

THE INTEGRATION OF SRI LANKAN WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

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Swarna Jayaweera fait le bilan des plans et des programmes de développement importants mis en effet au Sri Lanka au cours de la Décennie pour les femmes de l'ONU. Elle évalue le degré d'intégration des femmes du Sri Lanka aux plans de développement, et comment ces plans les ont touchés. Son analyse se termine avec une recommandation: l'intégration des femmes à la planification du développement doit se fonder sur des concepts d'égalité d'accès, de dignité humaine et de justice sociale. Elle esquisse d'importantes directions nouvelles pour la planification du développement à l'avenir, pour rectifier la situation inéquitable qui existe actuellement.

In consonance with the goals of Equality, Development and Peace of the UN Decade for Women, the World Plan of Action formulated in Mexico in 1975¹ and the Programme of action prepared at the Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen in 1980² prioritized the need for integrating women in Development. Integration has often been synonymous with exploitation, and the integration envisaged for women is on the basis of (i) equal access to assets, knowledge, skills and services, and (ii) human dignity through equal participation in the development process and in resource allocation in the family and society, and ability to control one's own resources.

A pre-requisite to such a process would be the integration of women in national development plans and programmes. The Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen deplored the lack of evidence of any effective integration of women in such plans.³ It is opportune at the end of the Decade to review the plans and major development programmes implemented in Sri Lanka during these years in order to ascertain the extent to which Sri Lankan women have been integrated into development plans, and concomitantly, to see how such plans have affected them. Women are affected by conditions in their society,

and in their socio-economic classes or groups, as well as by their position as women *per se*. This review will focus largely on gender specific issues pertaining to the integration of women in development planning.

Women in Sri Lanka were apparently a non-issue prior to 1970 and were not mentioned specifically as a target group in the plethora of plans and programmes prepared from the 1940s to the 1960s. They were, however, equal beneficiaries of the social welfare policies that were an important component of national plans since the 1940s. By 1970, equal access to education had brought women in significant numbers into the public arena. In International Women's Year in 1975, participation in the Mexico Conference and accelerated activity by women's non-government organizations gave a momentum to interest in women's issues. The visibility of women in the public scene and in official consciousness increased with the establishment of the Women's Bureau as a special national machinery to enhance the position of women, with regular national seminars and workshops and with successive International Women's Day activities.

This visibility is reflected, to some extent, in official documents and in public pronouncements, but there is little evidence of purposeful integration at the planning level over the last ten years, and, as in many other countries, development plans and programmes are seen to have had a differential impact on men and women. It is noteworthy, too, that gender role assumptions underlying plans and implementation programmes do not appear to have changed significantly during these years.

The planning process in Sri Lanka has been traditionally centralized. The process of decentralization initiated in the 1970s has been largely a political exercise with little departure from the conceptual framework of macro-level and district sectoral planning – Divisional Development Councils (1971), Decentralized Budget

(1973), District Political Authorities (1973), District Ministers (1978) and District Development Councils, Divisional Development Councils (Pradeshya Mandalas) and Village Development Councils (Gramodaya Mandalas) in the 1980s. In this context plans are influenced largely by the perceptions of political and economic decision-makers, planners and administrators. The conceptual issues from which planning assumptions stem are an amalgam of patriarchal social norms and gender role expectations transferred from western industrial societies during the colonial and post-colonial decades.

National Plans

The U.N. Decade for Women began in the middle of the second U.N. Development Decade when the earlier preoccupation with economic growth had been tempered by a recognition of the need for distributive social justice. In Sri Lanka, the failure of the industrial model in the 1950s and 1960s and the youth insurgency in 1971 stimulated the Coalition government elected in 1970 to formulate an 'alternate model' for development. The Five Year Plan (1972-76)⁴ outlined development strategies which were to promote:

- (i) structural changes in the form of land reforms and re-distribution of assets in order to bridge disparities between the affluent and the disadvantaged,
- (ii) decentralized employment policies giving priority to the small scale sector, labour intensive methods of production and indigenous technology,
- (iii) development of the rural sector involving youth in commercial agriculture and agro-based industries,
- (iv) establishment of Divisional Development Councils to decentralize project planning and implementation, and

- (v) pre-vocational and vocational orientation of the school and university curriculum respectively.

The 1971 youth crisis had brought to the surface the employment needs of young women who were the products of the expanding education system, and for the first time, therefore, a national plan took cognizance of the role of women in development. The Plan, however, did not take specific note of the development needs of women in the formulation of strategies and programmes.

In 1977 the election of the U.N.P. government introduced a sharp change in development policies. Priority was given to economic growth, free operation of the market mechanism, export-led growth, private enterprise and reduced welfare subsidies. The major development programmes were identified as: (i) the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme; (ii) the establishment of Investment Promotion Zones (Free Trade Zones) near Colombo; (iii) the Urban and Housing Development Project; and (iv) the Integrated Rural Development Programme.

Annual Public Investment Programmes which are a series of five year projections on a rolling plan replaced the pattern of fixed term plans. The influence of International Women's Year and the Decade is seen in the increase in official awareness reflected in the annual programme documents since 1981. These have referred to the participation of women in the labour force (1981 and 1982) and in education (1984), and to women as a target group of economic and social development policies (1983).⁵ The 1982-86 Investment Programme even brought women into the focus of policy objectives: "The provision of more and better employment for women in order to improve the status of women and to integrate them more meaningfully into the development process has been a major objective of the government."⁶

Greater awareness at national policy level is reflected also in the 1978 Constitution which removed disabilities based on quotas in public sector employment, and even included women with children and the disabled as a "dependent group" needing special protection. In 1980 the government also ratified the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women at the Mid-Decade Conference at Copenhagen.



The positive attitudes reflected in statements and in such documents need to be translated into action through development programmes, and these are the programmes that are the outcome of the planning process.

National Machinery

A significant development during the Decade has been the establishment of national machinery to promote the integration of women in development. International trends and pressure from local non-governmental organizations impelled the government to implement one of the recommendations of the Mexico Conference to establish a separate machinery at national level as a focal point for policies for the advancement of women. The Women's Bureau for which women's groups had been lobbying since 1975 was established in 1978 and located in a key position in the Ministry of Plan

Implementation under the President. It was transferred to a newly created Ministry of Women's Affairs and Teaching Hospitals in 1983, subsequent to a recommendation made at the National Symposium for Women in 1982 to create a separate Ministry for Women's Affairs.⁷

It was intended that the Bureau should play a catalytic role in accelerating women's progress and operate as a co-ordinating agency and a "watch dog" of women's interests. It was expected to identify plans and monitor programmes to increase the participation of women, raise consciousness, and promote research and data collection pertaining to women.⁸ Reviewing its activities in the last six to seven years it is apparent that the Bureau has been successful in increasing the visibility of women and in projecting an 'image' of women as important beneficiaries of development. It has sought to mobilize rural women through projects and its greatest achievement is its non-elitist orientation.

Preoccupation with an extensive district-based programme, however, has prevented the Bureau from carrying out its crucial catalytic and advocacy role in promoting change, and from developing an adequate data and research base. It has failed to integrate women in development planning because the Bureau itself has operated outside the mainstream of planning at national and district levels. The implementation of the Bureau's projects outside the framework of the District Integrated Rural Development Programme is an illustration of the marginalization of the Bureau and its clientele in the planning process. In consequence, the Bureau became a state implementation agency of relatively isolated 'women's sector' programmes.

Development Programmes

'Development Programmes' implemented in the last ten years have encompassed agriculture, industry, rural development, social policies and special programmes directed to women. The divergence between official blanket policy statements pertaining to the need to integrate women in development and the direction and content of development plans and programmes, point to conceptual issues underlying the perceptions

and gender role assumptions of the majority of political and economic decision-makers and planners and administrators. Some of these perceptions and assumptions surface from the social norms of a patriarchal society that buttress male dominance in the public sphere. Nevertheless the economic activities of women in traditional society were not circumscribed by their 'private domain' and the middle-class bias in perceptions of the economic role of women appears to be a by-product of western development models. Colonial ideology introduced nineteenth century Victorian norms of the 'domestication of women' which legitimized elite life styles, and through the process of "sanskritization" seeped into the administrative and social structure. Western orientation in development planning in post-colonial society has in turn contributed to reinforcing these norms.

The Sri Lanka experience is not unique in this respect. Irene Tinker has analysed the impact of this western model of 'glorified domesticity' on the position of women in Third World countries.⁹ Esther Boserup drew attention to the fact that the participation of rural women in agriculture in economically developing societies has declined and their rights eroded as a result of the 'modernization' of agriculture.¹⁰ Margaret Mead described the distortions caused by the adoption of the western model of agricultural training which directs education in scientific agricultural production to men, and home economics, food processing and nutrition to women, and reserves the use of machinery for men, on the assumption that there is gender based differentiation in the processes of agricultural production and post-harvest operations and a dichotomy in the roles of men and women.¹¹

As the experience in Sri Lankan settlement policies illustrates, middle class administrators in economically developing countries such as Sri Lanka, are conditioned by these 'models' to perceive rural women as dependent housewives and not as agricultural producers. It has been seen that what has been aptly termed as 'housewifisation' in rural development¹² is clearly reflected in both settlement and rural development programmes with the exception of the change-agents programme. Assumptions relating to domesticity are also extended to urban women, and the marginality of

women in development programmes is partly the outcome of perceptions that all women are secondary earners who supplement family incomes, and not primary or co-earners whose economic activities are crucial to family survival and mobility. In contradistinction, rural women and women in low income families perceive themselves as producers, workers and providers of families and not as dependents.

The perceptions of decision-makers have other facets too, that impinge on development planning. 'Suitable occupations' for women are seen not in terms of physiological differences as often claimed but on assumptions of socially produced behavioural patterns, as for instance, the rationalizations made with regard to the 'docility' of young women and their so-called aptitude for monotonous repetitive jobs in world market factories and the contradictions between the image of frailty and the manual labour of women in construction and other activities.

The assumed incompatibility between child bearing roles and economic activities, which is also implicit in Western feminist theory, has influenced attitudes to the economic participation of women, but is not supported by evidence in Sri Lanka where the majority of women in the official and unofficial labour force are married, and where employment is increasingly seen as a substitute for the traditional dowry.¹³ The majority of Third World women do not see their family responsibilities and economic activities as

alternate roles. Many of them are primary earners and do not have the luxury of options. Development planners have yet to perceive the multiple roles of women in balanced perspective and to provide support for these role 'enactments'.

A corollary to the 'domestication of women' is the segregation of gender roles in family-oriented programmes. International and bilateral agencies and local planners and administrators appear to assume that the 'family' in social development programmes is synonymous with 'women'. The role of men in family related programmes such as health, nutrition and family planning is accordingly undervalued with negative consequences in plan implementation.

Another stereotype that has implications for development planning is the underlying assumption that the 'household' is the ideal target for all programmes.

The household or family is perceived uniformly as a cohesive, harmonious unit, and benefits are expected to trickle down to women from male heads of household. In reality gender inequalities within the family structure often affect responses to policies and prevent equitable resource allocation within the household. An extreme illustration is the lack of access of Indian estate women to their own wage earnings and to control of their income and their lives.¹⁴ The fact that women are not perceived as individuals tends to strengthen the dependency syndrome that traps them as unpaid family helpers.

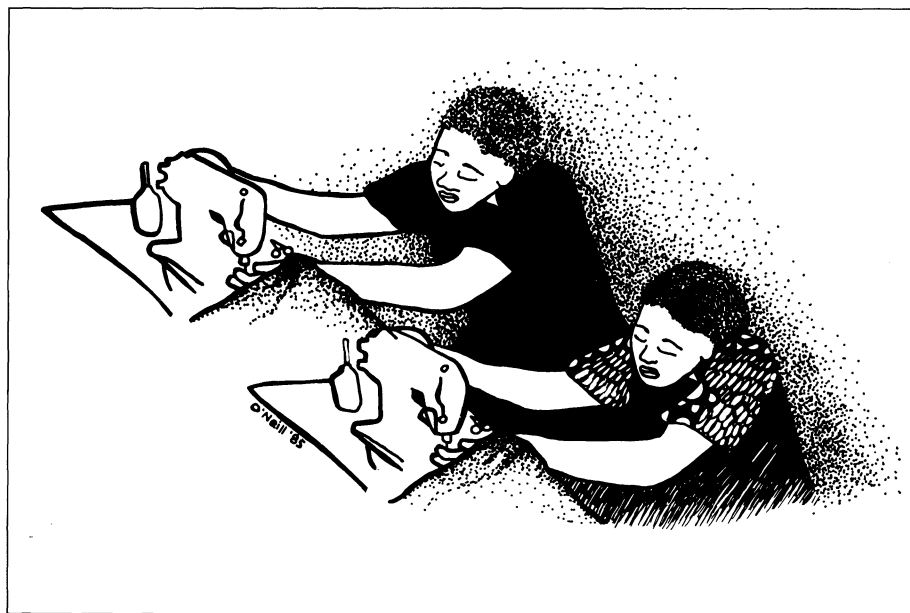


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It is difficult to believe that development planning will take adequate note of the social realities of the lives of Sri Lankan women unless these conceptual obfuscations are removed by informed research and by advocacy programmes directed to the upper echelons of the political, administrative, economic and social structures. It is possible that otherwise a minority of women will continue to enhance their status while the majority will be economically and socially exploited or displaced and marginalized by changes in the modes of production and by mechanization and technological progress.

An Overview

This review of the participation of women in development plans and programmes has indicated that despite the impetus given by the Decade, programmes have had a differential impact on men and women, partly as a consequence of the failure to integrate women in development planning on the basis of equal access to resources and skills in all sectors and equal opportunities for participation.

Women's economic roles are still not recognized in national statistical data and in planning perspectives. Women have been perceived as dependent wives of male farmers in feudalistic production relations and as exploited cheap labour through wage discrimination in capitalistic production relations in plantations and allied enterprises. Export-oriented industries, foreign investment and trends in the international labour market have stimulated demand for professional, managerial, technical and manual skills, as well as for semi-skilled and unskilled female labour, and in response women are concentrated in employment with relatively low skills and remuneration and with job insecurity in 'world market' and other factories and in domestic service in West Asia.

It cannot be said therefore that women are significantly better off at the end of the Decade – although their contribution to the economy has even increased. The presence of a core of professional 'elite' women and the entry of women into several male 'preserves' during the last ten years cannot compensate for the fact that a large majority are still enmeshed in the lowest levels of the employment pyramid, and that the official unemployment rate

for women is double that of men in the context of relatively higher economic growth rates.¹⁵

It has been noted that women have been perceived as passive consumers of welfare services rather than as equal partners in development. If the development programmes are to promote human resource development, equity and human development, they need to be conceived and operated in an ideational framework based on concepts of human dignity and distributive social justice. In this context the integration of women in development planning on a basis of equality, even within present macro-structural constraints, needs fresh directions encompassing:

- (i) research studies to strengthen the data base, probe interactive social processes and related conceptual issues,
- (ii) advocacy programmes to change perceptions and counter gender role stereotypes,
- (iii) micro-level participatory planning processes to ascertain the problems and needs of women in their real life situations,
- (iv) explicit recognition of women as participants and target groups in all sectoral and inter-sectoral plans in the design and activities of programmes,
- (v) provision of equal access to resources, services and skills including technology, and
- (vi) mobilization of women as self-reliant agents of development.

¹*Declaration of Mexico, Plans of Action – World Conference of the International Women's Year (19 June – 2 July 1975), United Nations, New York, 1975.*

²*Programmes of Action for the Second Half of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women; Copenhagen, Denmark (14 – 30 July 1980).*

³*Ibid.*

⁴*The Five Year Plan, Ministry of Planning and Employment, Government of Ceylon, (1971).*

⁵*Public Investment 1981 – 1985, Public Investment 1982 – 1986, Public Investment 1983 – 1987, Public Investment 1984 – 1988, National Planning Division, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1981, 1982, 1983 & 1984.*

⁶*Public Investment 1984 – 1988, National*

Planning Division, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Colombo, Sri Lanka (1984).

⁷*Report on the National Symposium on Women in New Dimensions in the Role of Women, Nov. 1982, Women's Bureau, Ministry of Plan Implementation, Colombo (1983).*

⁸*Women's Bureau of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Plan Implementation, Vol. 1, Nov. 1979.*

⁹Irene Tinker, "The Adverse Impact of Development on Women," in *Women and World Development*, ed. by Irene Tinker and Michele Bo Bramsen, (Overseas Development Council U.S.A., 1976).

¹⁰Esther Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970).

¹¹Margaret Mead, "A Comment on the Role of Women in Agriculture," in *Women and World Development*, ed. by Irene Tinker and Michele Bo Bramsen (Overseas Development Council, U.S.A., 1976).

¹²*Rural Development and Women in Asia, Proceedings and Conclusions of the ILO Tripartite Asian Regional Seminar, Maharashtra, India (April 1981) ILO Geneva, p. 16.*

¹³Swarna Jayaweera, "Women and Education," in *The Status of Women, Sri Lanka* (Ceylon: University of Colombo, 1979), p. 404.

¹⁴Rachel Kurian, *Women Workers in Sri Lanka Plantation Sector*. ILO Geneva (1982).

¹⁵Male and female unemployment rates were reported to be 13.2% and 31.8% respectively in the *Census Report 1981*, and 7.8% and 21.3% respectively in the *Consumer Finances and Socio-economic Survey Report 1981/82*.

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