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Gender and Development in South Asia: Can Practice Keep Up with Theory?

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ABSTRACT — *This paper documents how institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, have responded to South Asian women's economic needs over the past three decades. It analyses how these interventions have evolved with regard to the different theoretical approaches to gender and development, ranging from the welfare, efficiency, and anti-poverty approaches of the 1970s and 1980s to the more recent empowerment, rights-, and capabilities-based approaches of the 1990s and the new millennium. The author emphasizes that most governmental interventions in South Asia, regardless of political persuasion, have been preoccupied with employment and income-generating schemes as the means of empowering women. As a result, measures of women's empowerment and gender justice continue to revolve around employment and labour force participation and not the alleviation of the burden of domestic labour, increased political participation, or equal property rights. Barring some notable exceptions, NGOs have also shown unwillingness to involve themselves in controversial issues. This despite the continued assertion by scholars and practitioners that in addition to economic opportunities, women need not just more potent political power but also independent and equal rights in land and property ownership to be able to empower themselves and gain equal footing with men in society. The author concludes by asserting that at least in South Asia, the theoretical discourses on gender and development appear to be more than a few steps ahead of policy and practice.*

RÉSUMÉ — *L'article démontre comment les institutions gouvernementales et non gouvernementales répondent aux besoins économiques des femmes de l'Asie du Sud depuis trois décennies. L'auteure analyse la façon dont leurs interventions ont évolué par rapport aux différentes approches théoriques de la relation genre et développement : depuis celles axées sur le bien-être, l'efficacité et la lutte contre la pauvreté, dans les années 1970 et 1980, jusqu'à celles plus récentes axées sur l'autonomie, les droits et les capacités qui sont apparues dans les années 1990 et au début du nouveau millénaire. Dans la plupart des cas, souligne l'auteure, les gouvernements de l'Asie du Sud, de toutes les tendances politiques, se sont préoccupés de projets créateurs d'emplois et générateurs de revenus comme moyens de favoriser l'autonomie des femmes. Par conséquent, les mesures d'autonomisation et de justice pour les femmes restent axées sur l'emploi et la participation au marché du travail et non sur l'allègement des tâches domestiques, l'augmentation de la participation politique ou l'égalité des droits en matière de propriété. Sauf quelques exceptions notables, les ONG ont hésité à s'engager sur des questions controversées. Pourtant, les théoriciens et les praticiens continuent d'affirmer qu'outre des possibilités économiques, les femmes ont besoin d'un plus grand pouvoir politique, mais aussi de droits indépendants et égaux par rapport à la propriété des biens fonciers et immobiliers pour acquérir de l'autonomie et parvenir à être traitées sur un pied d'égalité avec les hommes. L'auteure conclut en affirmant qu'au moins en Asie du Sud, les discours théoriques sur la relation genre et développement semblent plus en avance que les politiques et les pratiques.*

INTRODUCTION

Women's practical and strategic needs have been emphasized in many different contexts and within different planning frameworks during the relatively short history of gender planning, which essentially commenced with the 1975 declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women. Before the Decade for Women, development planning concerned with women primarily focused on addressing the practical needs surrounding their reproductive role through a *welfare* approach that concentrated on food delivery, family planning, and health care. The original WID approach, ushered in during the Decade for Women, was initially conceived as an *equity* approach that recognized women's active role in the development process as reproductive, productive, and community workers (Boserup 1970). This approach emphasized the fulfillment of their strategic needs through direct state intervention (Molyneux 1985). The political nature of this approach alienated governments and it was soon replaced by the *anti-poverty* approach that focused on practical needs surrounding women's productive role. The *efficiency* approach, which followed the anti-poverty approach, is currently still the most popular approach in South Asia and focuses on the practical needs of women in all three of their roles. The most distinct feature of this approach is that it seeks to enhance women's contribution to the development process in order to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of project interventions. This approach understandably continues to enjoy support in governmental and non-governmental circles because it recognizes quite correctly that a country's development process depends to a large extent on the full social, political, and economic participation of women. Its major weakness, stressed by Caroline Moser (1993) among others, lies in the implicit conviction that women's time and energy are elastic and, more importantly, that women are merely instrumental to accomplishing implied grander goals of population control, poverty alleviation, and economic growth. The *empowerment* approach succeeded the efficiency approach and considers women's improved condition and position to be ends in themselves, rather than only helpful for accomplishing development goals (Rowlands 1997). Like its predecessor, this approach continues to focus on meeting women's needs in terms of their triple roles, but it departs from the top-down nature of the equity and efficiency approaches by espousing self-reliance and grassroots action toward women's goals (Parpart 2002).

More recently, many activists have envisaged a *rights-based* approach to the development process in general and to realizing gender equality in particular (Kerr 1993; Kerr, Sprenger, and Symington 2004). This approach seeks to establish the achievement of human rights as well as the creation of an enabling environment in which human rights can be enjoyed as the main objectives of the development process. Because this approach transcends sectoral concerns, it can potentially encompass concepts of welfare, anti-poverty, equity, and empowerment as different facets of the rights of all people. Because the achievement of human rights is the ultimate objective, efficiency arguments are not generally employed in rights-based approaches. However, a few authors, such as Savitri Gooneskere (1998), have deconstructed the rights-based approach even in efficiency terms and explained the benefits of legal enforceability, state responsibility, and moral authority pertaining to human rights.

In the Asian context, the forging of women's rights and human rights movements has been impeded somewhat by the misinformed but widespread belief that "Asian values" — based upon the subjugation of individual rights in favour of collective community rights — are incompatible with "Western" notions of autonomy and individual rights. Additionally, in South Asia strong religious traditions are integrated into state administration and governance, increasing the perception of human rights as a secular ideology antagonistic to religious and cultural traditions. The 3rd and 4th

World Conferences on Women in Nairobi and Beijing have helped build consensus on these issues as have the research and writing of individual scholars and activists (Bhavnani, Foran, and Kurian 2003; Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1999). The Jakarta Declaration for the Advancement of Women in Asia and the Pacific, for example, notes that it is increasingly being recognized that an unqualified human right to freedom of conscience and religion does not justify the manifestation of religious belief in practice and observance so as to undermine or violate gender equality (ESCAP 1999).

The *capabilities* approach may have evolved out of the rights-based approach and is the newest entrant of relevance in the discourse of gender and development. It differs from the previous approach in that it does not explicitly talk about rights but stresses that it is imperative that human beings are afforded the social, political, civic, and economic circumstances that allow them to optimally exercise their central human functions and capabilities (Baruah 2003; Nussbaum 2000; Nussbaum and Glover 1995; Sen 1999). While this approach acknowledges the importance of local knowledge in understanding people's problems, it strongly defends universal values, such as the dignity of the person, bodily integrity, basic political rights and liberties, and economic opportunities, as appropriate norms in assessing the quality of people's lives anywhere in the world.

I. GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSES TO WOMEN'S NEEDS

By now it has been well established that because women experience poverty and deprivation in different and more acute ways than men, their economic needs require a specific focus that is distinct from that of men. Until recently it was widely assumed by economics and development theory as well as by governments and NGOs that the household is a unit of congruent interests, among whose members the benefits of available resources are shared equitably regardless of gender (Albelda 1997; Beneria 2003). The process by which this assumption came to be challenged over the past 30 years or so is complex. While it cannot be outlined here in detail, it can be stated that it came about as a result of negotiation and struggle that involved the efforts of academics, researchers, activists, government policy-makers, bureaucrats, and international agencies. It was set in motion by at least three interrelated factors: the building up of gender-specific empirical evidence and analyses, especially since the mid-1970s, which exposed a systematic gender gap in how the benefits and burdens of development were being distributed; the mushrooming of women's organizations loosely constituting a women's movement, since the late-1970s; and changes in the international context, most notably the declaration of 1975–1985 as the UN Decade for Women, with associated increased research funding, media coverage, and pressure on countries to generate gender-specific data and reports on the status of women.

A. Gender in Government Planning

Today, although there is no consensus on why gender gaps in income, education, and political participation still exist or how they can be done away with, it is widely accepted that development is not gender neutral (Beneria 2003; Lister 2004; Momsen 2004). At the governmental or policy level, this recognition has been reflected in a number of developments. These are the establishment of separate cells, departments, or ministries in governments to monitor and coordinate women's concerns in the development process; the incorporation of policy directives on women and development in the planning process, as in India's Five Year Plans, which in 1980 incorporated women's issues as a separate category for the first time; and the initiation of separate literacy and income-generating schemes targeted at women.

In India, the focus on poverty alleviation and efficiency ensured that economic initiatives far outweighed other ventures and legislation during most of the 1970s and 1980s. Schemes like the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) were developed to meet the credit needs of households below the official poverty line. Although the IRDP did not aim to specifically target women, it did include a clause that 30% of individuals assisted by the program had to be women (Kabeer 1996). This figure was subsequently increased to 40% in 1991 but failed to reach even the original target number of 30% women. While several reasons have been suggested for this, the failure to reach the target number of women can probably be attributed to a number of factors that include complicated application procedures, women's lack of collateral, inconvenient locations of banks, and large scale co-optation of the program by competing political factions. The Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) program emerged subsequently as a sub-scheme of the IRDP in response to the findings of an IRDP review, which revealed that of all its priority target groups, women were most likely to be excluded (Agarwal 1994). It was estimated that less than 5% of IRDP's beneficiaries were women. Set up with assistance from UNICEF in 1983 as a pilot project in 50 selected districts, it has since been extended to other districts, and by 1995 it was being implemented throughout India. DWCRA was designed to address some of the exclusionary aspects of IRDP. The major objective of the program was to bring about an overall improvement in the quality of life of women and children from households that qualified for IRDP assistance by creating credit-based opportunities for self-employment for poor women and by improving their access to and utilization of services such as child care, mother and child health care, and adult education. Therefore, it appears that although DWRCAs were intended as a sub-program of the IRDP, its objectives were wider and encompassed both economic and social aspects.

While these developments are certainly steps in the right direction in an environment where previously no programs were directed at women, the approach underlying them essentially treats gender as an additive category — what Harding (1987) called the “add women and stir approach.” Instead of perceiving gender as a lens through which the approach to development should be examined and, if necessary, amended, it aims to simply add women as a target group to existing concerns. These programs are essentially based on the welfare or basic needs approach of the 1970s and seek to provide basic goods and services such as food, health care, and education to the economically disadvantaged without seriously questioning the existing distribution of productive resources and political power or the social (including gender, class, caste) division of labour. Additionally, South Asian governments typically deliver such provisions or services in a top-down manner that involves little consultation with the recipients, especially women, about their specific needs or the optimal means of meeting them (Seth 2001). Women's strategic needs received very little attention in policy formulation in this scenario.

In India, the first five-year plans focused almost exclusively on employment, education, and health, and made only passing references to women. It is only in the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980–1985) that there is limited recognition of women's specific needs for literacy and land rights. Even these appear to be written in with the purely instrumental purpose of poverty alleviation and family welfare. The rest of the 1980s witnessed an overwhelming concern with poverty alleviation translated almost inevitably into efficiency-based strategies for income generation and credit delivery. Then in 1990, after many years of sustained efforts and lobbying by women's organizations and gender-progressive bureaucrats, the *Indian National Commission for Women Act* was passed. This act created a commission with a wide mandate to investigate and monitor “all matters relating to the safeguards provided for women under the constitution and other laws” (Government of India 1990). The *Act* mandated that the government place recommendations made by the Commission before both

houses of Parliament, along with a memorandum of actions that it proposes for the government. The *Act* also mandates that the government sufficiently justify non-acceptance of such recommendations. Because the Commission was expected to take active responsibility for enforcement of social and economic legislation, it was counterintuitive that the Eighth Five Year Plan in 1992 did not even have a separate chapter on women and development (Seth 2001). Instead, women's concerns were largely subsumed under the chapter on social welfare, which also deals with children, the disabled, the elderly, and the destitute. In this document women are perceived more as victims than as active agents of change and contributors to development. The reasons for this retrogression, especially in light of the Commission's specific agenda to protect and advance the interests of women, are unclear. In contrast, although the Sixth and Seventh Plans also mentioned women's concerns as social welfare concerns, they at least provided separate chapters on women's economic and social programs, recognized women's productive contribution to the economy, and employed the language of equality and rights.

The situation in other South Asian countries is also discouraging. For example, Nepal's Eighth Five Year Plan (1992–1997) employs the efficiency rhetoric and highlights women's employment and the need to encourage their participation in economic activities but makes no other gender-progressive references to political participation or property rights (Agarwal 1994). In Bangladesh, the Fourth Five Year Plan (1990–1995) contains two chapters on women and development but, quite predictably, the emphasis is consistently on the family welfare aspects of female employment, health, literacy, nutrition, and credit (Agarwal 1994). Pakistan's Eighth Five Year Plan (1993–1998) has a chapter entitled "Affirmative Action for Women and Other Disadvantaged Groups," which promises women preferential treatment in employment and education but makes no mention of implementing other crucial strategic interests. Instead, it discusses gender relations in traditional terms, with the state explicitly undertaking to "protect the marriage, the family, the mother and the child" and to forego any approaches "which [could] antagonize male members of the community" (Government of Pakistan 1991).

It is important to reiterate, as many scholars have, that even efforts directed at meeting women's practical needs sometimes lead to improvement not just in women's condition but also in their position in society. The neatness of the theoretical distinction between "practical" and "strategic" needs, as distinguished by Molyneux (1985), is often confounded in practice. Group organization for wage increases, credit circles, and better working conditions are excellent examples where the process of fulfilling practical needs transforms into fulfilling strategic needs. Some elements in the governmental apparatus may be beginning to realize this. In India, a government attempt to promote adult female education, namely the *Mahila Samakhyā* (Education for Women's Equality) Programme launched in the state of Karnataka, is not only couched in terms of female "empowerment" but also recognizes that organizing rural women into groups to discuss gender relations can be a necessary first step toward that end (Narayanan 2002). Fully funded and run by the state government, this project is explicitly aimed at increasing women's confidence and initiative and empowering them in their dealings with employers, government officials, and husbands. In addition to educational gains, the very existence of the women's collective has the potential to transform the family, making it no longer the sole source of affiliation for women. Their new-found empowerment has motivated women in this program to fight corruption of local governing bodies and also to demand health visits, teachers, and regular water service. Although the initial intention of the program was to empower women to have more control over their material environment, the implications of this process may actually be more than the state bargained for. That welfare and efficiency arguments for focusing on what are presumably strategic needs appeal more to bureaucrats and the fact that it

continues to be more acceptable in the South Asian context to frame gender concerns in terms of improving women's material condition rather than their position in society should perhaps not detract from viewing such developments as progressive! The successes enjoyed in recent years by *Mahila Samakhya* in supporting women's entry into village level local government, made possible by the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian constitution that granted women one-third of seats in *panchayats* and urban local councils, is a good example of how organizing for "practical" purposes can lead to more "strategic" political outcomes (Narayanan 2002).

The reasons why welfare and efficiency driven arguments resonate better with state planners than those explicitly grounded in equality and empowerment are debatable. The answer may lie in part in the fact that welfare and basic needs arguments focus quite strongly on poor women and, consequently, lend themselves well to being incorporated within the poverty-alleviation component of planning that targets the most vulnerable groups or the "poorest of the poor," which frequently means women and children. Part of the answer may also lie in entrenched notions of appropriate gender relations prevalent among men who design and implement policy and who may perceive empowering women to transform gender relations as inappropriate and even threatening to existing hierarchies in kinship and family structures that serve men well. As a result, planners may be more motivated to push for changes that give poor women a better chance of survival than to challenge basic inequities and injustices that have transformative potential for gender relations. This probably explains, at least to some degree, the comparative enthusiasm for, and preponderance of, health, nutrition, and poverty-alleviation schemes over gender-redistributive land reform and political equality.

While criticizing South Asian governments for failing to evolve in correspondence with women's expressed needs and priorities over the decades, it is important to emphasize that there are significant differences between regions and between central and state government policies and programs. For example, although India has done extremely badly in basic education across the board, the southern state of Kerala has an adult literacy rate of 90% and almost universal literacy among adolescent boys and girls. Kerala's development achievements extend into economic, social, and political spheres, earning it the well-deserved title of "the most socially advanced state in India" (Nussbaum 2000). Although not affluent in terms of per capita income, Kerala's achievements are the outcome of more than 100 years of concerted public action, involving the state and the general public, as well as matriarchal traditions and a long, partly Jesuit-inspired tradition of education that goes back to the 18th century. The higher levels of human development enjoyed by the state did not stop its government from forging ahead with new programs and reforms. For example, the government of Kerala accurately foresaw that providing a nutritious school lunch would strengthen the intra-household bargaining position of children, increasing child education and diminishing child labour. Several other southern states have implemented scholarship programs for girls based on similar logic that increasing female literacy requires giving parents economic options and incentives. In Maharashtra, job training is offered to daughters of sex workers as a security for the future. In Andhra Pradesh, girls are provided with subsidized skill training programs and boarding school facilities to delay marriage and motherhood. Similar state and district-level interventions in other parts of South Asia have the potential to compensate for the inaction on the part of national governments.

II. NON-GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSES TO WOMEN'S NEEDS

In the 1970s when gender concerns were incipient, the state was indisputably the key institutional player in the design and implementation of programs in market-led economic growth, poverty alleviation, and education. In the early 1990s, decades of neoliberal critique of the state, compounded by the failure of centrally planned economies around the world, and the growing awareness about the "feminization of poverty," led to a shift in international development ideology (Baruah 2002). An alternative route of "bottom up" empowerment began to emerge and while it continued to include the public and occasionally the private sector, it also envisaged an expanded role for civil society organizations. This was based partly on the advantages attributed to these organizations as being less bureaucratic, less conservative, closer to their constituency, and, therefore, more in touch with its needs and constraints. The face-to-face interactions between NGOs and their constituencies were also deemed to give them a greater advantage in promoting innovative participatory strategies and less scope for trivializing or avoiding the issue of women's subordination.

Like the state, during the 1980s and the early 1990s most NGOs that worked with women also focused predominantly on poverty alleviation and income generation. In addition to food-for-work schemes led by international NGOs such as Oxfam, UNICEF, and CARE, microcredit opportunities comprised the most popular interventions. If government credit interventions for the poor represent its attempts to address the exclusionary implications of the formal banking sector vis-à-vis poor people, then NGO efforts can be seen in part as the attempt to compensate for the exclusionary practices of governments and banks. A broad overview of the literature on NGOs in poverty alleviation, including those with gender-specific agendas, suggests that they catered to one or more of the following areas: acting as financial intermediaries between government schemes and the poor, lending directly to the poor, promoting self-help thrift and savings groups, and forming non-government cooperative banks for the poor (Baruah 2004; Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala 1996; Chen 1996).

Until the late 1980s most NGO efforts appeared to be designed to promote women's welfare and access but rarely their awareness, participation, and control. There was a growing awareness toward the end of the decade that increased income generated through credit and labour force participation was not leading to durable gains in women's empowerment and status in society. NGOs' flexible organizational structures and the comparative closeness to their constituencies allowed them to respond more quickly than governments to new perceived needs and priorities. Popular education, conscientization, organization, and mobilization witnessed resurgence at the grassroots level and more NGOs joined the bandwagon to provide not just economic services but also to facilitate the achievement of women's social and political goals (Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala 1996). Among the most successful and oft-quoted examples include the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Action for Welfare and Awakening in Rural Environment (AWARE) in India; the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Pakistan (AKRSP); Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and *Nijera Kori* in Bangladesh; and the *Sarvodaya Sharmadana Movement* (SSM) in Sri Lanka. While these organizations have disparate priorities, goals, and strategies, their success seems to largely derive from their ability to organize people at the local level and thereby fill the institutional vacuum that had been growing over the years (Baruah 2004; Calman 1992). While I cannot outline the philosophies and strengths of all these organizations, I will elaborate upon the strategies of a few to illustrate the conscious shift from welfare and basic needs priorities to those of equality and empowerment.

A. Psychological Empowerment and Mobilization: The AWARE Strategy

By now it has been well established that to derive optimum social benefits from the resources invested in development plans, a strategy that treats people as active agents of participation and change and not just as targets or beneficiaries is most effective. Amartya Sen (1999) stresses that what is important is not so much what people receive as how much involvement they have and what part they play in the process of development itself.

A strategy that reverses the conventional sequence of development assistance by addressing awareness generation and empowerment first and economic assistance later has been promoted by a number of prominent NGOs, women's organizations, and community groups in South Asia (Calman 1992; Narasimhan 1999). Most notable among these is AWARE, a secular, non-political, voluntary organization that works with rural women in communities across India (Narasimhan 1999). The primary aim of the NGO is to raise consciousness among the poor about their rights and legal entitlements and generate within them the urge for a better life. Once the community is sufficiently motivated and ready to undertake development projects, AWARE steps in with economic programs and loans that are strictly limited to matching whatever resources the community is able to mobilize on its own first and supporting the kind of economic intervention the community itself wants. Assistance is provided in forming self-help groups for the purpose of generating resources like labour, materials, and credit from within so that it becomes a "people's initiative" rather than something extrinsic thrust upon the community. The strategy is built on the belief that for the self-sustaining components of developmental activities to be strong and viable, it is essential for people to identify with the projects on hand and participate as both implementers and decision-makers. Although the strategy begins with motivation and then moves on to economic development, there is also a third stage, which is seen as an equally important component of the organization's strategy: that of withdrawing from a community once a self-sustaining momentum for initiating change has been generated. Avoiding a dependency syndrome is a major aspect of the AWARE strategy. The first batch of 150 villages became "independent" in 1985, and the second in 1987. By the end of the century, the organization had withdrawn in this manner from 2620 villages across India where the community has been empowered with confidence and the ability to tackle problems on its own (Narasimhan 1999). The fact that AWARE is able to withdraw from a village once awareness has been generated in sufficient measure itself shows that it is not so much material input that is the decisive factor in appropriate strategy as psychological priming for community empowerment. Although the measurement of empowerment continues to be a debated topic, a number of studies based on participant observation and interviews have revealed that women who have been exposed to the awareness generation strategy fare significantly better than women who have not (Baruah 2005; Sato 1999; Schuler and Hashemi 1993). This includes most widely accepted areas of empowerment such as income, education, health care, status, access to and ownership of assets and resources, autonomy, assertiveness, and group mobilization.

The emphasis on human development, rather than on immediate income generation, differentiates the AWARE strategy from conventional approaches of many women's programs. The sense of solidarity and camaraderie generated among the women has also enabled them to seek solutions to domestic and social issues in the community. Emphasizing psychological empowerment, awareness generation, information sharing, and motivation and bolstering this with modest economic assistance appears to effect changes that credit alone cannot bring about.

Other organizations have also tried motivation and sensitization as part of their strategy. For example, the UNDP's India Project, launched in 1996 in three districts of Andhra Pradesh as part of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation's (SAARC) regional experiment in poverty

eradication, employs a strategy similar to AWARE (Narasimhan 1999). It also emphasizes self-help, self-reliance, and community participation. It helps indigenous women develop revolving credit schemes by pooling their savings and motivates them to overcome the handicaps of illiteracy through awareness and information workshops. One woman is identified from each village as a potential health worker and sent to the nearest hospital for a month-long training period. Upon completion of training, she returns to her village and works as a barefoot doctor in spreading awareness about health, sanitation, and preventative health care. Like the AWARE women, the women in the UNDP project bonded together to fight domestic violence, child marriages, the practice of demanding dowry from the parents of brides, and ostracism of widows. They also took a lead in community initiatives for developmental work in water supply, agriculture, and health care.

A few other well-known initiatives may be mentioned here. *Nijera Kori*, an NGO founded by development activists in Bangladesh, does not distribute material resources to the poor but seeks instead to build their organizational capacity to enable them to press claims on public institutions (Kabeer 1994). The NGO reasons that while there is state commitment to providing various material resources to the poor, from redistribution of unclaimed publicly owned land to the provision of employment through government work schemes, what prevents disenfranchised people from claiming their just entitlement is their lack of political clout. In terms of economic resources, priority is given to the mobilization of the communities' own resources and includes joint cultivation and aquaculture supported by group savings. The Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan, India, also focuses less on putting new mechanisms of delivery in place and more on building alliances and networks that would enable poorer rural women to put collective pressure on unresponsive local institutions (Kabeer 1994).

The *Annapurna Mahila Mandal* and the *Lijjat Papad Project*, both based in Mumbai, employ women's skills as cooks and homemakers to generate incomes and in the process empowers them through collective bonding and group support (Rowbotham and Mitter 1994). Although these initiatives have become very successful, they do not target specific depressed communities like AWARE does. Also, unlike AWARE, the memberships of the latter two organizations are primarily urban. What they do have in common with AWARE is the experience of bringing about meaningful economic and attitudinal change even without conventional education or large injections of money and infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

As embodied in national Five Year Plans, most governmental responses directed at women in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan appear to still be stationed at the welfare or anti-poverty stage. The instrumental approach to alleviating poverty by increasing women's earning abilities has also enjoyed widespread support and resulted in a rich proliferation of government efforts across the length and breadth of the sub-continent. Research indicates that in many cases this has resulted in women bearing the additional burden of earning a visible income in hard currency while continuing to bear their disproportionate share of household maintenance, care of children and the elderly, and community management (Kapadia 2002; Momsen 2004). Government efforts aimed at renegotiating the sexual division of labour by, for example, providing masonry or carpentry skills to girls and women, encouraging men to participate in household chores and childcare, and overcoming discrimination against women owning land and property are visibly and disappointingly practically non-existent. The fact that some women have managed to increase their bargaining power within the household and the community on the strength of their increased earnings can be credited almost

entirely to the women themselves and to their ability to organize themselves and negotiate better terms. Additionally, government schemes continue to rely on the official poverty line as a measure of people's deprivation, although it has been demonstrated quite convincingly to be extremely insensitive to intra-household inequalities based on gender and age. On the optimistic side, several state governments have taken the lead in creating gender-progressive legislation and policies compensating for, or at least offsetting to some extent, the inertia of the central governments.

The sheer range of NGO interventions in South Asia is definitely broader than that of the governments in the region. Some regions such as the southern states in India, Gujarat, and Bangladesh have had a long history of civil society organization and activism. Most NGOs have established networks of members and affiliated bodies. Due to their grassroots memberships and comparatively less bureaucratic structures, they are able to react more quickly than governments to acute situations. They also have valuable experience of successes and failures in implementing programs (Cheston and Kuhn 2002; Jhabvala and Subrahmanya 2000; Rahman 1999). They provide a wide range of services such as informal education, vocational training, counselling, sheltering abused women, health care and health training, crèche facilities, and organizing and unionizing domestic workers, agricultural workers, and labourers. Some NGOs pressure governments to meet national and international commitments on women's rights and to enact gender-sensitive labour legislation. Others publicize human rights issues such as dowry deaths, domestic violence, so-called "honour" killings, and other forms of cruelty, aggression, and intimidation against women. There are also South Asian NGOs that act as lobby groups to influence public and government discourse on the host of issues related to peace, disarmament, and the environment.

Despite such a wide range of mission objectives, most NGOs in South Asia have, regardless of political persuasion, been preoccupied with employment and income-generating schemes as the means of empowering women. As a result, measures of women's empowerment continue to revolve around employment and labour force participation and not alleviation of burden of domestic labour, increased political participation, or equal property rights. Barring some notable exceptions as noted earlier, NGOs have shown unwillingness to involve themselves in controversial issues, despite the continued assertion by scholars and practitioners that in addition to economic opportunities, women need more potent political power and independent equal rights in land and property ownership to be able to empower themselves to have equal footing with men in society.

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