



# IN SEARCH OF ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES FOR GENDER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: VOICES FROM INDIA

Edited by Christa Wichterich

 HEINRICH  
BÖLL  
STIFTUNG

**WIDE**  
Globalising  
Gender Equality  
and Social Justice



**IN SEARCH OF  
ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES  
FOR GENDER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:  
VOICES FROM INDIA**

Edited by Christa Wichterich

**In search of economic alternatives for gender and social justice: Voices from India**  
**Edited by Christa Wichterich**

Final production: Barbara Specht  
Produced by: WIDE  
Rue Hobbema 49  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium  
[www.wide-network.org](http://www.wide-network.org)

Copyrights©2010 WIDE

WIDE gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of the Heinrich Böll Foundation for the production of this publication. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and cannot, therefore, be taken to reflect the official opinion of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Any parts of this publication may be reproduced without permission for educational and non-profit purposes if the source is acknowledged. WIDE would appreciate a copy of the text in which the document is used or cited.

# CONTENTS

<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
Christa Wichterich	
<b>Macroeconomics, Growth and the Development Paradigm</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Gender-sensitive Macroeconomics and Reshaping Economic Development in the Context of the Crisis</b>	<b>9</b>
Jayati Ghosh	
<b>Engaging with Economic Growth: Learning from the Ground</b>	<b>15</b>
Devaki Jain	
<b>Reclaiming Development in the Information Society</b>	<b>20</b>
Anita Gurumurthy/Parminder Jeet Singh	
<b>Indian Taxation Systems and Policies: A Gendered Perspective</b>	<b>26</b>
Ritu Dewan	
<b>Gender-Responsive Budgeting as a Tool for Alternative Economic Planning</b>	<b>32</b>
Yamini Mishra	
<b>Co-operation, Commons and Voice</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Gendering Agriculture: Putting Women First</b>	<b>38</b>
P.V. Satheesh	
<b>Economic Justice, the Co-operative Principle and Women's Agency</b>	<b>44</b>
Renana Jhabvala	
<b>Women in Kaimur Reclaim their Right to Land</b>	<b>49</b>
Kalyani Menon-Sen	
<b>For a Few Pots of Water</b>	<b>54</b>
Alka Parikh	
<b>Socio-Economic Security and Care</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Social Security for the Informal Sector</b>	<b>60</b>
Mirai Chatterjee	
<b>Ethical Sourcing in the Garment Sector</b>	<b>65</b>
Sanjay Kumar	
<b>The Case for Social Policies on Care Work</b>	<b>68</b>
Neetha Pillai	
<b>Conclusions: A Jigsaw of Alternative Economics</b>	<b>72</b>
Christa Wichterich	
<b>Notes on contributors</b>	<b>77</b>

## **ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

BPL	Below poverty line
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CFE	Committee of Feminist Economists
DDS	Deccan Development Society
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross domestic product
GRB	Gender-Responsive Budgeting
HUF	Hindu undivided family
ICTs	Information and communication technologies
IP	Intellectual property
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NREGS	National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
OSS	Open source software
PDS	Public distribution system
PIT	Personal income tax
Rs	Rupees
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association
VAT	Value Added Tax
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing

## PREFACE

For many years the issue of ‘Feminist alternatives for economic and social justice’ has formed an integral part on the agenda of the WIDE network<sup>1</sup>. We share a common interest in developing feminist alternatives to the prevailing neoliberal development path, which promotes trade liberalisation as the main driver for economic growth. Rather than ensuring sustainable economic and social development, present trade policies prioritise the interests of global capital and profit-maximisation. In its current four year programme (2008-2011) WIDE identified ‘Feminist alternatives for economic and social justice’ as one of its four thematic priorities. The thematic area is supporting WIDE’s ongoing work around influencing the EU trade and development agendas from a perspective of gender and social justice.

In October 2007 the Heinrich Böll Foundation India and WIDE in close collaboration with Indian and EU partners started a project of networking, awareness raising and capacity building with a focus on the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and on social and gender justice. In the context of changing global power dynamics, the stalled multilateral WTO negotiation and the proliferation of bilateral free trade negotiations, WIDE identified the start of the EU-India-FTA negotiations as a timely entry point for deepening its gender and trade work. The EU-India FTA was taken as an example for raising awareness on the linkages between gender, trade and development, and advocating for gender and socially just trade relations. Based on shared concerns with partners in India the main objectives of the project were to contribute to shaping EU-India trade relations consistent with women’s rights, social and gender justice and environmental sustainability: We do not want to allow policy makers and governments on both sides to decide upon deals and policies which are decisive for the life and livelihoods of nearly 1,5 billion people in India and the EU without any transparency and democratic involvement of civil society.

Since then WIDE has stressed the major conceptual shifts in EU trade policies through numerous activities<sup>2</sup>: WIDE highlighted the asymmetries between the so-called “equal partners” India and the EU in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), trade balance and implications of tariff reduction, and we raised concerns that the EU-imposed

---

1 Already in 1995 WIDE has published *Towards alternative economics from a European perspective* by Wendy Harcourt, Lois Woestman and Louise Grogan.

2 Including the publication: Christa Wichterich, Kalyani Menon- Sen: *Trade liberalisation, gender equality, policy space: the case of the contested EU-India FTA*; WIDE 2009; and the WIDE consultation *EU bilateral and regional free trade agreements: bringing women to the centre of the debate*, November 2007, Brussels.

principle of reciprocity among actually unequal partners will result in unequal gains. WIDE challenged the broadened EU agenda which includes issues like government procurement and investment that were earlier rejected by India and other countries of the South at the WTO-level. WIDE emphasized the non-integration of development goals as well as of social and especially gender issues in the negotiations. It raised concerns that the new trade regime would favour corporate interests, in the EU and in India, and cause high development and social costs in terms of food and social insecurity, loss of resources and livelihoods to be borne mainly by small actors in the markets and vulnerable segments of society, among them many women. Increasingly, we felt the need to produce an alternative agenda for EU-India trade relations in which the social reproduction and provisioning side of the economy and the linkages of economic and social policies are at the centre.

This publication is a further outcome of the project. It is a collection of Indian voices on economic alternatives for gender and social justice which challenge mainstream economic thinking, search for macroeconomic and macro-political solutions to pressing problems, and develop conceptual and practical alternatives in the very local context and in everyday life. The contributions do not only suggest new and alternative ideas to take care of sustainable development, social and gender justice in the context of the EU-India relations but at the same time, they provide some general guiding principles and building blocks for shaping an alternative agenda for economic, social and gender just development.

WIDE expresses its sincere thanks to Jayati Ghosh; Devaki Jain; Anita Gurumurthy; Parminder Jeet Singh; Ritu Dewan; Yamini Mishra; P.V. Satheesh; Renana Jhabvala; Kalyani Menon-Sen; Alka Parikh; Mirai Chatterjee; Sanjay Kumar and Neetha Pillai as contributors to this publication. We are especially grateful to Christa Wichterich for editing it and to the Heinrich Böll Foundation India for enabling us to realise this project.

Barbara Specht, WIDE

# INTRODUCTION

The dominant economic market paradigm has utterly failed to achieve development goals like the provision for basic needs and food security, social equality and gender justice, as well as environmental sustainability. The interlinked global food, financial, economic, social and climate crises of 2008/9 are only the latest proof that the neoliberal model which now increasingly centers around the financial market, can not cope with its own inner contradictions. It constantly exceeds the limits of growth and systemically produces one economic, social and environmental crash after the other.

Accordingly, social movements and civil society organisations elaborated and differentiated their criticism of this unsustainable and crisis-prone economic model and the respective development strategies and neoliberal policies. WIDE contributes a feminist perspective to this criticism and locates its critical analysis in a framework of feminist economics. Taking the EU-India-FTA as an example, it recently has substantiated its critique of trade liberalisation as the engine of the neoliberal economic model – in cooperation with civil society organisations in the EU and India. The objective of this criticism is to change trade, investment and other economic policies which give preference to market expansion over development goals, to corporate interests over human rights, to maximisation of efficiency over provision of people's basic needs. Essentially, this criticism aims at a change of direction of economic development, away from the presently dominant principles of profit-oriented growth, market opening, trade liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation.

Criticism is only the first step to resist the neoliberal political regime, the hegemony of the neoclassical economic theory and the myth that the capitalist market is the best place for resource allocation and a win-win-game. But criticism alone does not make for the change of economic processes, policies and power relations. Change agents need ideas, models and visions of alternative practices and paradigms which are informed by other than neoliberal and capitalist principles. They need concepts and strategies which open up policies for heterodox economic thinking.

## **Feminist economics**

At a theoretical level, feminist economists have developed an alternative framework which goes beyond redressing women's exclusion, discrimination, and gender inequalities (J.K.Gibson-Graham). It conceptualises the whole of the economy, the market and the non-market sphere, paid and unpaid work, production and care/social reproduction. One crucial assumption is that market economies are sustained by caring activities and unpaid work (Nancy Folbre, Diane Elson, Isabella Bakker). Similarly, ecological economics and ecofeminism (Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva) flag

that nature and environment are productive and regenerative resources, and all environmental costs have to be included into the “whole” of the economy (Hazel Henderson).

Feminist economic concepts have many interfaces with moral economies that are primarily based on co-operation (instead of competition), social re-embedding and reciprocity. They are need-oriented and emphasize the importance of “giving” and “caring” to satisfy needs (Genevieve Vaughan). Thus, they share with Marxist economics the critique of profit-orientation, capital accumulation and concentration of economic power, private ownership and wealth. With Keynesian economics they have in common that they do not believe in the self-regulating forces of the market. On the contrary, they stress the need of state intervention for the purpose of redistribution, demand side management and stability of prices.

Diane Elson and Nilufer Cagatay identify three biases which presently inform economic policies: a) the male breadwinner bias which prioritises decent and remunerative employment for men, b) the privatisation bias which sees public provision as less efficient than private, c) the deflationary bias which keeps interest rates, inflation, taxes and expenditures low instead of stabilising the economy through an increase in paid jobs. These three biases have to be avoided while building a new economic and financial system.<sup>3</sup> Diane Elson suggests that the “download of risks to the kitchen”, meaning: the externalisation of costs from the market sphere to private households and women’s care work has to be stopped and systemically turned around, in particular in a crisis situation.

Concepts and goals of feminist economics have been often controversial and need a lot of further debate. How, for example, should women’s unpaid work be counted and valued? Should all care work be given a monetary value to be included in the gross domestic product (Marilyn Waring) or should care work not be reduced to a dollar-price (Nancy Folbre)? Is subsistence including a de-industrialisation of the mode of production the prime goal of an alternative economic system (Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen) or a regulated, social market regime based on decent work, social security and strong redistributive mechanisms (Stephanie Seguino)?

### **The future has already begun**

Crucial for shaping of alternatives is the practical knowledge and the emancipatory and transformative power of people. At the grassroots all over the world, women and men have already developed and are practicing alternatives which are mostly

---

3 Elson, Diana/Cagatay, Nilufer (2000): The Social Content of Macroeconomic Policies, in: *World Development*, Vol.28. No 7, 1347-1365

community based, decentralised and re-focus on the local or regional economy. Some initiatives are new; others have traditional roots and a long history. Some co-operate with the State or seek its support, others aim at autonomy.

Out of emergency situations or due to failed reforms, in a number of Latin-American countries people shaped new forms of an “*economía solidaria*”. This comprises of co-operatives, factories and enterprises run and owned by the workers themselves, farmers’ movements that take over private land or commons, and women’s biodiversity-based farming systems.

In South Asia, women have developed outstanding models of sustainable organic agriculture which centre around their own seed and knowledge banks. In Thailand and in many European countries, people invented their own local currencies in order to develop new value and exchange systems, so-called LETS - Local Exchange and Trade Systems. In Africa, barter trade<sup>4</sup> has been an alternative to trade governed by the value of money. On the national and the transnational level, fair trade and ethical investment initiatives were set up.

In many of the local initiatives or co-operatives women have to negotiate and to struggle for space for their practical needs, strategic interests and decision making voices. Engendering of alternatives is a task at the micro-level of the economy and politics and at the macro-level likewise. These local initiatives of solidarity economy are basic components of an alternative economy. However, they can not substitute “another” world economic order. Both are needed. Changes bottom-up from the micro-level and top-down from macro-economic and macro-political level must transform economic activities, relations as well as the mind-set of people.

### **Towards an alternative paradigm**

Searching for alternatives on a conceptual and practical level is part and parcel of what Paolo Freire called a “fierce struggle to recreate the world” and of unveiling opportunities for hope. It is a struggle against the global colonisation of people’s minds by the capitalist market model and its ideological pillar that “There Is No Alternative”. This “TINA”-principle - as Pierre Bordieu called it - is in its nature totalitarian and a fundamental constraint to change and transformative agency. Therefore the anti-globalisation or global justice movement answered to the TINA-dogma with the call: “Another world is possible”. Susan George, proponent of the global justice movement, countered the TINA-principle with TATA: “There Are Thousand Alternatives”.

---

4 Goods or services are directly exchanged for other goods and/or services without a common unit of exchange (without the use of money).

As part of stimulating and broadening alternative ideas and practices, WIDE encouraged and invited Indian civil society actors, including feminist activists, scholars and grassroots representatives, to write about economic alternatives to the globalised neoliberal model. As this model has also become the prevailing development path in India, the collection of articles attempts to compile good practices, concepts and visions about economic alternatives from a gender and social justice perspective.

This publication is an edited collection of 12 short essays by Indian authors on economic structures, relations and principles that are needed to serve the goals of sustainable economic and human development, poverty eradication, social justice, and empowerment of the most vulnerable segments of society: women, *dalits*<sup>5</sup> and *adivas*<sup>6</sup>.

The authors who contributed to this booklet shaped – without knowing from each other – an agenda of alternative thinking, linking gender concerns with other social, livelihood and democratic concerns. Though the essays draft various reference points and perspectives for an alternative paradigm, they highlight some common guiding principles for alternative economic practice and building blocks for an alternative economic paradigm. Yet, it is not a complete mosaic or a systematic framework but a jigsaw in which a number of pieces are still missing. This is just the beginning of an exploratory journey to outline alternative models which offer space to the diversity of local initiatives and a transformative perspective to the various approaches depicted.

By publishing this collection we want to encourage further debates on strategies as to how alternatives can be turned into realities and stimulate a critical engagement with the ideas and concepts, and free ourselves of the shackles of the colonisation of the mind.

Christa Wichterich

---

5 Political notion for people who were excluded from the four main caste groups in Hindu society, “outcastes” who were called *harijans*, children of god, by Gandhi.

6 Indigenous or tribal communities and peoples in India.

# **MACROECONOMICS, GROWTH AND THE DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM**

Jayati Ghosh

## **GENDER-SENSITIVE MACROECONOMICS AND RESHAPING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CRISIS**

It does not really need a crisis to show that our current development strategy is flawed. Much was wrong with the global economic boom that preceded the crisis. Everyone now knows that it was unsustainable, based on speculative practices that were enabled and encouraged by financial deregulation. But it also drew rapaciously and fecklessly on natural resources. And it was deeply unequal.

Obviously, therefore, it is necessary to change this strategy for growth, and this requires not only a focus on more inclusive growth in general, but recognition of the need to incorporate a gender perspective into the very formulation of macroeconomic strategy. The basic elements of a gender-sensitive macroeconomic strategy would include a focus on employment-led growth rather than growth-led employment and on the need to ensure the public provision of essential goods and social services of reasonable quality with universal access.

### **1. Fiscal policies**

The ongoing financial and economic crisis has brought back to the fore the recognition of the crucial role of government expenditure in stabilising economies and averting or mitigating recessions. In this context, when fiscal expansion is seen as necessary for economic regeneration, the direction of such public spending matters greatly. Fiscal policies have to be non-deflationary, have to allow for counter-cyclical expansion in particular, and have to be designed to ensure that important areas of public spending (such as on nutrition, health, sanitation and education) are never cut but rather are increased in per capita terms. This is more important for the overall conditions of women than simply increasing expenditure on women-targeted programmes, as is common through gender budgeting exercises.

Fiscal deficits in such a context are not only acceptable but even necessary to ensure economic recovery. Public spending on employment schemes, and on health and education, not only generates more direct employment but also more indirect employment because those who are newly employed by this are more likely to consume a higher proportion of their incomes. Therefore, programmes such as that

put in place by the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)<sup>7</sup> in India also act as macroeconomic weapons against slump.

## **2. Financial and monetary policies**

Despite the bitter experience of financial crisis, there has been no moving away from the 'efficient markets' hypothesis that determined the hands-off approach of governments to the financial sector. Financial institutions have been bailed out at enormous public expense, but without changes in regulation that would discourage irresponsible behaviour. Banks that were "too big to fail" have been allowed to get bigger. Flawed incentive structures continue to promote short-term profit-seeking rather than social good. So we have protected private profiteering and socialised the risks. The large bailouts to financial firms and other corporations may be essential (or at least may be seen to be essential) to save the system as a whole from collapse, though there are always complex and nuanced judgements to be made about which firm deserves how much bailout, and what the implications would be if it is not bailed out. However, the enormous bailouts should have been accompanied by much more systematic and aggressive attempts at financial regulation to ensure that the same patterns that led to the crisis are not repeated. Similarly, there must be regulation to prevent speculative behaviour in global commodity markets, which can otherwise still cause a repeat of the recent crazy volatility in world fuel and food prices. There must be a ban on futures markets in all essential commodities.

There is no alternative to systematic State regulation and control of finance. Since private players will inevitably attempt to circumvent regulation, the core of the financial system – banking – must be protected, and this is only possible through social ownership. Therefore, some degree of socialisation of banking (and not just socialisation of the risks inherent in finance) is also inevitable. In developing countries this is as important because it enables public control over the direction of credit, without which no country has industrialised.

It is extremely difficult for a country to embark on any gender-sensitive macroeconomic strategy as long as rapidly moving capital flows can create destabilising effects and even seek to indirectly put pressure on the policies themselves. Therefore, some degree of control on capital flows is absolutely necessary even to contemplate the other elements of the policy. Monetary policies should focus not only on inflation targeting but more crucially on employment targeting. Banking policies have to ensure greater provision of credit to small producers in all sectors, including agriculture,

---

7 The National Rural Employment Act, also known as National Rural Employment Scheme, aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing 100 days of waged employment in a financial year to a rural household which volunteers to do unskilled manual work.

through some measures for directed credit. In developing countries, the focus of financial policy should be on widening rather than deepening: financial inclusion, especially of those typically excluded such as women and micro producers.

### **3. Trade policies**

The obsessively export-oriented model that has dominated the growth strategy for the past few decades needs to be reconsidered. Rising inequality meant that the much-hyped growth in emerging markets did not benefit most people, as profits soared but wage shares of national income declined sharply. Developing countries that continue to rely on the USA and the European Union as their primary export markets must seek to redirect their exports to other countries and, most of all, to redirect their economies towards more domestic demand. This requires a shift towards wage-led and domestic demand-led growth.

Trade policies that encourage export-oriented employment must also be conscious of the problems of volatility of such employment and competitive pressures leading to reduced wages and working conditions in such sectors. This may call for specific forms of protection for producers and workers in trade-related sectors. This is especially important in those export sectors (often dominantly employing women workers) where the recent crisis has led to downward pressure on wages in the urge to remain competitive.

### **4. Public provision of services**

There must be substantial increases in the public provision of basic goods and services. Such provision must be rights-based and ensure universal access at reasonable quality. Education is one area in which relying on private provision leads to very substantial underprovision and socially suboptimal outcomes, because the social returns of education far outweigh the private returns. Relying on private profitability to determine investment in this area, even in higher education, is socially inefficient and does not ensure future knowledge needs, which must necessarily be determined not just according to current market considerations but through some sort of plan-based assessment of the likely future requirements of society. Profit-based provision of education typically excludes a major part of the population and does not ensure either merit or adequate representation by gender, class or social group, making it undemocratic in content. This is not to deny the usefulness of private investment, but simply to state that this cannot replace public expenditure in the area.

Planning – not in the sense of the detailed planning that destroyed the reputation of command regimes, but strategic thinking about the social requirements and goals for the future – is absolutely necessary.

## 5. Employment programmes and labour market regulation

More stable and less exploitative conditions for work by women cannot be ensured without a revival of the role played by governments in terms of macroeconomic management for employment generation and provision of adequate labour protection for all workers. Changes in labour market regulation alone do little to change the broad context of employment generation and conditions of work, if the aggregate market conditions themselves are not conducive to such change. Given that external competitive pressures are creating tendencies for more exploitative and volatile use of all labour, including women's labour, this has to be counteracted with proactive counter-cyclical government spending policies.

There is a case for public employment programmes (which must be designed to ensure the maximum participation of women workers) which would also contribute to the public provision of goods and services. For example, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India is not only desirable from a social or welfare perspective, it also provides direct economic benefits through direct employment and output effects. Additionally, it generates more equity and has the potential to increase the quality of life in rural areas and transform rural economic and social relations. NREGS reverses the way the Indian State has traditionally dealt with the citizenry, and envisages a complete change in the manner of interaction of the State, the local elite and the local working classes in rural India. The very notion of employment as a right of citizens; of the obligation of the government to meet the demand for work within a specified time period, and to have to develop a shelf of public works that can be drawn upon to meet this demand; of the *panchayat*<sup>8</sup> participation in planning and monitoring; and the provision for social audit are all very new concepts. NREGS is necessarily inclusive and disproportionately involves women, scheduled casts and scheduled tribes as workers in the scheme. For India as whole, women workers account for more than half the work days in NREGS so far, while they accounted for only 36 per cent of all rural workers in 2004–05.

## 6. Food and nutrition

Food security is currently one of the most important policy areas, and demands stressing a rights-based approach to public food strategy and a proactive strategy of public intervention. This is also a crucial gender issue because of intra-household food distribution, which in India leads to large gender gaps in nutritional outcomes. Public procurement has to be combined with public distribution, which in turn must be locally accountable and sensitive to local needs and food consumption patterns.

Any programme of national food security must be complemented by a focus on im-

---

8 Body of village governance

proving food grain production in the country, to reduce dependence on imports. The extreme volatility of global food prices combined with that of speculative forces make it difficult and undesirable to base a national food security policy on import dependence. Very small open economies need to develop other strategies, such as regional arrangements, to ensure food access.

## **7. Policies towards agriculture**

The crisis in agriculture needs to be addressed on a priority basis, with government strategies for redirecting public investment to rural areas, providing livelihood security to cultivators, ensuring access to institutional credit, and reliable and reasonably priced inputs, and much more attention to the requirements of farmers to cope with the rise in cultivation costs (also associated with rising prices of fertiliser and greater commercialisation of increasingly expensive inputs such as seeds and pesticides); the threat of import competition from developed countries, which are based on high levels of subsidy; the decline in agricultural employment and stagnation of other employment, leading to reduced food consumption and forced migration of workers.

This requires making cultivation financially viable as well as more productive. A policy of providing minimum support prices that reach all farmers is an essential part of this. It is necessary to avoid instability in domestic prices of food grain; this does not simply mean cracking down on hoarders. It also requires preventing speculative activity in futures markets. In addition, public intervention is required to support more relevant research and extension services that benefit small farmers in particular, as well as strategies to improve land productivity and reduce chemical input use.

Agriculture continues to account for nearly two-thirds of the working population in rural areas, and 70 per cent of rural women's employment. Women farmers are typically more adversely affected, since they are usually denied not only land titles but also access to subsidised inputs, institutional credit etc. and, therefore, have higher cultivation costs. It is time for those concerned with gender issues to focus particularly on the plight of women farmers, and ensure that they get equal access to credit and input and output markets.

## **8. Reshape economic development**

Both sustainability and equity require a reduction of the excessive resource use of the rich, especially in developed countries but also among the elites in the developing world. This means that redistributive fiscal and other economic policies must be specially oriented towards reducing inequalities of resource consumption, globally and nationally. For example, within countries essential social and developmental expenditure can be financed by taxes that penalise resource-wasteful expenditure.

This requires new patterns of both demand and production. This is why the present focus on developing new means of measuring genuine progress, well-being and quality of life are so important. Quantitative gross domestic product (GDP) growth targets, which still dominate the thinking of regional policymakers, are not simply distracting from these more important goals but can even be counterproductive. For example, a chaotic, polluting and unpleasant system of privatised urban transport involving many private vehicles and over-congested roads actually generates more GDP than a safe, efficient and affordable system of public transport that reduces vehicular congestion and provides a pleasant living and working environment. So it is not enough to talk about “cleaner, greener technologies” to produce goods that are based on the old and now discredited pattern of consumption. Instead, we must think creatively about such consumption itself, and work out which goods and services are more necessary and desirable for our societies.

Since State involvement in economic activity is now imperative, we should be thinking of ways to make such involvement more democratic and accountable within our countries and internationally. Large amounts of public money will be used for financial bailouts and to provide fiscal stimuli, and how this is done will have huge implications for distribution, access to resources and living conditions of the ordinary people whose taxes will be paying for this. So it is essential that we design the global economic architecture to function more democratically. And it is even more important that states, when formulating and implementing economic policies, are more open and responsive to the needs of the majority of their citizens.

We need an international economic framework that supports all this, which means that more than just capital flows must be controlled and regulated so that they do not destabilise any of these strategies. The global institutions that form the organising framework for international trade, investment and production decisions also need to change and become not just more democratic in structure but more genuinely democratic and people-oriented in spirit, intent and functioning. Financing for development and conservation of global resources must become the top priorities of the global economic institutions, which means in turn that they cannot continue to base their approach on a completely discredited and unbalanced economic model.

## ENGAGING WITH ECONOMIC GROWTH: LEARNING FROM THE GROUND

The global crisis sent the economies of the world, both rich and less so, into a spin – destroying many spaces but also jolting *ideas*. It started waves of rethinking on the ways that economies should trigger growth – it was like a wake-up call. It is another matter that despite this deep distress, and the burst of proposals for an alternative programme, the ‘power’ economists and economic agencies have not transformed, and are only engaging with more of the same as a response to healing the damage already done.

The GDP growth rate has been one of the most accepted measures of progress, and with the embedding of globalisation – not just the run of private capital but also the connectivity that the Internet has provided – trade, both in goods and in services, has become the most favoured engine of growth and indicator of economic success. Economic arguments drawn from free trade theory have capital hunting for the cheapest productive capacities. However, the so-called free trade agreements are *not* free; trade is tethered in highly controlled systems to benefit some at the cost of others, and so we should not use the words ‘free trade’, although the globalisation model is based on the free trade theory, which argues that it maximises the efficient use of factors of production at the lowest cost. So, global growth via foreign trade is or *was* the mantra.

In a world that is extremely unequal in economic conditions and peoples, ‘the global factory’ – as it is being called – has shifted to poorer people in developing countries. And amongst the poorer people of these countries, women are the ‘preferred’ labour, as they are willing to accept insecure and hard work due to their drive for the survival of their households. The export of goods and services from Asia has been a source of income for women, whether as self-employed home-based workers or as workers in Special Economic Zones. However, I will never forget a presentation made by a Thai trade union leader a few years ago, who showed how Nike (the sportswear and sports equipment supplier) marched from one country to another, shifting its production units and driving down wages and negotiations for the protection of workers. Every single country fell into line, flea eating flea in a race to the bottom.

The recent downturn in the global economy has taught us that this employment segment is painfully vulnerable at the lower end. Even the last person – for example, the woman waste-picker – has been affected, as shown by many studies, the most

---

9 Assisted by Divya Alexander.

striking of which was done by Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) in collaboration with the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Due to the global crisis, the demand from China, the largest importer of the world's waste, has gone down, resulting in a drop of the selling price of waste material by 40 to 80 per cent in India and in a severe decrease in earnings of women waste-pickers.

The crisis did, however, establish one structure that was in the melting pot<sup>10</sup> but had not really boiled, and that is South–South configurations in economic bonding. The crisis hit the financial markets and the employment sheds of the Northern countries harder than it did many of the continents of the South – one could ironically say that the less developed the banking and stock market systems, the better the survival of the economy, as was proved by Latin America and some countries of Africa. Countries such as China and India, while quite developed in markets of capital and tradables, could also maintain some growth of GDP and a quick revival while the European countries were lagging behind.

This difference further strengthened the Southern continents to attempt new configurations of economic clubs, trading preferences so that they could both release themselves from the North's demand pull for products, seeing how volatile that was. Apart from shifting the direction of trade, i.e. exports from the formerly rich countries, there is a desire to find ways of trading which emancipate the region from dependence, collectively reorder the power relationships, and build their own strength using their own large population demand, as in China. Regionalism then is emerging as a bulwark against globalism. And hence the extraordinary difference in the targeting of responses, due to the particular *relative* autonomy of the region from the global run.

But as Asia and Latin America strengthen themselves against North-driven tsunamis on their economies, are they thinking of the women of the region? Or to put it differently, are the women of the region engaged in these negotiations? Not as far as I can see. Therefore, the first task is to engage with those configurations. What do the organisations of women workers such as SEWA and others in the mode of advocacy for women as workers have to say about the new arrangements and aspirations? We must look at the anatomy of those arrangements and gender them from the top, i.e. the managers of the plan, right down to the implementation, including the flows of finance and the design of laws – i.e. gendering the macroeconomic sky. Most important is how the capital markets roam, what they bite into, what arrangements should be made for the survival of food farming etc. – i.e. the macroeconomic decisions and initiatives.

---

10 Jain, Devaki: 'The Problematique of South–South', in *Isis International*, May 2007.

The time has come to shift our work and our advocacy *from* looking for gender justice and explaining women's location (especially exploitation in the success story of trade), for example, as experienced by India and China today – and asking for special considerations within that framework – *towards* arguing for another kind of view of economic progress and prosperity; for a voice to direct the economies usually called the Keynesian approach. This suggests that demand can be and should be generated through a widespread employment base, shifting from capital-led growth to wage-led growth, and making decent work – employment with a decent wage and security of wage – the engine of growth. It is my view that we need to shift our language – from gender equality and other terminologies and objectives such as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – towards ensuring securities: food, livelihood and water security for women. This should be the responsibility of the State. States are now all geared to ensure security against terror attacks, but it is these 'peace goods' that women want and should have, if there is seriousness in the State's commitments to ensure 'inclusive growth'.

Hence, it is crucial at this time for feminists and the women's movement to consolidate their knowledge on the *how to* of economic growth, to identify new triggers of economic growth which enable more equitable outcomes, as well as to engage with these new arrangements to ensure that women as labour get a better deal through laws and other structural arrangements.

There is a need for laws across the region to protect the workers as a community – for example, a regional minimum wage and a regional approach to the capital that comes seeking. When the Southern African Development Community (SADEC) was looking for a way forward to get the region to be a region, I suggested that they draw up a plan with optimisation of employment as the goal of the model – a regional employment plan which investors and governments could follow such that there was a consolidation of power as well as co-operation, to avoid the situation in the Nike example cited above.

On another occasion, I suggested that the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) set up its own Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)-type of legislation especially to protect South-South women migrants, who often face grave bodily harm in addition to other forms of distress. I pointed out that the major proportion of foreign exchange in countries such as Sri Lanka and the Philippines comes from women who emigrate as workers, and yet their lives were not seen as precious by the State.

That resonates with what Mahatma Gandhi proposed as the path for India's second freedom: freedom from poverty for its people. His theory could be called the 'bubbling-up theory of growth', which counters the old 'trickling-down theory of growth'. The

bubbling-up theory argues that the process of removal of poverty can itself be an engine of growth, that the incomes and capabilities of those who are currently poor have the potential to generate demand which in turn will drive production, but of goods that are immediately needed by poor people which are currently peripheral in production. The oiling, then, of this engine will bubble up and fire the economy, in a much more broad-based manner. Unlike export-led growth, it will not skew production and trade into the elite trap, which is accentuating disparities and creating discontent.

This can also be coincided with regionalism, suggesting that the goals of the regional trade compact would be to maximise employment in the region, so models can be built where the maximisation would be employment, rather than merely foreign exchange.

Feminists have come up with many well-reasoned policy ideas. For example, in India a Committee of Feminist Economists (CFE) who were consulted by the National Planning Commission during the preparation of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007–2012) argued that women were India's growth agents: they were a strong presence in the economic sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure and informal productive sectors, and much of the GDP came from their labour but was not recognised in the public domain of the State. The CFE presentation to the National Planning Commission contained information on women's contribution to savings and revenue despite their being increasingly excluded from formal finance sources: 60 per cent of total savings are from the informal sector with least access to financial savings.

One of the changes that was a result of the CFE's influence was that the chapter conventionally titled 'Women and Development' was renamed 'Women's Agency and Child Rights', enabling the shift from a 'social development' perspective to one of agency and rights. They were able to influence the sectoral programmes, such as agriculture, infrastructure, health, employment, etc. I am glad to report that their intervention and inside-outside partnership, i.e. the presence of a feminist in the Planning Commission, Dr. Syeda Hameed, made a striking difference to the design of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan.

Another recent initiative to which I am party is run by a group called the Casablanca Dreamers.<sup>11</sup> It is comprised of feminist scholars, authors and activists who come from very varied regions, specialisations, generations and ideological positions with tremendous experience and knowledge that made them experts in various fields of development and political and social activism – all coming together to create a unique and valuable dialogue. The common thread was a deep commitment to issues of social justice and equality, for women, for poor people, and for other excluded, oppressed and disenfranchised groups and communities.

---

11 <http://www.casablanca-dream.net/>

This international group is attempting to gender the macroeconomic sky through shifting the basis of economic reasoning and measuring progress drawn from ideas which have emerged from women's scholarship and activism. Their goal in "assessing the development paradigm through women's knowledge" is to go beyond fragmented assessment in relation to particular goals and targets and to reflect more deeply on the kinds of societies that are being created and the extent to which they can achieve social and economic justice: calling for an interrogation and rebuilding of concepts, measures and methods for achieving progress.

What I am trying to argue for is that we need to move along now in our advocacy ways from gendering, which was most useful in the previous decades up to around 2000, to reconstructing macroeconomic policies including regional and global economic arrangements, as a lobby not only for women but for economic justice in an economic democracy. We need to be the torchlight for changing the ways in which we try to build gender equality, implement CEDAW and remove poverty. We have to change the macroeconomic sky through our advocacy and knowledge.

## RECLAIMING DEVELOPMENT IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are making such a paradigmatic impact on our social structures that it is important for feminists to employ what can be called an 'information society' lens for feminist analysis – not only for the feminist critiques of the contemporary economic and social order, but, perhaps more importantly, to imagine alternative frameworks for gender justice.

Today, ICTs as the new technologies for global communication and co-ordination are a major means of transnational accumulation of economic, political, and cultural capital, and thus typically create new forms of dominance and structures of sustained exploitation. From a feminist standpoint, the economic logic of the information society throws up many concerns. The new categorisation of what is valued and what not in the knowledge economy is highly gendered, as are the means and terms of exchange. The digital economy is characterised by spaces that are racially and sexually configured.

However, the digital environment does not only underlie a capitalist consolidation, but it also privileges institutional forms that promote greater openness and inclusion, and thus values such as collaboration and community-ship. Therefore, what is at one level a capitalist transformation may also be characterised as a democratic transition. For instance, in the digital economy, information is commodified and sold through intellectual property regimes. Yet, in the diffusion and democratisation of information that new technologies make possible, a tension emerges between the logic of commodification and competition, on the one hand, and the logic of co-operation and free sharing, on the other. An urgent feminist task, therefore, is to grasp the spaces of resistance and counter power inherent in these tensions that are characteristic of the information society as it evolves through a continuous spiral where social structures influence ICTs and ICTs in turn condition social action. Web 2.0<sup>12</sup> tools, for instance, have spawned a whole gamut of spaces of resistance that have been used by social movements to politicise the public sphere, as well as for direct political action.

### **A citizenship framework for the information society**

The dominant information society paradigm is largely oriented to employing the novelty of the digital context for commercialising most or all social interactions, the ultimate aim of neoliberalism. It is, therefore, necessary to begin the project of claiming the information society alternative – towards a more egalitarian and gender-just

---

12 The term Web 2.0 refers to web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing and collaboration on the web.

society – by proposing a radically different framework for basic information society interactions and membership. In this respect, building on the information society's potential and propensity for democracy, the concept of citizenship provides a useful point of departure for feminist thinking. The propensities of the current techno-social paradigm in fact bring to the fore a tension between formal notions of citizenship (associated with the nation state) and the conception of citizenship as a normative project or an aspiration for equitable social membership (contained in the promise of an egalitarian global order). A new geography of politics has emerged in transnational and sub-national networks of social actors contesting the dominant order, asserting new visions of a global society, and pushing the accepted boundaries of rights. The scope for such radical politics is predicated upon the potential of new technologies to open up a new discourse on citizenship, and not simply of individuation and commercialisation of social transactions.

The feminist movement in Costa Rica, for instance, strategically used digital technologies in order to resist the Free Trade Agreement between the USA and Central America and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA) to make their proposals and concerns visible. The Internet became a virtual meeting point where content was uploaded by academics and downloaded, printed and distributed in communities; where podcasts of rural women stating their ideas were uploaded by local organisations and broadcast through radio channels. Women's leadership and the collective use of technology resulted in a huge mobilisation around, and democratisation of, the issues at stake. Even though the referendum against CAFTA was lost by a narrow margin, the feminist movement came out stronger from the solidarities generated through the process.

From a feminist perspective, the information society provides at least three points of discontinuity, comprising: the space for an inclusive citizenship – participation in an expanding public domain; new spaces and means for assertion of identity and group rights (as in the case of women from marginalised social groups); and the enabling conditions in new institutional alternatives that technologies bring, for moving from equal opportunity to equal outcomes (where the enjoyment of political and socio-economic rights follows the making of claims). At the community level, appropriating and orchestrating new information and communication processes can be hugely empowering for marginalised groups, including women, by triggering the conditions by which legitimate rights gain formal recognition and formal rights are made 'real'.

Of significance to feminist action, therefore, is the critical link between women's citizenship, on the one hand, and the affordances<sup>13</sup> of the digital environment and

---

13 An affordance is a quality of an object, or an environment, that allows an individual to perform an action. The concept of technology 'affordances' offers a useful middle ground between techno-determinist and social constructivist perspectives.

its legal, economic and social trajectories, on the other. Discerning these links and working towards the alternative entails multiple agendas. At their core, these have to do with reclaiming the commons and privileging public interest, placing marginalised women's interests at the centre. Challenging the dominant forces in the information society, however, calls for institutionalisation of alternative possibilities and forms, which first of all requires appropriate political frameworks.

Communities cannot transform new technological paradigms into social ones that are empowering and democratising without enabling structures; neither will a set of policy standards or new institutional arrangements in themselves result in social innovation unless the community with its heterogeneity and fluidity participates in creating localised meanings. Such techno-social processes, therefore, are more than a question of resources and investments and obtain in the interplay of policy mechanisms and the existing institutional arrangements and community structures (with their embedded norms and values) with individual and collective agency.

### **Agenda for feminists – analysis and action**

Claiming the information society alternative requires new frameworks of social analysis as well as action at political and community levels.

It is important to understand the nature and implications of the techno-social infrastructure that underlies and manipulates (as it enables) the information society processes. This new techno-social enabling structure performs two key functions: it allows new ways of knowledge flows (and thus of its creation), and it provides the basis of paradigmatically new socio-relational matrices. It is necessary to analyse how the technical interacts and co-determines the social, recognising the important points of determinability for possible influence in this dialectic.

The arena of technical governance, like Internet governance, which remains largely untouched by feminists, becomes an important political space for engagement for this purpose. Techno-deterministic notions often enter into unholy alliance with promotion of dominant interests to ward off these arenas from socio-political influences as far as possible.

Emerging spaces for participation and social membership in the information society require the unpacking of many phenomena – from non-transparent architecture of search engines to the entrenched gender biases of ostensibly open and collaborative platforms such as Wikipedia and of ostensibly democratic social networking sites such as Facebook, within an overall increasing oligopolistic corporatisation of the Internet.

The Internet, which was developed for free sharing of knowledge, and thus as a possible means of an extensive and deep global public domain, and whose underlying technologies are mostly collaboratively produced, is now increasingly being made into a global infrastructure for control and commercialisation of knowledge. While the Internet's openness is threatened by imminent tiering (privileging content paid for by content providers over other content), on the one hand, and complete dominance of a few proprietary applications, on the other, pure and unmediated peer-to-peer exchanges, the original intention of the Internet, are increasingly criminalised as sites of intellectual property (IP) violation. Websites facilitating such exchanges are increasingly stifled and penalised through more and more stringent laws that even rely on private policing by Internet Service Providers.<sup>14</sup> Such global norms and practices of knowledge commercialisation, and control of knowledge processes, are also leading to acts of serious cultural appropriation and exclusion.

While the nature of the new techno-social structures determines the nature and possibilities of flows of knowledge, along with the power relationships associated with them, the legal frameworks of 'knowledge ownership' in the form of IP regimes are increasingly becoming more and more exclusive, and are shaped after the interests of dominant sections. Marginalised women's access to information and knowledge and communication – radicalised as it is in the new information society paradigm – requires new public domain frameworks that challenge dominant IP regimes. Creating and nurturing such frameworks can in turn shape the future of the Internet.

For women from developing countries, the absence of protection for indigenous knowledge within the wider context of the corporatisation of the Internet is only likely to portend exploitation. Intimately linked to the question of women's knowledge are the issues of the public domain and knowledge commons, mechanisms for protecting local communities' and women's rights to create and share knowledge openly and freely, access public information and knowledge that concerns their basic needs and rights, and to be free from corporate poaching of indigenous knowledge practices. The vision of women's empowerment needs to be cognisant of the emerging era of collaborative innovation enabled by the Internet. Open Source Software (OSS) is the leading example of this trend, but the OSS development model based on collaboration, community and the shared ownership of knowledge is rapidly expanding to other areas such as content (Wikipedia), medicine (Open Source Drug Discovery), scientific publishing (PublicLibrary of Science) etc. The 'old' questions of commons as above and beyond 'property' – and knowledge as above and beyond monetary economies – are significant to technology governance in its connectedness to IP regimes.

---

14 Internet Service Providers are now often expected to directly take action against people suspected of infringing IP over the Internet. One such legislation was recently passed in France, with many other countries proposing similar measures.

Similarly, the new socio-relational matrices enabled in the information society – for instance, those supported by Web 2 technologies – present both new challenges and opportunities. These matrices can produce new, deeper exclusions – where ‘communities of choice’ can also become ‘communities of exclusion’, which can impact women’s interests adversely. They also present the challenge of developing new normative frameworks that adequately address new social situations, in a context where the means for developing them are greatly curtailed, inter alia, with greatly segmented public spheres, and loss of local and national social and political autonomies. At the same time, the possibilities of new relational matrices underlie new identities and solidarities, and possibilities for political action, as discussed earlier.

Feminists have to engage with and confront the growing governance deficit and the rising political power of giant corporations on the global scene, at a time when most of the important information society governance issues are essentially global – whether of technical governance, IP regimes, policies on digital ‘content’ and ‘applications’ or regulating digital monopolies. New political networks that adequately span and address the global-ness of the information society while promoting local autonomies form huge feminist challenges in this context. Many national-level policy issues, such as in areas of IP and public domain, use of the ICT context for marketisation of public service delivery, and vacation of social policy spaces for the benefit of networked global capital, are also important areas to work upon. One of the most important national-level policy issues is of public provisioning of basic ICT requirements as a universal entitlement, underpinning a citizenship framework for the information society.

At the community level, the recent field of community informatics offers the conceptual tools to construct spaces for resistance and recuperative politics of ‘local community’ autonomy within the global digital economy. It explores how power is organised and negotiated in community interactions, in the context of its information and communication ecologies, and can be reclaimed for community autonomy, solidarity and action.

Important insights lie in the many ongoing grassroots processes in the developing world. As telecentre operators, as community media producers, as activist bloggers and as individuals on the Internet, women are part of new social structures with new social roles. They connect also with others – women and men – and shape and define the public sphere in new ways. At the community level, these new roles and spaces, while creating new economic, social and political opportunities for women, also have a symbolic significance, challenging culturally disempowering gender norms and practices.

The use of ICTs by grassroots women in their struggle for better livelihoods, as in the case of SEWA, elucidates the institutional value of new technologies. ICTs have been assimilated into the fundamental structures and processes of the organisation of women workers in SEWA, providing them with a new institutional framework for organising production and sales, engaging with the State, and for community mobilisation asserting their claims and exercising their rights. ICTs are not just efficiency tools within the SEWA setting; the integration of ICTs has transformed SEWA's organisational frameworks in meeting its objectives for gender equality.

The information society also makes a new development dynamic possible by simultaneously creating space for voice and agency and for strengthening institutional responsiveness – in terms of transparency, accountability and openness for agenda setting by communities through new information and communication processes. In the states of Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan in India, in the implementation of a very significant social security programme – the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme – the government is holding consultations with grassroots movements, with significant involvement of women, who have for many years challenged a lack of accountability at local institutional levels, to seek inputs for setting up ICT-enabled information systems for monitoring and tracking that are citizen-oriented rather than just being management information systems. These new institutional developments, spin-offs no doubt of long struggles against unresponsiveness and exploitation, are new 'contracts' crystallising through the new institutional frameworks that are available in the information society.

For developing countries, the new context, in its inherent discontinuities, provides a historical point for non-linear change with new institutional frameworks, making "institutional leapfrogging"<sup>15</sup> (UN ECLAC 2003:9) possible. However, these countries will need to seize this window of opportunity in these times of flux by creating their own development paths, obviously, through their own interpretation of the information society. It would, therefore, be useful to locate change at the points of inflection that allow for bypassing prescriptive macroeconomic growth models. For feminists too, long seeking possibilities of institutional transformation, this may be an important opportunity to harness.

---

15 United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN ECLAC) (2003) *Road maps toward an information society in Latin America and the Caribbean*, <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/rc/bavaro/eclac.pdf>

## INDIAN TAXATION SYSTEMS AND POLICIES: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE<sup>16</sup>

The 'Washington Consensus', emphasising privatisation, liberalisation, deregulation, and also reduction of the fiscal deficit, has led not only to reduction of social sector expenditures but also reorientation of fiscal policies.

Taxation systems impact disposable incomes, prices of production inputs, and consumer goods, so their consequences affect major economic and also extra-economic decisions. The focus in this essay is primarily on an examination of gender biases explicitly and implicitly inherent in both the theoretical underpinnings and empirics of taxation systems and policies, in the hope that the emerging recommendations in the context of Indian reality will be considered with deserved seriousness.

### **Direct taxes**

The differential impact of taxation structures and policies needs to be necessarily located in the national pattern of changes in the composition of taxes during the last decade since the implementation of the process of globalisation. The share of Personal Income Tax (PIT) to total direct taxes has more than doubled over the last 13 years, while Corporation Tax in India has been steadily declining as a proportion to direct taxes, from 77.3 per cent in 1990–91, to 51.5 per cent a decade later.

### **1. Personal Income Tax**

The most explicit form of gender bias exists in the PIT, as it can be applicable on either an individual or a family basis. However, PIT is relevant only in the formal sector, where a small proportion – 8 per cent – of the total workforce in India is employed. Also, the informal sector accounts for 95 per cent of all women workers in the country, so their share of employment in the organised sector is even less. The difference in taxes paid by men and women is quite large, given the fact that more men than women are 'regular' employees and hence taxpayers. For instance, among the 39.82 lakh<sup>17</sup> (3,982,000) persons employed in the central government in India, women account for 7.43 per cent, with their share declining even further.

---

16 This is an abridged version of Ritu Dewan (2009) 'Indian Taxation Systems and Policies: A Gendered Critique', in: Dewan, Ritu and Seeta, K. Prabhu (eds) *Macro Economics and Gender*, published by Zubaan, an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi.

17 A lakh is a unit in the Indian numbering system equal to 100,000.

The basis of tax structures becomes crucial in relation to the impact it has on women's labour supply. Under joint taxation, the greater the difference between the spouses' incomes, the higher will the woman's earned income be taxed, and the less beneficial it will be for her to participate in 'gainful' employment in the labour market. This factor is compounded by the prevalence of the backward-bending supply curve after a certain threshold of income is attained, this threshold being determined by the location of the specific household in the system of production and reproduction. Additionally, the foundation of the chosen tax regime at the macro level and also the 'ideal' threshold income level determined at the meso and micro levels are closely intertwined in the specific context of the predominant notion that the woman is 'normally' a secondary earner. Furthermore, it is obvious that such gender-blind structures and policies do not recognise the existence of a fairly substantial number of female-headed households.

Women in India have the choice of filing tax returns either individually or jointly. The joint option is applicable primarily under the Hindu Undivided Family (HUF) that covers four communities – Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Under the HUF, the eldest male has the power to file returns for the entire extended family, which consists of all other men, their wives, and also unmarried women. The perception of the HUF as a social unit not only ignores but also negates issues of social relationships and dependency in a patriarchal society.

Individual taxation is preferred because the economic benefit of working depends on how much a woman earns and not the fact of her location in the patriarchal marital structure. Tax structures and policies may thus increase her incentive to take up employment and shift her labour supply curve. Additionally, taxes can also stimulate a woman's participation in the labour market if they are linked to the creation of a social infrastructure such as child care. An independent status as a taxpayer can also strengthen her negotiating position and participation in decision making within the household.

## **2. Wealth tax, gift tax, and property tax**

The three taxes relating to wealth, gift, and property have strong gender connotations. Considering the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, it should make greater economic and egalitarian sense that wealth and gift taxes in particular be increased, with higher amounts being taxed severely. However, the process seems to be quite the opposite in India. While wealth tax decreased from Rs 231 crores<sup>18</sup> (Rs 2.31 billion) in 1990–91 to Rs 91 crores (Rs 910 million) a decade later, gift tax fell from Rs 15 crores (Rs 150 million) in 1994–95 to obviously nil today.

---

18 A crore is a unit in the Indian numbering system equal to ten million (10,000,000).

It is generally accepted that gifts are known to be a source of large-scale tax evasion. It was to plug this loophole that the gift tax and the wealth tax were introduced way back in 1957. However, “gifts received on certain occasions such as marriage” are totally exempt. The gendered connotation of this alteration in the gift tax is clear – that there need not be any tax-related ‘problems’ where dowry is concerned. In this sense, therefore, the implications are two-fold: one, that dowry is actually encouraged, and two, that dowry can be continued to be treated as ‘women’s share in property’.

The state of Delhi has recently introduced a gender-differentiated property tax – 6 per cent for women and 8 per cent for men, with women being given an additional benefit of a 30 per cent rebate. It is possible that the transfer of property to women in order to avail of these tax concessions could create the basis of economically empowering them, especially in case separation is sought, wherein the eternal problem of alternate accommodation would not prove to be a major issue.

### **3. Corporation tax**

There is a gendered impact of corporation tax on employment. It is argued that a reduction of corporation tax would boost both growth and job creation, as not only the national corporate sector but also foreign capital would be provided with incentives for increased investment. However, it becomes necessary to examine which sectors are impacted – capital-intensive or labour-intensive industries – and in which specific sub-sector. If in the readymade garment industry in India, then women would benefit; if in quarrying, manufacturing etc., then men would benefit. Taxation analysis thus also needs to include preferential sectoral taxes in the context of prevailing gender-based employment and hence consumption patterns.

In spite of a large number of revenue and other concessions granted to foreign private capital especially and also local industries in the most industrially advanced state of Maharashtra, more than 27,000 small-scale units and 1215 medium and large industries were closed down within a short span of four years from 1998–99 to 2002, displacing over 2.8 lakh (280,000) workers. More jobs have been lost than created in the last ten years, the major reasons being closures, lockouts, ‘rationalisation’ etc. The issue thus is whether the revenue lost in corporate tax concessions could not have been of greater benefit if it had instead been utilised to benefit poor people and especially women. Mopping up of increased revenue by raising rates could have positive economic and distributive effects if invested by the government in appropriate sectors.

### **4. Indirect taxes**

We focus on the single most important tax, Value Added Tax (VAT), which has been implemented in most states of India from April 1, 2005. Commodity taxes alter the

relative prices of taxed and untaxed goods, and hence transform individual and household decisions about consumption, as well as production and investment decisions. VAT in particular is quite regressive, as it has a greater anti-women and anti-poor impact, given the fact that these sections typically spend a larger proportion of their income on basic consumption goods such as food than richer households do; low earners, therefore, pay a higher average tax rate. Also, VAT is almost always inflationary, as increased taxes are passed on to consumers at every level through the entire chain.

Experience reveals that VAT places a heavy burden on labour-intensive firms as compared to capital-intensive ones. The long-term implications have to be carefully examined in the specific context of a labour surplus economy where employment rates, particularly for women, are highly differentiated, as are wages and conditions of work. This issue becomes especially significant in economies where the informal sector is both predominant and gendered.

Not only should agriculture be declared VAT-free, targeted subsidies should be increased at both the regional and national levels on a par with those given in developed countries. The impact would not only be pro-poor but also pro-women, given three specific facts – that the majority of the population in India is employed in agriculture, that most women are employed in this sector, and that the rate of urbanisation has been slowing down since the last decade.

Inexplicably, Maharashtra has exempted certain commodities such as petroleum products, lottery tickets, and alcohol. In this connection, it is crucial to recall the anti-liquor movement launched by women in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The main issues highlighted by this state-wide struggle were that a significant proportion of family income, particularly of poor people, is spent by men on alcohol, thus reducing consumption levels, and that intake directly resulted in increases in domestic violence. As a result of the movement, alcohol was banned. However, within a short time the state government withdrew the ban on the grounds that the loss of revenue had led to increased fiscal deficit.

### **Policy recommendations**

Evaluation of tax policies is generally based on simplicity, vertical and horizontal equity, and neutrality. Normative values also come into play by the inclusion of other functions of a tax system such as economic stabilisation, income redistribution, regulation, and reduction of inequalities. Consequently, a gendered as well as an economically ethical evaluation must be based additionally on normative values including the fundamental concept of 'ability to pay' (versus benefit principle), particularly in relation to the fact that the debate today in India is increasingly centred around the appropriate degree of tax progressivity (vertical equity) and the 'benefit principle' (user fees).

The efficiency of a tax system is generally based on the social welfare function, which states that the desired revenue and social objectives should be achieved through minimal distortions to individual and business decisions. This method, which focuses purely on the market economy, however, has been criticised on several grounds both by mainstream and feminist economists. We add some of our own points of criticism.

1. Utilities cannot be individually calculated, standardised and then socially collated, more so in a society that is inherently unequal and patriarchal. The 'greater common good' thus does not imply a collection of 'individual' goods.
2. The current fundamentals of most tax structures negate income-saving and income-augmenting activities that men and particularly women perform in their struggle for survival in economies and also sectors based on 'mere' subsistence.
3. Tax regimes do not recognise nor include the economic contribution made by non-market and extra-market activities, which again are performed mainly by women. Excluded policy interventions are 'care' and reproductive activities which contain shadow-economic as well as societal value.
4. State withdrawal from the public sphere resulting from the implementation of economic 'reforms' transfers costs from the paid to the unpaid economy, which is deeply gender-segregated.
5. Neither economic nor productive values are included in public services, even though most women who are 'regular' employees not only work in but also benefit from these sectors.
6. Ultimately and most fundamentally, tax structures and policies omit even the possibility that fiscal policies can enhance societal and gender equity.

Our recommendations, therefore, are:

1. Increase in Personal Income Tax exemption limits especially for female-headed households and for those with dependents. Introduction of child care exemptions under PIT.
2. Abolition of Hindu Undivided Family as the basis for filing tax returns.
3. Regulation of medical insurance policies: The issue of medical deductions and their applications are not regulated by a uniform policy, as we discovered on interviewing two of the largest companies. Consequently, different insurance companies and even different branches of the same company within the same city impose their own rules such as not permitting single women to include their parents in family schemes, the fact that single households pay the same rates as those applicable to entire families etc. The gender component is quite clear in that women are more likely to have higher medical expenses than men because of additional problems related to reproduction.

4. Policies on pensions and post-retirement benefits: The present policy on pensions is currently quite severely biased against single-headed households, whether male or female. Pensions and other recurring post-retirement benefits cannot be willed or transferred upon death to a non-spouse, not even to dependent parents. While this explicit bias against single persons exists against both men and women, it is clearly more anti-women in the context of the fact that marriage for women over a certain age 'barrier' is generally not possible, and re-marriage is still not socially accepted. Compounding this anti-women stance is the fact that few women have opportunities to become full-time workers in the formal sector where retirement benefits and tax subsidisation policies are operative. The issue of pensions is emerging as increasingly significant in India as it is now sought to be applied to the informal sector.
5. Another fiscal policy measure that would benefit women significantly is that of granting tax exemptions to self-help groups, women's co-operatives and also women-managed non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Self-help groups are today one of the most important aspects of the nation's empowerment policy, while NGOs are increasingly taking over welfare responsibility in the context of State withdrawal after the introduction of economic reforms. At the same time, major exemptions and tax holidays given to Export Promotion Zones not only result in heavy revenue loss but also favour capital against labour. Thus, it makes sense not only for redistributive justice but also for economic growth and empowerment to grant women, the majority of whom are poor, at least some concessions.

## **GENDER-RESPONSIVE BUDGETING AS A TOOL FOR ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC PLANNING**

When someone last counted, in 2002 it seems, more than 60 countries were doing Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB), and since then the numbers have increased. Sixty countries is a significant number given that GRB as a tool that emerged only in the 1980s. It is now in the gaze of the global community, not as much for what it has done but more so for the potential it offers. What actually does GRB offer, and what value does it add to planning and budgeting?

GRB is a loose term for several different kinds of efforts that can be located at the intersection of gender and budgets. Segregating public expenditure for women, which is commonly being done in many countries as the first step in GRB, is just one of the several methodologies that GRB offers. Others include the commonly known tools of gender-disaggregated beneficiary assessment, gender-disaggregated analysis of the impact of the budget on time use, gender-aware medium-term economic policy framework and so on.

However, GRB is an evolving area of work. Several new and innovative strategies are being tried under GRB, and it is being applied to new areas. Budgeting for laws pertaining to women's rights, such as domestic violence laws and maintenance laws, and applying GRB to HIV and AIDS, to revenue mobilisation and to audits are just some such examples of evolving areas of GRB. Hence, when we talk about GRB, the gamut of issues and approaches that this includes is quite wide and is becoming wider with time.

The common perception among policymakers seems to be that so long as they are not explicitly discriminating against women in their policies, they are doing what needs to be done for women. What is often not recognised is that needs of men and women are different, and unless policies factor this in, they will not be gender-responsive.

The commonly known five-step framework on GRB tries to challenge this method of policymaking. By beginning with a situation analysis of men and women in a particular sector, it lays the foundation for explicitly recognising disadvantages women face. This also locates GRB in the larger context of the realities of the world we live in, where gender discrimination is rampant. The second step is an assessment of the extent to which the sector's policy addresses the gender issues and gaps described in the first step. This helps scrutinise the match or the mismatch between the policies and women's needs. The third step is to assess the adequacy of budget allocations to

implement the gender-sensitive policies and programmes identified. This step helps to identify the resource gaps. The fourth step entails monitoring whether the money was spent as planned, what was delivered and to whom. This involves checking both financial performance and the physical deliverables (disaggregated by sex). And the last step is assessment of the impact of the policy/programme/scheme through a gender lens.

Moving beyond the theoretical underpinnings of GRB, let us look at some dimensions of the methodology:

### **1. GRB as an opportunity to look at nuances of budgeting and policymaking**

Any work on budget analysis usually begins with looking at allocations. Analysing allocations offers useful insights into priorities accorded to women. However, budget analysis must also go beyond the level of allocations. GRB gives an opportunity to scrutinise budgeting in greater detail. Mostly, it is not just the quantity of resources that is an impediment; quality of money spent is also poor. In this regard some of the important questions that GRB should ask are:

- a. What are the utilisation patterns? Are the resources allocated for women reaching them?
- b. If there is underutilisation, then what are the causes for that?
- c. Are there specific components that consistently show underutilisation? How is fund utilisation divided across different financial quarters?
- d. What is the staffing pattern? Are there adequate and trained staff to carry out the services that are mandated to be provided?
- e. What are the unit costs of delivery? Are these realistic? How do these compare with international or national standards or benchmarks?

Research studies have shown that a large number of policies and programmes for women are budgeted with unrealistically low unit costs, suffer from lack of adequate trained personnel who would be able to deliver quality services, and have significant portions of the budgets that go underspent. Addressing these issues is important if GRB is to mean anything to common women.

### **2. GRB as a tool for governance accountability**

GRB efforts should be seen in the larger context of citizens, civil society organisations and the women's movement, trying to hold governments accountable to the commitments made. The mismatch between what is expected from the State and what it is delivering is at the centre of the argument. In holding the State accountable to its promises, not just in international human rights covenants but also to gender-neutral commitments, GRB becomes valuable, since it draws attention to about 50 per cent (or so) of the population.

Since one of the most important milestones in women's struggle for equality is CEDAW, GRB should be used to strengthen the State's accountability to commitments in CEDAW. Currently, women's groups in many countries of the region are largely using the mechanism of shadow reports to track governments' implementation of CEDAW. However, GRB could be used as a tool for tracking how far governments have implemented CEDAW. One could analyse the amounts allocated and the amounts spent on each of the articles of CEDAW. Further, these allocations could be tracked to see what the quality of spending is. If budgets for women are made with CEDAW and its substantive equality principle in mind, it will definitely propel better planning and budgeting for women.

### **3. GRB as an opportunity to look at national women's machineries**

GRB work globally has also shed light on weak women's machinery at the national level in many countries. Most of these institutions, whether it is the women's ministry or others, are usually underfunded, understaffed and often do not have the mandate that would enable them to make an impact on women's lives. It has also drawn attention to the need for other ministries, including the Ministry of Finance, to take on gender concerns as their concern.

In India, for instance, research has shown that the creation of an independent Ministry for Women and Child Development has not resulted in any significant increase in allocations for women and children compared to when it was a department. Allocations for women and children have gone up in absolute numbers, but in relative terms (relative to the total expenditure of the union government) it is still a marginal increase and is still abysmally low, at less than 1 per cent. Worse still, priorities for women, in particular, within the ministry/department have actually gone down from 9.2 per cent in 2004–05 (real expenditure) to 3 per cent in 2006–07 (real expenditure). The union budget 2009–10 brings a further decline in proportional resources for women.<sup>19</sup> Since women's machineries are meant to play a nodal role on women's issues, strengthening them will help in better economic planning for women.

### **4. GRB in the context of the changing aid scenario and UN Security Council Resolution 1325**

Although governments' budgets are the largest single source of financing for gender equality and women's empowerment in most countries, the changing global aid and security architecture once again points towards the need for strengthening GRB. The only way to track and monitor official development assistance and conflict-reconstruction money flowing into many countries from a gender lens is through GRB.

---

19 Mishra, Yaminia and Jhamb, Bhumiika (2009) 'An Assessment of UPA-I through a Gender Budgeting Lens', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 29, 2009.

## 5. Challenges that remain

As we move ahead in the trajectory of not just further refining the tool but also applying it more creatively to diverse areas of women's rights, several challenges remain. A non-romantic scrutiny of what is being done in several countries in the name of GRB will necessarily point towards the need for greater sharpening and sophistication of GRB as a tool and an area of enquiry.

### *a. Methodological review and deepening of GRB*

As country after country in the region – and within countries, states/provinces too – take to GRB work, it is also important to take stock of different methodologies being used and set minimum standards to ensure that in this effort of spreading GRB, there is no compromise on its quality.

### *b. Interrogating allocations alone won't suffice*

Merely interrogating how much of the budgets is going to women, though a necessary first step, will not suffice if the end result is to ensure better outcomes for women. It is important to carry out GRB work in a more comprehensive framework. Some of the important questions that we should be asking are:

*What is the priority for women in the budgets?* Existing evidence from GRB suggests that allocations for women or women's programmes are extremely low; however, States implementing GRB are rarely going beyond preparing the GRB statements to make a strong case for increasing allocations for women. This suboptimal spending on women needs to be increased if one is serious about addressing the development deficits women face or the historic discrimination they have experienced. The global gender equality financing gap has been estimated at USD 12 billion to USD 30 billion in 2006.<sup>20</sup>

*Do these resources reach the women?* As gender advocates, it is important to work on factors that constrain effective utilisation of funds. Women's struggle is not just over the quantity of resources, but the quality of resources also needs to be established. When these resources reach the women, *what is the impact?* Often, even well-meaning programmes for women end up having either an adverse impact on women or reinforcing gender stereotypes.

### *c. Which women are we talking about?*

It is important that GRB exercises use the intersectionality framework. GRB methodologies and approaches must try to assess how much money is reaching the

---

20 UNIFEM (2009) 'Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability', *Progress of the World's Women* 2008/09.

most marginalised women – factoring in differences of class, caste, race, disability etc. How much budget is being allocated and spent for these doubly discriminated women, what the quality of spending of such programmes is, what the impact of these programmes is etc. must be assessed.

*d. Earmarking resources versus segregating expenditure*

One sees two different kinds of approaches to gender-sensitive budgets. In several countries, one would see a gender budget statement which tries to assess how much of the budget is meant for programmes for women. The other approach is to earmark a particular amount of resources for women, as a floor minimum. For instance, in India, the Women's Component Plan provided for at least 30 per cent of plan allocations of all "women-related" ministries to be earmarked for women. Such earmarking has its merits. However, from a gender perspective, not only does one need to track what is being charged to this component, as evidence has shown all kinds of expenditures being charged which may have nothing to do with women, one also needs to try to ensure that this pot of money covers expenses for women's strategic gender needs and not practical gender needs only. If this pot of money covers women's practical gender needs, such as general health, education etc., one would end up short-changing women.

*e. Engaging not just with the numbers in the budget but also with budgetary processes*

The budget-making process in many countries continues to be a male bastion. Engendering this process is as important, and in some senses, a precondition to engendering the outcomes. In the formulation phase of the budget, when different departments or ministries are formulating their demands for grants, women's priorities must be factored in. In the legislation phase, it is important to assess how much attention is being given to women's concerns – whether a budget for women's schemes is being debated in the Parliament or not. In the implementation phase, it is important that budget tracking exercises by civil society organisations include a gender perspective, and in the audit phase it is important that the parameters of audit try to capture the gender component.

*f. Bringing GRB down from national to local levels*

Many GRB efforts have begun at the national level, largely because of the active role played by the women's ministry or the finance ministry. Doing GRB at the national level gives prominence and importance to GRB, which is welcome. However, in the coming years, it is extremely critical to take GRB from the sovereign level to sub-sovereign and to local levels. Only when GRB is being done at the local level will it impact on the lives of common women, the poor women who constitute the majority of this planet.

*g. Engaging macro processes*

GRB work cannot and should not be done in isolation. Fiscal policy space that

States have, social sector spending etc., are the superset of GRB. Unless the larger macroeconomic framework respects women's rights, GRB will just result in minor tinkering with the system. Drawing attention to policies for women in the unorganised sector, in agriculture, to the care economy etc., putting them at the centre of the policy discourse and promoting good policies and budgeting for these sectors is extremely important.

The challenge for all GRB practitioners globally is to redefine and take GRB from the domain of a techno-managerial tool and translate it in terms of what it means for entitlements for women so that in their struggle for substantive equality, women as active citizens can stake claims over these resources. Only then will GRB reach the last woman and ensure her participation, using the Gandhian framework, and until then this struggle will continue.

## CO-OPERATION, COMMONS AND VOICE

P.V. Satheesh

### GENDERING AGRICULTURE: PUTTING WOMEN FIRST<sup>21</sup>

Having worked for over two decades with small and marginal women farmers from low-income *dalit* families in the Medak District of Andhra Pradesh, the Deccan Development Society (DDS) has been privileged to acquire a range of exciting perspectives offered by the women on their agriculture. This paper presents some of those perspectives which turn the arguments of formal agricultural economists and scientists on their head and present a unique vision of food and farming born in and nurtured from the ground. This presents us with the question of whether a gendered vision of agriculture is an exercise in cloning men's concerns onto women or creating and nurturing the authentic women's paradigm in agriculture, especially that of the small and marginal women farmers from ecologically challenged areas.

The women's agricultural paradigm is marked by a process of humanisation of all things related to farming. Let me illustrate this with the epistemology of the women farmers: Earth is invariably referred to as *Bhootalli* (Mother Earth) by them. She is not a piece of real estate or a lifeless piece of grain-producing machinery. She is the mother of life. From this point onwards the entire process of crop growth is seen by women in the same manner as the growth of a human child from the embryo stage. When the crops are in the podding stage, *Bhootalli Pottatoni* (Mother Earth is pregnant). When the grains are filling, *Paalu taagutindi* (they are being breastfed). When they are mature, they are *Pottakochindi* (ready for delivery).

Women farmers look at the entire farming process as a cycle of life. Food is produced in a cyclical and nurturing process of birth, growth, maturity and regeneration. This vision is as different from the vision of Green Revolution agriculture as chalk is from cheese. Women's paradigm challenges some of the key principles held up by industrial agriculture and the science on which it is based.

First and foremost is the principle of productivity. Industrial agriculture is totally focused on productivity of a single grain and, therefore, measures farming success in terms of the highest quantity of kilograms of grain produced per unit of land. For

---

21 This is an abridged version of a paper written for a workshop on 'Women in Agriculture in South Asia' by the Aga Khan Foundation – International Food Policy Research Institute, 12–14 August 2008.

agricultural science and economy, the primacy of yield is non-negotiable. But the women reject this totally. They say that if a large quantity of a single grain is produced through monoculture and brought home, the first impact is that it moves out of the home and reaches the market. The money earned from selling the grains goes into the pockets of the men who control the marketing of the produce. Chances are that much of this money goes to non-food purchases. Even if food is purchased from the market, they try to purchase cheaper (low-quality) grains in smaller quantities. The chances are also high that the purchased food is chemically produced and makes their health insecure.

Therefore, the women actively oppose single grain production and monocultural farming and reject the argument that higher yield can be sold to buy what you want from the market. Instead, they argue that biodiverse ecological farming that they practice leaves the control over the produce in the hands of women. Since diverse grains come home in smaller quantities, the men will not be interested in taking them to the market. The grains, therefore, stay at home. Women can use them as and when they want in quantities that they decide. Since the production is ecological, there is no threat of chemically contaminated food. This way of production also ensures a variety of foods on the plate. Such a diverse diet is the first principle of health and nutrition.

In the case of DDS women, being farmers of millets which are five to eight times more nutritious than rice or wheat, they are also assured of much higher levels of nutrition. On the other hand, if they go out to the market to purchase food, they end up buying cheap rice which offers no nutrition whatsoever. This control over their agriculture prompts the women to reject the mainstream argument of monocultures and higher yields.

### **Weeding out the concept of weeds**

The other holy cow of the Green Revolution model of agriculture is the issue of weeds. Most modern agriculture is almost obsessively focused on removing weeds from agriculture. Some of the most poisonous weedicides have entered the market. But is the threat of weeds real?

A weed is defined as a “right plant in the wrong place”. But for the women farmers of DDS, there is no wrong place. A weed is either food for humans or livestock or it is a medicinal plant. Even if they are standing in the centre of crop fields they are still food. And, therefore, they are a part of the cropping system itself. Therefore, undermining weeds and getting them exterminated, instead of studying their health, nutrition and economic benefits as mainstream science does, is an issue of gendered agriculture. Uncultivated foods enhance access to food and nutrition by women and promote their vision of ecological agriculture. As early as 1993, DDS and its women health

workers discovered that over 165 uncultivated greens are a gift from their farming and commons.

### **Biodiversity**

The third major aspect of agriculture for the women is the issue of biodiversity. While the 'scientific' agriculture of the Green Revolution variety has no value whatsoever for agrobiodiversity, women farmers cannot think of their agriculture without biodiversity. This is another area where they are compelled to set up a direct clash with the formal agricultural institutions.

Women, particularly from low-income *dalit* sections of society, have a worldview which has a profound relationship between diversity and a number of elements in their food and farming. They include moisture requirement (which is critical to their dryland farming system), household needs, diet and nutrition, seed selection and culture. In this manner biodiversity is intricately linked to all aspects of women's life, culture and agriculture.

My purpose in making these points is to establish the conceptual differences between the institutionalised, formal, 'scientific' agriculture and women's paradigm of agriculture. While the former is one-dimensional and is focused on monocultures and productivity, the latter is far more complex, multidimensional and integrates biodiversity, ecology and control of women over food and farming into its agricultural vision. This vision, when practised, results in gendered agriculture that spells autonomy for women.

### **Heightening the access**

In the early years of DDS, access to food was aimed at providing the women with interest-free consumption loans that would enable them to purchase grains regularly from the Public Distribution System (which many of them were unable to do since they would not have cash when their ration arrived at the village, and, therefore, they would forego the ration) as well as from the market at advantageous moments such as harvest time when prices would be at their lowest.

But soon DDS realised that this was not the best strategy to allow them to gain food autonomy. Therefore, we started helping them to reclaim the infertile lands that they owned but, due to their incapacity to invest in enhancing their fertility, had left untended. Over a period of ten or more years, a programme called 'Eco-employment' took over 5000 acres of marginal lands owned by the members of DDS and created nearly one million person days of employment. Most of all, it increased food availability to each of the participating families by over 400 per cent. The lands that were addressed through this programme had been semi-abandoned. Through the programme, women

bunded, destoned and at times added top soil. This rejuvenated the soils, and with the hard work that women put in, the fields started yielding between 200 kg and 300 kg of a variety of grains per acre. Since the women brought into their lands their traditional practice of farming millets, legumes and oilseeds simultaneously, it was not only cereals that were coming into the family but also nutritionally rich pulses and oilseeds.

Another major step that the DDS *sanghams*<sup>22</sup> took towards their access to land and food was to start a land lease programme. Under this initiative, the village *sanghams* of DDS would rent a piece of land from the bigger landowners in the village and farm it collectively. They would share the produce that came out of their lands. Thousands of women have participated in this initiative in the last 20 years. This liberated them from their feeling that they could only manage tiny pieces of land. It also made it possible for them to collectively manage agriculture. Both these aspects were vital to gendering agriculture.

Another significant aspect of both these programmes was that the women practised their own traditional millet-based farming on these lands. Therefore, the food that was coming into their family was not rice, which is a grain on the lowest rung of the nutritional table. They were now raising and eating a variety of millets that included sorghum (*jowar*), pearl millet (*bajra*), foxtail millet, proso millet, kodo millet and barnyard millet.

### **Community-controlled food sovereignty**

The third and most seminal initiative, called the 'Alternative public distribution system (PDS) through Community Grain Bank', was initiated in 1994. The basic objective of this PDS programme based on *jowar* (the local millet which is nutritionally very rich) was to ensure local production, local storage and local distribution. This was operationalised by advancing financial assistance to the marginal farmers in 30 villages in the first phase to reclaim their fallow lands through timely cultivation, application of farmyard manure and carrying out other timely farming practices. The agreement was that the money advanced would be returned in the form of grains to be stored in their own village and sold at a cheap price to the poorest families in the villages. All the decisions related to this programme were made by the community. In each village a committee of *dalit* women was elected to lead and manage this programme. Thus the women had taken over the food leadership of their village communities, an extraordinary achievement for them. Through this act they were able to explode the myth that it is only the Green Revolution model of agriculture in high-potential areas that can bring food security into this country.

---

22 Assembly.

Such massive and sustainable employment generation also has a direct impact on the purchasing power of poor people. The oft-repeated problem with the mainstream PDS is that even when there is enough food in ration shops, there is no uptake because people do not have the purchasing power. The 'Alternative PDS' of DDS has also found a solution for this vexing problem.

Over the last five years DDS has expanded this programme in 134 villages in eight districts of Andhra Pradesh, benefiting nearly 100,000 persons. Thus the 'Alternative PDS' programme has achieved the following:

- household food security
- health security
- nutritional security
- fodder security
- livelihood security
- ecological security.

### **Community Gene Fund and community kitchens**

The next major step for DDS *sanghams* was the 'Community Gene Fund' programme, which had as its aim seed sovereignty for all the women in DDS communities. This programme has put critical control over seeds back into the hands of the rural women in general and *dalit* women in particular. In tune with the paradigm of women's agriculture, this initiative has laid heavy emphasis on biodiversity in agriculture and recovery of traditional landraces. Within a span of five years about 900 women who participated in this programme recovered over 85 traditional landraces and have set up banks of traditional seeds in 50 villages.

Ten years later, the situation has completely reversed the gender and caste relations within their societies. Every DDS woman now has 10–15 varieties of seeds in her home. Once upon a time, she would have eaten these seeds when she had no food grains at home. But with their food sovereignty assured, the women moved towards seed sovereignty. Even as every single woman was achieving her seed sovereignty, 55 villages now have ten-year-old community gene banks managed by one or two women seed keepers selected by the village *sanghams*. Each of these community gene banks stores between 50 and 80 varieties of seeds. Anyone can borrow seeds from this bank and return the quantity in the form of seeds. The higher castes and men come to these banks to borrow seeds, thus completely reversing the gender- and caste-based power relations. Twenty years earlier it was *dalit* women who used to go begging seeds from high-caste men. With the reversal of their status from seed seekers to seed providers, *dalit* women have actually brought about a gender revolution in agriculture.

Apart from the consistent growth in the household nutritional status of women and children, DDS communities have institutionalised some of these efforts. Since 1988, DDS *sanghams* have run their own *balwadis*, day care centres for their children. This has ensured that the children from the low-income families in the villages have access to good food on a regular basis. After doing a hunger map of their communities and identifying the destitute and people unable to do any work, in 2007 the women started community kitchens with their own grain and labour contributions for these people.

### **Food sovereignty first**

In 2006, DDS took another seminal step by establishing its Food Sovereignty Trust, composed completely of nine rural *dalit* women. The Trust has its own corpus fund to look after the agricultural and food sovereignty initiatives of the society. The preamble of the Food Sovereignty Trust points to the character of the Trust by emphasising:

- making hunger vanish from their communities
- enhancing biodiverse farming systems, especially on poor people's farms
- ensuring a large variety of traditional seeds in the hands of the women
- guaranteeing ecological security
- leadership of women and *dalits* over their food and seed systems
- all-round employment for landless and poor people.

The DDS Food Sovereignty Trust has the basic aim of restoring the dignity of poor people by helping them to establish total autonomy over their food production, storage and distribution systems at the community levels.

In the final analysis, by tailoring its agriculture, food and nutritional initiatives to the paradigm of women, DDS has not only ensured their basic needs such as food, nutritional and health security but also addressed their strategic needs such as leadership and political roles, articulation space and visibility in the public domain.

## **ECONOMIC JUSTICE, THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND WOMEN'S AGENCY**

Today's economic system is often cruel towards vulnerable people, who suffer insecurity, poverty and sometimes starvation. In many segments of the economy, we are moving away from employment for poor people and environment-friendly technologies to the opposite. For example, in waste collection, contracts are being given to private companies for burning waste or for landfill. The situation is similar in retail. In urban areas, weekly markets are being closed down in part because of the arrival of malls. Street vendors are just being forced out. In the construction sector manual work is being replaced by machine work, replacing unskilled female labour. At the same time, there are certain sectors, such as the outsourcing sector, where more and more women are being employed. Homework is on the increase, but this is not matched by the increase in earnings. There is a feeling of insecurity due to uncertainty of the availability of work.

The question is: can we move towards an economic system where people have a certain level of security, at least of their basic needs, where work is fulfilling and not back-breaking and exploitative, and where people feel a sense of community and empowerment? We think there are many alternatives!

SEWA has tried not to take an ideological stand, but to understand how the economic processes are affecting poor women, and how they could affect them in the future. The objective of studying the changes in women's lives is to adopt a proactive stance on programmes and policies in order to better the lives of women in the microcosm of the informal economy. Rather than enter the debate at the macro level, we observe the changes at the ground level and try to link them to macro changes and policies. To build alternatives we need both: conducive policies and organising so that communities and women at the grassroots get a voice.

Empowerment through organising is the process by which the disempowered – the powerless people – can change their circumstances and begin to have control over their lives. Empowerment results in a change in the balance of power, in living conditions, and in relationships. Perhaps the most important effect of empowerment is that the person says "Now I do not feel afraid".

### **Where women are leaders**

In the last century, it was the trade unions that were the agency for organising the workers who were considered the most exploited. However, due to globalisation and

liberalisation' the trade unions have lost a lot of power and the focus has shifted to many new types of organising. In particular, the issues around which women organise today cover a wide range from environment-related issues to micro finance to protests over land. It is important to recognise that women are not 'followers' in the organising process but often the leaders. In this process women have brought into the national consciousness issues which have major relevance to society as a whole, and have invented new forms of organising.

One area where women have taken the lead is in giving a new direction to the workers' movement. Until recently, the movement had been dominated by the idea of 'labour' instead of work, of an employer–employee relationship, of factories and formal workplaces. However, the majority of workers today work in the informal economy in occupations which have never been recognised. The trade union movement too has been dominated by male leaders and male workers and their concerns. As the economies around the world change, the employer–employee relationship is increasingly vanishing. Since most women workers are used to being in these insecure, 'flexible' and informal types of work situations, they have been taking the lead in organising informal workers, which include home-based workers, domestic workers, agricultural workers and many more.

The changing nature of work has also given rise to many new types of organisations. SEWA is the earliest example, although today there are many organisations in the same model. Registered as a trade union, SEWA is different from the traditional trade union in a number of ways. First, it brings together workers from many different trades ranging from urban street vendors to rural livestock breeders, unlike most trade unions which organise workers of one trade only. Second, it organises workers who are generally not in factories. In the informal economy, women tend to work in non-factory settings – in their own homes as home-based workers, in others homes as domestic servants, in fields as agricultural labourers, in public places as street vendors, in their own enterprises as self-employed workers. The bargaining process doesn't always involve an employer, as in most cases these workers do not have an employee–employer relationship as such. In the case of the street vendors, for instance, we have to negotiate with the municipal authorities to obtain vending space. Third, SEWA not only organises for higher wages or enterprise benefits but for a whole variety of needs ranging from developmental needs, such as skills training and micro-finance, to social security and child care to education; it follows an integrated approach. The form of organising adopted by SEWA is dictated by what the women workers need.

### **An economy of co-operation**

We believe in the co-operative principle as opposed to the dominant principle of

competition in our economic system. Initially, SEWA had to promote its own co-operatives due to the total lack of public services for workers in the informal economy. In 1975, we started our first women's co-operative, a bank providing saving and micro-credit facilities for the sole use of our members. When I visited Grameen Bank, which started in 1979, over 80 per cent of the loanees were men. As their repayment rate began to suffer, Grameen Bank turned to women, and by 1990 over 90 per cent of the loanees were women. Since then, in many places, micro-finance which started as a small organisation has been taken over by the corporate sector that functions as money-lender. Unlike this, all shareholders of SEWA Bank are SEWA members who then elect their own board. Today, SEWA Bank has expanded to over 300,000 members and a capital of Rs 1 billion.

In 1981 SEWA started the first women's producers' co-operative, called the Sabina Stitchers Co-operative. The number of co-operatives increased, and in 1995 it started a state-level women's co-operative federation, which today has over 100 women's co-operative members in the state of Gujarat.

Co-operatives are people's organisations which promote and generate women's employment for those who do not have bargaining power in the labour market and are at a lower level of the economic hierarchy. They help poor people to gain control of their resources, to enter the markets from which they are usually excluded as individual participants, and to bargain for better economic conditions. Though organising poor women workers into co-operatives is clearly a viable alternative, there are very few women's co-operatives. Unfortunately, the government is demoting such a mode of organising. It is often not possible for an unorganised group of women workers to register itself as a co-operative under the Co-operative Act, as the procedural requirements are too cumbersome. As neoliberal economic policies became more prevalent in India, it became increasingly difficult to operate co-operatives, and easier to work with companies. SEWA has been forming women-owned producer companies which bring them up the value chain.

Those women-owned co-operatives or companies can make use of the skills of women who are called 'unskilled' in the formal sector. In India, there is a division of workers in highly unequal 'skill' levels. At the upper end are workers with a range of sophisticated skills who, especially after liberalisation, have many new opportunities. At the lower end, workers tend to learn their skills from each other or from within their families, and have a level and type of education which permits them little leeway in terms of learning and almost nothing in terms of employment. Women workers tend to be crowded onto the lowest rungs of the 'unskilled' workers.

However, many of these women are not really without skills. Skills need not be identified

only with education or only as those presently certified by professional agencies and training institutes. Some examples of skills, which are not recognised but which exist with local populations, are: women in forest areas with skills of recognising and using herbal plants; people with a mix of traditional and modern medical skills; skills relating to water storage, purification and usage; agricultural skills, including seed preservation, storage, intercropping, and use of natural pesticides; and artisanal and crafts skills, both traditional such as in embroidery or bamboo work, or modern such as plumbers or auto mechanics. Many of these skills are a mix of modern and traditional as traditional craftspeople adapt to modern technologies and markets.

The present infrastructure and resources for training are mainly geared to the formal sector and to higher levels of skills. To reach the mass of people, especially women, we need to create a new physical and human infrastructure. Although infrastructure is often thought of as buildings, equipment and other physical infrastructure, the most important part is the human resource, i.e. teachers.

It is most important to organise people in the informal sector on the ground and on the national level so that they don't get swept away by privatisation and the corporate sector. If the community has a say in public spaces and takes care of common resources, such as water property, in a collective way, then people don't want privatisation. If street vendors are organised and speak with a united voice – for example, in the National Alliance of Street Vendors – they can negotiate with the municipal authorities for vending space, influence policymaking and are able to compete with retailers.

## **Conclusion**

Despite a rich tradition of organising in India, women in the informal economy seem to have little voice at policy levels. It seems that there are few forums where they can speak for themselves, and not many organisations which represent them.

I see women's member-based organisations as the way of organising in the future, as these are the only forms which can be owned by poor women and hence be accountable to them. This requires that women's own forms of organisations be recognised and that they should form the building blocks for both, organisation and voice. However, being effective requires scaling up. For example, small self-help groups of ten women each can have a very limited effectiveness, even in the lives of those women, and almost no impact on society or policy. But hundreds of thousands of women, acting together, can have a major impact on the women involved as well as on society. The challenge then, is how do women's organisations scale up? The original base of organising is always local – the self-help group, the community-based organisation. These small organisations start as single-issue groups – around savings

or loans; around a need for drinking water or toilets; protesting against displacement; coming together for better wages; around finding a new market for their goods or services. Scaling up means expansion, replication and higher forms of organisation. In 2005, SEWA applied to be recognised as a national trade union and after a major struggle with the existing trade unions was indeed recognised and is now a trade union at the national rather than only the local level.

At the same time, reaching across countries, SEWA is the founder of a number of international networks such as StreetNet, HomeNet and WIEGO because we feel that organising on the local, national and international levels is necessary in the global economy.

The vision of a society with member-based and co-operative economic organisations is indeed possible, but it needs a great deal of policy and financial support. Today, economic rules and market regulations prefer and support corporate forms of organisations over co-operative ones. Although the majority of the economy is outside the corporate sector – 93 per cent of workers in India work informally or are self-employed – it is rarely recognised. The search for economic justice requires that governments and policymakers recognise the importance of co-operative organisations and take steps to help them scale up and become important and equal players in the market and the economy.

## WOMEN IN KAIMUR RECLAIM THEIR RIGHT TO LAND

The Kaimur region encompasses four districts of the state of Uttar Pradesh in India. Situated on the eastern border of the state, this area is defined by the thickly forested Kaimur hill range, which spreads over nearly 7000 km<sup>2</sup> and extends into the neighbouring states. The area is rich in mineral resources – primarily coal and iron ore – and is dotted with mines and power plants.

On paper, almost half of this region is classified as forest land and is under the control of the Forest Department. In reality, as much as 40 per cent of the area classified as forest does not have a single tree and has been under cultivation for at least a century. Despite the enactment of land ceiling legislation and a stated policy of distributing ceiling-surplus land to landless cultivators, the dominant castes continue to control huge holdings. The *dalits* and *adivasis* of the Kaimur region are primarily wage workers, scratching out a precarious existence on tiny plots of degraded land while living in perpetual fear of eviction by the Forest Department which has proclaimed them illegal occupants of forest land.

The situation of *dalits* and *adivasis* in Kaimur today must be understood in its historical context. Many of these communities were forest dwellers in the past, living in tiny hamlets and carrying out subsistence agriculture in natural clearings. Although technically subjects of the *zamindars*,<sup>23</sup> their way of life was largely allowed to continue until the forests themselves came under attack and large-scale felling began, fuelled by the demand for timber generated by the expanding railway network. The landowners now incorporated the cleared forest land into their agricultural holdings, and the erstwhile forest-dwelling communities became bonded cultivators. With the passage of the Forest Act in 1933, the government assumed ownership of private forests, but no compensation was paid to the forest-dwelling communities, who were forced to abandon their hamlets and move from village to village as more and more forest land came under the control of the Forest Department.

The land reform legislation enacted at Independence, while intended to benefit landless people, actually worked against their interests. The landowners adopted every tactic they could to subvert the 'land to the tiller' policy – huge holdings were parcelled out on paper to various members of the extended family, some unproductive or non-agricultural land was surrendered to the government with great fanfare, and communities who had been living and working on the same tiny farms for generations

---

23 Landlord.

were evicted to neutralise the possibility that they would press their legitimate claims as tillers.

These are the communities who in 2000 organised themselves under the banner of the *Kaimur Kshetra Mahila Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti* (KKMMKSS – Struggle Committee of Women, Farmers and Workers of the Kaimur region). They are among the poorest people in this state, which is home to the largest segment of India's poor people. The region which they inhabit ranks among the lowest on all indicators of human development. The dominant castes exercise near-absolute power and control both the administration and public services. *Dalit* and *adivasi* children seldom complete even primary school, and *dalit* families have little or no access to health and social services. There are a few NGOs that function mainly as subcontractors for government programmes and whose interventions do not cover so-called forest villages.

Forest-dwelling communities are also exploited by the Forest Department. Although the land they cultivate is unforested and severely degraded – and has been so for generations – they do not have legal title to it and are constantly threatened with eviction or legal action and forced to pay protection money to petty officials to deflect the false cases of illegal felling and timber theft that are filed against them. The caste and economic solidarity between the landlords, forest officials and police – who constitute the core of the powerful 'timber mafia' in the state – renders *dalit* and *adivasi* communities even more vulnerable to extortion and brutal violence. The fact that the Kaimur forests spill over into the neighbouring state of Jharkhand, much of which is under the control of Maoist insurgent groups waging war against the Indian State, increases the vulnerability of these communities – any young man or boy who oversteps the caste line can be picked up by the police and held in jail indefinitely under charges of being a Maoist rebel. Custodial deaths are common and are overlooked if not condoned, even by the judicial system and the media.

The first organised action by the women of the Kaimur region was a spontaneous protest in Basoli village, where two children and a woman were killed as Forest Department officials tried to demolish the *adivasi* hamlet and plant trees in its place. The women of Basoli reacted with rage, blocked the road and prevented the demolition, by physically chasing away the officials. This was the first time the *adivasis* had resisted eviction. The news spread fast, and women from surrounding villages, all of which were under attack by the Forest Department, collected at Basoli and decided to organise and start reclaiming their traditional lands which the Forest Department was trying to prevent them from cultivating. Almost overnight, about 1500 acres of land in these six villages was ploughed and planted with lentils and oilseeds. The women took turns living in huts in the fields to protect the crops. As many as 200

cases were filed against them under the Forest Act, but the women refused to back down and successfully harvested the crop.

This success galvanised women across the region, who began emulating the same tactics in other villages. In the next season, the women managed to plough and plant more than 20 km<sup>2</sup> of land, and refused to budge even when confronted by the Forest Department and armed police, resisting physical attacks with the sheer force of numbers. Several women and children were injured in one incident of unprovoked firing by the police in 2003. Efforts to file a case against the assailants and move the courts for protection proved useless – the police, landlords and Forest Department officials formed a united front against the women who stuck stubbornly to their slogan: “We have only taken back what was always ours – we will never give up this land”.

The movement to reclaim land was growing in scope and scale, and was gaining support from other people’s organisations and rights groups (although local NGOs preferred to keep a safe distance!). The women cultivated the land collectively, with the men being involved only in ploughing. The women handled the rest of the work and guarded the crop with their lives. Despite the fact that the region has experienced severe drought for the last five years, this degraded and neglected land has shown good yields of traditional varieties of dryland crops such as pulses and oilseeds. The income is equally shared among all the women involved, after setting aside a certain percentage for the organisation. In most cases, this fund is used to meet the expenses of fighting the hundreds of court cases that have been filed against the organisation by the Forest Department and the district administration.

The passage of a landmark legislation in December 2006 – the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (popularly known as the Forest Rights Act) – was a watershed event in the history of this region. The result of a decade-long campaign and sustained advocacy by a coalition of activist groups under the banner of the National Forum of Forest Peoples and Forest Workers (NFFPFW), this legislation is an attempt to redress the injustices perpetrated on adivasis and other forest dwellers across the country while recognising their traditional rights and roles as ethical custodians and efficient managers of forest resources.

The declaration in August 2007 by the newly elected Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh – herself a *dalit* woman heading the largest *dalit* political formation in the history of the country – that forest dwellers would be given formal titles to their lands, brought matters to a head. The women decided that they would immediately occupy all the lands that they could establish as having been wrongfully claimed by the Forest Department. As the movement intensified, with more than 20,000 acres of degraded land being ploughed and planted, reprisals became more brutal. Hundreds of young

*adivasi* boys were arrested as suspected Maoists, and there were several instances of police violence against women. The wave of State violence was fiercely resisted by the women and culminated in the arrest of three of the frontline leaders of the movement. These three women were accused of inciting communities to overthrow the State by grabbing government land. One woman was charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and held without bail – the first time this law had been used against a woman.

The arrests sparked widespread outrage and sparked a national protest led by the Forest People's and Workers Forum and joined by many other people's movements. An appeal to the Chief Minister resulted in the women's release and an order to the district administration to legalise land occupied and farmed by tribal communities and distribute land titles to the tillers. The movement still faces opposition and reprisals by the police and district administration but is pushing ahead regardless, with the women determined to take full advantage of a supportive and sympathetic government at the state level. While the leaders have been released, many of the cases filed against them under the Forest Act have not yet been withdrawn.

Although the district administration is now offering to register land titles in the joint names of husbands and wives, it is striking that the women continue to oppose this and are demanding collective titles in the name of the organisation. They insist that land is a collective common resource. They strongly oppose the idea of private ownership, seeing it as the root of the destructive cycle of greed, appropriation and exploitation that has destroyed the forests and their traditional way of life. "Our survival depends on the forest, and the forest depends on us," they say.

Interestingly, this is a view not always shared by the men of these communities, who have proved highly susceptible to bribery and persuasion by the Forest Department and landlords and have often tried to persuade their wives into accepting individual titles.

With a membership of more than 10,000, the Kaimur women's organisation has become powerful enough to negotiate directly with the district administration and is now demanding access to public services and enforcement of the minimum wage legislation. They have confronted caste oppression, filing cases against landowners and officials from the dominant caste. These dominant communities, including the politically powerful *yadavs*<sup>24</sup>, now generally steer clear of angering them. The organisation has taken a conscious decision to provide support and protection

---

24 Indian caste that claims descent from Yadu, the eldest son of king Yayati. Yadas have been mentioned as one of the panchjanya tribes in ancient Vedic texts.

to destitute, elderly and single women in their villages. Individual women are also renegotiating gender relations within the family and are no longer willing to take violence from their husbands. Their children, particularly their daughters, are their allies and are involved at all levels in the activities of the organisation. The trajectory of the movement reflects the way in which the women have used their kin networks and relationships with their natal families to garner support. Despite occasional disagreements, men have fallen into line and by and large accept that the women are the leaders. The women have decided to marry their daughters only into villages where a branch of their organisation is functioning – they describe this as a decision that will not only provide the girls with protection should they need it but will also strengthen the struggle. Yet, some things have not changed. For instance, when asked if they will bequeath a share in their collective lands to their daughters, they shake their heads. “She will go to another village; how can she have a share in our land?” is the answer.<sup>25</sup>

---

25 Source: Interviews with Roma and other women leaders of the KKMMKSS, personal documentation and newspaper articles.

## FOR A FEW POTS OF WATER<sup>26</sup>

Forty per cent of the world's people live in countries where water is scarce; by 2025, this figure is expected to rise to 66 per cent. According to the Annual Report of the Ministry of Water Resources of 2001–02, the per capita availability of potable water in India in 1951 was 3450 m<sup>3</sup>. In 1999, it had come down to 1250 m<sup>3</sup>. In 1993, 23 per cent of rural and 15 per cent of urban Indians did not have access to potable water.

It is odd to use the word 'scarce' to describe a resource that covers three-quarters of this planet. And yet, as time passes by, not only is the availability of fresh water becoming increasingly problematic but demand for it is increasing in direct proportion to economic development. Scarcity of water has become a bitter reality in today's world, and rights to water resources come increasingly under threat as fresh water becomes scarce.

Water is not just a basic necessity of life, but a source of life. A key argument of many activists is that every human being should have access to water, and everyone should be able to get what they need for survival, because water is a common good. Those who support this argument further believe that water cannot, therefore, be a property right for anyone; rather, it should be a fundamental right for everyone.

However, it is argued by others that when water is used for commercial purposes (for irrigation, industries, water parks etc.) rather than for survival, it should not seem unethical that the ones who benefit from its use should pay something in return for it. Here water becomes a commodity, rather than a basic right.

It is not easy to see how smoothly the same resource can, based on the use to which it is put, act as a 'fundamental right' in one instance and become a marketable commodity in another. Are there checks and balances in the system that can ensure that water is available to everyone for survival first, before it can be used for other purposes?

Millions of Indians do not have access to water, and even fewer have access to safe drinking water. At the same time, it is not that because of this, water is not available for

---

26 This is an abridged version of Parikh, Alka (2009) 'For a few pots of water: Water rights and subsidies', in: Dewan, Ritu and Seeta, K. Prabhu (eds): *Macro Economics and Gender*, published by Zubaan, an imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi.

luxurious purposes in India. Rather, in this, the elite have usually had precedence over the survival needs of the poor. It is not even true that water is not available only in arid regions due to geographical factors. A river full of water might be flowing alongside a village, and yet the same village might be facing a severe water shortage because the river water is used by the urban supply system and hence not allowed to be used by the villagers. More than the physical atmosphere, it is the political economy of a region that defines who gets water and how much.

Haven't we all witnessed lush green patches of irrigated fields in the middle of severely drought-affected regions? Water is often easily available in thousands of gallons for water parks and swimming pools in luxurious residential colonies, and women in the nearby slums wait for hours to fill up just a few pots. It has been noted that in the villages through which canals pass, the women struggle to get a few pots of water from failing water sources but are not allowed to touch the gallons of water flowing by in the canals. As the Narmada Bachao Andolan leader Medha Patkar says, water scarcity is a result of a wasteful economy where a culture of wastefulness is practised by a few at the expense of the needs of many. The Narmada Bachao Andolans have been demanding rights for the village communities living beside a river, whether there is a dam on the river or not. The idea is to change the pattern of water allocation from urban-centric to rural-centric.

### **Water: a crucial issue for gender researchers**

There is no controversy over the theoretical point that water for domestic purposes should be available to all, without any discrimination. The National Water Policy 2002, in fact, assigns the first priority to drinking water. However, no action is taken to ensure that drinking water indeed gets first priority. The National Water Policy does not try to operationalise the priority given to drinking water.

Why should water rights be included as a topic in gender studies? Consider the suffering and hardship that so many women have to undergo just to fetch water: the women of drought-affected villages in Rajasthan and Haryana travel up to 8 km a day to fetch water for their families. In villages or shanty towns where each area has a tap or a hand pump, the women spend a lot of time filling water (that often comes only as a trickle) from this source. Even middle-class women in many cities spend a considerable amount of time filling water, because the pressure of the flow is often very low, and shortages are common for at least half the year. Considering that these three groups would account for at least two-thirds of the population of women in India, the problem of water becomes a burning problem for any gender researcher. In this context, it is interesting to note that whenever an all-woman *panchayat* is formed, one problem that the members invariably attend to is that of water!

Throughout this essay, we argue that water for domestic purposes should be given precedence over all other uses. It is tragic that this needs to be even said, and it is difficult to believe that such an important resource is so frivolously allocated. Researchers and policymakers have simply not paid much attention to water rights; rather, they have focused much more on land and forest rights. In the absence of research on the subject, the authors of the National Water Policy might have indeed found it difficult to operationalise the priority accorded to drinking water.

### **Property rights over groundwater**

There is an asymmetry in Indian law about ownership between flowing surface water and groundwater. In respect of the former, the law does not recognise ownership rights; there are only rights of use. However, in terms of the Indian Easements Act, the ownership of land carries with it the ownership of the groundwater under it, subject to regulation and control by the State. When about 85 per cent of the rural drinking water comes from groundwater, this Act has very serious implications for women who fetch water for their families. Connecting water rights to land rights affects the poor adversely, since most of them do not own land and hence would not have access to water easily. Small and marginal farmers cannot afford to drill bore wells or tube wells.

Well irrigation has led to heavy exploitation of groundwater, resulting in a reversal of the ratio of withdrawal and recharge of water. It should be emphasised that in spite of population pressure in rural areas, the demand for domestic water is never so much that it could dry up the aquifer. Large-scale over-exploitation of groundwater in rural areas always comes from its commercial use, not the domestic. And yet, when aquifers dry up, women have no one to turn to; it is perfectly legal for the landowners to withdraw as much groundwater as they please. Such priority given to irrigation over drinking water has, surprisingly, not been questioned. The economically backward people are denied their genuine share in the common pool resource.

### **Water subsidies and privatisation**

People living in urban areas do not fetch their own water from a source; rather, water is made available to them through the water supply system built by the government. Thus water is not a 'free gift of nature' for the city dwellers; it reaches them after considerable expenditure is incurred by the system. Therefore, there has to be a charge for the end users.

The controversy is about how much the user should pay. The dilemma is: if too much is charged for water, poor people are deprived of the most basic necessity of life. The normal criterion in such cases would be to recover the operational and maintenance costs from the charges levied on the users. Since water is a basic necessity, the cost

of building the infrastructure can, therefore, be borne by the government. However, determination of water charges seems to be more of a political issue than an economic one. People living in Hyderabad, Mumbai and Chennai pay more than 100 per cent of the operational and maintenance costs, while people in Kolkata pay just 14 per cent, and those in Delhi a mere 26 per cent. Mumbai charges a flat rate of Rs 3.50 per kilolitre of water, while Delhi starts at 30 paise (Rs 0.3) per kilolitre for small users.

The World Bank was one of the main proponents of the idea of privatising water supply systems. Most of the problems faced by developing nations regarding water are shown in World Bank literature to be mainly a result of poor and corrupt management by government bodies. It is argued that the more efficient management practices of the private sector can help improve the situation. The World Bank also advocates that, given the scarcity of water and the fact that often water is more wasted than used, full cost pricing of water is advisable.

Barlow and Clarke (2002) in their famous book *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World's Water*, counter these arguments. They argue that privatisation of water leads to many damaging effects, including rate hikes, reduced water quality, secret contracts, bribery and corruption. Their most forceful argument is that privatisation of water supply might result in the exclusion of poor people from the water market altogether.

One more concern exists regarding privatisation: much more importance might start being given to 'high valued' use of water over 'low valued' use. Thus priority might be accorded to commercial uses over survival uses of water. Privatisation, thus, could go against the interests of urban poor people.

Above all, in tackling the problem of water scarcity, demand management is more crucial than supply management. There is no guarantee that increasing water charges would reduce water wastage at the household level. Otherwise, by the same logic, an increase in fuel prices should have reduced fuel consumption. Unless citizens realise the value of water, and their demand for water starts falling, water shortages will persist. Privatisation cannot be expected to solve the fundamental problems plaguing the water situation.

### **A blueprint for operationalising water rights in rural areas**

Understanding water allocation should start from the local perspectives of those who use water, their daily experiences, range of strategies used for claiming and obtaining water and the rights they have for defending their access to water. The local rules get established via various types of negotiations. Negotiation could take the form of abstention, obstruction, resistance and sabotage. All of these forms have been used

while negotiating rights over irrigation water. Sengupta (2000) describes a case where a village forcibly diverted the canal water, leaving the downstream canal people high and dry. After trying out various methods of persuasion, a village downstream finally decided to take the law into its own hands. The villagers came in a mob and broke down the structure erected by the upstream village, releasing the water again for their village. Many people were killed in the process.

Such forceful means of negotiating accessibility to drinking water are not likely to be available to disempowered rural women. That means that whatever might be the strategies used for getting access to drinking water, many women will still have to undergo considerable hardship to fetch water. Hence women, especially from water-poor villages, need help in tackling the problem of accessibility to water.

It might be worthwhile for the State to attempt to undertake the ownership of all water in the country, whether surface or underground. Under such a property rights regime, user rights can be given to all individuals for filling up ten pots of water (or about 200–300 litres) a day from any well or canal in the village. With such rights, women can collect water for their domestic requirements from the nearest water body. Even if the river water is collected for supplying to urban areas, the villages close to the river should have the right to demand at least 300 litres of water per household.

Farmers can be allowed to use the water from their wells but *only after* the drinking water requirements of the village are satisfied. The *gram panchayat* (the village government) can decide the number of hours farmers can be allowed to use their wells per day, depending on the water table of the village. This would check excessive withdrawal of groundwater and ensure sustainable drinking water supply over the long run. If there is a water shortage in the village, all other uses of water, except that for domestic use, would be immediately stopped.

Monitoring the actual extractions by concession holders and restricting the withdrawals to agreed levels could be an almost impossible task for the central authority. However, at the village level, where any passer-by can be watching when the field is irrigated, implementation of the set limits could be more feasible.

Alternatively, the *gram panchayats* can decide to impose charges on the user of groundwater according to the crops grown. The suitability of crops for a region depends on the natural resources available in the region. If a crop requires too much of a resource (say, water) that is short in supply in the region, the *panchayat* can decide to impose higher charges on those crops. Only protective irrigation would be allowed during droughts. Higher charges for water can change the cropping pattern – for example, from water-intensive wheat to more drought-resistant sorghum and

barley. Similar results might be seen with the scheme that we propose. It needs to be emphasised though that the success of such a system would be dependent on the existence of effective rules and mechanisms for their enforcement.

### **Conclusion**

We argue here that it is high time we take water and rights over it seriously. Realising the importance of water as a source of life, even Gandhiji suggested that the only solution to this problem is community ownership of water. We suggest further that only an all-woman committee should decide the allocation of water, because they are most likely to accord highest priority to domestic use. The mode of operationalising this priority is proposed in this paper.

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC SECURITY AND CARE**

Mirai Chatterjee

### **SOCIAL SECURITY FOR THE INFORMAL SECTOR**

Ninety-three per cent of the Indian workforce is informal. More than 60 per cent of India's GDP comes from the informal economy. Of the women's workforce, more than 94 per cent are informal workers. They have no fixed employer–employee relations, and many are self-employed. They work long hours for very low wages in difficult and often hazardous conditions or earn very low income. They often have to face multiple and frequent risks which compound their poverty and vulnerability. Sickness, accidents, the need to care for a young child, old age and other events in a worker's life cycle affect her ability to work and earn. Without social security that takes care of these needs, a worker cannot attain work and income security. Lack of social security to take care of the various risks restricts workers' productivity as well.

Conversely, without work security, a worker cannot have access to health care and other services, because she needs money to pay for these. But with no work and income security, she has to borrow from money-lenders and others, pawn her jewellery and even sell her land and other assets.

Thus, for working people, both work and social security are needed. One without the other has limited value. They are two sides of the same coin.

#### **Right to social security**

SEWA is a union of one million women workers in the informal economy in nine Indian states. As working people actively contributing to our nation's economy and to society, we demand the right to social security. We are responsible for generating wealth and prosperity in our country. We need this economic support to survive and to provide a better future for our children. We are only asking for what is our due: work and income security, food security and social security. Enshrining the right to social security in the law is an important step towards basic security and full employment.

Social security includes basic services that provide protection to workers and promote their well-being. It is the means through which workers can make their lives secure, safe and productive. Once they have some social security, they do not slip deeper into poverty; they may even come out of poverty and move towards self-reliance.

Social security must include at least the following elements:

- health care – preventive, curative and promotive care
- child care – holistic care of the young child, including nutrition, health care and child development activities
- insurance – protection against as many risks as possible, including sickness, accident, maternity, assets
- shelter and basic amenities – a roof over one’s head with water, sanitation and electricity
- pension – to provide regular income in old age.

This right to social security should be translated into concrete action on the ground in favour of working people.

In October 2008, the Indian Parliament passed a landmark act, The Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Act, giving statutory benefits such as insurance, pension and maternity benefits to informal workers for the first time. The Act states that these workers must obtain at least a minimum level of social security. This is to be ensured by a National Social Security Board and state-level ones as well. These boards will be entrusted with developing appropriate schemes.

At present, almost all of the social security schemes developed are restricted to Below Poverty Line (BPL) families. The worker’s name has to be on the government’s BPL list to qualify as a beneficiary of the various schemes. The net result of this approach is that large numbers of poor and deserving workers are left out of the ambit of social security schemes. Additionally, social security schemes organised by the government’s labour, rural development, urban development, women and child and health departments usually do not reach the poorest workers due to lack of political will, poor management, logistical issues, inadequate funds, poor fund management and corruption.

However, there are several categories of workers who are covered by labour legislation, enabling them to access social security. This legislation has resulted in establishing Workers’ Welfare Boards for specific workers. These boards are tripartite in nature –they have representatives of workers (unions and others), employers and the government’s labour department. Funds for social security are collected by way of a cess (tax) levied on the particular industry involved. These monies are then used to set up social security programmes for the workers, such as insurance, health care, child care, housing and pensions.

These boards also register all the workers and give them identity cards, a very important right for the workers. For the first time, their presence and economic

contribution is being recognised. And the identity cards help to reach services and benefits to workers, as they each now have a name and a face. Several groups of workers including bidi workers, construction workers, head-loaders, salt workers, mine workers and others are entitled to social security in this way.

Implementation of the actual social security benefits varies by state and, most often, by the pressure brought by the workers through their unions or cooperatives. When working poor people organise and build up their collective strength and bargaining power, then the state takes notice and develops appropriate and participatory governance structures and implementation mechanisms. This has been the experience of both the welfare boards in Kerala and those in Gujarat, created by the pressure of informal women workers organised in SEWA. For example, in Gujarat, SEWA helped set up a board for *mathoda* workers (head-loaders) and to develop social security schemes. *Bid*<sup>27</sup> workers also obtained social security and other benefits when they organised in SEWA, as their collective strength ensured implementation.

If we are to reach the workers of our country, unions, co-operatives, self-help groups, *mahila mandals*<sup>28</sup>, farmers' groups, *panchayats*, NGOs and others in civil society will have to be involved in implementation. Systems and procedures that are simple, speedy and transparent will have to be developed. Instead of government schemes with little implementation, we want mechanisms that will ensure that the services and benefits actually reach poor people, and in a timely and efficient manner.

We have learned that when poor people themselves implement social security services, and through their own people's organisations or NGOs, it is empowering. It promotes further organising and empowerment of the poorest of workers, and especially women. It also brings out practical, constructive mechanisms for action on social security, since the workers know best how systems can be tailored to their needs.

Thus, we want social security as a right, and with implementation, as far as is possible, by, or in close partnership with, people's organisations and NGOs.

### **VimoSEWA**

VimoSEWA is the national insurance cooperative promoted by SEWA. Currently 150,000 women and their family members are insured by VimoSEWA. It is India's first national insurance organisation run and owned by women workers themselves.

---

27 Thin cigarette made of small amount of tobacco flake wrapped in a tendu leaf and secured with colored thread at both ends.

28 Women's associations.

VimoSEWA is governed by a board of 14 directors, of which 60 per cent are the poor women themselves from different parts of India. There is a team of 60 trained staff, many of whom are insurance professionals.

VimoSEWA develops different insurance packages for its members, comprising both life and non-life products. Hence, rural and urban women can choose to cover themselves for as many risks as they would like. They are the policyholders, and through them their whole family is insured. Most of VimoSEWA's members choose to cover themselves through an integrated insurance package covering life, accident, health and asset.

Insurance products are sold by insurance promoters called *aagewans*, who undertake education on the concept of insurance, which is new for women workers in India. These women earn a commission on every policy sold and assist with claims-servicing. They are also union members and live in the very neighbourhoods and villages where their SEWA sisters live and work. The premium they collect is deposited in VimoSEWA.

The premium collected at VimoSEWA is then forwarded to large insurance companies with whom VimoSEWA has a rigorous process of negotiation to ensure that it gets the best deal for its members. Thus the risk of insurance is borne by the insurance companies. Claims-servicing is done in-house by VimoSEWA by a claims committee comprising SEWA union leaders and professional staff. The claims thus passed are sent to the insurance company for reimbursement.

In Ahmedabad city and three rural districts, VimoSEWA has linked up with 26 hospitals – government, charitable trust and private ones – enabling our insured members to get reimbursement at the hospital bed itself. We call this “prospective reimbursement”. Members can only obtain care at these hospitals. They phone *aagewans*, who process their claim and give them cash at their hospital bed. Hence, they no longer have to borrow from money-lenders or relatives.

In three rural districts we have tie-ups with three hospitals in each district, and similar services are given to the village women.

All data is maintained by VimoSEWA, with each insured member having a unique identification number. Thus we are able to track each and every member and her claims history. VimoSEWA now has 17 years of invaluable actuarial data on the claims patterns and risks borne by poor people in India.

### **Policy recommendations**

1. The Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Act should be implemented, but with the necessary funds and implementation mechanisms to give it 'teeth'.
2. Implementation of the above law and other social security programmes should, wherever possible, be implemented by membership-based organisations and NGOs.
3. Child care programmes, including integrated child development services (ICDS), should be developed and implemented in a manner that is beneficial to workers, especially women, in the informal sector. For example, full day care (or at least care according to women's working hours) should be made available.
4. Health insurance should be implemented as a priority, including maternity benefits.
5. Micro-insurance and pension by people's organisations should be encouraged by amending or enacting regulations. For example, the Rs 100 crore (Rs 1 billion) capital requirement should be reduced by at least a third, and service tax should be removed.
6. Essential drugs, as per the World Health Organization's Essential Drugs List, should be made available at all private health care systems. Women's groups and self-help groups could help in the sale of these, as is being done by the SEWA-promoted health workers' co-operative.
7. Dai schools for midwives and balsevikas schools for day care workers should be set up at district level. Thus local, informal women workers will get access to training and will provide services to their communities while getting employment.
8. The state government should set up a Social Security Fund for workers of the informal sector, eliciting tax-exempt contributions from industry and others. The uses of this fund (insurance, child care, pensions etc.) may be decided by a board which includes workers' representatives.
9. Ration shops should be preferentially run by women's groups or self-help groups to ensure proper implementation and, ultimately, food security.
10. Areas and villages and slums which continue to have high levels of malnutrition, especially of young children, should be identified. Special, targeted feeding, programmes, closely monitored by people's organisations, should be developed.
11. Slums should be upgraded for and with people's organisations and NGOs in every nagarpalika (municipality), big or small. This includes infrastructure development such as water and sanitation, electricity, roads etc.

There may be many more avenues for action. A few are mentioned here. We will have to act in our villages, in urban areas, and at the state, national and international levels, if we are to make social security for all workers a reality in our country.

## **ETHICAL SOURCING IN THE GARMENT SECTOR**

Home-workers add value through traditional artistic embellishment work to garments that are outsourced by international companies. Even though this vital work makes the garment more valuable and beautiful, home-workers are often the most vulnerable and economically deprived workers in the supply chain. They are exploited by layers of middlemen, their existence is denied by the suppliers, and they are not considered in ethical sourcing decisions. Home-work in the supply chain is a reality that the enlightened corporate world cannot afford to ignore. Many US and European garment retailers outsource to South Asia, China and other developing countries, and companies maintain competition between countries to keep sourcing prices as low as possible. Having competition at each level and many options available, the entire garment business and sourcing is very competitive. While suppliers and contractors survive because of their capital influence, the home-workers are unable to negotiate and hence are dependent on the decisions of the contractors.

Thirty million women in India work at home, many making a living from sewing and hand embroidery. They face numerous problems such as poverty, exploitation, very low or late pay, a lack of training and proper equipment, and health problems from poor working conditions.

SEWA organises home-workers in nine states in India. It has over one million members and has shown that the conditions of home-workers can dramatically improve through the approach of embarking on the collective strength of the women by means of organising them and through protecting and promoting their livelihoods. In 2006 SEWA established a groundbreaking embroidery centre in Delhi that supports embroidery home-workers. This model removes the layers of middlemen and has enabled home-workers to work directly with the suppliers of international brands such as Gap, Monsoon, Next etc. Through this unique initiative, SEWA has developed a model which ensures competitive rates, high-quality products, timely delivery and ethical sourcing of products, including elimination of child labour. The centre provides its members with a range of opportunities, services and support. It links members directly to textile suppliers and exporters, provides members with regular work at a fair price, and ensures members are paid on time.

Most of the women associated with SEWA's embroidery centres are from migrant families from the State of Uttar Pradesh and are familiar with the rudimentary skills of zari embroidery. Their skills are enhanced through training given by master trainers in the existing locations. These women embroidery workers visit the centre on a regular

basis – twice or three times a week – and collect work orders and raw material. On completion of the work, these members submit the finished product and receive their payment from the centre.

**Possibilities of improving the lives of poor home-workers: building the case from a successful community-led model promoted by SEWA in India**

SEWA negotiates piece-rates and timelines with the exporters on behalf of its members. The rates are derived from the time-motion study among the members, and the final financial agreement is arrived at with the consent of the embroidery workers themselves. In this manner, the income of hundreds of home-based embroidery workers in Delhi has almost doubled as women themselves decide the piece-rate, negotiate with the suppliers, and the income goes directly to them.

The overall activities of the embroidery centres include material distribution, quality control, record keeping and delivery of the finished goods. The embroidery centre is also a social meeting place for SEWA members. They come here, share their personal issues, and find solutions among themselves. Besides, the poor embroidery workers are provided with access to other SEWA support services including a crèche and education centre for members' children, financial services (savings, credit, insurance), provision of social security, health and safety training, and project management skills. Furthermore, SEWA has recently begun the process of linking the embroidery workers to the government scheme of Artisans' Insurance, which provides them with a legal identity under the Ministry of Textiles, along with medical benefits, compensation in case of any injury, and scholarship for their children.

SEWA's unique initiative for the women embroidery workers thus ensures their overall empowerment, as it not only enhances their economic status but also provides them with an opportunity to come out of the confines of their homes and take their own decisions. Above all, SEWA with the help of this model is striving to develop a business culture among the home-based embroidery workers through constantly interacting with them about the importance of timely completion of the work, and by upgrading their skills from time to time.

Supporting this centre provides a unique opportunity for retailers to fulfil their corporate social responsibilities and ethical commitments. It also provides an organised, reliable workforce from which to outsource. It shows that positive and mutually beneficial working relationships can be developed by acknowledging and working constructively with home-workers and the organisations that represent them.

SEWA wants to reach out and offer this opportunity to US-based companies operating in India. The SEWA model can be scaled up to serve the needs of more retailers and

can be replicated in all areas. SEWA is willing to train suppliers and contractors on this model and how it can promote transparency in the supply chain and at the same time maintain the business interest of retailers and suppliers.

It is time to grasp the opportunity to change the lives of poor home-working women in developing countries. The current garment-sector supply chain is complex and requires creative and practical joint solutions. The retailers need to be sensitised towards such community-led initiatives. If such initiatives are given preference in passing on more work orders, women will benefit directly. The retailers need to improve their purchasing practices, which become the basis for competition and exploitation at various levels. The SEWA model provides one such solution based on sound economic and social principles. Supporting such an initiative can develop customer appreciation for ethical sourcing, while improving the lives of thousands of home-workers who will have fair wages in their hands.

## THE CASE FOR SOCIAL POLICIES ON CARE WORK

Care giving is regarded primarily as a private matter, where women are assumed to take up care responsibilities. Given this, public policies are largely silent on care giving, and care givers and families are assumed to bear the cost of care giving – be it child care, old age care or care for disabled people. Further, the limited State policies on care are still based on the notion of a ‘male breadwinner model family’, which assumes that men take primary responsibility for earning, and women for caring. Thus, in families where women from within are not available for care giving, they have to depend on individual arrangements, either hiring the services of paid domestic workers or that of private arrangements. This (as has been argued by feminist scholars) not only has huge cost implications for families but also results in unjust consequences for women. One such dimension is its impact on women’s participation in the labour market. Care work often affects women’s entry into the labour market and their ability to participate on equal terms.

The issue assumes special significance under the liberalisation framework. Policies forcing low-skilled women to take up employment, regardless of the conditions of employment, assume that any job is more beneficial to families of these women than care work they provide at home. This comes from the notion that household work is not work and that reproductive work is a private responsibility, which has led to the devaluation of care work and of women who perform such work – whether paid or unpaid. Further, in the context of both men and women entering the labour market, State policies which are rooted in the male breadwinner model fail to acknowledge the need for sharing the care burden, raising serious concerns in the context of gender equality.

In many countries, the goal of economic and social policy during the last two decades or more has been either towards encouraging poor women to stay at home or pushing them to take up paid employment. Though there has been no explicit State intervention in this regard, in the context of India, economic reforms have tremendous impact on the livelihoods of a large section of the population. As a result, women are entering the labour market, which is reflected in an increased participation rate of women after 1999–2000. This increase characterises both overall trends as well as women in the so-called reproductive age-brackets.

The patterns of female employment suggest that the employment choices are constrained by their care responsibilities and the existence of a paid–unpaid work continuum. This has not only resulted in an increase in their work burdens but has

also segregated women to low-wage, low-productivity areas. Studies have shown that women are forced to work under exploitative conditions, and larger expansions are in segments which have long working hours, adverse terms of work, and minimal or zero social protection and job security.

Self-employment is on the rise and accounted for 61 per cent of female employment during 2004–05. In the non-agriculture sector, the increase in self-employment has been attributed to the expansion of the outsourcing system, leading to an increase in the number of home-based women workers, while in agriculture this is driven by the expansion of unpaid family labour. The agrarian crisis, leading to shrinking employment opportunities in rural areas, is resulting in a widespread migration to urban areas, sourcing the informal sector. In this, a significant trend is the sharp increase in the number of women working as domestic workers, such that domestic service has more than doubled its share in the total service-sector employment of women.

The most important feature which may be noted from the above pattern is that female employment continues to concentrate in areas akin to their care responsibilities or where they can easily combine both care work and 'employment'. Even in the event of economic compulsion, the pressure of house work is evident from the proportion of women who showing willingness to take up economic work provided such work is done at home. Of the 56.8 per cent reporting domestic duties in 2004–05, 35.7 per cent of the women in rural areas and 29.4 per cent of women in urban areas showed willingness to do work, if the work could be done at home.

The demand for paid care services (both child care as well as care for elderly people) is on the increase. Many middle-class families employ domestic helps to perform caring tasks as well as other domestic functions. The increased demand for care has accelerated the influx of female migrants from lower social hierarchy into paid economic activity. Though domestic workers are highly underreported in national statistics, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of workers by about 2.25 million in a short span of five years. Accordingly, the percentage of domestic workers in total female employment in the service sector increased from 11.8 per cent in 1999–2000 to 27.1 per cent in 2004–05. It is very likely that the market for care will accelerate its expansion in the years to come. Demographic and socio-economic trends all point in this direction. However, there is no law, at present, to regulate the sector. In India, domestic workers are absent from labour laws and are excluded even from the National Minimum Wages Act.

### **State and care provisioning**

Care for elderly and disabled people is yet to figure in any major way in State programmes/policies. There is a growing demand for elderly care, with a near

complete absence of institutional provisions. Largely on account of the campaign on child rights and education of children, care is now an aspect which figures off and on in many policies. Focusing on child welfare policy, the section seeks to illuminate and reinforce claims for public support for care work from a gender perspective.

Constitutionally, child development is a concurrent subject, which implies a shared federal and state responsibility. During the past half a century, provisioning of child care services has been limited to few interventions. Establishing labour rules (such as the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, and the Provision for crèches under the Factories Act, 1948) is one of the important interventions in this regard. However, given the low rate of workforce participation among women and the fact that more than 94 per cent of women workers are engaged in the informal sector, and thus beyond the purview of the law, the number of women who benefit from these provisions is very small. Furthermore, these initiatives are based on the female care model, eliminating possibilities of any redistribution of the care burden. The recent government initiative on child care leave for women in the public sector further reaffirms the gendered prejudices in social policies, reconfirming women's role as carers and men as 'non-carers'.

Apart from the provisions under the labour laws there have not been adequate initiatives or even thinking to address care requirements of families. Some interventions are recorded in the public supply of child care at the so-called 'pre-school level'. However, these initiatives are haphazard and minimal and do not address the requirements of many families. Families are left to themselves to manage their child care demands. There has been unprecedented expansion of early childhood initiatives such as day care centres and pre-schools in the private sector in the country. Formal private-sector provision is not affordable to many and remains limited. This demand is met primarily by engaging domestic workers or through informal networks of support. Though reliance on paid domestic workers has increased, this could again be accessed only by the better-off sections of society. In the context of chronic shortages in public services, family and informal networks are expected to fulfil an important role in poor families. It is true that poorer people rely more heavily on their family and other networks for care than the better-off. However, in the context of a diminishing number of 'carers' who would supply care silently and for free, a 'care vacuum' is soon to evolve.

The withdrawal of the State from investments in the social sector has added to the care burden of poor women. In the event of education and health services becoming unaffordable to many, women in the households are forced to take up these responsibilities in a major way. In the absence of any assured supply of public services, regular household maintenance, such as collection of water, also demands increased time from women. Further, the market-centred approach, which

seems to be the State's response at present, ignores the class and racial hierarchies among women. This not only has allowed the gender status quo to remain but has also resulted in further devaluation of care work. What is required is generous State support for care work along with investment in education, health and direct anti-poverty programmes, thereby enabling women to take decisions about care giving and wage work. Additionally, unpaid work needs to be redistributed among women and men through policies and programmes that facilitate burden sharing. This calls for a shift in policy approach from a male breadwinner model to that of dual earner model which would bring in the required social change as to how care work is valued and shared.

## CONCLUSIONS

Christa Wichterich

### A JIGSAW OF ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS

Taken together, the 12 essays form a kind of an agenda of alternative thinking, linking gender concerns with other social, livelihood and democratic concerns.

A precondition for drafting, planning or building economic alternatives from a feminist or women's rights perspective is a gendered socio-economic and political analysis. Thus underlying these 12 essays is an analytical map of problems, most of them gender-, class- and caste-specific. The good practices and the policy recommendations are responses to the current economic problems. Each alternative has the two dimensions of transformative intervention at the policy level and change of practices at the level of real economies, communities and people's lives.

One guiding principle is apparent: each alternative economic practice or structure has to include and benefit explicitly the weakest economic actors: women, *dalits* and *adivasi*.

Most of the essays are down to earth. Their starting points are women's micro-economic realities, their valuable contributions to survival, wealth and economic growth, on the one hand, and their vulnerabilities and disadvantages, on the other. Through this angle the authors point out economic interactions or relations which actually constitute women's struggle for survival and livelihood, and their strategies to get access to employment, resources, rights and bargaining power. They are inclusive instead of exclusive, based on co-operation instead of competition. They counter power imbalances and policies that work increasingly in favour of capital, the resource- and energy-devouring industrial model of production and the appropriation of community resources.

These alternative practices are in different formative stages. Some of the essays tell success stories of women's *sanghams* and co-operatives, and their economic activities which aim – at least in the long run – at a change of direction in certain sectors and markets. Others focus entirely on some particular improvement for poor people and more equality within the existing system. They are ambivalent or double-edged in the sense that they argue *within* and *against* the mainstream economic processes and policies. However, not all of them have a perspective which goes *beyond* the existing system.

Some of the articles focus on influencing macro-economic policymaking to bring about change. They redefine growth towards an inclusive, employment-oriented strategy and highlight the importance of coherent trade, finance, economic, labour and social policies which give preference to redistribution and development objectives. Thus they advocate a democratic reshaping of macro-economic policies. Again, some go beyond a narrow gender equality approach and beyond the mere re-regulation of financial markets to reduce the frequency of bubbles and crises; others focus on gender justice without questioning the whole systemic framework. However, they all stress that gender cannot be tackled as an isolated issue.

### **Towards an alternative paradigm**

The essays have four cross-cutting concerns in common which can be considered as core elements and building blocks for an alternative economic paradigm:

- organising of those who are poor in terms of resources, voice and power;
- the important role of the community and its control over the economy and resources;
- challenging neoliberal policies and the important role of the public sector; and
- economic and social security.

### **1. Organising and voice**

Alternatives need voice and space. One common element in many of the articles is the stress on organising and developing a collective identity to gain visibility, voice and recognition in society and in the markets. Only if people organise will they be able to counter the resistance of politically and economically powerful stakeholders or challenge vested interests. Only if they develop collective voice and strength can they apply pressure on governance regimes at the local and the national level. Collective agency is seen as a crucial tool to make a difference. A democratisation of the economy is needed in terms of inclusion of women informal workers, small peasants and street vendors, *dalits* and *adivasi* into decision-making processes.

SEWA is an outstanding example of how a community-based organisation developed a multitude of initiatives, tools and bargaining power bottom-up to cope with the complex interwoven problems of women. They didn't wait for the government to come to their rescue but invented their own collective support mechanisms. However, they have not let the government and policymakers off the hook but are constantly challenging municipalities and government policies and are trying to influence policymaking at local, national and international levels. For the latter, transnational organising and alliance building is a must.

Organising and exerting pressure on policymakers is a necessity from the local to the

international level to forge policy changes which take up the needs, demands and perspectives of the most needy.

## **2. Reclaiming community control and commons**

Awareness creation, community organisation and local leadership are preconditions for taking the economy back into people's own hands, and building step by step new structures towards the conversion and transformation of economic sectors. Reclaiming common resources such as water and land which are collectively owned, controlled and used by the communities is at the core of their livelihood rights and survival strategies. Commons are about communities. Collective agency is seen as a crucial tool to make a difference. The struggle of *adivasi* women in Uttar Pradesh who resisted eviction and reclaimed land opened up new opportunities for collective subsistence, livelihood and redistribution in the community – based on the assumption that land is not private property but a collective common resource.

The *sanghams* of DDS in Andhra Pradesh have already travelled a long way towards a self-reliant and food-sovereign agricultural system which is based on land and seeds as common community-managed resources. This is a kind of antithesis to the propagated Green Revolution model and aims at shielding resources from private and corporate control. The collective management generates a new kind of efficiency and productivity increasingly independent from outside markets, the central government and droughts. Unlike mainstream development trends, the locally controlled and community- or women-owned initiatives offer new perspectives distinct from global marketisation and privatisation.

## **3. Challenge policymaking**

The good practices and alternative initiatives and approaches need recognition, protection and support by legal and policy measures. Public policies at local and national levels have to be both enabling and constructive, protecting community-owned resources and spaces, and empowering marginal groups in society. Legislation on local community rights as well as on women's economic rights is an indispensable reference system for the enforcement of their entitlements to access land, water and public services, and to improve their employment and income opportunities.

It is the State's responsibility to redistribute wealth and welfare, and to balance various interests and the growing economic and social inequalities. The essays make policy recommendations which aim to abolish discrimination, ensure access to resources and security, and enforce rights. Those altered policies would have the potential to foster a more socially equitable, gender-just, sustainable development. The authors stress particularly the crucial role that government expenditure, public provision of services and State regulation of markets have to play, instead of the State withdrawing from its economic, regulatory and social tasks within the neoliberal

policy framework. The authors regard demands for more State control and legislation, social provisions and protection of weak actors by the State to ensure fair dealing in the markets as common sense to protect people with limited assets such as income and capital, land and water, power and political influence.

In areas where the gendered analysis – for example, of taxation policies – is pioneering work, the outline of gender justice still has a very exploratory character. Contrary to an elimination of gender bias and gaps, and to a focus on gender justice in macro-economic policies – for instance, with the help of a tool such as Gender-Responsive Budgeting – some authors address a complete change of direction of policies and of the terms of the debate at the national as well as the international level. This is also a challenge to the State to shift priorities away from its neoliberal path based on the Washington Consensus towards development objectives, democratisation of the economy and decentralised solutions which centre around people’s needs, and are driven and managed by communities rather than by big corporations. Many of the authors refer to Gandhian parameters of development.

Political institutions have to give way to democratic mechanisms which allow local populations to control their own resources, make their own decisions and enforce social regulations. This, however, calls for the public responsibility of the State to assist building people’s control over seeds, land, water and vital public services, to protect community rights and common property against vested interests and to reverse the trend of commodification and private appropriation.

#### **4. Social and economic security**

One cross-cutting theme of the essays is security in a broader sense and in various dimensions: economic, employment, income, social, food, livelihood, resource, and rights. This interdependent and interactive set of securities is a precondition and a means to overcome poverty, marginalisation and vulnerability. For example, commons as well as provision of care ensure security. There are two key elements or entry points for ensuring security: employment and access to commons. There is a focus on women’s labour in the informal sector and precarious forms of women’s employment that lack any security and render women poor and powerless. Again, the State has a significant role to play to create this multi-dimensional security with policy and legal measures and enforce it as a civil/citizenship right.

#### **In search of answers**

The 12 interventions predictably cover a broad range of political positions and perspectives, from Keynesianism to Marxism, from Gandhian to feminist and deconstructionist approaches. They don’t draft a coherent paradigm but mark a cornerstone on the way into a more socially equal, gender-just and sustainable

future. Some of the demands or perspectives contradict each other. While some of the authors argue against dependency on foreign markets and the obsession with exports, SEWA hopes that it can bargain a fair deal for home-based garment workers and socially responsible corporations abroad. While one author does not believe in Gender- Responsive Budgeting as a tool for more gender justice, another ascribes a lot of transformative potential to that tool vis-à-vis various policies.

Many areas are not covered and still have to be explored. For example, what about the role of money in our economy? Can we do without money; do we need other, local currencies? What about consumption? How can we solve the dilemma of boosting consumption to create employment, and the need for a different mode of consumption to combat climate change and protect scarce resources, including biodiversity and water? Can consumer power regulate markets and the corporate sector? Where do we want community control, and where State control? How much planning, regulation and control by the State is necessary or desirable? How far is the State reproducing gender roles, stereotypes and existing power relations? In this context, we need to further clarify notions and concepts such as what 'public' means as opposed to 'common'.

Many questions are unanswered. Would South–South trade actually make a difference, and under which preconditions? To what extent can big corporations operate in a socially responsible manner and avoid the race to the bottom? What potential do the *panchayati raj* institutions have to democratise the local economies? How do we overcome the existing economic power structures? How do we cope with hierarchies among communities, among women, *dalits* and *adivas*? What strategies and which tools do we need for this? Are the potentials of ICT for democratisation able to outweigh their implications for total commercialisation and building new IT elites? Who could be potential allies?

Further discussions on alternatives are needed. Good practices need to be shared and promoted. Ideas about alternatives or visions must be nurtured, further developed and finally fed into actual policymaking. We have more questions than answers. But we have made a start.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

- Mirai Chatterjee** – Co-ordinator of Social Security at SEWA; responsible for SEWA's health care, child care and insurance programmes; Chairperson of the National Insurance VimoSEWA Co-operative and of Lok Swasthya, a health co-operative
- Ritu Dewan** – Head of the Centre for Women's Studies, Department of Economics at the University of Mumbai; Consultant to the Planning Commission of the Government of India
- Jayathi Ghosh** – Professor of Economics at the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Member of the National Knowledge Commission reporting to the Prime Minister of India
- Anita Gurumurthy** – Director of IT for Change; Associate of the International Gender Network: Gender at Work; Board member of ISIS International Manila
- Devaki Jain** – Development economist; Member of the erstwhile South Commission; Former Director, Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi; Consultant to the Planning Commission of the Government of India
- Renana Jhabvala** – National Co-ordinator of SEWA; Chairperson of SEWA Bharat and SEWA Bank; Chairperson of the WIEGO Board; Consultant to the Planning Commission of the Government of India
- Sanjay Kumar** – Co-ordinator with SEWA Bharat; Managing Trustee of SEWA Delhi Trust; PhD in Micro Finance; development photographer
- Kalyani Menon-Sen** – Independent researcher and feminist activist based in New Delhi; focus on the impact of macro-economic policies on women; Member of the Executive Committee of Jagori, New Delhi; Member of the Working Group on 'Empowerment of Women' for the Eleventh Five-Year Plan
- Yamini Mishra** – Executive Director, Centre for Budget and Government Accountability; New Delhi; Consultant to the Planning Commission of the Government of India
- Alka Parikh** – Associate Professor with DAIICT, Gujarat; PhD from Cornell, USA; work experience in NGO, corporate and academic sectors
- Neetha Pillai** – Senior Fellow at the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS); PhD in Economics; earlier Co-ordinator at the Centre for Gender and Labour at the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute
- P.V. Sathesh** – Director, Deccan Development Society, Hyderabad; developmental communication specialist
- Parminder Jeet Singh** – Director of IT for Change; Special Advisor to the convening group for the UN Internet Governance Forum; Member of the Strategy Council of UN's Global Alliance for ICTs and Development
- Barbara Specht** – Advocacy Officer at WIDE, based in Brussels, Belgium; M.A in Political Science
- Christa Wichterich** – Independent writer and feminist activist based in Bonn, Germany; PhD in Sociology; Member of the Scientific Board of attac Germany; member of WIDE





WIDE

59, Rue Hobbéma | 1000 Brussels | Belgium

Tel.: +32 2 545 90 70 | Fax: +32 2 512 73 42 | [info@wide-network.org](mailto:info@wide-network.org) | [www.wide-network.org](http://www.wide-network.org)