Gender Perspective in N.G.O.s

It has now been more than a decade of active concern and action on women's issues and gender inequalities. From looking at women's concerns through a welfareist orientation in the past, we are today beginning to recognise women as key agents of transformation. The last two decades have witnessed several mass struggles to address critical issues affecting women's participation as equal partners in the processes of development. The goal today is to empower women in the direction of organising them, eliminating different forms of injustice and exploitation against women.

It is at this juncture that we need to ask ourselves, what have been the gains in the process. Awakened consciousness of the few as contrasted to the increasing marginalisation and deprivation of the many!

For the mass of poor women, the multidimensional nature of oppression and poverty is juxtaposed against a backdrop of religious fundamentalism, communal violence, ethnic conflicts, political manipulation, ossification of traditions and practices et al. Women are still struggling to gain control over their bodies, labour, resources and environment. Women's groups, human rights groups, mass movements have all been part of the numerous efforts to actualize the alternative vision wherein gender equality and equity are the bases of a new society.

Along with serious efforts to address women's issues, we have also been witnessing much tokenism and lip-service being paid to women's issues, especially so when one finds a yawning gap between the stated and the done.

The fundamental question therefore, is how are poor women going to be empowered in the context of the empowerment of the poor and deprived as a whole. It is time for all of us to look inwards and ask ourselves, are we in the developmental sector continuing to perpetuate the status quo by believing and replicating stereo type myths about women and doing precious little to challenge and change these? Or are we...
genuinely addressing changing power relations between men and women in society? On the ground, how do we, in our individual contexts of work and home, comprehend and internalise and live gender issues.

Many of us need to reflect and critique the tenets of our work with the poor within a gender framework, for there can be no emancipation and equality for women without each of us making it a reality for the women who work and relate with us.

The starting point today is a redefinition of empowerment. Empowerment for whom? By whom? Towards what end? Rhetoric needs to be sifted from the substance. The process of empowerment for women cannot be seen outside that of simultaneous process of empowerment of men; the empowerment of poor women is situated within the struggle for empowerment of the labouring poor itself.

Empowerment has several facets and in concentrating on one to the exclusion of the others fragments the totality. We believe empowerment is a process that leads to enhanced consciousness through which poor women are equipped with critical tools of analysis enabling them to gain control over decision making processes which affect their lives in the family, community and other levels. It is a process in which women confront and address power relations wherever these exist to oppress them, and attempt to change these. The process entails enhancing gender consciousness, and empowering women workers, and women leaders at individual as well as at collective levels, so that they can influence organisations they work with to become responsive to women’s issues.

There are and will continue being forces that would covertly and overtly work to ensure that women continue to be deprived, marginalised and denied any sense of worth and dignity. The first step is recognising and then becoming sensitive to countering these forces within our lives - in our attitudes, values, beliefs, behaviour, language, etc.

Divisiveness, isolation, derecognition and power struggles within the various efforts to empower women have led, thus far, in fragmented results. The challenge is how to build bridges and cement alliances across various ideologies, positions and strategies such that the focus of the poor in the sum total of our efforts does not get diluted.

We need to set in motion a sensitisation process that will help our male and female colleagues, activists and heads of organisations analyse the ‘why’ of their work and question existing sexist policies and biases, to create a gender sensitive culture and programme directions.

While we have been debating some of the above issues with groups that we work with, we feel the need to gain broader insights from the experiences of many more groups grappling with some of these concerns. The idea being that we develop a clearer understanding about gender issues to be able to translate it effectively in our personal and work lives.

A wider platform for debate and discussion, analysis and joint action is imperative if we wish to move towards political and social change.

We invite all of you to join in the process of translating conceptual thinking into practical reality...
WHAT EMPOWERMENT MEANS TO A STRUGGLING WOMAN -

IN HER OWN WORDS...

"During these four years I got a lot of experience. We women in the tobacco factories have become courageous. We are not afraid of either husbands, factory-owners or the police. We talk back to them, we are not scared of the jails or courts; if our husbands fight with us we tell them that we do not need them. All this has happened because of the union. Now we walk with heads high. We speak with courage. I suffered like Sita. But I have come out of it. Though we had eyes we were blind, though we had ears we were deaf, and though we could speak we were silent, we changed all this. This has been the story of my life."}

Quite often sex and gender have been used interchangeably both in academic and practice. However, it is necessary to differentiate between the two terms:

* **SEX** is determined by biological and physical attributes in individuals.
* **GENDER** identity of men and women in any given society is considered as socially and culturally determined.

GENDER : HOW IT IS DEFINED?

It is the process by which males and females become social categories of 'men' and 'women' through socially and culturally acquired traits of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

Gender roles are learnt through a process of socialisation and may change over time.
**A PROFILE**

**ISSUES FACED BY WOMEN ACTIVISTS**

The following is an excerpt of a report of a workshop held in 1988 entitled: Women Activists: Challenges and Dilemmas. It is interesting to find that issues and reflections during that process are still critical issues for all of us today!

**Profile of the Women Participants:**

* Several years of experience in mobilising and working at the grass-roots level;*

* Were a mix of heads of organisations, heads of units, second level activists and field activists;*

* Come from the voluntary, parastatal institutions, and intermediary organisations;*

* Were struggling to redefine their roles, identity and "self-concept" as women.

**Process and Methodology of Workshop:**

Delving deep into oneself, one's work, one's family, in a caring and sharing framework. The process of the workshop was in itself an experience of going deep into ourselves, our work, our families. It was a crucible of feelings, reflections and ruminations. As a group women drew links with other women, and shared perhaps for the first time their innermost feelings. Realised in the process that "...we were constantly seeking "personal" solutions to organisational problems... burdened with mantle of guilt and time and again negotiating and renegotiating with ourselves, as if the fault lay with us as women and not with the systems that created such a framework".

**ISSUES AT THE WORKSHOP:**

**Organisational Issues:**

* Bases and discrimination in recruitment*

* Assumptions that women's work is secondary: she is a "consumer" rather than a "producer", de-valuing her experience resulting in lower starting scales and positions as those compared with men.

* Marital and non-marital status to be defined at the outset both are hindrances; in the former, her reproductive role, in the latter she is vulnerable and insecure.

* Family background information solicited during recruitment at times is humiliating, demeaning and seemed like prying into her life unnecessarily all in an effort to define the character of the women.

* Assumptions that women were best for secondary level, field level and administrative work.

* 'Cosmetic Effect' induction: Since there is a decade of women, it is necessary to have a Women's programme, so recruit women staff!

**Assumptions:**

* Women's capacities are limited*

* Excellent secondary, administrative support providers*

* Will accept whatever salary is given, does not negotiate*

* Handicaps in long-term employment - family roles considered a burden.

**Orientation and Training:**

* Lacks gender perspective and sensitivity*

* Training seen as a short-term investment for women, long-term for men (very typical of familial attitudes towards women and girls) and therefore most opportunities seized by men.

* Women's responses to these issues were also within the patriarchal framework.

* Largely end up undervaluing oneself, one's work, one's capacities.*

* Feel a lower sense of confidence, inadequacy and tentativeness.*

* Rarely demand their right and access to resources in the organisation on the basis of equality and equity.*

* Mode of response to issue is characterised by mere acceptance vs demand.*
Role Allocation, Decision Making, and Leadership:

* 'Natural' (feminine) responsibilities invariably dumped on women. Women ended up being 'organisers' & hostesses many a times;

* Thinking, conceptualising, decision making, planning, considered preserve of the men alone; routine administration, back-up support considered the domain of women, even when they could as effectively play other demanding and challenging roles.

* Women have to work much more to prove their competence. If in doing so they feel stressed they are made to feel they are slow, unproductive, reactive, emotional. Comparisons made with men.

* Very few women in leadership positions. Leadership in a tokenist form existed in some places. There too expectation of organisations was for the women to be followers of the patriarchal model of leadership. "Most organisations think like men, make decisions like men and cope like men. They teach us to act like men."

* Women experienced their authority being resisted, rejected, challenged and sabotaged by peers.

* Typically in husband-wife teams, the husband (the boss) deals with external (macro) environment and the wife (the assistant) looks after internal (micro) matters (replicating status quo).

Organisational Structures, Systems and Support:

* Structural systems, norms of work etc., geared to meet male needs and aspirations.

* These did not respond to women's roles and responsibilities in their families.

* Allowing flexibility in working hours, leave, to accommodate women's multiple roles mostly resented by colleagues giving plea that others in the organisation would also start demanding these "why don't you join the government if you want so much leave".

* Fact that women spent extra hours taking community meetings seldom taken into account. But if they were late to work because of family pressures, Women's commitment and efficiency was in most cases called into question.

* Very few support services in the form of creches, day-care centres for children of women activists. Women encouraged to travel with their young children to the field, meaning more stress, harassment for women. "There is this romantic myth that is being perpetuated that women should travel with small children wherever they go".

Hiring of household support difficult for many women in the salaries they got.

Women at times over identified with the organisation, and sought security, reassurance and felt insecure if this did not come.

Women responded by:

- Avoiding to talk about these problems as it was considered very often boring and personal in which others would not be too interested.

- Accepting status quo thinking that since these structures were beyond them to change, only course then was to reconcile.

- Taking on lesser challenging work and responsibilities, in the process lending strength to the stereotype image of women not being suited for such work.
Other issues raised at the workshop concerned women activists' relationship with:

* Male heads of organisations.
* Female heads of organisations.
* Family.

In responding to these issues, women activists experienced:

* Role conflicts
* Guilt
* Sense of inadequacy.

Felt that in the work context, the same quality is extolled in men and shunned when seen in women. "If a man works hard, he is considered dedicated; a woman works hard, she is considered negligent to the family..."

Response of organisations and leadership to these issues:

"Most seemed apparently insensitive and viewed these as personal issues and therefore did nothing to address them."

Reactions from families:

"Themselves trying to understand the commitment of women activists at the cost of other family commitments and could therefore offer little support."

And the Women?

"Not sure where we stand"!

Consequences of these tensions for women

* Some had to leave the sector
* Rapid turnover of women staff in some organisations
* Women settling down to more peripheral contributions in the sector.

A few critical questions raised at the workshop were:

* Why should women always be pushed into adopting male styles of leadership?
* Why can there not be 'our' own models of authority which we can comfortably work within, given the realities of our lives as women?
* Why can women themselves not define what it is to be a 'good' wife, mother, daughter or sister?
* Why do women have to struggle to pursue individual aspirations all the time nagged by a sense of guilt of not being able to do justice to roles at home?

If I don't know what I am
If I don't know what my virtues are or my strengths and abilities.

Then not do I know.

My weaknesses and shortcomings.

I can't value myself for what I am.

I have no self-respect, I don't even like myself.

I need to get to know myself.

So that I can grow and develop as a person.

If I know myself better.

I can help other people.

AND I'll be able.

To help myself.

"WHY CAN WE NOT WRITE OUR OWN SCRIPTS FOR THESE MULTIPLE ROLES WHICH ARE IN TUNE WITH OUR NEEDS AND ABILITIES".

A detailed report of this workshop is available with PRIA.
Forum on Women and Politics: In the context of the 1991 elections, a Forum on Women and Politics was initiated by the coming together of individuals and representatives of eight voluntary women's groups. The purpose of the Forum is to enhance women's participation in political processes by publicly raising women's issues, applying pressure on political institutions in the country and trying to influence national policies in favour of women.

Apart from meeting representatives of political parties from time to time, organizing rallies, seminars, meetings with media persons and concerned citizens, the Forum emphasizes on initiating an educational process among women of the community so as to help them understand the implications of present day politics on their lives.

The Forum is, among other things pursuing the speedy implementation of the National Commission on Women Act 1990.

For details, contact: Women and Politics Forum Action India 5/14, Jangpura B, Mathura Road, New Delhi.

---

* AIKYA and Society for Human and Social Development, in Bangalore organised a working conference on "Management of Gender Differences" in Individual, Family, Organisational and Social Roles from 10-16 November, 1991 at Claret Nivas, Bangalore.

For Details contact: AIKYA 377, 42nd Cross, 8th Block, Jayanagar Bangalore - 560 082.
*Women in Development: Profile for India* (May 1990)

This provides background information on women in India in the fields of education, economic participation, law, culture, religion, violence against women and others. With a detailed list of tables and statistical information, it is an important source of information on Indian women.

Prepared by Development Assistance Section, Canadian High Commission, Shanti Path, Chankaya, New Delhi.

*Doing Participatory Research: A feminist approach,* by Patricia Maguire (1987)

The author tries to come to an understanding of the biases of traditional research through the processes of engaging in participatory research with a group of battered women in Galup, New Mexico. This book provides gainful insights into the theory and practice of participatory research from a feminist perspective.

The Centre for International Education School of Education University of Massachusetts Amherst, Massachusetts U.S.A.

*A Space Within the Struggle: Women's Participation in People's Movements* Edited by ILINA SEN. (1990)

The book is a collection of essays that raise both directly and indirectly issues related to the women's movement in India. Written by activists from within the different movements, as well as by researchers, they deal with popular movements over the past few decades in which women have participated in large numbers. The ways in which such movements have had to define struggles and issues to accommodate women in their ranks have charted out new dimensions for women's struggles in India. It is argued here that an understanding of the nature of these struggles becomes important in order to gain a perspective on the women's movement that is more truly representative of the aspirations of the generality of Indian women than most currently available feminist theory.

Kail for Women: A 36, Gutniahar Park, New Delhi 49

*GADU News pack*

Oxfam's Gender and Development Unit brings out a news pack which includes articles, debates, news items, letters and comments on gender concerns. The focus is on how development projects and programmes affect women, and what lessons are to be learnt from Oxfam (and other) experiences.

For subscription, contact: Oxfam U.K. Gender and Development Unit 274, Banbury Road Oxford, Ox2 7LUX.

FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION ONLY
CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN WOMEN’S ISSUES

In our work, we are increasingly hearing and even using the terms WID, WAD & GAD. In the light of this extensive usage it becomes imperative to critically understand these terms. What follows therefore is a historical sequencing of trends in thinking, on women’s issues. It is important that when we apply these formulations we do so with restraint and after understanding their relevance in the contexts of our work.

WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

ORIGINS

THEORETICAL BASE
Linked with the modernization theory of the 1960’s, 1970’s. By the 1970’s it was realised that women were often under-represented, under-reached women, and in some sectors undermined their existing position.

FOCUS
Need to integrate women in economic systems, through necessary legal and administrative changes. Women’s productive role emphasized.

CONTRIBUTION
Women’s questions become visible in the arena of development theory and practice.

FEATURES
-WID was solidly grounded in traditional modernization theory which wrongly assumed that women were not integrated in the process of development.
-It accepted existing social structure; it did not question the sources of women’s subordination and oppression.
-Non-confrontational approach.
-It did not question why women had not benefited from development strategies.
-Treated women as an undifferentiated category overlooking the influence of class, race and culture.
-Focussed exclusively on productive aspects of women’s work, ignoring the reproductive side of women’s lives.

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

ORIGINS
Emerged out of a critique of the modernization theory and the WID approach in the second half of the 1970’s.

THEORETICAL BASE
Draws from the dependency theory.

FOCUS
Women have always been part of development processes; therefore integrating women in development is a myth.

CONTRIBUTION
Accepts women as important economic actors in their own right.

FEATURES
Women in development - which sustains existing international structures of inequality.

GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

ORIGINS
As an alternative to the WID focus this approach developed in the 1980’s.

THEORETICAL BASE
Influenced by socialist feminist thinking.

FOCUS
Offers a holistic perspective looking at all aspects of women’s lives.

CONTRIBUTION
It questions the basis of assigning specific gender roles to different sexes.

FEATURES
Does not exclusively emphasize on activities of productive nature.

GAD REJECTS THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMY.

REFERENCE