

Draft Perspective Plan for Women

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THE draft National Perspective Plan for women 1988-2000 A. D. is an attempt by the Government to "evaluate the impact of developmental plans and programmes on Indian women."

The Plan is divided into three parts. The first part gives an overall perspective with general guidelines and specific recommendations. The second part contains sectoral papers on rural development and agriculture, employment, support, services, education, health, nutrition and family planning, legislation, political participation and decision-making and media and communication. The third part reproduces important documents relevant to the problem.

The Plan states that the focus of government programmes for women has shifted from welfare to development and women must be looked upon as "producers and participants, not clients of welfare." It openly acknowledges the sexist basis in various areas of our national life. For instance, on the section on law it categorically states: "The framers, enforcers and executors of the law are by and large men, and women have little clout to influence legal processes." Similarly, the sections on education, health, family planning and communication are critical of the gender bias in those areas and the Plan has made some important and imaginative recommendations to counter this bias.

However, the Plan is silent on some vital issues such as the Government's policy of looking up family planning as a way to control fertility rather than a tool for men and women to make conscious decisions about their lives. This policy has led to the Government encouraging experiments with injectible contraceptives like Net-en on poor, illiterate women who do not know that harmful effects of these contraceptives have compelled governments of developed countries to ban them.

The Plan is the first of its kind since independence and it is a confession on part of the Government that its developmental policies have failed to reach justice to our people, specially our women citizens. In the preface to the draft Plan Margeret Alva, the Minister for State for Women's welfare, states that "the fruits of development have not gone equally to all sections of our people: the rural masses who constitute almost 80 per cent of the population have not been able to absorb these benefits as the urban classes have, the weaker sections are still unable to assert themselves as against the privileged and women have continued to be the single largest group of "backward citizens".

The Plan concedes that the negative indices over-

shadow the positive indicators of development. The sex ratio is still against women; age specific death rates indicate higher rates for female children and women till 35 years of age; the 1981 census showed that 75 per cent of women are illiterate; the number of women registered at employment exchanges increased from 1.12 million in 1975 to 5.1 million in 1986.

This dismal picture emerges despite the fact that we have already had a National Plan of Action from 1976 that provided guidelines based on the UN's World Plan of Action for women. The outcome of the National Plan was the setting up of the Women's Welfare and Development Bureau in 1976 to "act as a nodal point within the Government of India to coordinate policies and programmes and initiate measures for women's development." The Women's Welfare and Development Bureau was charged with the responsibility of (a) co-ordinating, and collaborating with multifarious programmes in other Central Government Ministries; (b) initiating necessary policies, programmes and measures; (c) collecting data to serve as a clearing house; (d) monitoring programmes for women's welfare; (e) servicing the National Committee — the Steering Committee of the National Machinery; (f) following up the recommendations of the 1974 Committee on the Status of Women in India by formulating proposals and providing guidelines; (g) working out financial and physical targets; and (h) liaising with multinational/UN agencies in the field of women's welfare; (i) legal issues and problems concerning women; and (j) implementing programmes and schemes.

The women specific programmes implemented by the Women's Bureau provide the following services: (i) strengthening and improvement of women's work and employment in agriculture, small animal husbandry, dairying, fisheries, handlooms, handicrafts, *khadi* and village industries, and sericulture; (ii) economic rehabilitation of women from weaker sections of society in the form of training and employment on a sustained basis; (iii) better employment avenues for women to bring them into the mainstream of national development; (iv) rehabilitation of destitute women by preparing them for suitable vocation and making them economically independent; (v) providing short stay homes for women and girls in moral danger together with counselling medical care, psychiatric guidance and treatment, services, and development of skills; and (vi) preventive and rehabilitative services to women and children who are victims of atrocities and exploitation.

The thrust of these various schemes and program-

mes for women "is to provide the five principal categories of services: (a) employment & income generation services; (b) education and training services; (c) support services; (d) general awareness services; and (e) legal support service".

The draft Plan has given a list of these programmes and targets set. However, it does not really evaluate these projects, schemes or programmes. It does not try to answer why they have failed to reach social, economic or political justice to women. It merely recognises that these schemes have not achieved the purpose they were supposed to. The draft Plan states in clear terms that an alternative strategy for development is needed. It states: "If the results and lessons of the past are any guide, a larger allocation of resources for women within the prevailing pattern and structures of development, does not promise a reversal of trends. A parallel substream of women's development even if possible, will only perpetuate discrimination and subordination. An alternative strategy of national development which will provide not just some additional space for women, but create a democratic, egalitarian, cooperative social structure has to be defined and tried. In such a scheme, it will be necessary to accelerate the woman's component of composite programmes, to ensure the integrity of the enterprise as well as a measure of compensatory justice. The goals of holistic human development must not be at the expense of one another and the ascent to equality must be collective."

The Plan recognises that "poverty is a consequence as well as a cause of several factors that limit life". However, the draft Plan does not attempt to draw up an alternative strategy for development which will effectively bring social, economic and political justice. In fact, the draft Plan does not address itself to the basic problem of removing poverty. It speaks of wiping every tear from every eye but does not even attempt to understand the causes of hunger, inequality and social injustice.

The section on Rural Development and Agriculture speaks of the "low and deteriorating status of rural women" as a result of "modernisation of the agricultural sector". However, it does not explain why modernisation has led to greater poverty and inequality. In the chapter on Employment and Training there is a paragraph on the impact of technology which has one line on mechanisation in agriculture: "adoption of new farming technology has significantly downgraded the input of women, largely on account of their limited education."

There is no mention of the fact that concentration of land in the hands of a few, non-implementation of land reforms and the Green Revolution have all resulted in creation of millions of landless labourers and greater economic inequality in the rural areas.

The Draft Plan does not address itself to the problem and consequences of uneven economic development whereby all the industries are concentrated in or around a few big cities. As a result of this the rural unemployed go to cities in search of jobs and land up either on the pavement or in the growing number of slums. It makes no mention of Free Trade Zones which have been exploiting female labour.

The only solution the draft Plan offers is that "poverty alleviation goals of 2000 A.D. should be to (i) bring all women headed households (estimated to be 30-35 per cent) above the poverty line; and (ii) attain the target of having women constitute 30 per cent of all beneficiaries to be assisted under the Integrated Rural Development Programme. In addition, the endeavour of the perspective plan should be to bring in the women's development dimension in the sectors particularly, agriculture and allied fields which have not responded adequately to women's needs."

The draft Plan's major solution to the problem of poverty and inequality seems to be the effective implementation of various schemes run by different Ministries and departments, by effective monitoring. The Plan recommends: "There are today sufficient number of programmes in the Government of India as well as innovative programmes in many States and sectors. What is needed is the technical inputs for greater effectiveness of these programmes, to guarantee better resources utilisation. Emphasis has to be placed on more effective planning, monitoring and evaluation of existing programmes through a result-oriented mechanism operating at different levels."

In addition to better implementation of the 27 government run schemes, the Plan places an undue emphasis on training as a means to solve basic, complex economic problems.

The Plan gives emphasis to training as a major part of a strategy for overcoming women's poverty and marginalisation. It states: A systematic human resource development strategy focussed on women is recommended. Three levels of training are envisaged viz., (i) grass-roots level; (ii) middle level; and (iii) policy and planning level. The content of training should encompass five principal components as follows: (i) organisational and extension training; (ii) skills training; (iii) management and entrepreneurial training; (iv) sensitisation of administrators/ implementors to women in development issues; (v) training of trainers."

There seems to be no awareness that even if all the schemes are effectively implemented and training perfectly imparted unless the economic policies are changed there will be lakhs of more women every year who will be marginalised, unemployed and destitute. How would these schemes and training programmes keep up with the growing inequality and injustice? These schemes, programmes and projects themselves have a gender bias which the draft Plan does not see as problematic.

The strangest part of the draft Plan is that it does not envisage any extra expenditure. The Minister states in her preface: "this Plan does not seek more investments or more resources. It seeks to give a new thrust and responsiveness to developmental programmes at all levels, and recommends certain special measures for women as transitory support to ensure that they catch up with the mainstream by 2000 A.D."

The Plan recommends that this new thrust and responsiveness can be achieved by the creation of various departments — Departments or Directorates of Women's Development at the State level;

Women's Development Corporations for implementation of economic programmes; a coordinator at the district level to coordinate and supervise education and health schemes; a Special Division in the Department of Women and Child Development for the enforcement of law under a Commissioner for Women's Rights; and an apex body for women's training in the country that cuts across various departments and Ministries to ensure proper planning and elimination of duplication of schemes.

The Plan does not explain how all these bodies will be set up without extra finances when the Plan itself states that the total outlay on the women specific schemes in the Seventh Plan is only two to four per cent. It also does not explain how these bodies or this Plan will deliver the goods when the previous Plan and previous schemes could not.

Perhaps the one difference is that this Plan envisages a widespread participation of voluntary action groups in implementing the recommendations. In the chapter on Voluntary Action in the Development of Women, the Plan concedes the fact that the voluntary agencies are closer to the people than the rigid bureaucratic system. Many autonomous feminist groups are specifically named and their role in raising women's consciousness against gender oppression is acknowledged. The Plan states that the Government is increasingly interested in "enhancing the role of voluntary agencies in the development of women" because "the Government has rightly felt that it cannot assume the entire responsibility of service provision and development. ... A meaningful partnership with the voluntary sector has thus been an avowed goal and an essential variable in the Government's attempts in integrating women in development".

Women's organisations, feminist groups and voluntary agencies have to decide whether they welcome this move or they look upon it as an effort of the Government to shift its responsibility on to the people. There is a need for us to have a clear understanding of what this cooperation means, on what basis it is to be carried out and what the political consequences will be of our decision.

It is indeed strange that while the Plan calls for a greater role of women's groups in the implementation of the developmental schemes, the Government has not bothered to associate any of these groups in the process of writing the perspective Plan. The Plan has been prepared by a core group of 14 people headed by Margaret Alva and this group consulted eleven experts who have been named. Neither the core group nor the experts consulted include any members of a women's organisation, except for one member of All India Women's Conference. The sector papers were prepared by the Women's Division of the National Institute PCCD which also did not consult the women's groups. The draft Plan acknowledges the pioneering role of the Committee on the Status of Women but none of the members of that Committee were consulted.

The draft Plan was put before the National Committee on Women headed by the Prime Minister. The Committee was set up recently to "advise the

Central and State Governments from time to time on the policy, legislative and administrative measures necessary for removing economic and social inequalities affecting Indian women and to suggest ways and means to enable women to achieve their inherent potential and utilise their capacity to contribute to the development process; and to review the progress of implementation of policies and programmes designed in pursuance thereof".

The Committee has such broad terms of reference but it is to ordinarily meet once a year and has no powers whatsoever. Further, the Committee has 29 members but there are no representatives of either national women's organisations such as the Mahila Dakshita Samiti, the Janwadi Mahila Samiti or the National Federation of Indian Women, or of any of the feminist organisations whose role has been acknowledged.

The draft National Perspective Plan was discussed by the Committee but many members felt that the Committee was not representative of women's organisations and the Plan should be a subject of a national debate. So far the Government has not invited such a debate as it did on their new education policy.

Women's organisations and feminist groups must decide whether they want to enter into a dialogue with the Government on the Perspective Plan. Some feel that no real changes can be brought about unless the system is changed, others have felt that the very act of entering into a discussion with the Government give credibility or legitimacy to a Government which is growing more and more repressive. These questions should also be debated at the national level. We must remember this question has a long history. During the freedom movement against colonialism, many nationalists like Tilak attacked social reformers like Pandit Ramabai and Ranade on the ground that asking the British to reform our customs was tantamount to supporting British rule.

The draft National Perspective Plan for Women is the first such Plan after 40 years of independence. The sectoral papers make certain recommendations which could help to bring some relief to a section of the oppressed women. A national debate on the Plan itself would generate greater awareness on the problem. We still have the possibility of political debates in our country. There is still space for open political discussion. This space was won by long years of struggle for democracy. All those concerned with preserving that space must take the responsibility of ensuring that it does not close because of our lack of political vigilance or our cynicism. □

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