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The Feminization of Poverty Highlights the Urgent Need for the Empowerment of Women in Bihar

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

The alarming trend of the feminization of poverty in Bihar necessitates immediate and strategic intervention. This phenomenon is marked by an increasing number of women who find themselves living in poverty, often due to systemic barriers such as limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Empowering women in this region is not just a pressing need; it is a vital strategy for fostering sustainable social and economic growth. By providing women with targeted resources such as vocational training, microfinance options, and educational programs we can equip them with the skills and confidence needed to secure stable employment and become financially independent. Furthermore, supporting women's leadership roles in their communities can cultivate an environment of inclusivity and resilience. Taking decisive action to uplift women in Bihar will not only enhance their

quality of life but also stimulate broader community development, ultimately leading to a more equitable society. Together, we can dismantle the barriers that perpetuate poverty and create pathways for women to thrive and lead transformative change in their lives and communities. The study came across appalling poverty among women who struggle to feed and educate their children. The World Bank country study on 'Gender and Poverty' in India represents the problems faced by poor women against a background of depressing statistics which show Indian women continue to be denied access to productive assets in the form of financial credits, markets or land ownership and human capital such as education and skill, training which would enhance their abilities as economic agents. Women are more vulnerable to the negative social effects of restructuring and recession.

Key Words

Feminization, Poverty, Empowerment, Women In Bihar.

Introduction

Poverty, inequality and social seclusion remain the most fundamental problems that people face in the 21st century. People are said to be in poverty when their incomes are so inadequate as to seclude them from normal social functioning. Poverty is a devastating state of deprivation of an adult member of a society and of his dependants. Most citizens of developed nations and social scientists think that in every country some people opt for poverty by refusing to work. Such poverty has been defined as voluntary poverty. This proposition

sounds irrational. Even if a very small percentage of such people who opt for poverty voluntarily is accepted that doesn't negate the fact that economic system pushes a substantial proportion of population into a state of deprivation by failing to provide enough jobs and enough opportunities to earn legally for maintaining self and the dependants, with socially acceptable standard of living. Of the 188 odd countries, a large number of them have been classified as low income or developing countries. Most of these developing nations have a large population of the poor inhabitants. Of more than 500 million people suffering from absolute poverty in rural areas of the developing countries of Asia almost two thirds of them are concentrated in four countries like India, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan. In contrast, the developing countries of Latin America and the Caribbean account for only 40 per cent of the population in the absolute poverty (The World Bank, 1975).

Development strategies which are planned in socialist or mixed economy aim at creating jobs and output both. But as the development process becomes more and more market oriented, competitiveness becomes a precondition for industrial units in formal organized sector. The emphasis shifts on producing more goods and services than creating jobs. Industrial units cannot survive in a competitive environment unless work force is reduced and workers are laid off in order to optimize labor costs. Ultimately work force is axed; unemployment generated by reduction of work force begets poverty to the working people.

Meaning of Poverty

A poor is a person who is not only deprived of his purchasing power to buy food enough for him or for the existence of the members of his family but also alienated socio-culturally and psychologically to the extent that he is discriminated against in his own group, community or nation. Poverty on the other hand, may be conceived as a phenomenon isolating certain persons in the population to the extent of depriving them of their status or position in the society because of socio structural, cultural and politico economic factors (Mehta S.R., 1997). Poverty denies a person control over his or her destiny. Poverty means not being able to tell what tomorrow would be like in terms of accessibility to food and other resources. The economists call such uncertainty as "insecurity". Poor stratum of population in most Asian, African and Latin American countries is threatened by food insecurity. Poverty is involuntary. It is neither desired nor designed by the poor. It is the intrigue of economic system, of policies and of institutions that generates and sustains poverty. Poverty is an evil of worst kind. There is no way one can defend the existence of poverty anywhere. When human beings die of persistent hunger, chronic malnutrition, common curable diseases or exposure to climate on a large scale, the situation is nothing but a sort of genocide.

The expression of life assured in Article 21 of the Constitution of India does not connote mere animal existence or continued drudgery through life but has a much wider meaning which includes right to livelihood, better standard of life, hygienic conditions at work place and leisure.

The structure of family and the status of woman and her children in the family have been studied. It is found that in under developed countries and developing countries the women are mostly illiterate and they are dominated by males who apart from earning meager income have vices which further erode their taken home wages.

Women in such poor developing economies play dual roles, one is paid and other is unpaid worker involved as a part of family trade, craft etc. Through her labor she also contributes in running the family by doing different domestic chores. The work of a woman in family by virtue of her being a mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in law and homemaker takes up lot of time and very often she is the sole contributor in running and keeping the family going. Yet this contribution of hers is not recognized. Thus although woman does double the amount of work and contribute doubly to the economy she is still the one who suffers most, due to family poverty. In such families men hardly allow their working wives to enjoy their earnings. Rights and privileges enjoyed by women are few. Since most of the men at the lower rung of society are addicted to social evils like smoking, gambling & alcoholism they not only do not contribute for family maintenance but

even grab women's earnings. They accumulate debt and the women of the family are forced to repay the loan. The feminization of poverty is the condition of such women mentioned herein.

Understanding Feminization of Poverty

Poverty is a condition of life wherein low standard of living, homelessness, malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, high infant mortality and low life expectancy become the main characteristics. And it gets feminized when poor females are at significant disadvantage compared to poor males and non-poor females in terms of welfare indicators such as health, education, nutrition, labor force participation etc. The hypothesis, throughout the world about Feminization of Poverty, is that these households suffer from chronic poverty and female headed households are left out in the process of development. Women have only about two thirds of the income of men which contributes to the feminization of poverty- Young women, with dependent children and older women, who outlived their spouses, have the highest poverty rates. Both individual and institutional discrimination contribute to economic plight of women. Traditional gender role socialization also contributes to poverty among women. Women are often socialized to put family ahead of their education and careers. They are less likely than men to pursue advanced educational degrees and tend to be concentrated in low paying and unsafe jobs (refer Annexure II photograph no 1.7 where a young girl is risking her life on a rope walk in Nanded to make a few bucks for evening meal). However even with the same level of education and the same occupational role women still earn significantly less than men (Mooney, 2000). To take from any community, its male workers would paralyze it economically to a far greater degree if they are removed from work than its female workers. The labor now performed by the women could be performed by the men, requiring only the setting back of many advanced workers into earlier forms of industry. But the labor now performed by the men could not be performed by women without generations of effort and adaptation. Men can cook, clean and sew well as women, but the making and managing of the great engines of modern industry, the threading of earth and sea in our vast systems of transportation, the handling of our elaborate machinery of trade, commerce- these things could not be done so well by women in their present degree of economic development. This is not owing to lack of the essential human faculties necessary to such achievements, nor to any disability of sex, but to the present condition of women, forbidding the development of this degree of economic ability. The male human being is thousands of years in advance to the female in economic status. This status of the human race in any nation at any time is governed mainly by the activities of the male; the female obtains her share in the radical advance only through him (Cullman C.P., 1905).

Most of the studies on this subject of Feminization of Poverty emphasize female headship as the cause of poverty. This is true for whole of India but there is an exception to this generally observed hypothesis. Exception is documented as infra.

In North Eastern India, in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura there are matriineal societies. Anthropologists refer these societies as Tribes. There is more than one matriineal tribe in any single state in the North East. The researcher has studied this aspect. The exception of North Eastern matrilineal societies does not weaken the presumption that female headed households are more likely to be poor because this is true for the rest of India having patrilineal societies. If there are Female headed households than they are more likely to be poverty stricken than male headed.

Hypothesis

Feminization of poverty is a social process in which the incidence of poverty among women becomes much higher than among men. Changes in social policy, the structure of the family and the work place, social security provisions, life expectancy and other aspects of society have had the unintended result of increasing the female proportion of population on low incomes or in poverty.

There are about 1.3 billion people in the world who live in absolute poverty and out of these seventy per cent are female. About 900 million women are those whose income is less than Rs.50 per day (less than one dollar

per day) In addition the gap between women and men caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen in the past decade.

Women are vital and productive workers in the Indian Economy. They make-up one third of the labor force. When women who collect fuel and fodder or work in diary, poultry or kitchen gardening are added to those in the conventionally defined labor force women's participation rates total 51% only 13% points below the rate for men. But they earn on an average slightly less than 50% of what men earn. In addition women also bear the children and take primary responsibility for domestic maintenance.

India invests far less in its women workers than in its working men. Women also receive a smaller share of what society produces. Women living in poverty are often denied access to critical resources such as credit, land and inheritance. Their labour goes unrewarded and unrecognized. Their health cares are not given priority. They lack sufficient access to education. Unlike men, women lacks the bureaucratic know how to make the system work for them. Social welfare systems in the county do not take sufficient account of specific conditions of women living in poverty. Women's participation in decision making at home and in community is minimal. Caught in the cycle of poverty, women lack access to resources and services to change their situation. Physical and mental violence against women is increasing. They are subjected to sexual harassment (World Bank County Study, 1990).

Women need access to inputs- education, training and other agents of growth and change. These inputs would enable women to realize their productive potential. Making women more productive hence more effective income earners Buvinic and Gupta postulate that will reduce their dependency and enhance their status. Enhancement of women's earnings would have a more profound effect on the welfare of the family as a whole since increase in women's income result more directly into better health and nutrition for children. Thus the economic success for women will improve their own lives and those of all Indians and therefore empowerment of women is very necessary.

Objectives

The study came across appalling poverty among women who struggle to feed and educate their children. The World Bank country study on 'Gender and Poverty' in India represents the problems faced by poor women against a background of depressing statistics which show Indian women continue to be denied access to productive assets in the form of financial credits, markets or land ownership and human capital such as education and skill, training which would enhance their abilities as economic agents. Women are more vulnerable to the negative social effects of restructuring and recession. However, because the situation of poor women is different from that of other women or poor men, measures taken to correct inequality between sexes are not enough. The International Labour Organization (ILO) advocates supplementing such measures with activities tailored to the specific conditions of poor women and which build upon their survival strategies. This takes account of the obvious link between the improvement of women's lot and that of their children. Measures to fight poverty prove ineffective when poor women are perceived as the passive beneficiaries of social welfare. For the best results it is important to emphasize the role of women first and foremost as active economic agents. Therefore study embarked upon the task of bringing to surface the aspect of poverty among women. Thus the objectives of the study are as infra:

1. To uncover the hidden causes of poverty among women on account of their female gender.
2. To eradicate gender bias from the society by bringing to the fore the issues related with feminization of poverty, deprivation, discrimination and oppression of women and the girl child.

Methodology

In the present study Case study approach has been used. This approach involves intensive examination of a single unit, a person, school, district, community or an event. The Handed district has been selected as the universe of the microscopic study. It leads to well- established conclusions. It also leads to empirically developed

hypothesis. This method provides for flexibility, involves latitude and apparent general freedom to the investigator with reference to the type and amount of data gathered, sources of information and the procedures used to gather the information.

Procedure of Data Collection

Primary Data

The study consists of three Block of the district, selected by purposive sampling method. Judgment sampling and quota sampling will be used to select villages and the households. Bhagalpur district has 16 Block. Only three Block i.e Munger, Purnea and Banka have been selected for the study by judgment sampling. Respondents are selected by quota sampling. Villages in each Block will be taken up by convenience sampling. Care has been taken to have 100% female respondents, even, if the household has male adult member. The study has divided the total number households (N = 600) into three categories a) Female Supported households (FSH) b) Female Maintained households (FMH) and c) Female Headed households (FHH).

While selecting the respondents Below Poverty Line (BPL) list of the Government has not been relied upon fully because the list prepared by the Government has errors. Thus the researcher proposes to survey respondents taking 150 from the tribal Block of Munger another 150 from the three Block of Banka district and remaining 300 taken from Bhagalpur city and the peripheral villages.

Techniques Used for Data Collection

Data were collected mainly through interviews. The interviews were structured when schedules were filled in by the researcher simultaneously while talking to women. In addition to filling up schedules field notes were made.

Conclusion

The religious dogmas prevalent in India are also supporting patriarchy. Whether husband is employed or unemployed whether he is earning lesser or more than his wife and whether wife alone is maintaining the household or supporting the household by contributing her earnings all these situations do not weaken the status of husband. In Indian society husband is recognized as the undisputed head of the household even if he is dependant on wife for his pocket expenses. Julian Lampiatti and Linda Stalker have pointed out in their World Bank sponsored global study on female poverty; that India, Nepal and Pakistan do not have any separate segregated data about male headed and female headed households (Lampiatti J.A and Stalker.L,2000),¹ While conducting the present study myriad difficulties were encountered in identifying and distinguishing female headed households in poor localities. In the course conducting interviews in cases where husband was dead the widow indicated husband's brother or father-in-law as head of the household. And In spite her being the only earning member of the family, the widow refused to answer the questions in the schedule.

Almost all the respondents requested that their answers to sensitive questions about sexual harassment and threats physical attacks on them and husbands by moneylenders may not be recorded. The poor women were apprehensive of retribution. Out of six hundred households only 100 households were belonging to widows having adolescent children and none of them had remarried. Out of 600 households that were surveyed 192 households were female supported households. In which earnings of the husband were equal or slightly higher than wife's earning. Out of 600 households 174 households have been found as female maintained households. The researcher of the present study faced bewilderment about how to distinguish between a male headed household and a female household in poor localities since all poor households had women members as full time workers. Such women contributed to the family income substantially. All the households which form universe of this study were thus de facto female headed households however some of such households faked as de jure male headed households.

For convenience the researcher has categorized the households in three broad categories. It may be noted to avoid confusion that in categories 1) and 2) illustrated below even though some respondents reported household as de jure male headed as has already been mentioned earlier.

1. Female Supported Households: In this type of household husband and wife both are earning. But the husband earns substantially more than the wife.
2. Female Maintained Household; In this type of households wife earns more than the earnings of the husband and the household is maintained with the larger income or the earnings of the wife.
3. Female Headed Household- This is the category in which the household is entirely maintained by female without any earnings of husband and there is no presence of husband. This category is further divided into X and Y
4. Out of 234 female headed households 100 households were found to be belonging to widows.
5. Out of 234 female headed households 134 are found to be such that in each household husband has deserted the house leaving wife and children to fend for themselves. The major characteristics of male headed households are:

In female supported and in female maintained households clubbed together (combined 366 households) in 75% or in 275 households it was found that husbands spend substantial part of hard earned combined earnings on wasteful habits and vices. Such as drinking liquor, chewing tobacco and betting money on matka and instant lottery. These husbands depended on wife for running the household and indulged in hedonism and also expected that wife maintains households without any grudge. In the words of Murray (1938) such people have developed dependence which is a learned behavior. Murray defined dependence as a behavior which has its goal "obtaining of nurturance from other people" (Kuppuswamy, 1960). In the present study it was observed that reliance upon the help of wife in maintenance of household is the principal goal of husbands. Bowlby (1955) has stressed that dependence is the innate behavioral pattern* (Kuppuswamy, 1960).

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