

## First Annual Meeting of the MIMAP Gender Network (Phase III)

### Impact of Macro Economic Policy on Gender

ISST, New Delhi, 31.1.2004

#### MICRO IMPACT OF MACRO ADJUSTMENT POLICIES

##### Key Note Address

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1. I congratulate the Network for the bold decision to go beyond purely economic indicators. Women's Studies was perceived by the Indian Women's Movement from the beginning - as an interdisciplinary field - which needed to be promoted and developed for two major reasons.
  - A. **To enable** the Higher Education System to play its necessary role "as the conscience of the Nation" - by studying various tensions and injustices within society and to assist in the search for their solutions (a la Education Commission;) and
  - B. To improve the quality of the human and social sciences by breaking their inherited class and gender biases. In our view, the expected benefits were likely to be as important for the scientists engaged in such studies + their students/readers - as the women whom they studied.
2. **Why I avoid the word Gender** - Having painfully learnt the power of the **politics of language** - Women constantly acquired invisibility - under words like people, persons, community, peasants, etc. **Most Indian and South Asian languages used to have gender specific terms for all the traditional occupations.** A few of them still survive - but in the occupation that engaged the overwhelming majority of our people - agriculture - the feminine words **disappeared in usage.** The iniquity of this trend becomes still more glaring when I gratefully draw on Dr. M.S. Swaminathan's authority - that paddy agriculture was the **discovery of women in South and South East Asia.**
3. **The issue of Identity** - all of us have multiple identities - by birth, by upbringing, skills, occupations, and other characteristics we acquire through life. **Yet, in women's case, it is only the familial and reproductive identity** that remains the dominant image - even in the minds of sensitive scholars - who by and large come from the urban middle class. And when the thinking of that class has been shaped by half a century of the **Population Explosion as the enemy of Development or Progress** - the mythical enemy acquires a **female face** - and the Girl Child replaces women per se as the larger **missing group**, and

4. I am sorry that I cannot agree with Swapna that "**Gender discrimination and poverty are the two major factors that determine the context within which the average South Asian woman spends her life**". Nor with Amartya Sen that the **contemporary phenomenon of the "missing" South Asian Girl child is an outcome of culture**-the standard escape route for all economists, when the pursuit of further investigation become unpalatable. I have some related questions to add to you conceptual exercise:
- a) **Is the Dynamic Context limited only to that politically loaded misnomer economic reforms?**
  - b) Are its manifestations confirmed only to change in the job market and the household economic environment?
  - c) **Have we experienced no dynamics, in the cultural, social and political arenas?**

I suggest that you ask my old friend Ravi Kapur to speculate on his earlier study of attitude to violence among young people. The study is over a decade old. If it were to be repeated today- would he expect similar result?

Women's Studies in India began in the late '70s with a **deliberate focus on poor women** - for various reasons - some of which have little relevance today. But one of the first lessons that we learnt very early was about the **extraordinary political dynamism** demonstrated by the new breed of large organizations of poor women in the urban informal sector- in three regionally, culturally and historically distinct metropolis - SEWA, (Ahmedabad), WWF (Madras), and AMM (Bombay). Since then these have been subject of many case studies by diverse scholars - including some by the world Bank and other international agencies. The net outcome of all this extraordinary interest - on the policy front today - national, regional and global is the virtual deification of **micro credit, as the one solution** - for gender injustice/inequality in our globalised world. **Still more significant is the substitution - in the lesson of the large, spontaneous coming together of desperate and struggling women of the poorest class of urban women by selected groups of a defined limited number (25) of relatively stable and in many cases - upwardly mobile women in rural and urban areas - as Self-help Groups (SHG).**

Being basically a student of history, I have an inconvenient memory which resents the games played- by the politics of memory. **Contemporary debates on micro-credit and self - help groups carefully exclude any reference to the one policy intervention that enabled the three outstanding organisations I named earlier to emerge** - the DRI or Differential Rates of Interest introduced in the 5<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan in India as an anti - poverty measure. **SEWA, WWF, AMM and many other less known organisations were thus able to access Bank credit directly.** What was reported by the few concerned Banks was very profitable results - especially when they compared the outcome with the corporate sector?

In comparison, the SHGs appear to be mobilizing their own savings for the Banks. Some cynical critics observe that a major part of their utilization at the familial level - is possibly for dowry payments certainly for rising costs of marriages. **Even if the policy was intended as an instrument of empowerment - the outcome can hardly be defined as such!** I suggest that during your planning discussions over the next few days you take a look at two sets of data and maps that are being made available by the Registrar General of the Indian Census and India's National Crime Records Bureau. They raise many questions for the designers of Human as well as Gender Development Indicators. I will content myself with posing only one here. Himachal Pradesh, which received a certificate from the probe team for its magnificent gender impartial achievement on the Human Development front - and had no cultural history of female infanticide, or being a part of the Bihar/Jharkhand states - a la Ashish Bose - has suddenly emerged with a record of the girl child going missing at a very fast rate.

The Group on Women's Empowerment for the 10<sup>th</sup> Plan decided to **follow** the strategy recommended by women's studies scholars in the pre-reforms era of 'empowerment from below. Begun in the 7<sup>th</sup> Plan with a minimum one third quota for women within the anti-poverty programmes (enhanced to 40% in the 8<sup>th</sup> Plan) and emphasised the critical role of organisations at the grassroots. Persons participating in the two recent Social Forums - the Asian one (Hyderabad, 2003) and the just concluded World Social Forum (Bombay, 2004) were struck by the incredibly large numbers of women - young and old - from diverse backgrounds and evoking memories of the Salt Satyagraha (1931) led by Mahatma Gandhi when male leaders were mostly unprepared for them. Even the Mahatma had initially asked women not to join - but he was asked to shut up by Sarojini Naidu - another bit of history which has been a victim of the Politics of Memory. We have to thank a sculptor and some film makers for preserving some record.

This talk was not meant to be a walk down memory lane, but offer a few lessons from the past which may help you to plan your research strategy for the next phase. Over 30 years of **learning about and from poor peasant women in different corners of South Asia have taught me many lessons - the most important ones being never to start with pre-conceived images about them and never to take their reactions for granted.** In my opinion the household survey is a very limited instrument, because it imposes and thus limits women to their familial identity. A conspiracy by the gender units within the UN system in the early '90s resulted in a decision to organise a Peasant Women's Summit before the World Conference on Environment (Rio 1992). The unanimous decision by these units was that **such a meeting could only be held in South Asia!** And it was held at Lahore which produced a Declaration. **4 peasant women leaders - from India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh went to Rio - where they manifested their common identity, shared inherited knowledge and experience and managed to communicate among themselves and with others with a minimum of interpreter service.**

I hope your next phase of research will innovate multi and inter-disciplinary methods to **capture the interface between these last survivors of peasant agriculture, its indigenous, inherited knowledge base which has been mainly preserved by women through oral transmission (grandmother to grand daughter) and the various types of**

**contemporary dynamics which impinge on the human and social psyche -increasing senses of illusion and powerlessness.**

My second suggestion is to build in a focus on **organised response or resistance by women - by themselves, and by women along with men, to various changes that affect their own and others' lives - the latter not necessarily their own families or kin groups.** Dynamics must be matched by dynamics. Social Scientists trained to look for a perfect, stable methodology cannot survive, let alone innovate forward looking research in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My last appeal to this Network is to examine all the information now available regarding **the role of technology, trade and the capital market in spurring the disappearance of the Girl-Child - not only in India, but also possibly other countries in the region.** I am not the authority to give you this information, but I can offer the name of someone who can. I hope this Network will not disappoint me and many others and incorporate the demographic challenges and dynamics as a critical issue in the next phase of your research, because they present grave portents for the future, and also partial explanations for the present. You have the skills and the commitment - some courage to take risks in research is all that is needed.