

**International Symposium on 'Women Work and Structural Transformation in South Asia'**

**17 December 2014, Ranchi, India**

The Symposium on ' Women, Work and Structural Transformation in South Asia' was organized by the Institute for Human Development (IHD), New Delhi; International Labour Organisation (ILO), New Delhi; UN-ESCAP SSWA Office and International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada in collaboration with Ranchi University under the auspices of South Asia Research Network on Employment and Social Protection on Inclusive Growth (SARNET) on 17 December 2014 as a Pre Conference event of the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Indian Society of Labour Economics held at Ranchi. The panelists for this Symposium represented four South Asian countries, namely, Dr. Simeen Mahmud, BRAC University, Centre for Gender and Social Transformation, BRAC Development Institute, Bangladesh, Dhaka; Dr. Bandita Sijapati, Adjunct Professor, Nepa School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Kathmandu, Nepal; Dr. K. P. Kannan, Chairman, Laurie Baker Centre for Habitat Studies, and Former Director, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram; Dr. Ramani Gunatilaka, Visiting Faculty, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka and Independent Consultant. Dr. Haris Gazdar could not participate in the Conference. The Session was chaired by Professor Nirmala Banerjee, Former Professor, Centre for Social Sciences, Kolkata, Professor Alakh, N. Sharma, Director, Institute for Human Development delivered the opening remarks which was followed by remarks by Dr. Sher Verick, Senior Employment Specialist, International Labour Organisation, New Delhi and Professor L.N. Bhagat, Vice-Chancellor, Ranchi University.

**Prof. Nirmala Banerjee**, chair of the session, spoke on the crying need to go beyond passing an Act for reformation and protection of female workers and in particular domestic workers and concentrate instead on ensuring speedy implementation of these Acts. To measure the progress and well being of any economy we clamour after its economic growth. But in this chase we forget to take cognizance of an important fact, i.e., have the benefits of economic growth trickled down to the various segments of the society and especially the women? Unless we look at growth from a more holistic perspective inclusive growth will remain a distant reality. Women, especially the rural and tribal women, do not have choice in work opportunities and hence are mostly engaged in agricultural and livestock rearing. We need to ensure that they are protected against many ills such as human trafficking and get dignity and

equality in their own workspace. The society as a whole needs to take upon itself the social responsibility of cohesive and fair gender growth.

**Dr. Simeen Mahmud**, in her presentation on the situation of women workers in Bangladesh, pointed out that the labour force participation rates for women increased faster than that of their male counterparts in the period during 1983 to 2010. She further added that share of young women workers who are mostly engaged in factory jobs has increased more than that of older women workers who are mostly engaged in casual employment.

**Dr. Bandita Sijapati** took the case of Nepal which is a remittances driven economy where the migration rate of the menfolk for work is very high. Hence the gender ratio is much skewed. There is structural transformation from agriculture to services. Agriculture contributes only 35% to the national GDP of Nepal (2013 figure). Given the fact that remittances contribute to 30% of the national GDP, the BPL population has fallen from 40% in 1995 to 25% in 2010-11. So in a broad sense, migration is seen as having an equalising effect. Yet, the spillover effects of higher per capita income are far from visible as the nation still ranks very low on the Human Development Index. The women labor force participation rate (WLFPR) in workforce is very high essentially because the men are migrating. However there is a catch 22 situation. At lower per capita income the WLFPR rises and then with the consequent rise in per capita income the latter starts declining. Hence, on an average, both these indicators have largely remained stagnant over a long period of time. However, we need to interpret higher FPR with caution as this does not imply higher quality jobs for women in the workforce. A whopping 96.5% are still employed in the informal sector. The female literacy rate is 20% lower than their men counterparts and especially in the rural areas. The overall gender parity index is .91 at higher educational levels but the figure takes a steep fall at lower education levels. Needless to say then that gender segregation is very high and the distortions in the labor market very pervasive.

**Dr. K. P. Kannan** spoke at length about women and development and the need to exercise restraint when interpreting results vis-a-vis averages. He presented both an overall scenario of women's employment and disaggregated narrative for different socio-religious sections of women within India. He emphasised that, while on the whole women lost out in the neo-liberal growth context, it is the most vulnerable groups that experienced significant marginalisation and on the other extreme, the wealthier caste/class women with better education gained in the emerging markets like IT, Banking etc. He remarked that there is

high degree of commonality in “gender” and the underlying tension between the pursuit of aggregate economic growth and status of women in work and welfare. Women seem to be losing out even in the process of slow structural transformations. All women do not experience the same level or pace of inequality or inclusion. A case in point would be those women with low assets and hence at the bottom of the social structure. The WLFPR has deteriorated significantly in the last 3 decades from 30% to 22.5% while that of men in the same reference period has increased only marginally. The gender gap has increased from 25% to 33% in this period. Elaborating further, he said that a large part of this gap can be attributed to differential educational patterns at urban-rural level as also at different age levels. A closer look at the rising gross enrolment figures indicate that the rise is only for the younger women and does not percolate to those in the age group of 20-25 years. The same indicator also compares poorly for the rural women who seem to have lost out in the race. He remarked that structural transformations remain largely a male phenomenon given the employment figures. He emphasized that any change in this story will only be driven by taking into account social dimensions and endowments, i.e. education and assets. The gender question that needs to be addressed at the grassroots level is embedded in the induced inequality in the society.

**Dr. Ramani Gunatilaka** pointed out that women employment, in Sri Lanka is one of the lowest in the region. She further added that women workers in Sri Lanka are concentrated in agriculture, manufacturing and education; with very few engaged in construction, transport, finance and trade sectors. Significant numbers of unskilled women workers in Sri Lanka choose to migrate overseas for employment as domestic or blue-collar workers. She elaborated on the disappointing outcomes from neo-liberal growth for Sri Lankan women despite their better initial standing compared to other South Asian countries. This, she pointed out, was because the emerging sectors did not benefit women which is reflected in their "weak representation" in these sectors.

The Panellists included Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud, Dr. Nisha Srivastava, Dr. Sher Verick and Dr. Ritu Dewan who summarized the essence of the discussion and threw light on the challenges and the way forward. Apropos the Bangladesh situation, Dr. Mahmud highlighted that though the girls outperformed the boys at school, still boys were favoured at home in many respects such as nutrition and girls were deemed to continue schooling only till they got married. This is quite in contrast to the fact that most women in Bangladesh work in the government sector which requires a certain level of schooling. This should incentivise the

schooling of girl child but that does not seem to be the case. **Dr. Sher Singh Verick** explored the importance and implications of structural transformation for women and work in South Asia in general and with a focus on Indian situation based on evidence in the last decade. He presented evidence that suggests a decline in Female Labour Force Participation Rates on the whole for Asian countries. He pointed out that the pattern of growth in different sectors has specific implications for women's participation in work. Further, "there are many demand and supply-side factors driving participation and work status of women, he added.

Citing the case of India **Professor Nisha Srivastava**, noted that married women and those with young children are less prone to work. Women who are widowed or are tribal are more likely to work. Hence employment seems more like a response to stress. Trade employment patterns have changed over time. Urban areas provide different types of work opportunities to women and a case in point is the chemical sector in India which is increasingly employing women. There is an imperative need to focus on different dimensions of structural transformations and reallocation of work across sectors and the implications thereof. The state needs to play a more proactive role given that the economic activities have changed. A moot question was how to incorporate the household work done by women in the national income? This has for some time now been the raging question in the economists' and statisticians' corridor and a fair answer is still awaited. However, the silver lining to the entire panel discussion was the concurrence on the sharp decline in child labor!!!!

### **Conclusions:**

The speakers in this Symposium recognized the fact that South Asia has the lowest rates of women participation in the labour market. Women workers in this region are mostly engaged in low-paying informal work with very low levels of productivity; further, a large percentage of women's work is not included in official labour force estimates. Recent estimates suggest that in India, the labour force participation rates for women has declined in recent years which is largely because of the lack of appropriate job creation for women. For this reason we find that the unemployment is almost double among the educated women workers than among the educated male workers. In states like Bihar, for example, more than 55% of educated women are unemployed.

The speakers also pointed out that women's work is a major driver for structural transformation. Rapid advancement made by Bangladesh due to increase in education for women and a higher rate of work participation was largely responsible for the enhancement

of various human development indicators for Bangladesh. Women workers in South Asian countries, like India and Pakistan, face several obstacles such as traditional barriers, lack of educational opportunities, lack of support mechanisms for women's work , concerns of safety, etc which prevent a rise in work participation rates for women.

The panelists unanimously stressed the fact that women workers are underpaid in all sectors and that the poor, unskilled women are more likely to be subject to wage discrimination. They also added that there is a strong gender bias in hiring and workplace practices and that there is a need to evolve effective skill development strategies in order to facilitate greater employment among women workers in the region.

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