

CSD – Training Workshop on Social Development: Concepts, Measurement, Challenges and Programmes/Projects

Module 3 : *Gender and Social Equity : Issues and Problems*

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Before I take up the issue of the “missing” girl child, let me raise a few questions about this Module’s theme. As a woman who was a full adult at the time of independence and a ‘first generation beneficiary of the equality clauses of the Constitution and a teacher of international politics for several years – I am extremely wary of the politics of Language and Memory. The word Gender displacing women or the Women’s Question, Equity replacing Justice, Social, Economic and Political are classic examples of the politics of language and memory speeded up by the current phase of globalization, which seek to blot out history of values and ideology. My multiple identities landed me as Member Secretary of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, (CSWI) in 1972-74 - itself a product of the International Women’s Year (1975) – and participatory roles in working collaboration with our counterparts in the Non-Aligned Nations, through the women’s decade (1975-85) and beyond.

The Women’s question, untouchability, the communal question were all *Political Issues* that needed resolution to give shape/reality to the vision of the free Indian nation as Equality, Justice and Freedom – assuring the dignity of the individual were vital values for the Indian Welfare State. The existence of the Non-aligned Movement and its vision of the New International Economic Order provided a historical backdrop for the International Women’s Decade – and a far larger collective struggle by 3rd World Women to question the *Central Paradigm of Development from the two poles of Equality and Peace* (contributed by the 1st and 2nd World’s Women).

The CSWI was a belated gesture by Government of India, to produce a Report in time for the World Conference in the International Women’s Year (Mexico 1975). Set in the context of a growing crisis, with increasing inequality, poverty and threats to people’s rights, the CSWI’s conclusion *regarding “increasing marginalization of the majority of women in the economy and society”* – reopened the debate on the Women’s Question and the renewed wave of the Women’s Movement – armed with far better/extensive information gathered meticulously by the *two groups* hit by the twin crises of conscience/identity -- Academics, Professionals, Bureaucrats. Similar alliances developed in other 3rd World countries – which promoted a ‘knowledge explosion’ regarding women’s economic roles – rescuing women from ‘statistical invisibility’.

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Lucille Mair, Secretary General of the Mid-Decade Review Conference (Copenhagen 1980) paid tributes to Indian Women's Studies scholars for their path breaking research on women's situation "within the processes of structural change in the global economy which have implications for the working lives of women the world over", regretted third world women's lack of "control". According to the UN's World Survey (1985), women were 'stunningly absent' from all formal "institutions/processes which internationally, nationally and locally determine priorities and allocate resources".

The Women's Decade enabled women in different lands *to engage collectively*, both in the politics of knowledge and memory + intervene at many levels – village/shanty towns to national/international planning/programming – which represent persistent challenges to analytical concepts/*theories of development, 'growth and its creatures'*.

According to a woman analyst "*In the 1960s development was 2/3 Utopia, today it is a mess to be empirically analysed*". The disillusion represented by that frank term – *mess* is also the historical backdrop for the CSD's transition – from its 1995 output – which emphasised "*Challenges of Equality, Integration and Empowerment*" to the current volume on Social Development – whose Introduction begins with an emphasis on *Exclusion and Social Backwardness*.

If you look at my old paper in that volume and compare it with my topic for today – you will find a *similar transition in concern, undoubtedly rooted in my advanced age and anxieties for the future facing our grandchildren*.

India's Sex Ratio : In spite of all the derision that India, as a 3rd World, 'underdeveloped' country has faced from the denizens of the 'Developed' North – when it comes to time-series of quantitative data or methods of analyzing them by different branches of social sciences – India's position remains high. The CSWI used a 100 year long trend of Declining sex ratio as the *most telling indicator of increasing marginalization of the majority of women* during and after the colonial period.

In 1981 the Registrar General, Mr. Padmanabhan noted a slight upward tilt and announced with great jubilation, that the country had "crossed the hump", and women were no longer 'being done away with'. What he missed was the source of the upward tilt with increased life expectancy of older women. He also missed that decline continued – possibly at a faster rate among children. This was eventually caught by the Registrar General of the 1991 Census, Mr. Nanda – who thought it wiser to prevent the GOI into a less harsh and more child-friendly Population Policy. But ½ a century of projecting the population bomb/explosion phenomenon *as the greatest enemy of development* – had created a legitimacy and a mindset among the affluent sections - including planners and the party that came into power in the decade of globalization and neo-liberalisation.

Advances in genetic sciences and biotechnology through the middle decades of the 20th century had made it possible for the same section to use these technological aids to dispose off the girl child before birth. Abortion had been legalized in 1971, and since

'failure of contraception' had been included as a legitimizing condition – its negative impact on medical ethics was as predicted by the Doctors who served as members on the Expert Committee which recommend 'decriminalisation' abortion "to permit doctors to save lives of women', but not to make the law an instrument of state policy".

Set against this history, the SAARC Summit's dedication of the '90s as the Decade of the Girl Child was bound to be a failure. The provisional Results of the Census of 2001 however proved that the Missing Girl Child phenomenon *was at least 40 years old* Razia Ismail essay on India's Promises and obligations to the child has made my task easier. She provides all the markers for the tragic failures that mark India's halting moves towards a better deal for all children, but draws specific attention to the downward trend in the child sex ration (p 213) – describing it as "a damning indictment of the social valuation of the girl child".

"The 'shock figure of the 2001 Census is not the 927 females per 1000 males ratio of the 0-6 years group, but the 858 females per 1000 males of the 15-19 years cohort. Focusing on hopes for women who have survived early disposal the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women fails to see where justice for the female Indian must begin, before her birth".

While agreeing with Razia's assessment, I have to also record some credit for the small group of crusaders, who detected the trend back in the 1980s and 1990s and fought for the Prenatal Diagnostic Tests (Prohibition) Act and its implementation since then. Razia herself deserves credit for her struggle to pursue national and regional agencies (e.g. the SAARC Summit) to taken note of the decline and adopt remedial measures.

In my opinion, without such protests from people's organisations – especially women's and child rights groups and health activists, *the improvement of the sex-ratio in the youngest age group noted by Razia would not have taken place*. I have enclosed a copy of an earlier paper of mine which records some of the earliest protests and provides a historical record of the investigative analysis done by these activists.

But for all of you present here, my conclusion will involve some forays into the politics of globalisation, the international scenario, and some criticism of one of our heroes. Soon after the release of the Provisional Results of the 2001 Census, Prof. Amartya Sen wrote in the Frontline that the 'Missing' Girl Child phenomenon had assumed "statistical significance" – but placed all the blame for it on the 'culture of son preference'. At the time I concluded that it was just another manifestation of the tendency of many leading economists to shrug off their social responsibilities. Of course Prof. Sen was not affected by the *crises of conscience and identity* that had overtaken women social scientists in the aftermath of the CSWI's Report. These twin crises had also affected women bureaucrats – one of whom you have heard already. Mrs. Buch has been struggling for the last several years against the hypnotic effect of over half a century of the Population Bomb theory on India's ruling elites, who sought to undermine the Panchayati Raj amendments to enhance women's representation in these bodies, by tagging on a 2 child/1 child norm as qualification for the elected representatives.

The UN's publication World Population Prospects : The 2002 Revision, Vol. II provides Sex and Age Distribution of Population by countries, continents and regions. This time-series data covering a 50 year period destroys the *culturalist explanation* for the disappearance of girl children. *The only region which escapes the charge of doing away with their daughters is the least developed* – which includes 34 countries in Africa, 9 in Asia, 1 in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 5 in Oceania.

My colleague Savitri Ray has presented this data in the form of the Sex Ratio more familiar to Indians. I have included a set of her tables. The work is by no means complete, but provides enough evidence to challenge Prof. Sen's culturalist explanation of the Missing Girl Children.
