

## **IMPREGNABLE ENTITLEMENT: India's Clamor for Genuine Women's Empowerment**

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### **I. Gender disparity in India**

In any society, the status of women is a significant reflection of the level of social justice. Women's status is often described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as the roles they play within the family, the community and society.

In India, the population is still dominated by men, composing roughly 52% of the whole population. However, a comparison of the literacy rate would show that women are at a disadvantage, with the illiteracy rate being double than that of the men. Moreover, like in any other Asian country, women have extensive work loads with dual responsibility for farm and household production (FAO, 2005).

The plight of women in developing countries like India ranges from domestic disparity to societal oppression to disenfranchisement brought about by private interests such as large scale projects. Women and girls suffer disproportionately due to their larger role in providing for household energy and water needs. As water becomes scarce, which is the case in most parts in India, women and girls spend more time collecting and hauling water. As water quality declines, women and girls spend more time caring for sick family members affected by poor sanitary conditions, which in turn contributes to reduced school attendance among girls and an overall reduction in the productive potential in the family. Women bear the brunt of the worsening fuel crisis, as they are forced to walk further to collect firewood for cooking. The added work makes for chronic fatigue and anemia among women, and thus may also affect the health of newborn children (EHP, 1997).

A woman in India dies delivering a baby every five minutes, a maternal mortality rate of 534 per 100,000 deaths. This translates to more than 100,000 Indian women who die each year from pregnancy-related causes. Studies found that 37% of all pregnant women in India received no prenatal care during their pregnancies (WPA, 2005). Moreover, working conditions result in premature and stillbirths. Women's health is further harmed by air and water pollution and lack of sanitation.

In most areas in India, a strong cultural bias favors sons over daughters. Female children frequently suffer neglect in terms of health care and education. A study revealed that boys received health care more often than girls, and the average amount spent on treatment was also significantly higher for boys. India likewise has the largest population of non-school-going working girls (EHP, 1997).

Violence against women and girls is the most pervasive human rights violation in the world today. In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India. A woman is raped every 34 minutes. And every 93 minutes, a woman is burnt to death over dowry (Coonrod, 1998).

It was found that 35% of the total number of girls and women trafficked to India were abducted under the pretext of false marriage or good jobs. West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, and

Bihar are the main transit states of India, as they share their border with Bangladesh or Nepal. India is both a destination and transit area for trafficking of women and children (ADB, 2003).

## II. ADB's attempt at gender and development

The ADB has a Policy on Gender and Development (GAD) which adopts mainstreaming as a key strategy in promoting gender equity. This policy provides a review of ADB's policy on the role of women in development (WID) which summarizes the evolution of ADB's WID approach and that of other agencies; traces the transition from WID to gender and development discusses some of the new and emerging areas of concern for women in the Asian and Pacific region; and highlights the recommendations to development finance institutions contained in the Platform for Action endorsed by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 (ADB, 2003).

The key elements of ADB's policy (ADB, 2003) include the following.

- *Gender sensitivity*: to observe how ADB operations affect women and men, and to take into account women's needs and perspectives in planning its operations.
- *Gender analysis*: to assess systematically the impact of a project on men and women, and on the economic and social relationship between them.
- *Gender planning*: to formulate specific strategies that aim to bring about equal opportunities for men and women.
- *Mainstreaming*: to consider gender issues in all aspects of ADB operations, accompanied by efforts to encourage women's participation in the decision-making process in development activities.
- *Agenda setting*: to assist DMC governments in formulating strategies to reduce gender disparities and in developing plans and targets for women's and girls' education, health, legal rights, employment, and income-earning opportunities.

The ADB claims that their projects have successfully included and mainstreamed gender concerns and issues. It likewise features eight projects in India, which they claim to show that gender equality and empowerment of women is practiced by the bank:

1. Madhya Pradesh State Roads Sector Development Program
2. East West Corridor Project
3. Modernizing Government and Fiscal Reform in Kerala Program
4. Gujarat Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Project
5. Western Transport Corridor
6. West Bengal Corridor Development
7. Calcutta Environmental Improvement
8. Karnataka Urban Development & Coastal Environmental Management

## III. Mainstreaming or tokenism?

Careful monitoring and analysis of ADB's implications of the efforts are imperative to ensure that genuine gender mainstreaming is achieved and not just plain tokenism.

Consultations with women in the community, ensuring representation of women, and information dissemination are efforts which help uphold the gender and development framework. However, the manner of its implementation and the intent for doing such should likewise be taken into consideration. If these efforts are merely a sugar-coating to the pill,

making the projects easier to “swallow” for the communities, then the essence of genuine empowerment is lost.

Furthermore, the shift from subsistence to a market economy, a strategy which is supported by the ADB, has a dramatic negative impact on women in India. The Green Revolution, which focused on increasing yields of rice and wheat, entailed a shift in inputs from human to technical. Women’s participation, knowledge and inputs are marginalized, and their role shifted from being primary producers to subsidiary workers.

Large-scale development projects supported by the ADB and other IFIs, which are most of the time infrastructure projects such as dams and roads, will result to displacement and involuntary resettlement. Women are most affected in these situations since the entire household, which is managed by women, has to adjust to the new environs and the challenges it poses.

#### IV. Towards a genuine women empowerment

The Indian government is assuring its constituents that economic reforms are oriented primarily to spreading and deepening rural prosperity, improving the quality and delivery of public services, and bringing about a visible and tangible difference in the quality of life of ordinary citizens of India. Overall, the government emphasizes its commitment to carry out economic reforms with a human face. What is lacking however are more efforts, both from the ADB and the government, towards eradicating the oppression that Indian women oftentimes encounter. Health and education programs and projects should especially cater to the needs of women and the girl child since they are one of the most disenfranchised sectors in the Indian society.

Finally, for the ADB to move towards genuine efforts in empowering women and achieving gender mainstreaming, it must conduct a comprehensive gender assessment of its projects in India, as well as other countries in the region. It must likewise be able to evaluate if these efforts actually have positive results for the women in the different countries. This will provide a legitimate review of the Bank’s implementation of its policy on GAD.

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