

## The Gender Park: A Kerala Model for Gender Equality

1. The state of Kerala in the south of India has the highest Human Development Index (HDI) in India. In the education and health sectors, gender disparities have been wiped out, with Kerala having human and selected social indicators as good as that in some of the developed nations. The paradoxical nature of the 'Kerala model of development', with high levels of human development indicators, despite its relatively low per capita income has drawn considerable attention in the recent past. Despite this progress, women in Kerala have not been able to translate their high levels of human development to function effectively in a male-dominated terrain where they remain economically disempowered with weak voices in the public arena and poor access and control over economic resources. Furthermore, increasing alcohol-related gender-based violence, crimes against women including dowry-related harassment, suicides and heavy constraints on women's mobility remain a concern. There is a necessity for the economic and social empowerment of Kerala's educated and healthy women.
2. The Gender Park was conceived by the Department of Social Justice, Government of Kerala as a platform where State, Non-Government Organisations (NGO), academia and civil society unite for learning and research on gender equality, as well as one where innovative and new interventions, in partnership with various stakeholders, can directly support the empowerment of women and gender equality. The Park would provide a space for all gender identities, including transgenders, to overcome the socio-economic and political boundaries imposed on them by society and contribute to the economic, cultural, and social aspects of the state and the country.
3. The Gender Park acts as a convergence centre for gender-related education, activities, entrepreneurship training and capacity development, in the spheres of Culture, Art, Literature and media, social, human, economic, and political development.

### Vision

To achieve a just society where men and women have equal access to development opportunities, resources and benefits and equal voice in key decision making that shape their lives, communities, and the state.

### Mission

To create state-of-the-art knowledge and encourage learning through transformative research on gender equality and justice, as well as to develop innovative partnerships to support gender equality and inclusive growth.

### **Box 1: Goals of the Gender Park**

Specific objectives of the Gender Park are as follows:

- Capture and dissemination of knowledge on innovative and good practices to support gender-aware policies and interventions;
- Strengthened Capabilities through Effective Capacity Development on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
- Strengthened economic empowerment of women through effective partnership models
- Replication of successful models tested by the Gender Park in other parts of the state and country on a demand basis.

### **The Gender Park Campus**

4. Whilst the broad concept of the Gender Park will provide an umbrella under which all gender related activities will be organised in the state, the need for a tangible space is indispensable. Thus, the first campus of the Gender Park is proposed to be set up in 24 acres of land in the district of Kozhikode in Kerala. (Subsequent campuses are planned in other cities of the state). The first of its kind in India, the campus will include Research and Learning, Socio-cultural and Economic and Administrative Clusters. Each of these clusters will be further divided into various zones.

- Research and Learning cluster: This will comprise the proposed South Asian Regional Centre for Gender and Development (SARC-GD) discussed below, the Library and Documentation centre, the Museum, and Training centre.
- Socio-cultural and Economic Cluster: This will entail the Residential zones, Cultural zone which houses the Recreational centre (amphitheatre with facility to showcase music, dance, theatre and art shows) Fitness centre, Writer's Village, and the Commercial zone
- Administration Cluster: This will include all the administrative buildings, the multi-purpose halls, the world-class Convention centre and other common facilities.

5. Partnerships with public authorities, educational and research institutions, Non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations (including Women's organisations), voluntary associations and individual experts at local, national and international levels will be encouraged. Linking up with existing CSR initiatives can be mutually beneficial, to help provide business at different levels, with the tools and support to become effective advocates for gender equality.

#### ***Knowledge Capture and Dissemination***

SARC-GD (South Asian Research Centre on Gender & Development): Proposed to be the first International Centre in India for research on Gender & Development, the SARC-GD will eventually be converted into the first Gender University in India. The primary objective of the centre is to support multi disciplinary R&D programs leading to efforts at the grass root levels to support gender equality and empower women. It will work in liaison with local, national and international stakeholders to conduct research. Dissemination of knowledge and information exchange through seminars, workshops and publications (in print, visual and multimedia formats) on gender will be encouraged.

#### ***Strengthened Capabilities through Effective Capacity Development on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment***

The main purpose of this component would be to provide demand-based capacity development and training programs for various groups. This will also include offering academic programs including Ph D Programs, Certificate & Diploma courses, Short term courses, Academic collaborations, Educational Exchange programs, Seminars, Workshops and Conferences.

The other on campus activities at Gender Park will include:

- Organizing seminars, symposiums, open forums and discussions at national and international level for knowledge sharing and information exchange on gender equality, women's empowerment agenda and day-to-day issues related to women at the grassroots

- Organizing capacity development and need-based training programs for various stakeholders including state and non-state actors, differently-abled women etc. Special emphasis on maintaining and promoting women athletes.
- Documentation and publication of gender related data (booklets/reports) and the precedent and recent trends in all related fields to develop a comprehensive database for the propagation of social security, anti-violence, law, education etc;
- Support writers clubs, Gender festivals, media watch etc to promote gender equality
- To promote a participatory process of fund and resource generation and allocation.
- Recognising and honouring global best practises and distinctive personalities
- Outreach programs with universities, colleges and other institutions with a special focus on business and trade promotion programs
- Work in liaison with International agencies for investment in business activities of women

### **Empowerment of Women**

The future belongs to a society where women are equal partners to a sustainable development- a vision attainable only through the collective effort of a resolute public, an accountable government and pioneering, visionary leadership. Whilst recognising the need for a more gender aware approach to development, the immediate and primary focus of the Gender Park will be to empower women in order to correct existing inequities. Recognising that women are a potent socio-economic and political force, the Gender Park will provide a common platform where women's capabilities are strengthened and they are presented with a plethora of opportunities to identify themselves, their potential and weakness and respectively take up roles suiting their intellectual capacities in various sectors of development.

These interventions would be off campus activities and include various projects which can be implemented throughout Kerala with a focus on total welfare of women. Typically, these consist of innovative and bold projects where the risks of failure are high. They are initiated as pilots and are then replicated only when the models prove to be sustainable.

**SHE TAXI** has been one flagship project of the Gender Park; it is India's first 24x7 taxi network by women, for women. It is a completely self-sustainable women-oriented taxi service owned, managed and employed mainly by women. It promotes entrepreneurship, self-employment and security of women whilst tackling the huge challenge of their limited mobility in the state providing a safe, responsible and reliable mode of transport.

The She Taxi is a distinctive and sustainable Private Public Partnership (PPP) model, with zero investment from the government who only played the role of facilitator. The drivers are also the owners of the vehicle. A strategic tie-up with a leading automobile manufacturer (Maruti) and provision of loans at low interest rates and moratorium period (facilitated through the Kerala State Women's Development Corporation) enables easy acquisition and ownership of the vehicle.

She Taxis are incorporated with enhanced proactive safety and security features and advanced GPS enabled web-mobile based convergent technology to monitor and track the activities of the cab driver and traveller. Additional tie-ups with the Police, Ambulance services, Fire Force, Night shelters and so on ensure smooth operation of the taxi service.

Sustainability is assured through an unconventional revenue model, and innovative use of internal branding and advertising allows additional revenue. Working Partnerships with multiple associations and companies ensures continued business. Public acceptance and demand for She-taxis is evident in the regular and growing customer base that includes pregnant women, mothers accompanying young girls, elderly women, female tourists etc.

Since its inception in November 2013, the She Taxi fleet has grown to 45 cabs across three cities (Trivandrum, Cochin and Calicut) and is steadily growing. She Taxi Club Membership, Credit/Debit card payments, Parking Bays, Taxi pooling systems, Mobile app for booking/rating/tracking of She Taxi service, Facility Performance and rating, She Taxi in-car infotainment-Travel and Save/Travel and Earn facilities, Environment-friendly initiatives like 'Pink is Green' (Bills as SMS/email to save paper) etc have been initiated and many more innovative value added services are planned including a Unique short code for She Taxi.

### **Box 2: The She Taxi initiative.**

#### ***Replication of successful models tested by the Gender Park in other parts of the state and country on a demand basis.***

The gender park proposes to become a one-stop hub for all gender-centric programmes and a centre for gender experts from across the world. By developing strategic partnerships, the Gender Park will assist in the replication of the tested and successful projects and programmes of the Gender Park and the Park itself, on a demand basis, in other parts of the state and/or country, subject to certain terms and conditions.

6. Funds and Resources of the Gender Park include Plan and non plan grant-in-aid from Government of Kerala, Financial assistance from Government of India and other Central government agencies, Financial assistance from other agencies within or outside the country, Income from services rendered by Gender Park, Financial assistance from local self governments, Funds from any agencies for implementing specific projects to achieve the objectives of Gender Park, Donations, gifts, contributions from any Individual or agencies, Interest income from the deposits, any other receipts . Sustainability and fund allocation will be project specific.

#### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Regular monitoring to understand progress, identify emerging problems, determine the effect of responses to the problems and guide revisions to all programs at Gender Park is crucial. A common Gender Equality Index (indicators based on the three constitutional dimensions- i). Increased/Equal access for women and men to education, health and social indicators ii). Equal access to economic opportunities, resources and conditions of employment iii). Equal voice and participation in decision making or positions of political power) will be developed to monitor progress and impact. The evaluation framework and methodology will be developed in a participatory manner given the Kerala context and will be project/activity specific. Each project or activity will individually identify suitable key indicators to monitor and assess impact. Participatory methods like Focus Group Discussions, Feedback Surveys, Workshops etc (involving all stakeholders) are encouraged at all levels of reviewing and reporting. In addition to the internal governing body, an Independent Evaluation Group/agency may be charged with the monitoring and evaluation process at the Gender Park, on a need basis.

## **Risks and Challenges**

Resistance to gender equality will be a risk. 'Gender' meets resistance, mainly the term is interpreted to refer to women alone. A culture of resentment and hostility from the more conservative sections of society, both men and women, is a concern. Therefore, the immediate and urgent focus is to generate awareness and disseminate a sound understanding of Gender concepts, and the need for all stakeholders to share the problem and 'own' the goals of change. Another potential risk is that the efforts at Gender Park may lead to short-term material benefits without necessarily leading to enhanced equal voice and equality. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of all programs at regular intervals, effective dissemination of concepts, and support from leaders of change will be crucial to ensure a strong and sustainable impact.

## **Conclusion**

While several projects have encouraged women to participate in development and decision making processes by specifically targeting them, it is now recognised that a more gender-focused approach is necessary. Women's groups do provide a forum for women to come together, share ideas, exchange information and develop a support network. Yet strategic shifts in access to resources and benefits can only emerge and be sustained if men too support such a shift and take on a more equal share of productive and reproductive work. If gender equality is to be achieved there is need to pay attention to the interests of women, but also to men and to shifts in gender relations occurring on account of contextual changes. The Gender Park is a definitive effort towards radical socio-economic transformation and inclusive development. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN women, Executive Director once said, ***"This should be the beginning of the end of gender inequality"*** and the Gender Park is certainly a step in that direction.