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Empowering Women: Five Year Plans

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The Government of India had ushered the new millennium by declaring the year 2001 as 'Women's Empowerment Year' to focus on the theme 'women are equal partners like men'. The most common explanation of 'women's empowerment' is the ability to exercise full control over one's actions. The last decades have witnessed some basic changes in the status and role of women in our society. There has been a shift in policy approaches from the concept of 'welfare' in the seventies to 'development' in the eighties and now to 'empowerment' in the nineties. An overview of how the Five Year Plans looked at women in India in the context of development gives us a clear picture of changes in vision, strategies of welfare in involving programmes.

Women in Development planning

The importance of the role of women in development had been recognized by the government of India right from the very first five year plan (1951-55). However, women in these earlier plans were treated as subjects of 'welfare' and clubbed together under the category of disadvantaged groups such as destitute, disabled, aged, etc. The Second to Fifth Plans (1956-79) continued to reflect the very same welfare approach, besides giving priority to women's education, and launching measures to improve maternal and child health services.

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supplementary feeding for children and expectant and nursing mothers. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB), set up in 1953, served as an Apex Body at the national level to promote voluntary action at various levels, especially at the grassroots, to take up these welfare-related activities for women and children.

There is no doubt about the fact that development of women has always been the central focus of planning since Independence. Empowerment is a major step in this direction but it has to be seen in a relational context. In recent years there have been explicit moves to increase women's political participation. The Women's reservation policy bill is however a very sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttled in Parliament. But after a long battle, the resolution has been passed in Parliament on 9th March 2010. A clear vision is needed to remove the obstacles to the path of women's emancipation both from the government and women themselves. Efforts should be directed towards entire development of each and every section of Indian women by giving them their due share.

Women as Partners in Development

In the beginning of seventies, the development was not proceeding as planned and the fact was realised that women did not actively participate in the process. It was underlined that women must be

urgently equipped with the capabilities required for them to take up these new responsibilities. These revelations and recommendations gave birth to the concept of women as 'partners' in development and took the importance of their education to a new threshold. However, it was after the early nineties, that there was a gradual shift in the approach from 'welfare' to 'development', which started recognizing women as important participants of the developmental process.

In 1971, in response to a request from the United Nations, the government of India appointed a Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) to examine all questions relating to the rights and status of women in the context of changing social and economic conditions in the country. The Committee's comprehensive report named 'Towards Equality' saw a significant change in the government's policies for women. Women were now no longer viewed as targets of welfare policies but as critical groups for development. This was reflected in the 6th Five Year Plan (1980-85) where strategies for women's employment & economic independence, education, health care and family planning and the creation of a supportive legal and institutional environment were conceived. It was for the first time the Planning Commission included a separate chapter on 'Women and Development' in the Sixth Five Year Plan.

In the Seventh Plan (1985-90), the developmental programmes continued with the major objectives

20

September 15, 2010

SOUTHERN ECONOMIST

of raising the economic and social status of women and bringing them into the mainstream of national development. In the year 1985, the Department of Women and Child Development was set up as a part of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. This department plans and implements certain innovative programmes for women and children. The major policy initiatives undertaken by the Department in the recent past include the establishment of the National Commission for Women (NCW), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), adoption of National Nutrition Policy (NNP), setting up of National Creche Fund (NCF), launching of Indra Mahila Yojana (IMY), Balika Samridhi Yojana (BSY) and Rural Women's Development and empowerment project (RWDEP).

The Eighth Plan (1992-97), with human development as its major focus, played a very important role in the development of women. The Eighth Plan promised to ensure the benefits of development from different sectors and did not bypass women, the 8th plan implemented special programmes to complement the general development programmes and to monitor the flow of benefits to women from other development sectors which enabled women to function as equal partners and participants in development process.

Life Cycle Approach

In the Ninth Plan (1997-2002), the Planning Commission, with a view to converging the benefits in the social and economic development sectors for women had requested all the Secretaries of the various Ministries and Departments of the Government of India to draw up a Women's Component Plan to identify allocation in all the sectors at the Centre by aggregating them in an integrated

manner. The Ninth Plan adopted the Life Cycle approach in the empowerment of women which categorizes women in to 5 distinct sub-groups (population as projected for 2001). They include:

- Girl children in the age-group 0-14 years who account for 171.50 million (34.6 percent), deserve special attention because of the gender bias and discrimination they suffer from at such a tender age;
- Adolescent girls in the age-group 15-19 years who account for 52.24 million (10.5 per cent) are very sensitive from the viewpoint of planning because of the preparatory state for their future productive and reproductive roles in the society and family, respectively;
- Women in the reproductive age-group 15-44 years numbering 232.72 million (47.1 per cent) need special care and attention because of their reproductive needs;
- Women in the economically active age group 15-59 years, who account for 289.40 million (58.4 per cent) have different kind of demands like education/training, employment, income generation and participation in the developmental process, decision making etc; and
- The elderly women in the age-group 60+ years numbering 34.87 million (7.0 per cent) have limited needs mainly relating to health, financial and emotional support.

Commitments of Ninth Plan: The main objective is to empower Women as the Agents of Social Change and Development.

Strategies: a) To create an enabling environment for women to exercise their rights, both within and outside home, as equal partners along with men through early socialization and adoption of 'National Policy for Empowerment of Women'.

b) To expedite action to legislate reservation of not less than 1/3 seats

for women in the parliament and in the State Legislative Assemblies and thus ensure adequate representation of women in decision making. c) To adopt an integrated approach towards empowering women through effective convergence of existing services, resources, infrastructure and manpower in both women specific and women related sectors. d) To adopt a special strategy of 'Women's Component Plan' to ensure that not less than 30 percent of funds/benefits flow to women from other developmental sectors. e) To organize women into Self Help Groups and thus mark the beginning of a major process of empowering women. The Self-Help Groups developed and to provide a permanent forum for articulating their needs and contributing their perspectives to development. f) To increase access to credit through setting up of a 'Development Bank for Women Entrepreneurs' in small and tiny sectors.

Women Empowerment

The finance Minister in his Budget speech of 2000-01 had announced that the year 2001 will be observed as 'Women Empowerment Year'. He also announced setting up of a Task Force to chalk out specific programmes for observing the year 2001 as 'women Empowerment Year'. The objective of the Women's Empowerment year was to create large-scale awareness with the active participation of women themselves. A special taskforce also was created to plan and execute programmes to observe the year and the national policy was declared. The goal of the policy was to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women.

Commitments of the Tenth Plan to Empower Women (2002-2007) approach is to continue with the

September 15, 2010

21

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SOUTHERN ECONOMIST

major strategy of 'Empowering Women' as Agents of Social Change and Development

Strategies

To adopt a Sector-specific 3-Fold Strategy for Empowering Women based on the prescriptions of the National Policy for Empowerment of Women. They include:

Social Empowerment

To create an enabling environment through various affirmative developmental policies and programmes for the development of women besides providing them easy and equal access to all the basic minimum services so as to enable them to realize their full potentials.

Economic Empowerment

To ensure provision of training, employment and income-generation activities with both 'forward' and 'backward' linkages with the ultimate objective of making all potential women economically independent and self-reliant; and

Gender Justice

To eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and thus, allow women to enjoy not only the de jure but also the de facto rights and fundamental freedom on par with men in all spheres like political, economic, social, civil, cultural etc.

Eleventh Plan and Women Empowerment (2007-2012)

The main task of the XI FYP is to ensure that women are at the centre - stage of all the activities - economic, social and political. The crucial areas concerning themselves, to a large extent, suggest the thrust areas that are required to be kept in view in the Eleventh plan, while priority will continue to be laid on health, nutrition, education, income generating activities, relief and

rehabilitation for women in distress. Micro credit will be continued to remain the backbone of SHG finances and therefore will need to be strengthened and streamlined in the eleventh Plan. There have been many instances of exploitative rates of interest charged by the unscrupulous agencies which has led to economic distress in many parts of the country. Therefore it is imperative that the Ministry of Finance formulates a regulatory mechanism for micro credit lending to make the system more transparent and beneficial.

National Commission for Women

The National Commission for Women was set up in 1992 to protect and safeguard the rights of women. The activities of the Commission include receiving complaints or suo moto enquiring in cases of deprivation of rights of women, providing counselling, conducting Parivart Lok Adalat and legal awareness programmes and organising public hearings. The National Commission for Women being the nodal agency for protection of the rights of women needs to be strengthened. The NCW Act needs to be suitably amended to give the Commission more power. The requirement of funds for the XI Plan for the activities of the Commission is estimated as Rs.35 crore.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development, as the nodal agency for all matters pertaining to welfare, development and empowerment of women, has evolved schemes and programmes for their benefit. These schemes are spread across a broader spectrum such as women's need for shelter, security, safety, legal aid, justice, information, maternal health, food, nutrition etc as well as their need for economic sustenance through skill develop-

ment, education, and access to credit and marketing. The schemes of the Ministry like Swachak, Shriyansha, STEP and Swasthamban enable economic empowerment. Working Women Hostels and Crèches provide support services. Swadhar and Shakti Stay Homes provide protection and rehabilitation to women in difficult circumstances. The Ministry also supports autonomous bodies like National Commission, Central Social Welfare Board and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh which work for the welfare and development of women. These schemes were run in the Tenth Plan. It was proposed to continue some in the Eleventh Plan and also to take up new schemes.

Conclusion

Jawaharlal Nehru once said "You can tell the condition of the nation by looking at the status of women."

There is no doubt about the fact that development of women has always been the central focus of planning since independence. Empowerment is a major step in this direction but it has to be seen in a rational context. In recent years there have been explicit moves to increase women's political participation. The Women's reservation policy bill is however a very sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttled in parliament. But after a long battle, the resolution has been passed in parliament on 9th March 2010. A clear vision is needed to remove the obstacles to the path of women's emancipation both from the government and women themselves. Efforts should be directed towards entire development of each and every section of Indian women by giving them their due share.

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