

GENDER DIMENSION OF WEALTH DISTRIBUTION:

ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIA

By

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In Indian Society, the inequalities among the different sections of people are prevalent in terms of economic and social status but it becomes more conspicuous when it is viewed from the gender perspective. The concept of gender refers to the socially defined characteristics of men and women, which are shaped by historical, economic, religious, ethnic and cultural factors. To quote **Oxfam Gender Training Manual**:

Gender not only varies from one culture to another but it also varies within cultures over time; Culture is not static but evolves. As societies become more complex, the roles played by men and women are not determined by culture but by socio-political and economic factors.

The classical economists like John Stuart Mill recognised that historical and social factors played an important role in determining the distribution of income. Historically, in most cultures women have been made to depend on men, both within the family and in society at large. Because of their economic dependence women became a silent, passive, powerless lot. However, the level of this dependence has varied from culture to culture and in the Indian context, from one caste to the other.

In numerous households, women are more disadvantaged in comparison to men because of their inability to mobilize the resources, including their own labour power independently. They have almost no say in the decision making within the household and the community. Different statistical estimates indicate that disparities exist between Indian male and female in terms of literacy level, work participation-rate and income distribution. Women's mobility is restricted and there is a highly rigid sexual division of labour, heavily tilted in favour of men. The disadvantageous position of women in society has a great impact on the existing gender relations definitely which further reinforces inequities in the distribution of wealth between men and women.

Everywhere, women as a group, enjoy fewer advantages and work longer hours than men. Women's work and opinions are undervalued. In many countries women earn less than men, are prevented from owning land, face numerous obstacles to holding positions of authority, and face many threats of violence just because they are women. A starting point of the gender and development analysis is recognizing women's subordinate position. According to United Nations Statistics

- Women perform 67% of the world's working hours
- Women earn 10% of the world's income;
- Women are 2/3 of the world's illiterates; and
- Women own less than 1% of the world's property

The gender inequality is strengthened within the family through allocation of productive resources, creation of opportunities, division of labour and many other forms of socialization process. In most parts of India, it is guided by patriarchal values, caste, ethnic and religious norms which have significant impact on economic and political system. Girls and women are expected to keep the family prestige intact through altruism sacrificing their desires. It is patriarchy that puts considerable restrictions on women. Caste and patriarchy work together. In our caste-ridden society, women are at the receiving end. For example, among the upper castes, widow remarriage is restricted and widows are considered impure and socially ostracized. Almost all the castes which follow patriarchal values have strong preference for male children and exercise tremendous control on their female members. Thus women's freedom is curtailed down by the rules and norms of social institutions which necessarily follow patriarchy.

Poverty and deprivation are widely prevalent in India and gender inequality essentially plays an important role in it. That is why women headed households are mostly poor and vulnerable in respect of ensuring food security. In spite of being the sole earning member of the family, these women are mostly deprived of productive assets (land, livestock, etc.), literacy, necessary information or any steady source of employment and income. On the other hand, they are bound by strict social norms which go against their interest for earning their livelihood. This is true for the women from each class and caste because gender cuts across all the divisions of caste and class in our society where men enjoy more power than women. So the problems of gender inequality can not be solved without a radical distribution of power within family, community and state.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

In India, women constitute a sizable proportion of the total population. The neglect of women and their oppression is seen in all fields-health, education, employment, politics, etc.

Women in India have a lower life span than men and the mortality rate among women and girls is very high compared to men. The literacy rate for women in India is also very low. It was 39.4% in 1991 as compared to the literacy rate of men which was 63.9%. In fact, in most families, the birth of a girl is unwelcome. Consequently there are today increasing cases of female foeticide and infanticide. All this has adversely affected the sex ratio in the country from 972 female per 1000 males in 1901 to 927 in 1991.

The discrimination against women can be seen at two levels

1. At home and in the community
2. At work where they are grossly exploited and given unskilled jobs or low wages.

Women suffer this discrimination and oppression even though they make a major contribution to the development of society. They are responsible for the family's well being. Right from morning to night, it is woman who keeps the home going. She cooks, washes, cleans and looks after the children and is responsible for the upbringing of the children and thus moulds the future generation.

Yet, it is the woman who has to suffer gross discrimination and domestic slavery and harassment, early and forced marriages, the burden of dowry, drunken husbands, cruelty of in-laws, frequent pregnancies, ... etc.

A woman's role is not restricted to home alone. In order to survive and to cope with the increasing cost of living, she has to work to supplement the income of the families. Besides her work at home, a woman has to labour in factories, or toil in the fields for eight to ten hours a day, most often without adequate wages & social benefits. Though she may do the same work as her male co-workers, she receives much less in return. She has no control on what she earns, it is controlled by her husband.

This paper aims at exploring the various factors responsible for the gender disparity in wealth distribution and the measures taken by the Government as well as the civil society. The various factors are the historical, social, patriarchal, economic and industrial. J.S. Mill was right when he said that historical and social factors played an important role in determining the distribution of income. His statement is still more applicable to the inequitable distribution of wealth between men and women.

A historical study of women in India reveals that there were distinct stages of rise and fall in their share in wealth. Though women in the (early) Vedic times enjoyed equal status with men both in income and share in the property, their conditions deteriorated considerably after the Hindu law-giver Manu had made women entirely dependent on men and subjected her to the authority of a father, husband and son in the different periods of her life as daughter, wife and mother. His dictum was that "**for women there can be no freedom at any stage in life**". This position of women continued throughout the Hindu period (upto 14th century) and was reinforced by the Muslim rulers in the medieval period, whose custom and tradition were noted for the complete subordination of women by men and which considered women as inferior to men. The Indian woman was treated as an appendage of man with a distinct and meekly accepted conception of her family duties and obligations. The advent of British power did not have any immediate impact on the economic and social aspects of the lives as they did not want to interfere in this social fabric. Only through their English Education did they make subtle attempt to change their attitudes towards women. Though Indian government has taken series of efforts in equating women with men, it did not have its desired result.

The Indian social condition is fully governed by the caste system which is based on the birth of an individual. Women have been kept in a state of dependence and subjection all through their lives. As daughter, it was to her father and mother she owed submission, as wife, to her husband, to her father-in-law and to her mother in law and as widow, to her sons. At no period of her life could she consider herself her own mistress. Patriarchal

attitudes have largely contributed to the exacerbation of this phenomenon by denying women their rightful share of land and property on the one hand and reducing their chances of well paid employment on the other. Therefore by keeping women with their low paying work, their potential to cross educational hurdles and acquire decent jobs is sapped. This situation is further aggravated by the advent of new multinational companies and industries in the name of development which has only marginalized the women folk. The female workers who were engaged in traditional occupations like weaving and artisan trade were displaced and uprooted and their place is taken by men.

WOMEN'S WORK IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR

Data for India shows that more than 95% of women workers were engaged in the informal sector activities in 1991. Apart from women's role in household maintenance and reproductive activities, the major reason for this seems to be the extreme economic insecurity of poor households, particularly female headed households, and their reliance upon multiple income earning strategies for survival.

Despite the large number of women in this sector, even leading it to be termed the 'female sector', and the significance of her work in economic survival, the kind of jobs that women do, their skills and their low earnings have continued to be non-issues for a long time. They are left unrecorded in the collection and selection of facts in national surveys and statistical enumeration and as such remain unrecognised by the public, policy makers and the government. They are further subsumed in generalised categories which do not account for contributions in the form of household chores or assistance in primary/secondary production on non-contractual basis etc. The Human Development Report 1995 (UNDP) reveals that women's economic contributions are still undervalued to the tune of US\$ 11 Trillion a year internationally.

Reflecting on this issue, gender focused analysis of the late 1980s started to question not only the invisibility of women's work but also the segregation and differentiation between men's and women's work in the informal sector of the economy. Men were found to be performing the more skilled manual work or selling more profitable lines of products, while women were confined to the lowest paid, sometimes unpaid tasks. For example, the man may have a food stall on the street while it is the woman who cooks and supplies food to the stall; in the agricultural sector the man accesses technology which eases the burden of his labour, while the woman continues to contribute her labour for the productivity of the field; the man vends the more expensive lines of products and so on. A major reason for this segregation appears to be the sexual division of labour within the household and also the unequal resource allocation in the domestic sphere, including the control and distribution of capital for investment, equipment and tools.

AGRICULTURE SECTOR

According to UN Report of 1996 women's labour force participation in agricultural as well as in non-formal employment is increasing and economic participation rates are higher in rural than in urban women. However, problems of measuring women's

participation in subsistence agriculture and the informal sector tend to bias women's rural economic activity rates. As of 1994, female labour force participation is higher in South Asia at 55% followed by South-East Asia at 42%, East Asia 35% and Central Asia 33% (UN 1996).

Household work which is unrecognised and unpaid consumes around half the time and energy. It is estimated that unpaid household work done by women in developed countries constitute 25% to 40% of Gross National Product (GNP) while much of the work done by the rural women of the developing countries does not carry any monetary value nor is computed in GNP.

RURAL WOMEN

Rural women are fully engaged in agriculture and allied activities, including small farm agriculture, livestock, food processing, gathering, small trading and vending. Women successfully diversified their off-farm activities such as poultry farming, animal husbandry, bee keeping, tailoring, bidi (leafcigarettes) wrapping, construction sites labour, work in factories and worksheds; providing services such as cleaning and washing. The agriculture sector is the largest women employer. More than 50% women are employed in agriculture sector as wage labour.

Primarily rural women are engaged in agriculture and other off-farm activities and thus their potential farm income is confined. Their earning capacity is further depressed as they are mostly involved in activities like sowing, weeding, hoeing, cutting of fodder as well as harvesting and processing etc. which are considered as normal functions or otherwise carry a small profit. Since the introduction of mechanised farming has reduced the demand for farm labour which has indirectly affected the opportunities for both the work and income of the rural women.

WAGES AND WAGE DIFFERENTIALS

Equal pay is not only a measure to promote social justice, but also a means for the efficient utilisation of the labour force. The differential between men's and women's wage rates may be justified in terms of objectively established differences in efficiency and capacity, but all too often, it arises from traditional attitudes towards women and their work. Keeping the above in mind, equal pay has been regarded as an important issue by the ILO since its inception and provisions for ensuring the same are also found in Indian law.

The prevalence of the Minimum Wage Regulations should legally make it difficult to lower wages or discriminate between men and women in the payment of wages, in agriculture as well as other employment sectors. Further, gender discrimination in wages often occurs covertly, through a clear segregation of tasks to be performed by men and women, with the former receiving a higher wage rate than the latter.

In both rural and urban areas, women's wages in this sector are between 40 to 50 per cent of men's wages. Part of the reason for this is the clear segregation of work between men and women in the manufacturing sector, with women engaged in a lot of home based piece-rate work. The other element, however, is that a lot of women's work in manufacturing is in the form of unpaid family work, that is not recognised or evaluated properly.

The understanding of these structures and processes of discrimination is however only the first step towards removing them. While the need to have comprehensive information on women workers in the organised and unorganised sectors is an invaluable step towards this aim, it is also important to strategise across sectors/occupations to strengthen women workers themselves, their organisers and managements as well as to influence policy makers. "What has been emphasised by the ILO reference guide is the need to effect multi-pronged strategies across sectors and organisations (government, employers, trade unions, NGOs, women's organisations, ILO) for the overall empowerment of women workers.

ROLE OF EDUCATION IN EQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH

Economic deprivation of women is also associated with their lower level of literacy and education in comparison to men. India's literacy rate has increased more than three times since 1947, yet India is still first in the world in terms of the number of illiterate persons – 30 percent of the global total. According to Govt. of India, female literacy (43%) is 26 percentage points below the male literacy (69%). There are 91 million more adult illiterate females than males in India.¹ The low level of female literacy is definitely linked with gender relations. It can be noted that, the progress of female education is significantly slow in those areas of India, here "the gender division of labour, patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence, village exogamy, hypergamous marriage, and related patriarchal norms tend to be particularly influential."² The gender gap in literacy level is very high in some of the North Indian states particularly, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa where atrocity against women is more prominent.

The reduction in gender gap in literacy rate has a significant impact on some other parameters of development including infant mortality rate, female labour force participation and gender bias in survival. A recent study³ indicates that higher levels of female literacy and labour force participation are associated with lower levels of female disadvantage in child survival. The high literacy rate is certainly associated with the reduction in fertility rate too. As for example, the fertility rate is only 1.8 in Kerala, the state which has achieved highest female literacy rate too. The educated women definitely have better knowledge of family planning as well as willingness to follow birth spacing norms to keep the size of family small. This not only reduces their burden of reproductive work, but also leads to basic change in gender relation as women can get more time to participate in productive and political work. That is why, women have played an important role in Kerala's economic and political life, and to some extent in property relations and education movement.⁴

LABOUR MARKET DISCRIMINATION

Economic deprivation is one of the reasons of dis-empowerment of women. It has resulted from many age-old social practices like purdah, dowry, caste system, kinship and many other forms of patriarchal values and norms (inheritance of land to male heir, restriction of mobility of girls and women, strong preference for male child, etc.). In patrilocal, patriarchal, patrilineal joint family system, the women's role is confined within domestic sphere, allocating them a subordinate status and power compared to men. Historically, the role of man is as bread earner and woman as home maker in our society. Stereotypes about women and men even make it natural that women and men do different jobs. It has significant impact on participation of women in labour market because the rigidity in division of labour between men and women perpetuates from family to workplace. The labour market is characterised as being highly segregated, horizontally and vertically. The horizontal segregation of the labour market is often said to be characterised by the position of women in the secondary labour market.⁵ They are involved in insecure jobs in unorganised sector with low wages, less facilities and lower prestige. The vertical division of labour market shows that very few women hold high positions in top ranking jobs, particularly in white collar jobs. It is connected to the horizontal division of labour as 'women's jobs' and often offer fewer possibilities for advancing to higher levels.⁶

According to 1991 census, the female labour force participation rate in India was only 16 percent and merely 4.2 percent of the women were employed in organised sector. According to 1989 estimation, the percentage share of female employment to total public sector employment varies considerably from one state to other in India. For example, in Maharashtra, around 30 percent public sector employees are female while in Bihar, Orissa, U.P., M.P. J&K and West Bengal their percentage share did not even exceed 10 percent.⁷ Less than nine percent employees in All India Services are women. This gives a clear indication of labour market discrimination against women in India which results in their further disempowerment. To challenge the gender division of labour with a social order is to challenge the basis of core gender identities.⁸

Although the gender bias is more likely to get reduced with the increase in participation of female in the labour force, it should not be assumed that the gender relations will change automatically as women become equal partners in economic development. For example, in many households of urban and rural India, the women labourers do not have control on their own income and in some of the workplaces payment of equal wage to men and women is yet to become a reality. The gender based wage discrimination continues even for identical tasks performed by men and women such as weeding or even in a typical female labour intensive tasks such as transplanting.⁹ The results of the Third Occupational Wage Survey (1975-79) show that women's earnings in different types of industrial establishment were seldom equal to male earnings and typically ranged between 50-70 percent of male wage levels¹⁰. So, the mere participation of women in labour market does not ensure any significant change in gender relation either in household or in workplace. It can be possible, if women organise themselves through

their collective participation in economic decision making processes, by being members of Self Help Groups, democratically functioning co-operatives or trade unions.

THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION ON EQUALITY OF GENDER

The independent India through its constitutional framework guaranteed the formal equality for both men and women. The constitution of India not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women for neutralising the cumulative socio-economic educational and political disadvantages faced by them.

The Indian constitution guarantees certain fundamental rights which are justifiable and enforceable by the courts. **Article 14** guarantees equality before law, **Article 16** – provides for equality of opportunities in matters of Public employment for all citizens and **Article 19** grants the right to freedom of speech, assembly and to form associations or unions. While these may be termed positive rights, the negative rights include **Article 15**, which prohibits discrimination on grounds including sex; and **Article 23** which prohibits traffic in human beings and forced labour. Within the fundamental rights, Article, **Article 15(3)** makes a special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discrimination in favour of women. **Article 39(a)** – further mentions that the State shall direct its policy towards securing for all citizens, men and women equally, the right to an adequate means of livelihood. Some of these articles have been legislated upon and transformed into enforceable laws. Many remain unfulfilled in both law and actuality.

GOVT. INITIATIVES

In the years following independence despite the constitutional provisions and the enactment of various laws, it was felt that the slow pace of social change and economic change and the actualities of the enforcement of rights for women, required comprehensive examination. To this end, in 1971, the **Committee on the Status of women in India** (CSWI), was constituted by the Government of India, which submitted its report in 1974.

The CSWI report revealed the decline in the number and proportion of women workers in industry and the wage disparities between men and women. It pointed out that over 90% of women workers were engaged in the unorganised sector and were outside the reach of most laws that seek to protect the security and working conditions of labour. The CSWI concluded that labour laws concerning women had remained restricted to the attitude of protection and welfare and had not reflected the shifting emphasis towards equality and greater employment opportunities for women. This was despite ratification by Government of India of ILO Conventions of 2951 (No.100) and 1958 (No.111), regarding equal remuneration and against discrimination respectively. It was on the CSWI recommendation that in 1976, the **Equal Remuneration Act** was passed and in 1986, The Factories Act was amended to extend the right to create facilities to a relatively larger number of women employed in factories.

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON SELF EMPLOYED WOMEN

While, in the CSWI report, the review of labour laws had concentrated on the special clauses that provided for the protection and welfare of women workers, Shramshakti expanded the ambit of investigation to include the impact and enforcement of general labour laws and their specific impact on the majority of women workers. It highlighted the increasing atomisation of women's labour force and the downgrading of manual skills due to technological change, the marginalisation of the female workforce and the increasingly sweeping weight of unorganised work in the lives of working women.

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON RURAL LABOUR (1991)

In order to address the problems of inequality, the Commission recommended that an increase in the economic participation rate of women be brought about through, "self employment as well as wage employment, accompanied by occupational diversification to achieve the goals of better incomes and conditions of work for women workers."

Ownership of assets acquires importance for this and it was recommended that existing patrilineal inheritance laws, which discriminate against women be amended and provide co-ownership in land and productive assets be provided. The commission pointed out that in the Seventh Five Year Plan, the principle was enunciated that, whenever government distributes land, the title should be given jointly in the name of husband and wife.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PLANS ON GENDER EQUITY

The Five year plans of the Government of India have been the principal vehicles of the Government's policy towards development of the Indian economy. Under the First Five Year Plan (1951-56), the Central Social Welfare Board (CCSWB) was constituted, with a strong focus on welfare for women and for equal treatment for women. Although the welfare approach persisted, the Second Five year Plan (1956-61) recognised the need for the organisation of women as workers, highlighting the need for enabling facilities for women workers-maternity benefits, creches, equal pay for equal work and provisions for high skill training for women. The third, fourth and other interim plans (1961-74), focussed on a policy for women's education alongwith measures to improve maternal and child health services.

The Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) replaced the social welfare approach with the development approach. This recognised women's productive role and her contribution to the national economy and women were viewed not only as recipients of social goods but as contributors and efforts were made to remove the invisibility of women's economic contribution to the household and economy.

The Sixth Five year Plan (1980-85) shows a landmark in the history of women's development by focusing on a multi-disciplinary approach with emphasis of health education and employment.

The Seventh Five year Plan (1985-90) represents top priority for programmes to improve the status of women and operationalised the concern of equality and employment, generating awareness about their rights and privileges and training them for economic activity and employment. The focus was also on bringing them into the mainstream of national development. The Eighth five year plan (1992-97) continues emphasis on ensuring that the benefits of development in the different sectors do not circumvent women and that women must be enabled to function as equal partners and participants in the developmental process.

A major development in the empowerment of women is the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to the Panchayat Raj Act which requires One Third of the leaders in the elected Assemblies at the village, block and district levels and one-third of the posts of Sarpanch (Village Head) and Chairman of the 2 Block level Assemblies (Samities) and the district assembly (Zila Parishad) to be women. This is expected to bring a radical change in women's status and will generally increase their political participation.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT ON ESTABLISHING GENDER EQUITY

The administrative role of the government, in relation to promotion of women workers rights and gender equity can be broadly categorised into (i) enforcement of legal rights through the constitution and functioning of authorities and agencies stipulated by various laws, and (ii) implementation of various welfare, employment and training programme designed to promote working women's access to social and economic rights.

The administration of women workers rights operates through multiple agencies within different Ministries and Departments of the Government and various quasi-government and autonomous organisations. It is generally understood that the Department of women and Child Development (DWCD) under the Ministry of Human Resources Development, acts as the nodal centre within the government to guide, co-ordinate and review efforts for the advancement of women on gender equity.

Two autonomous statutory Commissions which have a special value for promotion of women workers rights have been constituted by enactments of the Parliament. The first is the National Commission for Women (NCW) set up in 1992, as a high level statutory body to oversee the implementation of constitutional and legal safeguards and the protection of women's rights and privileges. The Commission, while essentially retaining an advisory role to the parliament and the Government, has been conferred with the powers of a Civil Court in summoning evidence from individuals and government agencies to discharge its functions. The second is the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), set up with a similar wide ambit of powers. Both these Commissions have influence on government administration and are publicly accessible to women workers who seek redressal against violation of their rights.

DEVELOPMENT MEASURES FOR WOMEN

1995 has seen the International year of women and in the same year the Fourth International conference of women was held at Beijing. It was an impressive landmark. Since then dynamic women groups have sprung up all over the world making the world aware that woman, denied for centuries, of her rightful place in the sun, is now determined to make herself heard.

In theory, nations and various authoritative bodies accept that women are to be given equal rights as men. In practice, it is the contrary. Even though women are now employed in almost every area of life, they are not able to assume their full and proper role in accordance with their own nature.

Various developmental schemes and programmes were initiated by national and international organisations with the objective of emancipation and empowerment of women. Dr. Clarence Dias of the International Centre for Law and Development, lists various categories of the development projects which discriminate against women.

Ex : Some projects that are meant to help women further enslave them.

- Sewing machines overburden a woman, while the men use the income.
- the expansion of tourism: the employment of women in construction projects (some funded by world bank) exploits and displaces women
- the very projects the women work on, displaces them (Narmada Project)

National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) through its cooperation development programme in different parts of India, decided to promote the dairy farmers of women through cooperative movements. The role of agricultural cooperatives in the developing countries is considered as a tool in sustainable integrated rural development. Women's involvement and motivation in cooperatives can assist in equity, social justice and self-help development and encouraging women is organisations with requisite technical and management skill and credit facilities to their activities and operations. With a view to improving women's effectiveness of management cooperative and training. ASEAN women's Development Cooperative Forum (AWDCF) is conducting special training programmes for women.

Management cooperative training in India has been organised by three major cooperative development and financial institutions, namely, National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC); National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) & National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).

The dairy Federations in a number of states in India, including the Pradesh Cooperative Dairy Federation (PDDF) in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar State Cooperative Milk Producers Federation Ltd. (COMPEED) have taken the initiative for the formation of Women's Dairy Cooperative Societies (WDCS) wholly controlled and managed by women. The women's dairy programme in Uttar Pradesh has established 790 WDCS whilst in Bihar 623 WDCS have been formed. In fact, women account for more than 85% of the labour involved in dairy activities and yet their involvement in the sale of milk is less.

Self Employment women's Association (SEWA) has been organising poor and self-employed women in the rural areas of Gujarat in India. SEWA makes the rural women aware of their worker producer role and making women equal partners with men at all levels in developmental process and redistributive interventions. SEWA initiated income generating activities for the rural women, focusing on women living below the poverty line, and the socially deprived sections. The approach is thus need-based, geared towards income generating activities of the rural women.

THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Mission of the Church is to proclaim the message of liberation and this ecclesial mission demands that the Church herself be liberating, that is, that she engages herself actively in the task of promoting the integral liberation of man and women, such liberation includes also the human promotion, the fight against injustice, the participation in the effort to transform the world and to establish a more just and fraternal society.

One of the most beautiful things that Pope John Paul II has done is to make clear how Jesus Christ is the liberator of women in Chapter V of *Mulieris Dignitatem – The Dignity and Vocation of women* which he wrote in 1988 at the close of the Marian Year.

The Synod of Bishops, gathered in Rome in 1971 in order to reflect on the theme of "Justice in the World", established an essential link between the mission of the Church and the struggle for justice : The struggle for justice and the participation in the transformation of the world appear to us fully as a constitutive dimension of the proclamation of the Gospel which is the Mission of the Church for the redemption of the humanity and of its liberation from every oppressive situation.

Pope John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Asia* states (Church in Asia), "The Synod voiced special concern for women, whose situation remains a serious problem in Asia, where discrimination and violence against women is often found in the home, in the workplace and even within the legal system. Illiteracy is most widespread among women, and many are treated simply as commodities in prostitution, tourism and the entertainment industry. In their fight against all forms of injustice and discrimination, women should find an ally in the Christian community, and for this reason the Synod proposed that where possible the local Churches in Asia should promote human rights activities on behalf of women. The aim must be to bring about a change of attitude through a proper understanding of the role of men and women in the family, in society and in the church, through greater awareness of the original complementarity between men and women, and through clearer appreciation of the importance of the feminine dimension in all things human. The contribution of women have all too often been undervalued or ignored, and this has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. The Church in Asia would more visible and effectively uphold women's dignity and freedom by encouraging their role in the Church's life, including her intellectual life, and by opening to them ever greater opportunities to be present and active in the Church's mission of life and service."

In accordance with the Church doctrine, the church in India is striving to carry out this Ecclesial mission through its various Social organisations at Parish, Diocesan and regional levels. Caritas India, as the official organisation of the Catholic Bishops conference of India, has a special role to play in guiding and inspiring this common journey at various levels.

In 1979, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India had conducted a revealing survey on domestic workers, nationwide. Gradually, the National domestic workers' movement (NDWM) took shape, beginning in 1985, with a group in Tamilnadu, it spread to Mumbai and gradually to other parts of the country. Today, the NDWM is a registered body with 30,000 members belonging to its units in states such as Tamilnadu, Delhi, Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Punjab. (In Mumbai itself there are 30 groups which meet once a month).

The activities of the NDWM include: facilitating meetings of and for houseworkers, educating them about their rights, conducting leadership training to help their empowerment, providing opportunities to celebrate events like Diwali, Christmas, Id., crisis intervention and counselling; legal and medical aid; lobbying for a domestic workers bill, net working with other movements especially in the unorganised and marginalised sectors.

The goal of the movement are : work contracts for houseworkers (with minimum wage, work hours and leave), their legal recognition as "Workers", creating public awareness of their dignity and their rights.

Sangeeta was 16 years when she joined the Mumbai unit of NDWM five years ago. Empowered by it, she has succeeded in getting its demands implemented. She works eight hours a day from 6 am to 2 pm. She eats with her employers at the dining table. After lunch and rest, she attend a school for domestic workers run by the nuns at Regina Pacis, and is now in Std.VI. She earns Rs.2,500/- out of which she pays her employer Rs.500/- for board and lodge. (This was started by NDWM since it gives the domestic workers dignity to pay for their keep). Traditionally in India, domestic work has never been seen as productive work, contributing to national income and development. A concerted effort needs to be made to change traditional, male dominated attitudes and there by build respectability for domestic work, and thus empower them in the unorganised sectors to become assertive and vocal.

SPIRITUALITY OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Spirituality of inclusion and Connectedness.

The central point of this spirituality is our response to the invitation to a new way of relating with a reimagined God perceived as both male and female. Eliminating the sterile rationality of our binary vision, transacting the artificial division of our world into mutually exclusive opposites; men and women, rich and poor, white and black, powerful

and powerless ... accepting that we are two sides of the same creative principle ... upholding people of all cultures and persuasions.

Spirituality of Partnership and Synergism.

Its a call to deepen our capacity to work in co-responsibility, participation, discernment, decision, making, action, reflection ... Reinforcing the complementariness of male and female, their basic equality, mutuality and equity.

Spirituality of Questioning and Resistance.

Responding to the challenge of exercising our duty to speak the truth in love, to question the roles and models assigned to men and women, even when it makes us unpopular and exposes us to marginalisation and harassment.... Call to resist all forms of injustice, oppression and exploitation ... a resistance that will keep us whole and integrated.

Spirituality of Empowerment

Recognizing our own self worth as women and men so that in our enabling process we can affirm this worth in all others Empowering others by letting go of our own need to dominate.

Spirituality of Peace

Bringing together the feminine qualities of compassion, caring, nurturing Adopting non-violent strategies at the policy and decision making levels and implementing them in order to fulfill our mission of creating a future of PEACE.

Spirituality of Dialogue and Communion

Dialoguing with self, with God, with others and with our Environment in Faith is the essence of our Communion. Respect and acceptance of the other is the foundation of our Relationships, knowing the rhythms and principles of nature in our own bodies is the reason for our struggle for harmony.

ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS AND NGO'S

Attempt of the trade unions at organising women workers for equal pay with men, contract and casual have been going on for many years. There have been many success and many failures. Trade unions are also now attempting to sensitize men towards the problems and perceptions of women workers through education and training programmes. It is too early to say how much of a difference these initiatives are making but the process of change has begun.

The process of unionization has began in different parts of the country in the following sections like lime and brick, beedi workers, oil vendors, home based workers, vegetable

sellers, leather tanning workers, electronics and chemical units etc. The trade union activities focussed their issues on implementation of minimum wages for women, and the means applied by them were the legal interventions in high courts and the supreme courts.

The presence of the union has helped in bringing out the workers' perspective, especially of the women and among them, single women. The Union is also raising issues of sexual division of work amongst the male and female workers.

Unions in unorganised sectors such as anganwadis, beedi-making, construction, agriculture and the rural sector, are also campaigning for need-based minimum wages, inflation compensation and social security.

The National Campaign Committee for Rural Workers (NCCRW), an umbrella organization of all major rural workers' organisations, has been carrying out a campaign for the equal pay of the rural agricultural women workers and gained success.

As part of a campaign to organise the unorganised sector women workers, trade unions will have to make special efforts to promote the organization, as well as participation of women workers' in the trade union movements. The initiatives to be taken have to be both within the union movement as well as outside, at the level of government and employers' as well as women's organisations and NGOs;

Within the Union movement, it is not enough to involve women workers only in times of strikes / struggles, but unions should ensure that active women workers are given positions in the decisions making bodies of the union. Their contribution to the union should be recognised and not patronised. This would not only help in promoting involvement of women in the day to day activities of the union, but also help in putting women workers' issues on the collective bargaining agenda at the workplace. In the trade union election process, women being less in number (as also unorganised), end up not getting any effective representation especially when they are seen to be competing with male unionists for the limited number of posts.

Non-governmental organisations through mass mobilisation is spear heading the movement against 'gender discrimination in wealth distribution'. The NGOs through their awareness programme and dissemination of information and knowledge of rights and facilities among women created a conducive atmosphere for their equal share in the income generation programmes. The concept of self help programmes through NGOs penetrated into the rural areas and thereby empowered the women groups. The rural credit schemes generated funds for the unemployed women to start their own self employment projects like weaving, tailoring, toy making etc.

In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis in the Government on linking the administration of many programmes with non – governmental organisations Rastriya Mahila Kosh (National Credit Fund for Women) was set up in 1992 as an autonomous organisation working through the intermediation of NGOs in order to empower women

economically. Along with these specialised agencies, there are a host of credit institutions which promote the flow of developmental credit to poor woman in the informal sector. Chief among them are the nationalised banks and the NGOs are playing a key role in taking the credit schemes to the rural women folk.

BROAD STRATEGIES

- Create women's forums and organisations at the local, diocesan, district, state, regional and national level.
- Conduct leadership training and capacity building for grassroots women leaders and social activists.
- Organise forums for consultation, dialogue, colloquium and exposure – exchange programmes for social activists, women leaders and development workers for self conscientisation as well as to generate culturally rooted and environmentally viable alternative models of development.
- To generate awareness and demand for quality service and to impose a community system which makes local level government functionaries accountable to the people.
- Conduct participatory evaluation and planning process with NGOs to evolve a women's movement with a sense of direction by arriving at a common goal and strategies based on the grassroots women's agenda of action.
- Strengthen democratic institution and promote education for Peace, non – violence and interdependence of communities.
- Facilitate networking and collaboration between like – minded NGOs and GOs at the grassroots, state and national levels to promote a people centred development process and influence the trend of development in the country.
- Sensitize church and political leaders and administrative personnel towards policy changes and action in favour of women.
- Identify competent and committed grassroots women leaders and social activists and offer them structural support and solidarity.
- Keep up qualitative link with Women Awake groups and offer them timely support and financial assistance.
- Evolve contents and methods of training programmes in areas like leadership, gender sensitivity and participation, development education and communication, finance and organisation management etc. and prepare training modules for them. Make available appropriate resource material for social activists.

In conclusion, this paper aims at gender equity in wealth distribution is an essential means of empowerment which is identified as "the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to control over crucial material and non-material resources".

Gender equity in wealth distribution aims at equal status of men and women in society, equal access to and control over resources and creation of equal opportunities for both sexes. In order to gain equity, the women should not only be seen as active participants in

the process of development but their subordinate position in society should also be challenged.

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