” is the multiple identity of woman – all the usual stratifications of class, ethnicity, caste, religion, ideology, suggest heterogeneity. Hence advocacy for “women” is demolished if not constrained when attempts are made to call attention to “women” as a social segment that suffers discrimination universally: or / and as having needs and choices that distinguish them from men.

¹⁰ *Human Rights and Extreme Poverty: Report Submitted by Ms. A.-M. Lizin, Independent Expert, Pursuant to Commission Resolution 1998/25, paragraphs 111, 115, 118*

¹¹ Srilatha Batliwala and Deepa Dhanraj, ‘Gender Myths that Instrumentalise Women: A View from the Indian Frontline’, IDS Bulletin, Volumer 35, Number 4, October 2004, pgs 11-18

¹² Impact on women workers- Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme, a study sponsored by ILO, Geneva, December, 1979- ISST

Essentialism, instrumentalism –many such definitions/or names have been given to such efforts to develop a single identity, inhibiting efforts to a common or inclusive identity. Despite these doubts, it is argued here that there is a homogeneity in “women” – especially when seen with “class” or “poverty” lenses. And livelihoods – decent sustainable employment, covered with legal protection and supported by social amenities can be a crucial lifeline. And lifeline is used here in a literal sense as women’s life itself is in danger. The examples from sex ratio, from trafficking HIV aids and the work spaces reveal this homogeneity.

Looking at all this I would like to make a case to strongly support guaranteed employment¹³ with all the details of the original draft bill that was prepared by the campaign on Rozi Roti associated with Jean Dreze and Aruna Roy. Apart from being comprehensive it also asks for 40% of the jobs to be reserved for women. An important task for those of us who are interested in making this campaign successful in my view

Is EGA “uneconomic” – a fiscal problem?

Amit Bhaduri¹⁴ notes that until the most basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and health are provided for all citizens, "it is putting the cart before the horse to talk about a range of human rights to enhance individual capabilities." He argues that it is not tenable, either politically or theoretically to presume that the market will fulfill this function in a country like India. Politicians seem to lack the political will to make it happen; Bhaduri says that they fall back on the excuse that until the next round of reforms happen, we cannot expect good results.

Bhaduri does not accept such excuses. He points to the excess capacities in sectors such as cement, steel and transport; these would enable investment in public works. Wages paid in such projects would be spent on food and clothing, which are in plentiful supply. He notes the large foreign exchange reserve in India that could serve as a safety valve, and concludes that "the Government has no money makes little sense in this context."

He concludes with a plea for transparency: "Is it too much to expect that all Panchayats should, like the Fair Price Shops, be legally obliged to display on board the funds received and spent? As a matter of fact, without the Right to Information, an Employment Guarantee Scheme, even with enough funds would be like getting into the boxing ring with one hand tied at the back."

I would add however that women must be at the forefront of both planning implementing and receiving this guarantee of employment. This would be the first step toward healing the wounds of history and denial of citizenship.

Designing schemes

¹³ Dr. P C Alexander, ‘Guaranteeing employment’, Asian Age, 23 December 2004; Jean Dreze, ‘Employment as a social responsibility’, The Hindu, 22 November 2004; Amit Bhaduri, ‘Guaranteeing employment’, The Hindu, 27 December 2004; Prabhat Patnaik, ‘Need for a universal EGS’, The Hindu, 5 January 2005; N Chandra Mohan, ‘Guaranteeing work in India’s countryside’, The Financial Express, 23 December 2004

¹⁴ Amit Bhaduri, ‘Guaranteeing employment’, The Hindu, 27 December 2004

Equally important task before us is to create the kind of detailed plans that could be support systems to gram panchayats and other PRI institutions. To prepare plans where work would be available. In other words what is called employment planning at local level Mapping what would be sustainable in a particular area.

In my experience I found that the kind of works undertaken are often not sustainable and secondly usually get overpowered by larger projects. Let us say that we are planning a production programme based on land in a gram panchayat area. The state government signs an agreement with a multinational for them to take over the land to build let us say an agro processing plant. Then the larger project overpowers the micro projects.

Thus planning these job creating projects when has both to be aware of the macro ideas as well as create the communities collectivities and organizations which would resist the macro idea.

Therefore my next (Third) suggestion would be that before we do the projects we need to bring those women whom we think need the work into collectivities. In other words organized work of cooperatives or worker association on the model of SEWA. It is only through collectivizing women in trade or worker or cooperative associations that they will be able to negotiate their jobs and its implications. Once they are organized and they take the job as an organized group they then have the capacity to resist if necessary. They can also be networked into the main worker unions that we have in India as informal trade unions.

Worker organizations are also able to collectively design development programmes and also collectively generate leadership. As individual workers women workers are very vulnerable to every kind of assault.

Instead of having specific schemes for women, existing schemes need to be dismantled. Instead of that we have to design ways in which other sectors can be gendered. Other sectors such as infrastructure development, construction industry, the agriculture policies, the attempts for rural agro industry hubs, small scale industry, handicrafts and so on. Thus almost all the existing training programmes need to be dismantled and new programmes designed, which would enable women to engage with the growth poles.

It is crucial to locate women's actual roles in a production and sale or marketing process. Once we locate their position, it is possible to assess whether the design of the programme will enhance women's roles or cut them. In the enterprises it should be seen what is the role of women in a particular production and how to enhance it. In agriculture, how does irrigation of land affect the utilization of labour? For example, it is often argued that when land is irrigated, the crop changes from a food crop to a cash crop and this affects the nutrition of women and female children.

It could be suggested that in every infrastructure project, water and sanitation should be built in and this would directly benefit women's lives. In construction again, it should be instructed that women must participate and if necessary the skill to be upgraded

A scheme which would package together mid day meal which can offer in any State up to 1 lakh jobs for women as cooks and carers to be integrated with a crèche for working women, the ICDS and the self help groups. All these can be made into one fund, with the

idea that they are support services for poor women and this fund given to the elected PR system for them not only to expend it, but that all those in the area can hold the system accountable for the delivery. It could be a transformatory experience for poor women.

Thus it is imperative that the women's movement unites around the issue of livelihoods for women and becomes the largest lobby for the implementation of EGA in the original form in which it was designed . Many incarcerations that women endure can be relieved by this one step .