Status of Women's Empowerment in the Poorest Areas

A background paper developed by

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I. Context

For Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), voluntary organizations and women's groups, empowerment of women in the poorest areas of India has a close and umbilical relationship with the ideology of social development and human rights. This is specially relevant in an unjust society where to be born a woman in a poor family has been long accepted as fate or destiny. The hand of oppression has conspired to keep women under subjugation. Poverty, caste, powerlessness and gender are the four fingers of this hand of oppression with the all important role of the thumb being played by the lack of institutional mechanisms which are the basis of a democratic society.

For the purpose of this paper, the following definitions have been used:

- **Gender** is not a natural phenomenon, but is created by societies to order the roles of men and women, and it is bound up with political and economic objectives. There is a significant difference between sex and gender.

  - **Sex** identifies the biological make up and difference between the male and the female whereas
  
  - **Gender** is constructed socially and identifies the relationship between men and women in the context of power relations. Gender is not natural, but is created by society through socialization using institutions such as the family, religion, school and education and the state and laws. Gender relations can therefore be changed by the very society that created them.

Gender roles demarcate responsibilities between men and women in:

- Social and economic activities
- Access to resources
- Decision making authority

**Empowerment** is a measure of peoples capacity to bring about change, whether this is modest or far reaching in its impact.

II. On the world stage

The last decade has seen significant movement on the world stage with regards to women’s development. The **Second Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference on Women in Development held in Jakarta** in 1994 identified several critical areas of concern like the growing feminisation of poverty, inequality of women’s access to
economic resources and decision making, violence against women, denial of women's human rights etc. The Jakarta Declaration suggested measures to tackle the inequities faced by women in the Asian Pacific region.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in September 1994 expanded the narrow focus on family planning to the larger, holistic and gender sensitive concept of Reproduction Health (RH) as an integral component of general health.

One of the key events on the women's development map was the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) which was held in Beijing in September 1995. The FWCW came up with a concrete Platform for Action (PFA) that was to be implemented by the participating governments in the years to come. The PFA exhorted governments, United Nations and civil society organisations to take strategic action in the following critical areas of concern:

1. The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women
2. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training
3. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services
4. Violence against women
5. The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation
6. Inequality in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources
7. Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels
8. Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women
9. Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women
10. Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media
11. Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment
12. Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child

Over the last decade the PFA has been the strategic touchstone for strategies and policies in women's development.
Another important milestone in the international movement for women’s empowerment is the Convention for Eradication of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The draft optional to the protocol was discussed in the Forty-first session of the Commission for the Status of Women (CSW) in March 1997. Various governments, NGOs, inter-governmental organizations debated on the same during the meet. The replies indicated that on the whole there was wide support for the protocol. The 42nd CSW meet in 1998, discussed the broad theme of “Women and Human Rights” along with critical areas such as violence against women, women and armed conflict and rights of the girl-child.

The Women 2000 session was held at the United Nations between 5th and 9th of June 2000. this meet aimed to review the progress made on the PFA implementation by governments. The meet was marred by the slow pace of work, lack of adherence of most governments to the commitments on the PFA and the inherent tensions in the United Nations at that time. The North-South divide was perhaps at its peak at that time. In spite of these hurdles some policies were accepted by various governments including

1. Need to make legal and policy changes would have to be undertaken to ensure elimination of all forms of gender discrimination by 2005.
2. developing the country budgets to include provisions for achieving the commitments made at the international level.
3. Ratification of CEDAW and the optional protocol to CEDAW,
4. Implementation of "Equal Pay for Equal Work"
5. Promotion of a nation wide campaign for elimination of violence against women.

The year 2005 was to see celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the historic Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW). In fact the as per tradition the 5th World Conference on Women was to have been held this year. It was not to be. The two main reasons are that

1. The global political scenario has changed drastically after 9/11. It has changed the focus to terrorism. The relations between the United States of America and the United Nations have also altered. The USA has taken a stand on the issues of poverty and trafficking.
2. The progress by most countries on the implementation of the promises and commitments embodied in the Platform for Action (PFA) that resulted from the FWCW, Beijing has been tardy. In fact the murmurs from some quarters seem to demand dilution of the PFA. This dilution would have proven to be a significant setback to the women’s movement. This view was challenged by the European Union and some of the G77 countries of Asia and Africa. In this
scenario the fifth WCW would only result in more paper being created defending the lack of progress. Most women’s organisations round the world did not want this tokenism.

That the 5th WCW was not be held meant that the CSW 2005 meet assumed great importance. In this meet the focus was on two issues

1. Effective and speedy implementation of the PFA commitments and
2. Trafficking of girls.

One aspect was abundantly clear: the focus of governments has shifted to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and as a result there is silence on some key issues that came out of the Beijing PFA. The ‘politics of silence’ and ‘politics of neglect’ was evident throughout the process of the 2005 CSW.

III. On the national scene

Over the last three decades in India a significant shift has been apparent in the approach of government and NGOs towards women’s development. Starting with ‘Welfare’ in the fifties to ‘Development’ in the seventies and ‘Empowerment’ in the nineties. The Women In Development (WID) approach was very popular in the 1970s and aimed to “integrate women in development”. This approach often missed out the fact that women were involved in development processes anyway. This lead to projects being classified as ‘women’s projects’ thereby alienating men. In many a cases women were left off worse than earlier.

The Gender and Development (GAD) was more thorough and ‘examined the roles and needs of women and men and how these related to each other.’ It also raised questions about women’s access to resources and decisions over their use in relation to men. It also questioned gender based inequalities in all areas. The GAD therefore soon emerged as a more reliable framework of planning in gender.

Human Resource Development was one of the major thrust areas in the eighth five year plan and a special focus was placed on women and children. With children attention was focused on their ‘survival, protection and development’ especially for the girl child whereas for women the focus was on economic independence and self reliance.

Empowerment of women is a major objective of the ninth five year plan. This was the first plan which involved women’s groups from around the country in a consultative process. The plan aimed to create an enabling environment with requisite policies and programmes, legislative support, exclusive institutional mechanisms at
Status of Women's Empowerment in the Poorest Areas of India

various levels and adequate financial and human resources to achieve the objective. An integrated approach was to be used for the same. This implied that the efforts made on various fronts like social, economic, legal and political would be harmonized. Further a strategy to earmark funds as ‘women's component’ was to be adopted to ensure that the flow of resources was adequate. The plan also called for the expeditious adoption of the ‘National Policy for Empowering Women’ along with a well defined ‘Gender Development Index’ to monitor progress made towards improving women's status in the society.

The Human Development Report 2002 for the state of Maharashtra for instance identifies a lot of gaps and concerns on the issue of women’s development. Some of the more significant ones are the issue of the rapidly declining sex ratio leading to missing girl children and the increasing incidence of violence against women. Annexure I discusses these in detail. The status of these indicators in other poorer areas in the country is likely to be as bad if not worse.

IV. Challenges for women's empowerment
There are a number of heartening developments related to women's development in the country. These, inter alia, include

- Increased access to decision making, even if it is restricted to primary levels.
- Better health and nutrition status.
- Increased consultation with women's groups in the planning process.
- Movement towards experiments in gender responsive budgeting.

However, one cannot ignore the challenges that face the process.

- Women's empowerment movements themselves are trapped in their rigid frameworks. This has resulted in fragmentation, lack of concerted action and paucity of resources.
- Patriarchal norms and caste / class conflicts have hampered cohesive action on this cross cutting issue.
- There is a marked lack of sensitivity at all levels – government, bureaucracy, media and even the mainstream civil society, to gender issues. These issues are not even acknowledged let alone addressed.
- In spite of the strong women's movement in the country, NGO-GO interaction on women's issues has been very marginal and token. GOs and NGOs share an unequal relationship leading to severe imbalance in terms of negotiations. There has perhaps been lack of political will and a groundswell of popular support – both factors which are essential for policy change. One just has to track the progress (or lack) of the women's reservation bill to ascertain this.
These challenges have lead to what I call the 4Ps –

1. Politics of NEGLECT
2. Politics of RIDICULE
3. Politics of ISOLATION and
4. Politics of DILUTION

These 4 Ps have resulted in women's issues being less SEEN – HEARD – ADDRESSED.

This is further compounded by lack of knowledge on the issue and using concepts of WELFARE, EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT, EMPOWERMENT and GENDER JUSTICE interchangeably. This, especially when used in different contexts, results in dilution on all fronts and leads to a view of gender justice as an uni-dimensional entity.

V. Women's Empowerment Issues today in India

The issues facing women in India have their distinctive features as compared to the rest of the world. A confluence of history, mores and religion have kept the women subjugated by the patriarchal system for the past many centuries. The key issues facing women in India have been described in detail below.

1. The growing feminisation of poverty: A large proportion of the Indian population continues to live in poverty. Women, especially those from indigenous or minority culture suffer most from this abject poverty. This happens due to added responsibility, apart from the family and house-hold functions, on the women to earn a living and the skewed patriarchal system that denies access to ancestral wealth. Around the world, and more so in India, while women work nearly 67% of working hours they earn only 10% of the income and own less than 1% of the land! Poverty often leads to economic exploitation and sexual abuse of the women. The most debilitating effect it has is in the fact that if the woman is unable to come out of poverty the cycle is perpetuated through her children, especially the girl child. Another aspect of this feminisation of poverty is the inequality in access to and participation in economic activities as compared to men. Most of the work that women do, especially that at home or in the family fields, is not classified as an economic activity. Gender differences in the work place especially in the nature of work and the compensation continue to be widely prevalent.

2. Inequitable access to power and decision making: Inequities in the women’s share of decision making in the public domain as well as their private lives are
It is evident in most societies. It is in this regard that international standards and conventions such as CEDAW, Conventions on the Rights of the Child etc. can be used as a powerful strategy of persuasion of governments. While women have enjoyed the right to vote for many years, they occupy only a small fraction of the seats in the legislature or parliament. In a region which saw the first women head of state, women’s exclusion from most decision making bodies is indeed ironical. The situation is slowly changing with the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments that have provided for reservation of 33 % of the seats on Panchayats and Municipalities for women. This has yet to translate or be reflected at the national and state level.

3. **Violation of women’s human rights**: The incidence of physical, sexual and psychological abuse of women, even in her own home, are increasing by the day. Female foeticide and infanticide are still prevalent in some societies. Another form of abuse is trafficking in women, which is some times across international borders. Women often bear the brunt of riots, conflicts and insurgency. **Violence against women**, both domestic and societal, is also demonstrating an ever increasing trend. Cases of dowry deaths, rape and sexual molestation are regularly reported in spite of legislation and policies that specifically prohibit the same. Another horrifying violation of human rights that some women have to face at a very early age is being dragged into prostitution at a very early age. Child Prostitution has increased dramatically over the years especially. Due to abject poverty, children especially girls, are exposed systematically to sexual abuse for the pleasure and profit of adults. Pornography and child prostitution are all pervasive evils. Parents are known to sell their girls to agents who take them to brothels and condemn them to a life of squalor and misery. Violence against women needs to be understood, recognised and addressed as across cutting issue of support, at individual and community level. This issue needs committed efforts and cannot be an appendage or an automatic offshoot of micro-credit programmes or even the ICDS programmes.

4. **Inequalities and lack of access to education and literacy**: While literacy rates have improved over the last fifty years the female illiteracy rates are still alarming. This lack of education denies the women their right to productive employment as also their legal rights. Illiteracy amongst women is mainly caused by preference to the boys as compared to the girl in matters of education, text books and teaching styles that perpetuate gender type casting, poor infrastructure for the girls (especially those from religious minorities) and a host of other similar reasons.

5. **Inequalities and lack of access to health**: While maternal mortality rates have decreased over the years much remains to be done in order to achieve parity with
Status of Women's Empowerment in the Poorest Areas of India

the developed nations on this social indicator. This is mainly due to poor awareness of Reproductive Rights, poor nutrition, excessive workload and multiple child bearing.

This does not mean that other issues related to say access to natural resources, disaster situations etc are less important. In fact in actual life it is not possible to segregate development into neat compartments. In the final analysis, women in India often have to face the brunt of being born in a patriarchal, feudal society.

VI. The path ahead

If the principles of women's development and gender justice there needs to be work done on four fronts

Developing conceptual clarity
For all stakeholders ranging from individuals to civil society – government – bureaucracy - peoples leaders – media and opinion leaders.

Treating gender as a cross cutting theme
This has more or less been accepted in principle but is yet to find a place in practice at most levels. It normally degenerates into tokenism or development of 'women's programmes'.

Developing a support structure and linkages
There is need for strong support structures for women – from the community level to the state and national level. Linkages with other regional and international processes will be needed to address some of the more severe issues. For instance, South Asia Professionals Against Trafficking (SAPAT) is a forum of police, media, judiciary and NGOs on the issue of trafficking.

Using legal and policy frameworks
Even the existing laws and policies, insufficient though they may be, are not used effectively by campaigns for women's development. Study of these frameworks and their use would be a first step in building sustained campaigns for women's empowerment.

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Annexure I

Areas of concern related to women’s empowerment in the state of Maharashtra. These have been drawn from the State Human Development Report 2002.

1. **Life Expectancy at Birth (LEB)**
The benefits of high LEB accrue only to those women who survive high mortality rates in the early years of life.

2. **Sex Ratio**
Overall Sex Ratio of the State lower than the national average. It has been the sharpest decline in the last decade. Child Sex Ratio for the State lower than the national average.

3. **Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)**
Age specific death rate for female children aged 1–4 years is high.

4. **Maternal Mortality Rate**
MMR is high at one maternal death for 297 live births.

5. **Age-Specific Death Rate (ASDR)**
Female ASDR higher than male between 15 and 24 years. Reduction in female ASDR only after they cross the reproductive years.

6. **Older Women**
The proportion of older women in the State is increasing. Of 8.8 million widowed, separated and divorced women in the State (women headed households), 52 per cent are above the age of 60. Morbidity and dependence of these women is high. The amount and coverage of old age pension is very low.

7. **Violence**
All types of crime against women on the increase. Negative attitudes against women increasing. Torture is the most prevalent. Torture constituted 55.27 per cent of all crimes in the State. Convictions for crime against women are negligible.

8. **General Health of Women and Children**
42 per cent of women in the State have Body Mass Index of less than 18.5. Anaemia is widespread—49 per cent of women and 76 per cent of the children are affected.

9. **Age At Marriage (AAM)**
Percentage of women getting married below the legal age at marriage (18 years) is 39.9 per cent for the State. This percentage is very high in some districts of Marathwada.

10. **Total Fertility Rate (TFR)**
34.6 per cent of births are of third order. Many districts have TFR greater than 3.

11. **Maternal Care**
Percentage of women who had full antenatal care is only 54.8.

12. **Work Participation Rate (WPR)**
WPR for women higher than at national level. High WPR in rural Maharashtra may only indicate compulsion rather than choice. WPR for urban women low, only 15 per cent. A large percentage of women work as casual labour and at subsidiary/marginal activities in rural sector. Difference between male and female wage rates wide.

13. **Literacy and Education**
Girls drop out at the end of primary school in the largest proportions as well as at the end of every stage of school education.

14. **Empowerment**
Women in elected bodies in decision-making positions are few. Women Panchayat members face male resistance, which makes it difficult for them to take independent decisions. While some efforts have been made to educate women members of elected bodies at different levels to discharge their duties effectively, much remains to be done.