



Women's Empowerment and the Transformation of Economic Structures

Background Note

Over the past decades, great progress has been achieved in advancing towards the equality of women and men. Yet, as those working for the empowerment of women have realized, profound and enduring transformation will require not just changes in perceptions and behavior of people but also systematic and sustained efforts to transform those structures of society that inhibit women's full and meaningful participation in public life. Patriarchal biases and assumptions built into these structures can place limits on the depth and the scope of the transformation that can be achieved.

Among the various social structures that impact the condition of women, those that relate to the economic arrangements of society merit particular attention. The relationship between economic structures and the empowerment of women has been under-explored relative to its importance. Further, given the tendency to view development purely in terms of economic growth and the willingness to sacrifice social, ecological and ethical interests at its altar, the gender dimension requires special attention lest its relevance be obscured or compromised.

The prevalent economic system rewards competitiveness, domination and aggression which are values that characterize patriarchal societies. The value of altruism, reciprocity, cooperation, and mutual aid, whose relevance to a world of economic interdependence is increasingly acknowledged in academic discourse, remains largely ignored in mainstream economic policies.

The existing economic order emphasizes the accumulation of material wealth which tends to benefit a privileged minority while undervaluing collective prosperity, community well-being and environmental sustainability. Within such an order, scant value is placed on the unremunerated and unacknowledged work of feeding, nurturing and caring for others. The challenge is not only to render such work visible and valuable, but also to ensure that women participate more fully in all fields of work, that men become more active in the work of caring and nurturing and that the values underpinning such work are carried to other arenas of society.

Further, numerous studies have established the adverse impact of policies promoting unregulated economic globalization on the social fabric of India and, by extension, on the condition of women. The weakening of the local economy and the neglect of small scale agriculture caused by these policies have been shown to contribute to the exploitation and marginalization of vulnerable populations (particularly women and girls), and the large-scale degradation of the environment.

In this regard, we need to ask ourselves how women and men can engage in economic activity in a way that conduces to justice. How can they contribute to the construction of new economic structures and processes that reflect values such as reciprocity, cooperation, and mutual aid rather than competition and exploitation? How can we expand the conception of human rationality so that it is not reduced to utility maximization on the part of self-interested individuals who are

divorced from social and moral obligations? How do we render the unremunerated work of caring for others valuable and visible in society?