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## Feminization of Poverty in India A Globalisation Perspective

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### **Introduction**

Globalisation, is an established fact. It is a multifaceted phenomenon which is ruling the world and in the recent past the globalists have glorified the phenomenon of globalisation that it is playing an instrumental role in bridging the socio-economic disparities to establish an egalitarian and a just world order. However, the assertion by the proponents of this phenomenon does not go undisputed and the anti globalists are pointing out the vast and rigid inequalities created by globalisation which is not unsubstantiated. Despite the tall claims made by the globalists that the neo-liberal policies of the state would eventually eliminate the rigid class divisions, the world is still divided in to these divisions where some people enjoy the best of materialistic acquisitions and live in affluence and others who live in dehumanising

conditions, of deprivation and servitude. Although disadvantaged groups exist in all societies but women constitute nearly half among the dis-advantaged group and as far as poverty is concerned women account for 70% of the 1.3 billion people world wide who live in poverty. Since developing economies are more vulnerable to issues like poverty, pollution, insecurity of all kinds, women of such societies are doubly facing the brunt of poverty and globalisation.

In the past few decades, globalisation with its various manifestations has certainly improved the living conditions of people across globe and has significantly contributed towards improved standards of life. It has enhanced the access to economic opportunities to women; yet the increased phenomenon of feminisation of poverty has emerged as one among many concerns for nations across the globe.

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## **Indian Scene**

India is no exception in this regard and to address the issue of poverty and its impact it adopted the United Nation's MDGs in the year 2000. Unfortunately, the gaps related to the goals and targets still exist and continue to remain as a challenge for India. India's half of the population is poor as per the reports of the planning commission which is based on the survey by NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation) and many an expert have linked this with the liberalised trade environment and incoming foreign investments and the leverage given to the transnational corporations (TNCs). However, the fact remains that the benefits of globalisation have not trickled down to the most neglected sections of the society. Globalisation has not been a remunerative experience for most Indian women and they are subjected to new forms of exploitation and harassment. It is against this back ground that the present paper is an attempt to establish the relation for increased incidence of feminisation of poverty in contemporary times to the phenomenon of globalisation.

## **Understanding Feminisation of poverty**

Poverty is as much a debatable issue as globalisation. For some it is

estimated by the Head Count Ratio giving an approximate number of people living below the poverty line and the access to the basic amenities decides the poverty line. Again, basic amenities vary within and across societies and what actually are basic amenities is a contested issue. According to Mollie Orshansky, *to be poor is to be deprived of those goods and services and pleasures which others around us take for granted*. Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in the state of poverty when they are unable to appropriate the resources to fulfil their needs and amenities, nourish themselves with the diet and participate in the activities which are customary or at least widely accepted or approved in societies to which they belong. Poverty is not just low income or low consumption but is a state of multiple deprivations that amount to denial of social and economic rights. Poverty is not just an indicator of one's financial or economic status but has short and long term psycho-social implications.

It is a relative concept based on men-women comparison. The Human Development Report states that poverty has a woman's face i.e. of the 1.3 billion people in poverty, 70% are women. In most Asian countries women are more vulnerable to poverty and the

severity of implications of poverty on them has become a matter of discourse among academicians, policy makers and analysts. In India, poverty is continually growing among one of the most discriminated (women) section of the society.

The idea that women bear the disproportionate and growing burden of poverty at a global scale is encapsulated in the concept of feminization of poverty. This growth of women in poverty is termed as *feminization of poverty*, the term which was first coined in the beginning of the 1970s by Diana Pearce, an American sociologist describing a worsening trend of the gender gap in poverty. In most general sense, this as a phenomenon is an indicator of poor status of women in the society. The increased rate of incidence of poverty among women has a multiplier effect on their well-being and a threat to their integrity.

Although in no society do women enjoy the same opportunities as men but in developing societies like India the issue has emerged as a human rights violation requiring interventions at all levels i.e familial level, societal and national. According to Human Development Report, 2005 India is one of the most under nourished countries of the world and

feminisation of poverty is all the more alarming because the state of multiple deprivations among women is a prime reason for premature deaths, disease, under nourishment, illiteracy and social exclusion. In the following section an attempt is made to investigate the reasons that account for the aforesaid phenomenon with a special emphasis in the context of globalisation.

### **India: A Gender Biased Society**

Like most developing societies, in India too, gender is a basic determinant of social relations and determines rights in households particularly in the rural communities. In addition to gender, other factors like class, ethnicity, and caste decide the fate of women's opportunities, hopes, living standard, self-perception and securing resources and status in the community. The patriarchal set up of the Indian society subjects women to social and cultural biases. Indian women since long have been a victim of number of socio-cultural deprivations. Tradition, culture and stereotypes have contributed towards a gender division of labour that have forced women to be mainly responsible for caring of children, the elderly and the disabled in the family and the assistance she gives in the family

occupation, for example, in agriculture, handicrafts and in small business units etc, which generally goes unnoticed, unrecognised and is always unpaid. The general perception of women being a weaker and an inferior sex with no inherent qualities and with no capacity to develop the same has largely been responsible for their subservience and subordination.

The leadership of independent India took the issue of amelioration of status of women in a crusade spirit and a number of initiatives have been taken towards their capacity – building. However, women, by and large, have not been beneficiaries of the central or state initiated programmes. For instance, a significant proportion of rural women do not have access to agricultural credit, inputs and extension services which are essentially required by small-scale farmers to increase their output and develop profitable enterprises. Women farmers are a major contributor, about 60-70% of the total crop production, but less than two per cent of them have access to credit and agricultural training programmes. Due to customary norms, in absence of collateral and financial skills and lack of education and awareness, women do not benefit from agricultural services as much as men and these reasons

contribute towards their inaccessibility to micro finance services. This greatly hampers women to improve their skills, their working conditions and productivity and thus without access to productive resources it is extremely difficult for women to realize various development goals including poverty reduction.

### **Ownership Right to Land**

It is an irony that despite the symbolic association between women and the land in the sense of widespread Indian cultural perception of earth as mother, the percentage of women as land owners is just insignificant. Women's access to and control over land is a way to establish substantive equality as it addresses material deprivation, provides a sense of security and enhances self-esteem and confidence. As per the statistics for 2011 from National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) it is estimated that in India 79% women rely on agriculture as their primary source of income and yet only 9% of rural Indian women are land owners accounting to approximately 12.7% of land holdings under their ownership. The denial of full rights on access to and control over resources is a major contributor towards their deplorable condition, for their state of perpetual

poverty and security and to reducing them to a voiceless and a vulnerable constituency. Despite progressive and gender sensitive laws, women still do not constitute a significant percentage of population as land owners. A study commissioned by the Uttar Pradesh planning department had highlighted that only 2.6 per cent women (both in rural and urban areas) owned property in their own name.

### **Difference in Wages and nature of Work**

In the past, women had often been victims of the second hand treatment in the form of subjecting her to physical and verbal abuse, alienated from progressive laws and policies and denied of opportunities for self development through education and learning of vocational skills and this biased approach of the Indian social set up is one among many reasons for their perpetual state of poverty. Rural women have no other alternative of economic development other than keeping themselves involved in the primary occupation, and for the reasons mentioned above could not make a leverage of the state sponsored schemes and programmes for the farmers. Moreover, in the agriculture sector, women are usually employed on contractual basis for carrying out

activities like weeding, transplanting, winnowing etc. and are paid less as compared to activities such as ploughing, irrigation, levelling etc. that provides more income but fall in the male domain. Further with the mechanisation at all stages of production, the vulnerability of women as labourers has significantly increased. The brunt is faced in the form of unemployment, exploitation of all kinds, insecurity and inequitable distribution of money and resources thus augmenting their situation of poverty. Going by the Statistics from the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), 2011 women farm labourers earn only around Rs 68.94 daily while men get Rs 101.53 .

In the secondary occupations the situation is no different. In the urban set up, lower middle class women have found it difficult to make inroads in the male dominated professions due to absence of requisite qualifications, skills, awareness and of course, family support and therefore, women are segregated into low paying occupations and are forced to take up less remunerative jobs with flexible working hours that have minimal disturbance in the familial responsibilities that they have to shoulder. A significant percentage of women is tracked into *pink-collar*

jobs such as teaching, child care, nursing, cleaning, and domestic helpers.

### **Globalisation and Feminisation of Poverty**

It is an established fact that Indian social set up characterised by rudimentary values, gender biased social norms and traditions and male chauvinism have largely been responsible for the dismal socio economic status of women. Now that India is one among the rapidly progressing nations and fast integrating itself with the economies of the world, and is following a gender sensitive approach through legislative measures and policy making, yet a significant percentage of Indian women continue to live in abject poverty, insecurity and ill health. Despite an impressive economic growth by integrating itself with the economies of the world, India cannot boast of providing succour to its half of the population from the yolk of poverty and stagnation. Women folk constitute the significant portion of its people in poverty and thus globalisation and in this sense is largely responsible for feminisation of poverty in India in contemporary times.

Globalisation is a process characterised by integration of

economies and increased interdependence of nations for exchange of goods, services, capital and people facilitated through the lifting of the trade barriers, introduction of economic reforms and by widespread diffusion of technology and information. We are living in the era of globalisation in which our behaviour, thoughts, preferences, ideas, opinions and actions are a result of number of factors. It is one of the most contested phenomenon, which according to some has offered a plethora of opportunities for socio-economic upliftment and mainstreaming of masses that either were offered bleak or no opportunities of self improvement in the past. It is equally being argued that globalisation is one of the primary reason for the widening gap between the rich and the poor, growing inequalities and increased cases of injustices in most of the developing societies. In the same vein it is argued that the women in the developing economies are further pushed to the periphery with little or no access to the benefits of globalisation. Despite an increase in the employment rate of women they are still grappling with issues of poverty, ill health, insecurities of all kinds. A UN report found that "the number of rural women living in poverty in the developing countries has increased by almost 50% over the

past 20 years to an awesome 565 million of which 374 million of them are in Asia, and 129 million in Sub-Saharan Africa. While poverty among rural men has increased over the last 20 years by 30%, among women it has increased by 48%. This indeed is indicative of the fact that poverty has a woman face.

The case is no different in India, Ever since India liberalized its economy the transition from inward policies to outward policies have brought phenomenal results and significantly impacted the growth rate in the Indian economy. The long-term trend of rate of growth increased from 3.5 percent during the period 1950s-1970s to 5.4 percent in the 1980s, 6 percent in the 1990s, and to above 7.3 percent in recent years. There has been a decrease in poverty incidence from 54.9 percent in 1973-74 to 36 percent in 1993-1994 to 27.5 percent in 2004-2005; yet, chronic hunger, deprivation, starvation and malnourishment, disease and ill health for nearly 22 million people of India remains a principal concern for the Indian government. In India women account to nearly half of its 22 million in poverty who are living in miserable conditions. In a recently conducted survey by NSSO in 2009-10 and 2011-12 women are the most vulnerable section to be affected by the employment crunch in the rural

sector, a shocking figure of 9.1 million jobs lost by rural women is indicative of the their poor economic status with deep-embedded impact on their social lives. Most among such women, in dearth of secure, safe and well remunerative jobs take up transient work.

### **Economic Reforms and Feminisation of Poverty**

The forces of globalization have forced the developing economies to introduce certain structural changes to facilitate integration and hence forth they are detrimental in augmenting the problem of feminization of poverty. The structural adjustment policies, which are a stage in the worldwide establishment of liberalism, have been held responsible for the adverse affect they have on the women and poor. Liberalization of prices and trade, reduction of government expenditure and deficits, increasing the cost and/or reducing the level of public services, privatizing state-owned enterprises, and introducing value-added taxes etc. have had differential impacts on the various categories of the poor. With the introduction of New Economic Policies and the Structural Adjustment Programmes, the expenditure on public welfare schemes has significantly shrunk

that has drastically affected women, pushing them to periphery. With the embracing of liberal economic policies there has been a considerable shift of the state from the welfare approach that it followed during the pre-reform era and hence forth its withdrawal from the welfare policies and privatisation of basic services like health, education etc, an additional burden fall on women who are heading families. Women are forced to spend more time, money and energies on these responsibilities towards their children and other family members. With the retraction of states from the core sectors of social life, the marginalized section of society are exposed to the atrocities of market. In most average middle class families, shouldering the responsibilities leave no scope for women to get out of the vicious trap of poverty.

### **Neglected Agriculture sector and Rural Development**

Due to structural changes in the Indian economy, the share of the agriculture and allied sector in the GDP reduced to 18 percent in the Financial Year 2007, compared to the relative increase in the shares of the services and manufacturing sectors to 56 percent and 26 percent respectively in the corresponding

period. Given that over two-third of India's population that lives in rural areas and of this 56 percent of it draws its sustenance from agriculture and allied activities, have been drastically affected by the economic reforms initiated in 1991 that promised to make agriculture sector more competitive, efficient and productive. The fact, however, is that that there has been a significant cut down on subsidies in the area of agriculture and made agriculture less profitable. Further, the Indian government's expenditure and investment in the agricultural sector has drastically reduced in post economic reforms years. The expenditure of the government in rural development, including agriculture, irrigation, flood control, village industry, energy and transport, declined from an average of 14.5 per cent in 1986-1990 to six per cent in 1995-2000. All these have made a significant impact on the Female Headed Households (FHHs) and heightened their condition of poverty.

Reduction of government expenditure in the agriculture sector means that the income from the farm produce has reduced, forcing the rural people to migrate to adjoining towns and cities but due to social and economic reasons migration is not a feasible alternative for rural women

of India. Thus, remaining in the grip of poverty makes their lives miserable and to relieve them from such state it is imperative that efforts in the direction of increasing productivity in the sectors that sustain the rural economy are timely, adequately and appropriately made. In India, rural female work participation (RFP) in primary sector declined from 87.8 per cent in 1983 to 86.6 per cent in 1993-94 and further to 83.6 per cent in 2004-05. The figures are an indicator that the women who are not involved in the primary occupation are either left with no work or are compelled to work in the unorganised sector at too low wages, in poor conditions of work and with no social security.

### **Demand for Cash Crops**

In the wake of globalisation there is a growing demand for cash crops in place of food crops and that has also been a major reason for the poverty among women. The cultivation of cash crops require higher investments in technologies, new seeds for which farmers are dependent on loans. Moreover on the larger account, this shift from food crops to cash crops need greater labour at regular basis which is being filled in by male workers instead of women who earlier used to balance house and fieldwork flexibly. This

kind of deprivation for women has also amounted to *higher wage gap* between men and women. The intensified interest towards cash crop production in recent years that was perceived to be highly remunerative alternative has in reality impoverished the farmers, destroyed the traditional cultivation practices and knowledge of preserving seeds and live stock and has proved to be destructive to nature and to local economies. All this has affected women the most because in absence of institutional support women are often unable to engage themselves in cash crop production.

### **India as an Export Oriented Economy**

Although, it is argued that globalization is generating new employment opportunities and economic benefits for developing countries. At the same time, there is a concern that competition for exports and foreign investment is leading to a deterioration of working conditions and fall in wages and is fuelling a *race to the bottom* in labour standards. And since women are concentrated in the lower segments of global supply chains, they bear the greater brunt of this race. Globalisation is largely responsible for the re-emergence and proliferation of sweat shops and in India too, women in

large number are employed in such factories wherein they are subjected to horrible working conditions and innumerable injustice including low wages and poor conditions of work.

### **Expansion of Informal Sector**

Globalisation has encouraged the expansion of the informal sector accompanied by the shrinking organised sector. The contractual, casual, temporary, part-time, piece-rated jobs are fast replacing the permanent jobs. In such a kind of employability culture, women are the first to get affected. In the dearth of employment opportunities, a rough and tough competition at work places is often observed, making it difficult for women to sustain their integrity and often forcing women to leave their professions during the peak career making years. Moreover, as a part of the neo-liberal policies, there is shrinkage in the work force in the public sector and government departments as well and there too, number of workers on contractual basis are increasing. With restructuring and downsizing of workforce, women are the first to be retrenched, because of the general perception that women's income is supplementary and this practice grossly has implication on poverty and on feminisation of poverty in particular.

### **Mushrooming Special Economic Zones**

Globalisation has encouraged the establishment of Special Economic Zones, these are special in the sense that they are virtually outside the state control. There has been a significant growth of SEZs in our country. Although there is no explicit provision that labour laws would not be applied in these zones, in practice, however, even labour commissioners are not allowed inside these zones and the workers are practically at the mercy of the employers. Neither the central nor the state governments intervene to protect the interests of the workers. Thus with the State retreating from its minimum responsibility of providing social and economic security to its people is like a last nail in the coffin. Considerable number of women have got employment opportunities at the SEZs and they are preferred, for they are docile, comply to the rules and norms but the sordid stories of their routine work at the SEZs highlight the fact that long strenuous working hours at meagre wages happen to adversely affect their health and well-being and is a threat to their social and economic security.

### **Erosion of Traditional Value System**

The commercialization process

which opened markets in many developing countries, has succeeded in replacing the traditional cooperation in economic realm, with that of competition. In this process, the social institutions in these countries are finding themselves in conflict with the key aspects of the new economic systems. The family, as a social institution, has been a major victim in this respect. There has been a significant increase in cases of divorce and desertion in the Indian society in the past decade driving woman to a state of uncertainty and helplessness and of course, augmenting the vulnerability of women to poverty. The corporate culture as a manifestation of globalisation is taking a heavy toll on marital relations. The long working hours, unhealthy competition and inclination towards materialism have brought a significant increase in the cases of extreme behavioural patterns like anxiety aggressiveness and increased stress levels resulting in social withdrawal and break-up of families. According to Census 2011, 27 million households, constituting 11% of total households in the country, are headed by women and increased cases of divorce and separation are among the primary reasons. The Female headed families are to be cared and fed by women alone and most often than not the income earned

is insufficient to meet the house hold expenses especially due to the significant cut down of the government in public welfare services like education, health etc. The absence of social welfare henceforth has correspondingly, resulted in the emergence of care deficits in Female Headed Households. The increase of divorce and separation, female-headed households and single-parent households all indicate the pressure on females, particularly on mothers to engage in economic activities to maintain the family units. However, the income that she receives in many instances is not sufficient to maintain her family. This trend could be noted as "feminization of poverty" in which the poorest quartiles of society are increasingly made up of women and children.

### **Burgeoning Service Sector**

In the wake of globalisation, India has shifted from an agrarian economy to the service oriented economy and currently the growth rate of services accounting to more than 50% of GDP, has overtaken both agriculture and industry. This means that incidence of poverty among women can decline if women who were earlier occupied in the agriculture and the industrial sector get opportunities of employment in

the service sector but this unfortunately is not happening due to number of reasons. The first and the foremost is that most women lack education, qualifications and the requisite skills to be a part of the service sector. It will be worthwhile to mention that every cloud does not have a silver lining i.e. the expansion of service sector employment among women need not necessarily be considered as a panacea for ending poverty among women. A realistic probe in the matter brings to light that the expansion of service sector employment among women is actually the extension of unpaid care work into the market as social services are privatised.

### **Addressing the problem**

Poverty results in a wide range of problems ranging from mild to profound but if the vulnerability of women to poverty increases it is an indicator that the state is deviating from its *welfare approach* and is insensitive to the interests of women population within its territory. In such situations women often become a subject of neglect, forcing them to lead a wretched and miserable life. They lack access to education and skill training due to absence of financial resources. Such situation of deprivation lowers the self esteem

and confidence and make women silent sufferers of atrocities of all kinds. The inability of women to meet their basic needs force many women to take up flesh trade and involve themselves into immoral and illegal professions as well and thus become vulnerable to insecurities of all kinds. Women who are poor often suffer from poor nutrition, psychological problems, violence - both verbal and physical, ill-health, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including AIDS which further complicate their condition. There is a need for the concerted efforts by the state, well planned and well executed policies, to combat issue of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy among women in India. Government's support and services are extremely necessary for improved health-care and a broad agenda that covers female education and their rights, increased and re-targeted expenditure, improved management and decentralised public- private partnership which would address this problem. Self -help groups in past few years have been instrumental in empowering women and mobilising women at the grass roots level, to voice their grievances and claim rights. Self Help Organisations such as SEWA are redirecting their efforts to meet the challenges faced by most women due to globalisation. They need to

augment their efforts in the interest of poor women and strengthen their activities further. Through Public-Private Partnership, special focus on strengthening public distribution system for food security, health schemes, child care credit and insurance scheme could be given that would go a long way in addressing the issue of feminisation of poverty. Last but not the least, the feminist economists should pro actively involve themselves and may actively pursue the issues of neglect and pressurise state to address the same.

### **Conclusion**

Gender is not a homogeneous category, but is intersected by class, caste, community and ethnicity. Thus, the impact of globalisation has been uneven for women. By and large, women in developing economies like India have not been in a good situation. Globalisation has resulted in the expansion of the service sector and simultaneous shrinkage of the primary sector on which most Indian people are still dependent. A small segment has indeed become beneficiary and gained work opportunity in terms of newly emerging forms of employment, especially in the IT service and food-processing sectors, but the semi/unskilled ones have lost control over

their natural resources (land, water forest etc), as well as in traditional industries, resulting in the loss of traditional livelihood and sustainability. The displacement and dislocation brings plethora of problems, other than the inadequate, inappropriate and untimely compensation that adds to the economic woes of the affected people. The social and cultural insecurity is no less. Among those who are displaced and dislocated, women are immensely affected. There has been a considerable increase in women headed households due to the corporate culture, industrialisation urbanisation. Shifting away on the part of state from welfare approach additionally burdens women with household expenditure, making them unable to come out from situations of impoverishment. Despite the opportunities of employment, most unskilled and semi-skilled women are discriminated in terms of wages and other benefits. Therefore, it cannot be denied that globalisation is riding on the back of millions of poor women and it can be concluded that in contemporary times globalisation through its various manifestations is largely responsible for predicament of Indian women. Today, sustainable development is looked upon as the need of the hour and the goal cannot

be accomplished till the issues and challenges are addressed through strict international and national legislations. The national laws and rules must be in conformity with the rules set by international labour standards. Both the Central and the state governments need to have a gender sensitive approach by initiating programmes of economic and social development. Skill-upgrading, training, education and dissemination of information would go a long way in empowering women and eventually would bring them out of drudgery, exploitation, neglect and poverty. The state needs to keep a check on the violation of rights of women by the private sector, for women cannot be left at their mercy and forced to face the most harsh realities. ■

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