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Channels

In Focus

[Analysis](#)
[Bolography](#)
[Cartoons](#)
[Environment](#)
[Opinion](#)

Columns

[Business](#)
[My Word](#)
[PlainSpeak](#)
[Random Thoughts](#)

Our Heritage

[Architecture](#)
[Astrology](#)
[Ayurveda](#)
[Buddhism](#)
[Cinema](#)
[Culture](#)
[Dances](#)
[Festivals](#)
[Hinduism](#)
[History](#)
[People](#)
[Places](#)
[Sikhism](#)
[Spirituality](#)
[Vastu](#)
[Vithika](#)

Society & Lifestyle

[Family Matters](#)
[Health](#)
[Parenting](#)
[Perspective](#)
[Recipes](#)
[Society](#)
[Teens](#)
[Women](#)

Creative Writings

[Book Reviews](#)
[Ghalib's Corner](#)
[Humor](#)
[Individuality](#)
[Jagoji](#)
[Literary Shelf](#)
[Love Letters](#)
[Memoirs](#)
[Musings](#)
[Rambblings](#)
[Stories](#)
[Travelogues](#)

Computing

[General Articles](#)
[CC++](#)
[Flash](#)
[Internet Security](#)
[Java](#)
[Linux](#)
[Networking](#)

Society

India has Failed to Provide Basic Entitlements to its People

by K V Venkatasubramanian

Despite its upward economic growth, India has failed to put into place even the most basic entitlements that will ensure the right to survival, life and dignity for women, particularly Dalit and tribal women, a new NGO report to the United Nations says.

"Macro economic policies continue to be gender blind and liberalization has impacted women adversely," the just-released report "Divided Destinies Unequal Lives—Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Indian State", compiled by the People's Collective for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, observes.

The 92-page report will be submitted to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights at a review during May second week in Geneva. India had ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) on July 10, 1979, and become a State party to this treaty body. Though reporting guidelines require States to submit periodic reports every five years, India, after submitting the initial report, had failed to report to the UN committee. After almost two decades, India is scheduled to be reviewed by the committee.

India's upcoming review is an opportunity for civil society groups to engage with the government by using international forums and spaces to demand human rights for all. This process led to the preparation of the NGO report, says Priti Darooka, Executive Director, Programme on Women's Economic Social and Cultural Rights (PWESCR), which initiated the report.

"The report articulates the myriad voices from Indian civil society. Over 150 organizations and individuals got together to collaboratively prepare the report and to hold Indian government accountable to the promises made under ICESCR," she says.

The report highlights the gaps that exist between the promise and assurances given by the State and their actual delivery, and has sharply focused on the plight of

women.

Citing the report, Priiti says livelihood security, education and autonomy of poor communities have figured low in priorities and concerns of policy makers. "There has been a marked shift of emphasis from agriculture. More people are increasingly driven to seek work in the tertiary and casual work sectors, with State policies resulting in agricultural stagnation. Majority remain in the unorganized and informal sector, outside the purview of most protective legislation."

Women continue to perform unpaid work within the household and in family farms and enterprises. Despite its obvious economic and social worth, much of the work that women do remains 'invisible' in national accounting and the census, as well as unrecognized and unpaid within the family. "This constrains women's equal opportunities in life and discourages their participation in labor market," it adds.

The report says the high growth rate of the economy has failed miserably to generate adequate "decent" employment for the labor force. "Inequalities of income and growth have increased across regions and different socio-economic groups and between men and women. A gender neutral approach in policies cannot resolve these disparities."

It says trends in employment during the past decade and a half indicate that economic reforms are not likely to lead the economy towards full employment, as there is no built-in mechanism under the neo liberal policies to ensure full employment.

On the normalization of work, the report says some forms of work are stigmatized, criminalized and excluded from the ambit of protective legislation. "Women workers, particularly, are subject to discriminatory treatment, sexual harassment and exploitation."

The oppressive influence of caste on Indian society, and on women in particular, is nowhere more visible than in the systemic stigmatization of occupations traditionally reserved for the oppressed castes, such as cleaning of human waste (manual scavenging) and sex work. "Women in these forms of work are subject to discrimination, violence and the complete denial of rights... Especially, Dalit women are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation due to caste violence," it points out.

Expressing concern over the declining Child Sex Ratio, the collective says despite its commitment to the protect the girl child, steps taken by the State have failed to achieve the expected results due to the lack of political will in their implementation.

The NGOs say the government, in a bid to build its claims to protecting the family as an institution, has made invisible critical concerns of women within the family. "It has drawn a narrow interpretation of the term 'family', positioning it strictly within the heterosexual and patriarchal framework....The division of labor in a family is blurred, as women are doubly burdened with longer hours and arduous work patterns. Caste-class divides only add to their burden."

It says there is no social security for 93 per cent of the workforce (nearly 397 million workers), one-third of whom are women. Under any social benefit scheme, women are only looked upon as dependents of male breadwinners and not as equal citizens contributing to the national economy, the collective observes and calls for developing a comprehensive legislation for social security for all.

On the food front, the document says hunger, malnutrition and anemia are endemic among girls and women, especially amongst tribal and Dalit populations. Despite an increase in food production food inadequacy persists as the targeted public distribution system has left more people vulnerable and hungry as rising prices and decreasing access meet only partially the poor's food requirements

The collective says several acts of the government have led to deceleration in the agriculture sector impacting the livelihood of about 65 per cent Indians. Performance of this largest sector, where women constitute 40 per cent of its workforce, is crucial to livelihood and food security.

Noting that the country spends less than one per cent of its GDP to provide health care to one billion people, the document says the government has not fulfilled its obligation and commitments to ensure universal access to comprehensive, quality health care. "Women's right to health and health care cannot be achieved until her right to various social determinants is attained."

On the right to education, it observes continuing disparities in the educational status of Dalit tribal and Muslim communities in general, and women and girls

in particular. “The overwhelming focus of policy and programmes has been on increasing access, while ignoring equity and quality issues. An emphasis on privatization of education or the introduction of non-formal schemes, rather than an investment in creating fully equipped and staffed formal schools, has weakened the education system.”

The collective points out that Muslims suffer widespread and systemic deprivations in education, health, employment, living standards and cultural life. “Muslim children suffer from the highest rates of stunting and the second highest rates of being underweight among all social groups in India. Muslim women are doubly marginalized on account of both their gender and their religion.”

The report was released by Dr Syeda Hameed, Member of Planning Commission, in New Delhi On May 2.

May 4, 2008

[Top](#) | [Society](#)

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