

## SEMINAR ON NATIONAL POLICY FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN 2001

Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies  
&  
Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia

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### Keynote Address

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May I congratulate the **two Convenors** of this Seminar for the selection of the theme – and convey my thanks for this opportunity to share some lessons I have learnt from nearly 30 years of involvement in women's studies and the women's movement in India? Friends within the Government of India responsible for attempts to formulate this policy during the 90s were always surprised at my resistance to the idea. "But the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) recommended such a step in 1975, why are you resisting it now?" I could not convince them that **the dynamics of change had altered the scenarios** – at the national and international levels; among women in India in particular; and **my responses today are not the same as that of the Member Secretary of the CSWI in 1974**. Had the GOI acted on the recommendation immediately, the character of the dynamics might have been somewhat different – one does not know and it is futile to mourn lost opportunities.

A policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must grapple:

- (a) first with the **changed scenario and how that affects women's empowerment;**
- (b) **identify priorities and feasible strategies; and**
- (c) **then define programmes for implementation.**

In my opinion, the present policy falls short on the first two, thereby affecting the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Most of the policy lists measures promised or initiated by the GOI at different points of time, but provides no explanation **why some promises could not be fulfilled**. Nor is any information offered about the **results obtained from some measures**: legislative or programmatic:- e.g. in changing personal, criminal or constitutional laws to achieve gender justice; or the inclusion of a women's quota within anti-poverty programmes (1985). Thirdly, the document is silent on the **contradictions that have emerged at different levels of the Indian State between objectives pursued by different policies e.g.** those prescribed by the 73<sup>rd</sup> /74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments ( one third reservations for women in PRIs and urban LSG bodies) and the population control policies adopted by different states in giving shape to such reservations. Fourthly, the policy's **fragmented, sectoral and thematic approach** in its two major sections - **Goals and Objectives** and **Policy Preservations** - contain expressions of intent, without the whys, hows and who's. It uses some jargon currently being popularised by the UN system and international donor agencies ('stake-holders', mainstreaming gender-perspectives', 'civil society', 'women's perspectives' etc.) which do not reflect the complexities, diversities and systemic intricacies/overlapping or occasional break downs of a nation like India. E.g. which women's perspectives are we talking about? The answer to that will determine **who should/should not** be identified as "stake-holders'. How are we (or GOI) going to **differentiate or prioritise** between the diversities - individual/ familial/ regional/ linguistic/ cultural/occupational/class/caste/community/religious/ethical/broader political identities, beliefs, ideologies that influence Indian women's lives and needs - let alone their perspectives?

Poor, illiterate, landless and seasonally migrant agricultural labour women in West Bengal taught me of the 5 boundaries that had **confined** their lives, hopes, articulation, thinking and identities. They were (i) the family, (ii) the village; (iii) the caste/tribe and kin group; (iv) class and occupation, and (v) their resulting **status** among their neighbour.

"Before we formed our *Samitis*, we had no names outside our immediate family or kin. We were only *Kamins*. After organising and discovering/ demonstrating our collective strength and capacities, people called us by our names. As we grew stronger and learnt about our rights under law, we became *Didis* - even to local policeman and *netas* - even though we were still poor".

In some earlier accounts of these fantastic women - I coined the term *Panchabhutas* that had to be dealt with collectively, not necessarily by hostility/ alienation of the *bhutas* - **which very few women can afford or want**. The collective organisation became a source of strength, consciousness and communication skills which they used to assert their collective views before the

*Bhutas* –overcoming the opposition or bringing them round in the long run. I am citing this favourite story to point out my main critique of the Policy – that **it does not really define the term empowerment**. Women are projected only as **recipients of the benevolent, well-intentioned, state’s handouts**. Who is going to identify the contours of the **mainstream** or then incorporate **gender** into it? For my Bankura women, and millions of other grassroot groups, the **mainstream – for most of their lives – is right there, though a few of them have been articulate or empowered enough to confront other dimensions of the mainstream** – e.g. Agricultural/Environmental policies of the Indian state, or shortcomings/blunders/prejudices of the Agro-Science Research and Development establishment; or the legal/social system’s deliberate(?) failure to communicate women’s new rights and responsibilities to them.

Last year, the CWDS completed an India Report on Gender and Governance, which concluded that Indian governance per se – is currently a victim of acute systemic breakdown – leading to even “dysfunctionality” of some of the core areas of governance – e.g. criminal justice delivery. The whole sector of development – economic, social, educational, health, and political/institutional – is caught up in the dynamics of so called “reforms” dictated by India’s creditors – who prescribe a ‘withdrawal’ of the State from playing leadership/protective / balancing roles in favour of the underprivileged – to erect the supremacy of the market – which directly challenges the entire ideology underlying the Constitution or the struggles of the Indian people for freedom from imperialist rule.

Our Report identified that attempts to engraft the gender and governance equation on to these internal contradictions/confusions/crises resulted in the fragmented, de-conceptualised programmatic approaches which underplay the current threats to the needed cohesion within governance itself.

Despite such maladies, “the transformative impact of grassroot politics among women and by women on their allies and friends drawn from very different backgrounds (women’s studies scholars, sensitive administrators, social activists/media personnel and some political activists especially at the grassroot level) is one of the major advances which now needs to be used as one of the major actors or stakeholders in the reform or democratisation agenda”. (CWDS: Gender and Governance 2001).

The Convenors wanted me to identify some directions for the future work of the new Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women’s Studies. It is unethical for an old woman steeped in the values and dreams of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to dictate to a generation which has to look ahead. But you have begun very well by this collaboration with the Department of Social Work which may later be extended

to other Departments - especially Education, Mass Communication and the Social Sciences?

Please remember that Women's Studies in India was designed with objectives very different from those in the West. We had to opt for a catalyst, collaborative and hopefully - in the long run - a transformative, creative and reformist role for the education process/system as a whole. We argued against women's studies becoming a new discipline with new institutions/infrastructures or establishments (a la the Agro-Science, Science/Technology, etc.) - all of which to quote my *guru* D.S. Kothari - "Look away productive scientists from the Universities and turned them into sterile bureaucrats". If women's studies had to be an "instrument for academic and social development", it had to remain within the existing educational institutions, to bring these institutions closer to grassroot realities of women's lives - to remedy their earlier errors/ignorance/insensitivity - to "indigenise our social sciences" and promote teaching, research, curriculum development and direct involvement of the institutions" - with their human and infrastructural assets - in "women's development activities". This was the closest definition we could provide for the "positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women" - that the NPE provided to the National Educational system (NPE 1986/92).

Let me conclude by quoting a paragraph from the Tenth Five Year Plan Working Group on the Social Empowerment of Women:

**"Shared Transformation : A Two Way Process.** The concept of mutually reinforcing empowerment is not an abstract one but based on actual evidence and needs to be understood as a vital strategy for educational advance and social development. It is a democratic concept reflecting some of the unique achievement of India's democracy. It was one of the unstated goals of the National Policy on Education which now needs clarity, and procedural and directive support rather than resource support. It aims at better utilization of available social infrastructures and human resources providing an opportunity for participatory development with mutual respect amongst the educated and the uneducated sections of women".