

Status of Women in India

MY purpose here is only to raise issues that we, in the Committee on the Status of Women, come across in the course of our investigations. I must also confess that when the Committee decided to include the demographic perspective as a part of its report, none of us had any real understanding of its true significance. When we looked at the data, however, some of it appeared to be very frightening and beyond our comprehension. We had, therefore, to seek the assistance of a few experts to help us understand some of these complex phenomena.

Another thing which we discovered in the course of our hunt for meaningful explanations was that while most of us had been complacently enjoying the beneficial changes in the status of women, there were others whose expert knowledge had driven them to a state of anger at society's neglect and awareness of the remorseless forces that seem to be crushing the large masses of women in this country. The women of India owe a debt of gratitude to these people for drawing society's attention to these remorseless forces.

In his comment on the Report of our Committee. Chanchal Sarkar called us 'the declining sex'. The fact that all the development in the last few decades has not been able to arrest this peculiar trend in our population has to be regarded as the most significant indicator of the status of women in this country. We found that it has not been possible to explain this by any of the earlier theories like under-enumeration and sex ratio of births, or to relate it to fac-

tors like literacy or educational level. We were left, therefore, with the only possible explanation that the sex ratio is declining because women, as compared to men, are dying more and faster. We were also told that with all the controversies regarding mortality data, recorded evidence also proves this theory to be substantially correct.

The problem was that we could not substantiate this theory from our personal experience of women in our own circle of acquaintances. The Committee came, however, to the conclusion that using national and State averages for calculating these trends is totally meaningless "in the context of the gross inequalities and wide variations in socio-economic factors that influence women's lives. The answer may lie in identifying the actual groups—by socio-economic status, or by regional or communal origin which contribute the main thrust in shaping these averages". Unless investigations in mortality, malnutrition, fertility, etc. examine the differences of these trends at different levels of society, the actual horror of these trends cannot be properly exposed. For example, if the sex ratio is adverse for women in all social classes, then how do we explain the growing virulence of the dowry disease ? And yet no data is available by socio-economic or communal categories to help us to pinpoint the real problem sectors.

The problems that we have created for ourselves by treating the entire Indian population as a homogeneous group are innumerable. Take the case of child marriages for example. We all know that they still take place among large sections of our population, and we cannot stop them by merely wishing them away as the Census appears to be doing by not tabulating marriage data for the age-group below 10.

Another problem, and in our view a growing problem, relates to the family status of divorced or separated women. When discussing the question of women's employment a typical argument is that increasing entry of women into the labour market will only cause further disorganisation in a situation of chronic unemployment. Since men have to support families, it is argued, they must be given preference over women in employment. It is a cause of unceasing amazement that people can be so blind to Indian realities. A large majority of our women have always worked and continue to do so, to help support their families and not their personal ambitions. No attempt has been made, however, to investigate how many of the women who work are support-

ing families, i.e. children, sick husbands or aged parents or inlaws, or how many are left entirely to their own resources as a result of divorce or separation.

We still tend to think of divorce as a modern, urban phenomenon, practised only by the modern, educated, affluent elite. But this is far from the truth ; divorces in rural areas—most of which take place among the non-elite or working sections of the population through customary forms—still continue to outnumber the divorces that take place under statutory laws in urban areas.

We had built up some complacency about our progress in the education of women by using the same tools of averages and ratios as our measures and have tended to hide the growing enormity of the problem of illiteracy. Not being quantitative scientists, we looked at absolute numbers and were appalled by the increase in the number of illiterate women from 161.9 million in 1950-51 to 215.3 million in 1970-71. And who are these illiterate women ? The large majority of them are in the 15 + age-group, who cannot be reached by all the projected expansion of the formal education system. In the face of this reality, it is difficult to take pride in the fact that we have a very high percentage of women among university students even in comparison to the developed countries.

After reviewing the progress of literacy and education in different states, we concluded that the severe imbalances in the distribution of educational effort among different sections of the population, between rural and urban areas and between regions, reflect to a great extent variations in regional attitudes to women. But any effort to identify the factors responsible for these imbalances is baffled by the absence of detailed and reliable data at local levels. Let me cite one example. I have been trying to correlate enrolment ratios and the drop-out rate among school girls with certain population characteristics at the district level in the hope that it may be possible to identify some of the actual factors responsible for the failure of educational policies in these districts. But in spite of the fact that the problem of drop-outs has been recognised for years as one of the most crucial problems in women's education, there is no data by which one can calculate this at the district level for all States.

The middle class bias that affects our thinking about women is most apparent in our understanding of the trends in women's employment. In spite of the fact that the female work participation rate has been declining over the last

few decades, most of us have continued to believe that employment opportunities for women have been widened and increased by development. We may observe the transformation in the lives of middle class women in urban areas and even refer to some government publications¹ on women's employment which portray a very rosy picture of increasing employment of women in the organised sector of our economy. According to the Ministry of Labour, for example, the steady increase in women's employment in this sector "at a rate substantially higher than the growth rate for over-all employment" can be "considered as an important barometer of the change in the employment situation, occupational disposition and educational profiles of the employees, employment opportunities and other allied matters". Their analysis also shows an increasing majority of women in the tertiary sector, and declining proportions in the primary and secondary sectors. But Census data for the economy as a whole reveals a continuous decline in the total number and percentage of women workers in the labour force over the last few decades (with the exception of 1961). Sectorally, their number and percentage declined in the industry and service sectors, leaving them increasingly dependent on agriculture.

Such contradictions between different sets of data compel us to abandon the usual three-sectors or the nine-occupational categories as not really useful for understanding the nature and extent of women's economic participation or their problems. The organised sector which employs only 6 per cent of the women workers, offers certain protection and privileges in the way of better wages, more secure and humane working conditions, maternity relief and other welfare measures. It is regulated by laws and labour organisations and is exposed to a certain degree of public scrutiny.

The unorganised sector is characterised by the absence of all these. Laws like the Minimum Wages Act cannot be enforced in the absence of adequate information and labour organisations. Majority of the 94 per cent of women workers engaged in this sector are thus exposed to discrimination in wages, insecurity of employment and various other forms of exploitation.

The difference between these sectors is not functional. They cannot be identified with the rural and urban, the traditional and modern or the pre-

1. Women in employment, Labour Bureau, Simla, 1964; Women in industry, Labour Bureau, Simla, 1975.

Capitalist and parts of our economy. The same industry (like the Bidi) may contain both organized and unorganized forms. "The main difference between them lie in the organization of production relation, the degree of penetration of public control and regulations, and recognition by data-collecting agencies and scientific investigators."

Some of the production relations *in* the unorganised sector—particularly where women are involved, are remnants of the traditional forms of organisations, with the family as the unit. But increasing commercialisation has changed the forms of exploitation. Women from the families of bonded labourers can be compelled to work as construction workers at great distances from their homes, or become victims of immoral traffic with the consent and connivance of their families. Whether as casual or contract labour, or as self-employed in handicraft or trade, the women are helplessly dependent on and exploited by intermediaries.

In the traditional economy women had played integral and protected roles— in agriculture, industry and services. Development, with increasing complexity of markets and production techniques, and technological change, has been *the* relentless force which has displaced large masses of working women from their traditional occupations, made their productive and professional skills obsolete, and reduced them to the status of unskilled, unwanted workers. The alternative opportunities that have opened up as a result of development in services or new industry, are for a different class of women, educated and with new type of skills. They cannot absorb the displaced women, who are mostly illiterate, rural and with restricted mobility. The shrinking and seasonal employment opportunities in the rural areas drive women out to seek work, but unlike men, they prefer short-term, short-distance migration within rural areas. The evidence of observers of the rural works programme, that the majority of the labour they attract are women, added to our own observations led us to challenge the existing theory that the predominance of female migration in India was only due to marriage and associational migration.

A problem that calls for considerable investigation is the inter-relationship between migration and destitution caused by broken marriages, desertion of women and widowhood. We received many reports that the incidence of such desertions was increasing with growing pauperisation. The man moves away, leaving the woman with the family to support. The only way she may do so

is by moving herself, either on her own or in company with others. "The main inference that has to be drawn from the preponderance of female over male migration is the great degree of helplessness and insecurity that affect the status of women in this country. The data now available are only suggestive, and call for much more detailed investigation. Our inferences in this regard are supported by the relatively high proportion of widowed, divorced or separated women, and low proportion of women workers and persons of independent means." (2.51)

Shrinking economic opportunities, and rising costs of living are driving an increasing number of women to the only profession with an unlimited demand for female labour—prostitution. It is a pity that we do not count them as workers—or the work participation figures might improve considerably. Quantitative data is non-existent but all the evidence points to a rapid increase in the traffic. Traditional society had limited it to a few groups for whom it was a hereditary profession. Modern India has included an increasing number of women from all classes within its fold and exploited both the new entrants as well as the old professional groups by involving them in a traffic which is no longer limited to a locality or even the country, involving exports of women as commodities to other parts of the world. This 'export' takes place under many disguises and complaints are periodically made by social workers from different parts of the country. Many people believe that most women in this profession opt for it voluntarily, but we have found that in a large number of cases young girls and even children are driven to this by their families.

As young women in the pre-independence period, most of us had accepted unquestioningly that Freedom, with the promise of constitutional and legal equality, development and modernisation would remove all the barriers to women's progress and participation in all areas of social life as equals of men. For a few of us, the privileged ones, this did happen. But for the vast majority, the gaps have widened, not only between men and women, but also between different sections of women. All the conventional indicators of social change point to the operation of some remorseless force that are reducing the large majority of our women to greater insecurity, degradation, and helplessness. There are reports of increasing incidence of mental breakdowns and suicides—problems which require greater investigation. It seems that while the processes of social change have removed many of the inbuilt protections that traditional society provided to its women through the family structure

and community values, we have failed to replace them by modern institutions of social security. Perhaps one of the reasons for this neglect lies in the fact that we have become afraid of women's life-giving power. There is some evidence that the thinking is gaining ground that the population has to be controlled at all cost and perhaps the surest way to achieve this is to treat the large masses of our women as 'expendable assets'.