

## WORK

### **Linking Institutions and Livelihoods: Reflections on Women, Work, Skills and Collective Bargaining**

Development policy is ostensibly concerned with resolving problems of poverty, unemployment, and deprivations; however that these problems are gender specific is not adequately recognized. Women's experiences with the development process as revealed by a number of studies and emerging evidence in the early 70s, national and international, were largely inimical to their needs and interests and sparked off a debate on issues surrounding women's rights – to gainful employment when they did not have it; to recognition of their substantial contribution (paid and unpaid) to the national economy and towards their families' survival; to adequate rewards to their labour they do not enjoy; and to a share of resources, benefits and decisions regarding development to which they are entitled to as citizens of a country.

An issue that has drawn tremendous attention in development literature is women's work, in particular 'paid' work, both because of its potential for contributing to a number of development goals as also for transforming the lives of girls and women by addressing gender inequalities across various domains (Kabeer 2011). However, paid work is most likely to achieve its potential if it 'empowers' women, building their capacity to exercise voice and influence in the strategic domains of their lives and hence the nature of paid work assumes significance. What makes the situation complex is that a substantial amount of work women do is 'unpaid' both because it involves 'non-economic' activities within the household (which are not even recognized as 'work') as also 'economic' activities, largely carried on at home in which women work as helpers. An analysis from a gender perspective throws fresh insights into the ways we define work, understanding its complexities and challenging standard assumptions and concepts used in examining the employment scenario, and how gendering of work has other significant and related consequences, reflected for instance in the differential access of boys and girls to schools/higher education and the constraints women face in accessing certain types of employment.

The blindness to gender issues of macro economic development policy is reflected in its one-sided view of the macro economy considering only the monetary aggregates of the commodity

economy (the dominantly male sphere) while ignoring the human resource aggregates of social reproduction (predominantly the responsibility of women). While not intrinsically gendered, macro-economic policy is a bearer of gender via the social norms and networks needed for the smooth operation of the mediating institutions at the meso level (between the individuals and economy as a whole) -- the markets, firms and public sector agencies-- through which the policies are implemented but which are highly gendered in their institutional structure (Elson 1994). With development, the 'social' division of labour has not only remained largely intact but combined with the 'sectoral' division at the workplace, it is actually overburdening women. Changes have taken place in the composition and nature of employment of women, however such changes in 'sectoral' work have preserved female subordination even though in a different form; patriarchal structures are largely responsible for the way sexual division of labour in production is maintained (Swaminathan 2011). The labour market as is well recognized now, is becoming increasingly 'informalised' and segmented with women concentrated in the lower echelons of the informal economy and on average earning much lower than the men (Chen 2007). An important issue then is the need to create 'decent' employment for women and change the 'sectoral' division of labour to some extent. Institutional support would play a very important role in this.

Conceptualization of the sub theme on Work tentatively titled **Linking institutions and women's livelihoods: Reflections on Women's Work, Skills and Collective Bargaining**

The theme for this session suggest two kinds of perspectives, a) the need to bring together knowledge-generating organizations like universities, research laboratories, skill development/training organizations, extension centers and women as producers/workers in order to enhance livelihood possibilities and b) the influence of norms embodied in laws, rules and customs on women's livelihood prospects as for instance the influence of caste, class, ethnicity and gender in determining a woman's chances of finding employment, her prospects of occupational mobility, her wages etc.

We propose to have papers on four interlinked themes. The scholars whose names are suggested against each theme are not confirmed.

**1. Trends and patterns of women's employment**

This sub theme will lay the ground for the discussion by providing an overview of women's employment, unemployment over time and space, maybe moving from the international, all India picture to the specificity of Kerala. It will also seek to arrive at ways of understanding the trends and patterns over time in terms of changing aspirations of women and the implications for norms.

## **2. Gender and Informality in Employment**

The focus here will be on the challenge of regulation of employment in the context of the acknowledgment of the importance of the informal sector as dynamic from the earlier understanding that it was a residual that must be incorporated into the organized sector. The context of globalization and changes in organization of production towards a flexible regime and increasing feminization in specific sectors and sub sectors will be reviewed.

## **3. Linkages between Education/Skill development and Women's Employment**

This is a theme of special importance to Kerala where women's education has expanded but not their employment. Questions remain on whether employment remains 'invisible' or whether women are unwilling to take up employment that is available because of restrictive norms. Who seeks employment? What are the conditions under which they seek employment? How can we leverage available skill/educational programmes for benefit of women?

### ***References:***

1. Chen, Martha A (2007): "Rethinking the Informal Economy: Linkages with the Formal Economy and the Formal Regulatory Environment", DESA, *Working Paper No.46*.
2. Kabeer, Naila (2011): "Contextualising the Economic Pathways of Women's empowerment" ,*Pathways Policy Paper*, Brighton, UK
3. Swaminathan Padmini (ed) (2012): *Women and Work*, Orient Black Swan (p) Ltd, Hyderabad.