

Lacunae in new schemes for women

By MANJULA SEN

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THE national perspective plan for women 1988-2000 A.D. released by the Central government offers several progressive recommendations but fails to suggest any device to implement them or the already existing schemes.

The 81-page plan attempts a development perspective and begins with a review of the present status of women arrived at through the five-year Plans.

While the document is commendable for its admission of a lack of conceptual clarity and the general apathy regarding women's issues among government agencies, it is limited in its strategies by the necessity of having to rely on the same agencies for its approval.

The thrust of the document is that with the eventual shift from "welfare" to "development" in programmes for women, the latter must be recognised as "a source of unique strength for reaching national goals". It notes: "Women are not merely producers and providers but also individuals with a right to human dignity in a society where 'culture' and 'class' tend to discriminate against gender."

It is pointed out that the large allocation of resources for women within the prevailing patterns and structures of development does not promise a reversal of trends and therefore an alternative strategy of national development has to be defined and tried.

The plan dispenses with the need to estimate resources.

recommendations include: providing women's cells in all ministries, greater emphasis on access to basic services in general outlays, sensitising the bureaucracy and existing monitoring bodies, raising the representation of women in elected bodies in a manner that integrates and accepts women, creche facilities in girls' schools and at work sites that employ more than 30 persons (and not merely 30 women), health facilities for women per se, matrimonial property to be registered in the joint names of husband and wife and in the wife's when the marriage breaks down and the matter is pending settlement, minimum maintenance to be computed keeping the basic needs in mind, shelter for needy women, central maternity benefit fund to be set up with contributions from all employers and provision of alternate skills for women displaced by new technologies.

MIX OF PROPOSALS

This mix of old proposals, better applied or modified if required, and a set of new, much required programmes is welcome but marred by the fact that the onus for giving an impetus to women's development is

on those agencies which have had little impact in their fields for over four decades. It is mandatory that the reasons for their failure be pinpointed before making recommendations that are otherwise apt to be confined on paper.

For instance, who will ensure that reservation of seats in bodies like panchayats and legislative bodies will not be exploited by vested interests? Maintenance rights was an issue which the Central government used to appease a major vote bank at the cost of women's rights recently but there is no suggestion to circumvent such a recurrence beyond the demand for a uniform civil code.

The plan also recommends that maternity benefits should be provided by all employers, not merely those who employ women. This is a valuable suggestion but is liable to be observed more in the breach, as is the case of the Equal Remuneration Act, unless accompanied by proposals for its formulation and application.

The Union government has 42 schemes for women's training but the plan says these lack emphasis in content and direction. It recommends training policy for women and a sys-

tematic grid of programmes schemes for their training at different levels. Besides a multiplication of "schemes", not much can be expected if the political will is absent. A special division headed by a commission of women and child development really enforce law for women.

For grassroot social workers to take issues of health and literacy, necessary that the social work especially if the person is a woman, enabled to rise above the limitations imposed by the socio-cultural milieu.

The plan also mentions the need to compute value to housework, women family farms and other family business. These are often "under-repaid" because in most cases it is unpaid. However, remedies for this problem are not forthcoming. This lacuna is repeated when the document stresses the need for increased participation of women in trade union activities fails to suggest steps to achieve it.

The national perspective plan for women would, in the ultimate analysis, have done better had it drafted with better representation at the grassroot level and more recommendations on how to do what "should" be done.

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More than a welfare approach

“WE, as women, don't want the welfare approach. We're not asking for handouts,” explained a passionately articulate member, of the very latest, very select National Committee on Women which held its first meeting at the Prime Minister's office on May 17.

This was no breakfast meeting for an informal exchange of views. So there were no idli-dosas for the 29 women gathered from different corners of the country to discuss the Draft National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000 A.D.).

Members of the constituted group included Aruna Asaf Ali, Margaret Alva, Rajendra Kumari Bajpai, Shiela Kaul, Nandita Haksar, Mrinal Pande, Sarojini Vardappan, Amarjeet Kaur, Geeta Mukherjee, Jayanti Natarajan, Jaya Arunachalam, Sushmeeta Srivastava, Sheela Barse, Ela Bhatt and Aparna Sen, among others.

“In fact it was a very hungry meeting,” said Dr Najma Heptullah, Rajya Sabha MP. Lunch had to be skipped by all as the session stretched over three hours into the heat of the Delhi afternoon. Though the meeting started forty minutes later than scheduled, giving rise to some concern among the waiting women that they were not being taken seriously, it turned out to be a marathon session. And it was 3.30 before the assembled lawyers, activists, leftists, scientists and politicians could conclude their deliberations.

The content of the meeting though general was serious. Organised under the aegis of Women and Child Development Minister Margaret Alva, the group of 29 had ample opportunity to put forward their views and concerns to the Prime Minister.

Contentious issues and the inevitable controversies over sati, the Muslim Women's Act and the Indecent Representation of Women Act

The National Committee on Women comprising 29 eminent women, had its first meeting with the Prime Minister on May 17. A report by RUKMANI ANANDANI

time,” said one participant. “I regret that we were not practical enough to co-ordinate and hold at least one meeting beforehand so that we could put forward more specific recommendations, on the spot.”

The draft Plan itself, prepared after months of compilation by Mrs Margaret Alva's department in the Human Resources Ministry is generally considered to be a bold and fairly progressive document.

For instance, it sparked off some heated discussion since it states that maternity benefit of twelve weeks paid leave under the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, be provided by the government irrespective of the marital status of the woman worker.

Some of those present, including Dr Rajendra Kumari Bajpai, Minister of State for Welfare, were opposed to the idea of allowing maternity benefits to unwed mothers with children. It was suggested that in India this sort of thing was not acceptable. “But I don't think the Prime Minister was entirely in agreement with this kind of objection,” stated another member of the group of 29.

There was further disagreement over reservations for women. The draft Perspective Plan in fact envisages reservations of the order of 30 per cent in various areas like employment in the Government's rural employment works, IRDP beneficiaries, employment exchanges, professional institutes of study, seats in all Panchayath bodies and

ter on the impact of science and technology on women. Neither in terms of job displacement or fresh job opportunities nor in terms of spin-off benefits to women from scientific components in reducing the drudgery of their daily work both outside and within the home.

Sushmeeta Srivastava, chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Board, suggested that the rules for registering and running mahila mandals at the very grassroots level required simplification. This would encourage women for they would not have to tangle with chartered accountants for only very simple accounting would be required.

Social worker Mrs Ela Bhatt pleaded for the concept of asset building in the names of women. Economic upliftment and independence can only be rooted in title to, and control of, an asset, any asset, that is productive of income will do. This productive asset the woman must be able to call her own and against it she should be entitled to raise a loan whether it be land pattas, tree pattas, worksheds, equipment, cattle, savings accounts or even vending licences with identity cards.

Secondly, she wanted to stress the extreme vulnerability of women particularly in the rural areas whenever they come face to face with the police. “There is too much rape and exploitation of innocent women in their homes and police stations. I said simply this: that the police should not touch women at all,” recalled Mrs Bhatt.

field made by the draft Plan certainly make for interesting reading:

- * The plan recommends that there should be a Uniform Civil Code for all citizens by the years 2000 A.D.

- * All marriages should be registered. And dowry demand should be made a ground for divorce.

- * Steps to ensure the legal validity of a dying declaration in cases of suspected murder of a woman are needed.

- * Legal measures to deter husbands and in-laws from falsely certifying a woman as a lunatic and placing her in an asylum should be initiated.

Laws should ensure women's rights to motherhood and maternity benefits irrespective of their marital status.

- * Parents should be prevented from denying daughters their rightful share of property by making wills disinheriting daughters illegally.

- * Ration cards should be issued in the name of women.

- * Rules should be amended for women, especially single women, to open bank accounts/get loans without having to declare either husband or father's name.

- * Formula for calculating the minimum amount of maintenance (to a divorced woman) should be laid down on the basis of basic needs and the upper limit removed.

- * The right of the wife to the matrimonial home must be guaranteed.

But finally, was it not ironic that supra-committee of women, for women and by women should have men in its two topmost positions of chairman (Rajiv Gandhi) and vice-chairman (P. V. Narasimha Rao)?

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Contentious issues and the inevitable controversies over sati, the Muslim Women's Act and the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act were not raised, for the agenda was simple. The group was there to pool ideas and contributions for inclusion in the draft of the National Perspective Plan. This amended draft would then be circulated among the state governments upon whom a large chunk of responsibility for ultimate implementation rests.

But more homework and a closer reading of the draft document beforehand which was circulated ten days before the May 17 meeting would probably have added sharper focus to the discussion. "Strategically, we could have gained more since the PM gave us so much

idea of allowing maternity benefits to unwed mothers with children. It was suggested that in India this sort of thing was not acceptable. "But I don't think the Prime Minister was entirely in agreement with this kind of objection," stated another member of the group of 29.

There was further disagreement over reservations for women. The draft Perspective Plan in fact envisages reservations of the order of 30 per cent in various areas like employment in the Government's rural employment works, IRDP beneficiaries, employment exchanges, professional institutes of study, seats in all Panchayat bodies, and political parties.

Areas requiring further definition and inclusion in the draft Perspective Plan were pointed out by a number of those present ranging across their fields of expertise. Activist Sheela Barse indicated concern that there was no section in the draft dealing exclusively with the female child. It is she who goes on to become a statistic in illiteracy, in infant mortality, in malnutrition, in school dropout figures, in mortality at childbirth, and in unemployment.

Scientist Archana Sharma from Calcutta pointed out that there was no chap-

asset, that is productive or income will do. This productive asset the woman must be able to call her own and against it she should be entitled to raise a loan whether it be land pattas, tree pattas, workshops, equipment, cattle, savings accounts or even vending licences with identity cards.

Secondly, she wanted to stress the extreme vulnerability of women particularly in the rural areas whenever they come face to face with the police. "There is too much rape and exploitation of innocent women in their homes and police stations. I said simply this: that the police should not touch women at all," recalled Mrs Bhatt. "But these things are never so simple. It is not enough to hold seminars where all those high police officials are very polite and sympathetic for the reality on the ground for these poor, simple women is absolutely terrifying and pitiful."

There appeared to be general agreement that if the government is really serious about all these committees and recommendations then somewhere they must make a declaration as to police accountability and sensitisation through training, or disincentives, or punishment or whatever.

The recommendations in the legal

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But finally, was it not ironic that a supra-committee of women, for women and by women should have men in its two topmost positions of chairman (Rajiv Gandhi) and vice-chairman (P. V. Narasimha Rao)?

"No, not at all, for men should be involved in the development process," said Mrs Heptullah. "In fact this committee derives its importance from the Prime Minister's chairmanship."

Said another member of the group of 29: "It is more or less inevitable that all the powerful national bodies be headed by the politicians who count, and they happen to be men. We had a woman Prime Minister for sixteen years and now it happens to be a man. Since this committee is headed by the PM the buck now stops with him. Any assurances from him are valuable for they can later be quoted back to him."

And what was the Prime Minister's contribution to this long first session of the National Committee on Women? "Well, I would say that he was a keen listener."

Cosmetics for women

WOMEN'S GROUPS all over the country are up in arms at the cavalier manner in which the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000 AD) is being hustled through by the government. They fear that it will be brought before parliament in the forthcoming monsoon session and become policy without the promised national debate on it. Indeed, leading women's organisations see in the government's haste its anxiety not to permit any impediment in what could prove to be a useful election appeal to fifty per cent of the voting public.

Those who have seen the plan document point out that it neither has a perspective nor is it a plan. It only suggests cosmetic changes and worse, it does not even bother to make resource allocations for the implementation of the plan. The proposal to reserve seats for women in all elective bodies has legislative implications which have not been worked out and despite the fact that it stresses a holistic approach, it separates welfare from development.

On June 26, six women's organisations — All India Democratic Women's Association, All India Coordination Committee of Women Workers, Centre for Women's Development Studies, Mahila Dakshita Samiti, National Federation of Indian Women and YWCA of India — issued a statement, registering their joint protest. The statement said, "The document (i.e., the plan) which most of us have not seen, has been prepared without any consultation with or participation by the women's movement, which has been raising issues affecting women in the process of national development."

It pointed out that a plan that could affect all policies for women's development and participation for years to come should not be finalised without wider dissemination and a nation-wide debate involving organisations which have a popular base among women of different classes or have specialised in women's development concerns through study, action and networking.

Perhaps under pressure from these women's groups, the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) organised a two day seminar on June 29 and 30. Those who were invited included the chairpersons of all the state social advisory welfare boards and some selected individuals and representatives of voluntary organisations. Indeed, at least two national women's organisations had to ask the CSWB why they had not been invited to attend. Even more curious, the seminar's discussions were not made public though Doordarshan on its

SPOTLIGHT

Women groups all over the country are up in arms against the National Perspective Plan for Women which will be presented to Parliament during the monsoon session, reports Smita Gupta



Margaret Alva: planning without consultation

nightly news bulletin did announce that the seminar had recommended the need for a national debate.

The general recommendations of this seminar were: that the plan deserved an indepth study of all three parts of the document (so far only the first has been made public) and a nation-wide debate and consultation with grassroots organisations and other agencies before it becomes a government policy. That this document was a statement of intent rather than a perspective plan was clear because the word "plan" implied resource allocation and the document nowhere mentioned any such provisions.

Even though the total outlay on the women specific schemes in the seventh plan is only 2.4 per cent, Minister of State for Women's Development Margaret Alva, who headed the core group which drafted the plan, says in her preface to the document: "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 AD."

The seminar also felt that priority in planning be given to landless women labourers as they form a vast majority of our total deprived population.

On July 4 and 5, the state min-

isters of social welfare met in Delhi to discuss the plan and despite the fact that there were differences of opinion the government chose to issue a statement saying that it had been unanimously endorsed.

Asks a leading women's activist and pioneer in women's development studies, "Why this repeated attempt at suppressing dissent? Moreover, is the future of women such a peripheral issue that it can be settled by social welfare ministries? Should it not, like other plans, go before the National Development Council (a body consisting of state chief ministers and headed by the prime minister)?"

At the two day seminar (June 29 and 30), what was repeatedly stressed was that if the government was serious about empowering women, there was need for giving power to women at the lowest levels and that programmes should be generated from below.

While agreeing that reservation of seats for women in all local bodies upto the district level is imperative, it feels that the demand for similar reservation in parliament is unnecessary. On the question of programmes, while the plan document feels that there are a sufficient number of programmes at both the central and state levels, and all that is required is technical input for greater effectiveness, it also pointed out that the pro-

grammes should be need-based and location specific and that the role of the government should be to monitor, facilitate and finance and not to formulate programmes which should be done at the grassroots.

The seminar added that the performance of women's development corporations which have already been set up in six states should be evaluated before more are set up in other states to ensure that corrective measures are taken to make them more effective.

And finally the seminar pointed out that the dichotomy between welfare and development should not be so rigidly laid down as on page 61 of the plan document. "In a holistic approach as spelt out in this plan document, welfare and development programmes should go hand in hand. The CSWB should continue to be a nodal agency to coordinate the activities of the voluntary sector and the government. It should be further strengthened, rather than confirmed to welfare and supportive services as recommended in the plan document."

On June 22, in a detailed article in a national daily, Nandita Haksar, a civil rights activist and lawyer, who is also a member of the National Committee on Women, headed by the prime minister, and which had also urged a national debate on the plan, raised some political questions. She pointed out that the plan "does not recognise that Indian society is based on certain inequalities which are perpetuated by the kind of political system we have. Therefore, welfare or development schemes, training programmes or anti-poverty projects will not solve the problem..."

Haksar adds that though the plan lays emphasis on rural development and recognises that there is a need to look at women as "producers and participants, not as clients of welfare," it does not anywhere mention that women are being marginalised or thrown out of employment because of the processes inherent in the economic structure.

In its present form, the plan, because of no resource allocation to enforce it and the lack of clearly spelt out implementation strategies, may remain on paper even if it becomes a policy.

In the past too, a national plan for women was formulated after the committee on the status of women's report, but it was nowhere in evidence when the time came to formulate the sixth Five Year Plan.

Surely fifty per cent of the population, a majority of whom bear the twin burdens of poverty and gender, deserve more concern?