

Global Gender and Development Discourse: A View from India

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the gender and development discourse from a feminist standpoint. Acknowledging the meaningful contribution made by liberal feminists, it ventures into new articulations on development where the issue and interests of marginalized women in developing countries such as India take center stage. The article follows the synthesis of theory and praxis of development alongside the emergence of feminist thought that shaped the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With comprehensive and integrated global frameworks such as the SDGs, has the gender agenda finally arrived? The authors argue that the gender agenda is far from complete and hopelessly fragile. Read against the background of COVID-19 and its impact on women's work, this article serves to make the case that the reversals in the gains in gender agenda due to the pandemic are but deafening echoes of generational fragilities embodied within gendered narratives on global development.

Keywords: Gender and Development, Feminist Intervention, Development Goals, MDGs, SDGs

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Introduction

Despite various international and national efforts, 'development' has left vulnerable women and marginalized people behind. The development process conceived over the better part of the 20th century tried to improve individual countries' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) instead of addressing the overall well-being of people. It failed to bring about the desired improvement in the lives of a considerable percentage of women, especially in developing countries. The gap between the planned and implemented development processes in various countries instead resulted in hierarchical gender relations in public spaces, reinforced gender roles, robbed recognition of women's roles in economic activities, made economic development unsustainable, skewed women's contribution to subsistence, and led to environmental degradation and feminization of poverty (Braidotti 2004). Further, rapid industrialization in the late 19th and 20th centuries alienated women from formal economic activities, leading to a public-private dichotomy (Beassley 1999).

This development paradigm did not provide space for sustainable development since it was based on faulty assumptions. For instance, 'GDP-led economic growth will reduce poverty and contribute to the well-being of people,' 'the increase in income of a family will provide access to all facilities, especially health and education,' and 'economic growth will reduce health maladies like malnutrition' (Deneulin and Shahani 2009). Many of these assumptions were falsified as the world entered the 21st century.

Rightly, feminist economists criticized this development paradigm and called out the process of rapid economic growth that led wealth to "bubble up" instead of "trickling down" (Kabeer 1994). Along with western feminists, South Asian feminists, specifically Indian feminists contributed to the gender and development discourse, and the conceptualization of 'women empowerment' at the grassroots, in theory and praxis (Batliwala 1994, 2007, and in Spary, 2019). These theorists insisted on the scientific and technological pursuit of progress by challenging the reproduction of gender dichotomies and the framing of the discourse that pitched modernity against tradition. The development debate revolved around questions such as, are women independent or dependent? Are they willing to leave their families and move to urban areas? What is the difference between rural life and urban life? Authors such as Parpart and Marchand (1995) advocated accepting the postmodernist feminist thought on development issues.

Extant studies, apart from providing a theoretical framework, (Spary 2019; Jain and Elson 2011; Batliwala 1998) posited that the development model that equates 'economic growth' with development limits the role and contributions of women. This market-driven development model increased input costs and pushed small and medium

farmers, primarily women, out of agriculture. It also forced women to migrate to urban areas to join the informal sector. Furthermore, a critical issue that was not addressed within the economic growth model (perceived as ‘development’) was the unequal and abysmally low wages of lower-end workers, primarily women. In countries such as India, more than 90 percent of the workforce is part of the agriculture and informal sector. The productivity of this sector is very low (Dreze and Sen 2013). India’s rapid economic growth in the past thirty years (1991-2021) could not reach everyone, negating the “trickle-down” effect. The public revenue generated through rapid economic growth has not expanded physical and social infrastructure, which predominantly addresses the concerns of women by providing them with basic amenities such as access to safe drinking water, education, health services, and sanitation (Dreze and Sen 2013).

Given the poor outcomes of the developmental process for women in the past decades, this paper critically reviews the antecedents of the dominant development model from a feminist perspective. It explores the contribution of feminists to an inclusive gender-sensitive sustainable development process, especially global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It further critically analyzes whether these goals can address gender concerns of women in developing countries, like India, and offer the much-needed paradigm shift in developmental thinking and alternative developmental processes. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, it concludes that the reversals in the gains in gender agenda due to the pandemic are but deafening echoes of generational fragilities within gendered narratives on global development.

Development for Whom

The development models that came to be adopted in the late 19th and early 20th century have their roots in modernization and dependency theories (Leys 1995). The modernization theory critiqued the traditional production relations and believed in a free-market economy. Unlike the modernization theory, the dependency theory criticized the unequal relationship in production in the capitalist market. It argued that developing countries were forced to undertake the production of goods and services to fulfill the needs of developed nations. The dependency theory was influenced by neo-Marxist and Latin American Structuralist thought. It emerged from the analyses of the socio-economic conditions in the late 19th and 20th centuries. However, neo-Marxist and Latin American Structuralist differed in their approach to addressing economic maladies (Schuurman 1993; Leys 1995). Nevertheless, various studies (Spary 2019; Jain and Elson 2011) noted the shortcomings in the development models of the 1980s and 1990s evidenced in the widespread prevalence of violence against women and gender inequality in many Asian and Latin American countries.

Where are women and the gender agenda in the development process in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries? Have the feminist critiques of the development processes contributed to developing alternative theories and approaches? These are critical questions that need examination.

Integrating Gender into Development

Right from the beginning, there has been an acute lack of debate on gender concerns and women's contributions to development. Feminists have continually flagged these as problematic. For instance, the study by Esther Boserup on the African agricultural system (first published in 1970) highlighted women's contribution to agriculture and industrial development; it helped open the debate among policymakers on including women and their perspectives on development. The UN also played an important role in bringing women into the debates on development. Measures such as the UN Decade for Women (1976-1986), marked the beginning of an era to promote women's advancement by starting a discourse on gender equality (Boserup 2008). The declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year was particularly significant in this regard. The subsequent organization of four international women's conferences and formulation of the developmental policy approach on welfare (1950-1960), equity (1970), anti-poverty (the 1970s onwards), efficiency (1980), and empowerment (1990) aimed to construct gender within the developmental narratives. Simultaneously, on the theoretical side, feminist and development experts put forward various approaches to integrate women into the processes of economic, political, and social progress and change such as women in development (WID), women and development (WAD), gender in development (GID), and gender and development (GAD). Through these approaches, over time theory and praxis of development came together. A reflection of this confluence of theory and praxis is the positioning of the gender agenda within the developmental models that we see articulated in global frameworks such as the MDGs and SDGs in recent decades.

Gender and Development as an Approach

Gender and development as an approach emerged in the 1980s as an alternative to other gendered narratives on development such as the WID, WAD, and GID, all of which have their theoretical roots in socialist feminism. It bridged the gap left by modernization theorists by juxtaposing the relationship between production and reproduction taking into consideration all aspects of women's lives (Jaquette 1982). Socialist feminists argue that the socialization of production and reproduction is the primary reason for women's oppression. The GAD approach, therefore, focuses on social relations and questions the gendered roles of men and women in different societies. They argue that the oppression of women stems from patriarchal socialization processes. The approach does not foreground women's extraordinary participation in a

society's socio-economic and political life, and its primary concern is to question women's oppression and their secondary roles in society irrespective of their location.

Conceptually, the approach is positioned at the intersection of socialist feminist arguments and Marxist feminist analysis of patriarchy. However, from a standpoint of praxis, the gender and development approach is focused on women from developing countries, given that feminists who gave articulation to the GAD approach, drew on the ground realities from developing countries. The underlying tenet is, if states address the strategic gender needs of women related to assets and resources, going beyond basic survival needs of food, water, and shelter, it will ultimately change the existing gender relations, making them more egalitarian.

Within the GAD approach, the state has a definitive role and responsibility. Even whilst arguing that women are active participants in the development process and not just passive recipients of the welfare measures of the state and its agencies, the state is called to promote women's development and formulate appropriate policies and programs towards affirmative action, gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, political representation, and gender auditing and budgeting. Gender and development, as an approach, strongly advocates for a reexamination of the social structures and institutions that perpetuate patriarchy and champions change in these to usher in gender justice at all levels, ultimately bringing a shift in power relations.

From Theory and Praxis to Global Developmental Frameworks

A synthesis of the theory and praxis is evident in the various developmental models that have been put forward over the past couple of decades. These have attempted to include gender in public policies and state responsibilities to reduce inequality and guide gender-inclusive development. One such effort at a global framework was the UN Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs)—with eight development goals, eighteen time-bound targets, and forty-eight indicators for measuring progress—adopted at the UN Millennium Summit in New York in September 2000. Within the UN ecosystem, four international women's conferences—debating the concurrent discourses in theory and praxis of gender and development—paved the way for bringing gender perspectives into the global framework. Their efforts were complemented by the UNDP's Human Development Reports, the first of which was conceptualized by Mehboob ul Haq and Amartya Sen in 1990.

The launch of MDGs in 2000 served as a beacon for governments to address challenges to development – poverty, inequality, and disease in a time-bound manner. Regardless, it was seen as a limiting framework focused on eight goals and targets, without considering the totality of factors that lie behind disease burden, poverty, and inequalities, including the role of social institutions. But more importantly, its limitation

stemmed from its bridled focus on developing countries, which mirrored the discourses prevalent at the time of looking at these states as problems that needed fixing.

Following the MDGs, their shortcomings, and importantly, the lessons from their implementation struggle, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) came to replace the MDGs in 2015. The SDGs broadened the ambit of development, with 17 interconnected goals, 169 targets, and a global plan of action for all people (not just the developing world), the planet, and prosperity to be achieved by 2030. Getting states to reduce poverty, gender inequality, hunger, improve health, sanitation, access to clean water and education facilities, and strive towards peace, security, and justice, the SDGs are perhaps the most comprehensive and inclusive developmental framework, with a stand-alone goal on gender, and many interlinking targets on gender.

Stitching Gender and Sustainability and Development

Notwithstanding the many gains of a comprehensive framework in the form of SDGs and the refined theoretical articulations on gender and development, the lived realities of marginalized women the world over are not adequately represented in either theory or development praxis.

For instance, for many years, the GDP has been considered a reasonable indicator of material well-being and even a proxy for quality of life. However, new debates abound on whether this is still a valid approximation (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2011). Developing countries continue to formulate top-down policies, assuming that macroeconomic data and experts' opinions will churn out better solutions to address socio-economic maladies, little realizing that involving feminists, women at the grassroots level, and other stakeholders in the policymaking process and making policies through a bottom-up approach will bring more positive results in preserving and giving women access to and control over resources. The theory of eco-feminism has posited women's active participation at the grassroots in the sustainable use of natural capital such as forests, common properties, rivers, soil, ecosystem, and marine stocks. Several studies have established that community participation and a high percentage of social capital from communities, specifically women, have helped preserve natural resources (Agarwal 2010). However, a fixation on GDP-driven growth indicators and macroeconomic data crunching has overshadowed these achievements of women toward sustainability. But, beyond the lack of recognition of women's contributions to sustainability, remains the tragedy of 'unpaid care and work' that has become the mainstay of women's labor.

In the comprehensive SDG framework, Goal 8 focuses on "Decent Work and Economic Growth". The International Labour Organization (ILO) describes "decent work" as work that should: "fulfill the people's aspirations in their working lives. It should also be productive. It should provide decent income, security in the workplace, and social

protection. There should be personal development. It should provide opportunities for social integration. People should have the freedom to express their concerns in the workplace. People should organize and participate in the decision-making process that affects their lives. There should be equal opportunity and treatment for both women and men in the workplace”.

In India, the informal sector accounts for 60 percent of the GDP and employs 90 percent of the workers; 92.1 percent of women across various socio-religious groups are in the informal sector (Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017-18). Only 7.9 percent of the women are in the formal sector. Most of this work does not measure up to the ILO’s yardstick of “decent work”.

The liberal feminists (Beasley 1999) supported market-based growth, assuming that the market would grow and create opportunities for women, as it did for men. They expected a trickle-down effect from the market. It was expected that the active participation of women in market-based activities would reverse the existing gender roles, improve women's status, and bring them on par with men. Sadly, this did not happen, and the market did not create the required opportunities for women, as demonstrated by the poor female labor force participation rates and the increasing concentration of women in the informal sector. Compounding this marginalization, the globalized economy further contributed to segregating women in particular sectors of employment such as hospitality, tourism, and healthcare which were an extension of their gendered role within the home.

The Pandemic Effect: Unraveling of Weaknesses of Development

In India, the trend in poverty reduction reversed due to the COVID-19 pandemic; the number of poor in India with an income of \$2 per day doubled to 134 million from 60 million in just a year due to the pandemic-induced recession (Mahapatra 2021). The number of women in poverty during the same period (2020-21) was around 53 million. (Kanwal 2021). Analysts using the gender and development lens and feminist theorists argued that when the market slows down and economic activities are reduced due to macroeconomic shocks, women would be the first to lose jobs. Women from both formal and informal sectors lost their livelihoods during the pandemic. For all women, irrespective of caste, class, and location in India, unpaid care and work increased manifold. COVID-19 also triggered the migration of women from the urban informal sector to rural areas, increasing poverty among them. A considerable percentage of them sought work as agricultural laborers, further contributing to the feminization of labor in the agriculture sector.

Conclusion

Following the Second World War, the implementation of a developmental model based on the modernization theory assumed it would contribute to poverty reduction and improve the condition of all socio-economically weaker sections, specifically women. However, it did not acknowledge, much less address women's status until the 1970s. With structural adjustment and the opening of the free market economy throughout the world in the 1980s, it was assumed that rapid economic activities would reduce poverty and improve female labor force participation in all sectors and alter deeply skewed gender relations to usher in gender equality. However, this too did not come about, as evidenced by poor female labor force participation rates in many parts of the developing world. Moreover, economic development measured as GDP growth failed to provide equal opportunities for women. Further, GDP-led growth did not trickle down and did not alter the existing gender relations. The feminist approaches served to recraft the development discourse and brought to light many of these shortcomings.

The current informalization of women's work and the attendant lack of social security needs urgent attention. The present growth pattern has not reduced the concentration of women's work in the informal sector. Patriarchy and the existing socialization processes continue to fail to recognize women's contribution to the subsistence economy. The globalized economy has rapidly changed consumer behavior among the educated, middle-income population which has further had a negative impact on women and the environment. The rapid concentration of wealth, depletion of fossil fuel, increased pollution from fossil fuel, lack of government support for social security measures, absence of policies to ensure a minimum income, and continuing patriarchy are keeping women down and seriously impacting developing countries such as India.

There is an urgent need for alternative developmental thinking to address existing maladies and ensure the inclusion of women in the development process. To begin with, women's contributions need to be included in any alternative framework of development. This would not only improve the efficacy of the planned development, but would actually and automatically improve HDI, GDI, and gender empowerment measures.

In seeking to alter gender power relations, men may lose some and women may gain some. However, development should not be about toeing the line with modernization theory. It is about empowering women to gain access to and control over resources and institutions to pursue freedom and development. The notion of development should be inclusive, as many of the gains women had made in the past few decades were reversed with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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