

# Engendering Development

## Limits of Feminist Theories and Justice

*Recent feminist critiques of development have questioned some fundamental assumptions of feminist political theory; such critiques have also been successful in subverting long-held assumptions of conventional economic development. Viewed in the context of women's subordination in third world countries, a redefinition of development must not only be about economic growth, but ensure a redistribution of resources, challenge the gender-based division of labour and also seek to provide for an egalitarian basis in social arrangements. Further, as this article argues, any starting point for feminist critiques of development must also seek to link the end of gender oppression to multiple theories of justice – a justice not juridical but one that recognises the cultural membership of women in the community*

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Mainstream theories of development have gradually been moving away from the preoccupation with economic growth toward an interest in human development. Along with this approach there has also been a revival of interest in the social prerequisites of democracy. Historically, those lacking both material goods and individual capacities have been excluded from citizenship. It is not surprising therefore that improvements in living standards, the development of capabilities and the public provision of resources have been part of the recent discourse on development worldwide [Dreze and Sen 2003].

India's record in growth and development has gone hand in hand with gender bias in indicators of welfare, capability, work participation and income [Dreze and Sen 2002].<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny that in the last two decades social scientists and policy-makers have recognised the relevance of gender as an analytic category at both micro and macro levels. But the attempt to mainstream gender concerns faces major challenges in terms of collecting gender-related data and developing normative value concerns that sensitise the need to develop a gendered understanding of political institutions and economic processes.

On their part feminist theories have grappled with liberal and Marxist categories in their analyses of development in order to develop new feminist epistemologies [Shiva 1993; Visvanathan et al 1997]. Feminist interventions in the discourse of development at the level of research, grass roots politics and public policy have led to major changes in thinking about certain elementary notions like 'equity', 'sustainability', 'productivity' and 'empowerment'. Gradually, starting with the basic needs approach in the 1970s, development has been redefined as enlargement of people's choices and human capabilities [Nussbaum 2000a, 2000b; Nussbaum and Sen 1993]. A closer look at these approaches raises several questions not only about how feminist critiques of development should be conceived, but whether thinking in terms of feminist perspectives has been concerned with introducing alternative practices and redefining the goals of development in India.

In this paper I argue that the assumptions of research being done on gender and development issues require a deeper understanding of feminist political theories that have influenced and revised research approaches. This becomes more significant since the history of development theory is interwoven with debates

on the global language of democracy and rights. On the one hand, claims about human or universal rights are encouraged and seized upon to win inclusion and bring about political change; on the other hand, anti-universalist arguments are valuable in highlighting practices and processes that inflict suffering and injustices. In light of these debates and the current political scenario where numerous forms of fundamentalism are well-entrenched I propose that we need to rethink the meaning of universal justice itself.

In the past two decades feminist theorists have questioned at least four major assumptions that have developed new lines of questioning in development and which are relevant to the arguments in this paper.

First a predominant theme in recent feminist political theory has been a critique of the liberal conception of the public-private dichotomy both as a normative principle and as an institutional arrangement [Pateman 1987: 105; Okin 1989]. It entails that in order to understand women's position in the economy, we need to analyse their role in the household/reproductive sphere. It follows that the basis of the domestic economy, the sexual division of labour within the household, and the social relations between household members that it generates, must be closely examined. A natural corollary of this is that the household cannot be viewed as being isolated in the 'private' sphere and distinct from the public sphere because both spheres are interconnected. In development theory, incorporation of a gender-based perspective has revealed the asymmetrical distribution of benefits and burdens embedded in the household and pointed to the implications for individual members, who are part of it.

Secondly, feminist theories have challenged the evolutionary assumptions underlying modernisation theory and that are also central to Marxist theory: the idea that human history is a movement towards development of productive forces. For both, development is a strategy to combat scarcity in order to generate material abundance that is viewed as a necessary condition for resolving individual conflicts over resources [Verma 2000: 172]. Implicit in both Marxist and liberal theory is the assumption of a simple correlation between labour force participation and women's status. Both theories fail to recognise women's work in informal economic and political spheres or that factors determining women's status might be culturally specific and related to traditional work

roles. Their gender-blind categories hardly apply to household work, reproduction, procreation which include childbearing and childrearing.<sup>2</sup> Feminist theorists have also attacked Marx's theory of exploitation as too narrow to encompass all forms of oppression and domination. Exploitation, as defined by a standard theory of exploitation, is mainly appropriation of surplus-labour time and thereby it views household work under capitalism, outside the sphere of production.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, they have questioned the idea of culture that plays an important role within the narrative of modernisation which distinguishes modern from traditional societies. In traditional societies, culture was something modernisation usually acts upon in order to finally break and even destroy, in order to create new bonds. One strand in this critique has questioned the way third-world cultural systems were conceptualised as homogeneous and static in order to portray western culture as a universal definition of modernity. The growing scepticism about the universal claims of theories that controlled the definition of modernity led to a further critique of colonial-postcolonial "representation of the complex, diverse and multi-layered realities of third world women" [Parpart et al 2000: 93]. This focus on context has led to an increased sensitivity to the diverse material and cultural realities of women in the third world and encouraged them to address practices of labelling and defining individuals, groups and societies.

The alternative set of theories that have consequently emerged focus on men and women as agents of ordinary activities in life that sustain culture, economic practices and local institutions. Thus central to the current rethinking of development is the recognition that people commonly viewed as 'primitive', 'traditional' or as frozen in a static past represent in fact indigenous reconstructions of their economic and cultural conditions.<sup>4</sup> Many scholars have called for a fundamental rethinking of women's position in regard to the economy and environment and their access to knowledge systems [Shiva 1993].

Finally, feminist theorists have explored questions of methodology in the social sciences that have altered the way traditional questions were raised in development theory [Harding 1987]. This has involved a critique of techniques for gathering evidence and of how research should proceed by using women's experience as resource for any social analysis. Feminist theorising about the production of knowledge is based on the claim that knowledge based mainly on male experience represents a distorted perception of reality and is therefore only partial knowledge. Moreover the significance of starting out from the feminist standpoint provides a major contribution not only in eliminating social biases that contribute to partial explanations and understandings but also in greater interaction between researcher and subject. Feminist investigations of the experiences of women in developing countries have created the basis for new feminist-based knowledge systems that are being used for programmes and policies that fundamentally affect the lives of women.<sup>5</sup>

These questions raised by feminist theories have led development theorists to explore quite a different set of questions. However it is still unclear whether feminist critiques of development lead to a major questioning of the established development framework or are they endorsing the main claims of the development paradigm? By addressing this question, I wish to examine the premises underlying models of development with the goal of highlighting central problems in contemporary feminist theories on development.

Within development studies the lack of attention to gender – and in particular to systematic inequalities between men and women is due to certain premises upon which the status of women and their participation in development is evaluated. To that end I now explore five challenges for thinking in terms of feminist perspectives that need to be addressed.

*The legacy of colonialism:* Social scientists have to contend with colonial policies that redefined indigenous ideologies regarding identity, status, kinship, marriage, and gender relations. Some scholars rightly argue that within development literature the historic experience of subordination to colonialism left little room for explanations outside of the narrow bounds of ethnocentric assumptions. The term 'development' was "historically constructed in such a way, as both generally to impose 'outsider' interpretations and evaluations of societies and people experiencing 'development', and specifically to misinterpret and marginalise women's roles and lives [Groot 1991: 107-108].

Throughout the colonial period, both historians and anthropologists built the image of women as victims of oppression intrinsic to the societies being described [Groot 1991: 113]. They passed moral judgments in their writings on institutions such as harems, polygamy, matrilineal social systems and even women-centred agricultural production, rather than give accurate descriptions of the material and cultural context within which such institutions are sustained.

When colonial rule was swept away by decolonisation the newly independent governments adopted the main assumptions of modernisation theories in their quest for nation-building, economic growth and equity. They adopted these definitions in their notions of development policies and reinforced many of the negative perceptions of third world countries. An extensive body of literature now views such modernisation approaches as being inadequate and having failed to deliver benefits to women in these countries.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately many of these assumptions were central to women in development (WID) advocates who lobbied for aid agencies to integrate women into the national economies of their countries. They also used many of the liberal feminist arguments for equal opportunities for women. However they continued to work within the modernisation paradigm that identified western institutions, and values as more important.

*Measuring women's work:* The second challenge is to define and measure women's work and their contribution to economic growth [Majumdar and Sharma 1990: 187]. But this raises the issue of conceptual and ideological biases concerning the nature of women's work and consequent difficulties in collecting accurate statistics on their participation in the labour force [Joseph 1997: 21]. Within conventional definitions of the labour force, women's participation in economic activities tends to be grossly underestimated because these concepts are geared to measure labour participation in commodity production, i.e., in production for exchange and not in the household [Moser 1993]. In addition, the gendered division of labour has a serious impact on the opportunities available to women as compared to men. This is because the role of women as primary caretakers in the family restricts them in securing full time wage work. This role is now increasingly being acknowledged – that most women workers are at various times in their lives, also caregivers of the elderly, sick and children.

The problem of invisibility of women's work is based on the assumption that most women's work takes place for the purpose

of household consumption, i.e., producing food crops, collecting firewood, and water and gathering fodder. To fulfil these tasks they rely on community-owned croplands, grasslands and forests. This low evaluation of work and the social perception that they are dependents rather than producers gets further reinforced by women's lack of control over physical resources. In development programmes this is quite damaging because women engaged in such invisible work, are not granted access to land, credit and other resources that could improve their positions.

Of course feminist scholarship has changed these perspectives. In the early stages development theorists focused on women's family-related responsibilities, marital status, fertility, family planning and child care. They accepted domestic work as the domain of female activity and advocated the possession of skills that would make women perform tasks within that domain. 'Gender' as a concept emerged out of a critique of the women in development (WID) approach that was concerned essentially with anti-poverty and efficiency measures in development programmes. By situating the analysis of women's subordination within a framework of social relations, the gender and development approach (GAD) in the 1980s sought to challenge institutions, organisations and practices that subordinate women [John 1996]. *Dilemma of economic growth*: A third challenge is to the claim that higher productivity and improved standards of living are a necessary condition for women's enhanced status in society. The pattern of development we have followed so far is now associated with negative socio-economic consequences in terms of inequality, cultural fragmentation and its impact on environment. Though these critiques are numerous, they claim that development has negative effects on the position of women in India. Women's position at work, education, health and political participation has worsened. How could this be reconciled with the claim of a development policy that sought to improve the lot of people in underdeveloped countries?

Critics of development have observed that the benefits of growth have accrued to particular groups in society and to particular regions. While it is true that the fruits of development are shared both by men and women, it has been demonstrated that these benefits are often not distributed equitably within the household. Mainstream theorists did not predict that central elements of development – technology, geographical mobility, conversion from subsistence to market economies – would unleash social forces that pushed women out from their economic and social roles into the modern sector where they are discriminated against and exploited [Shah et al 1994; Sharma 1994].

*Expanding citizenship*: Another challenging area about development is related to the unequal distribution of power. Underpinning many of the integration efforts by development agencies was the belief that by increasing third world women's participation in formal economic structures, their status and position in the household and society generally would be enhanced. Associated with the view that women's status improves as they move into productive employment is the assumption that women's work in subsistence production, informal markets, community and household work is outside the domain of development.

Recent explorations of the debate on citizenship in feminist political theory share considerable ground with a feminist critique of development, in that they both address the substantive conditions that would make political equality a more plausible ideal. The most obvious point of entry is the under-representation of Indian women in the world's largest political assembly. The

Indian Constitution is based on sexual equality and legal equality, but today this abstract individualism of liberal democracy is under attack for it encourages a notion of the individual and the citizen as a character of indifferent sex.

The novelty of the arguments for citizenship lie not so much in what is being said about the sexual division of labour, as in the links being forged between the gendered distribution of paid and unpaid labour and the gendered distribution of political status and power. Under the rubric of citizenship, feminists are now exploring issues that used to be dealt with as economic or social policy, and the 'strategic significance is that it lifts the arguments over sexual equality from the private to the public realm' [Phillips 1991: 140]. These arguments take feminist analysis of oppression beyond material inequalities of income or occupation to focus on women's marginality and lack of power [Young 2000]. When women from different parts of the world gather to press for a voice in governance, they argue that they want not simply gender parity but also to transform the agenda, values and processes, in short the vision of politics. In countries like India, where electoral democracy is well-established, the qualitative nature of political associations has been questioned for ignoring the participation of women and for excluding them from rights of citizenship.

Universal principles of citizenship have been questioned to ensure that women along with other disadvantaged groups are treated as moral and juridical equals. Procedural guarantees of civic and political rights including rights of association and free speech do not translate into effective exercise of democratic rights [Agnes 1999]. Clientelism, patriarchy, caste and community subordination define female behaviour that subvert the exercise of rights to citizenship [Chen 1995].

The committee on the Status of Women took up the demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India in a systematic way. The report published in 1976 suggested that women's representation in political institutions needed to be increased through reservation of seats for women. Since the earlier focus was on grass roots participation, it resulted in the adoption of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution in 1993 that secured a quota of 33 per cent for women's representation in panchayats. Two years later the demand for quotas were raised in the context of women representatives in parliament which was highly contested.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, these feminist critiques have been extended to spheres of international law and justice. During the UN Decade for Women many attempts were made to recognise women's rights to bodily integrity, and violence against women was reframed as a human rights issue at the Vienna Conference (1993). Resistance to universal standards for women's rights has come from religious-minded scholars, post-structural feminists and non-liberal states. From these different positions there have been challenges to the principle of universalism that moral standards are decided by cultural values. Conservative states specifically argue that the idea of rights are bound up with their western origins and have little meaning for other cultures; human rights presuppose an ideology of possessive individualism and thus ignore the value placed on the individual vis-a-vis the social unit of which he or she is a part (Verma 2002: 177). In this way international standards on women's rights are seen to collide with cultural and religious groups at the national level. The other problem is that enforcing women's rights means that special attention be given to the private sphere which implies reinterpreting the notions of female dignity, autonomy, bodily integrity

and sexuality that are embedded in the cultural norms and institutions defined by religion. Further there is disagreement amongst feminist scholars about whether violation of rights occurs due to the presence of gendered ideologies or due to the global contradictions of capitalism [Kapur 1996].

Gender-sensitive analyses of international labour migration trends reveal an emerging 'feminisation' of refugees, the forcibly displaced and stateless persons [Manchanda 2004]. Within the nation state, the need for asserting rights for women in India has become more significant in recent years with land acquisition by the state. Most development projects have caused major changes in land use, leading to dispossession and displacement of large number of people [Thukral 1996, Dwiwedi 1999]. All policies for resettlement and rehabilitation go by the ownership of land or property when working out compensation and reflect gender bias.

While there are cases of ensuring individual property rights, scholars also lament the loss of women's productive resources due to the growing privatisation of communal property resources – forests, pastures, gram sabha lands. The colonial and post-independent period in India saw a notable shift in property rights in forests and village commons to increasing state and individual control and management. This had adverse consequences especially for women in such poor households because of their dependence on these resources for basic necessities [Agarwal 1997:3].

*Cultural pluralism:* I now turn to one of the most contested themes which overlap with what has been discussed above, in development literature – the role of values embodied in culture and expressed in political behaviour – which determine people's view of the good life and their responses to public policies. This raises the question as to how cultural diversities should be recognised or even encouraged in policies concerning government, law, education, and other important areas of development. An answer to this question has to consider two fundamental issues.

The first issue is about how cultural differences affect our understanding and experience of other societies. The second problem is when beliefs held by other peoples turn out to be manifestly irrational and false, when judged in terms of their criteria of rationality or truth. The question of cultural relativism and universalism are much debated in development literature; as to whether we should seek a universal measure of life for all men and women, or instead, focus on the many different norms that traditional cultures have selected.

Martha Nussbaum articulates these issues succinctly when she maintains that on the one hand, it seems impossible to deny that traditions perpetrate injustice against women in many fundamental ways. On the other hand value judgments about a tradition in some distant part of the world as morally wrong are viewed as familiar legacies of colonialism and imperialism [Nussbaum and Glover 1995].

For several decades the dominant explanation for the lower status of women was given as biological determinism. Later this was challenged by feminist scholars who believed that it had a lot to do with the way difference was interpreted within culturally defined values systems. Feminist interventions about cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity that shape development processes and how they should be applied to social relations were important ways of thinking about development. Some critics from postcolonial and third world positions exposed the cultural assumptions about non-western women that dominated western feminist studies. This position implicitly evaluates all cultural positions as equal and gives no basis for judgments about social justice. In Martha Nussbaum's terms the adoption of a relativist

stance by outside observers, is the involvement of the tourist; the detached observer, who is not forced to ask herself what it means to live by such norms.

Seyla Benhabib's solution for establishing communities of planetary interdependence and to a global dialogical moral community appears admirable but difficult to obtain [Benhabib 1995]. But development literature in the past has been dominated by western categories that claim universal application; we must be wary of forms of ethical universalism which ignore different local conditions or leave no space for distinctive world views, traditions or interpretations, because in reality we face plurality and lack of consensus on ethical issues. There is no doubt that locally sustainable lifestyles, participatory democracy and recovery of people's subjugated knowledge are important contributions to a reconstruction of locally adapted sustainable development styles. But the following problems are inevitable: idealisation of tradition, blindness to local power structures, and issues related to women's subordination within the family and the community.

While noting problems with the false universalism of liberal political theory, in recent years, the changed global context in which ethnic politics have argued for greater scope for cultural rights has led to a reassessment of liberalism's potentiality for accommodating women's rights. Martha Nussbaum defends a tradition of liberalism that insists on the active role of the state in creating the material and institutional prerequisites of positive freedom. In her earlier work with Amartya Sen, Nussbaum claims that a quality of a person's life should be assessed in terms of the person's capabilities. A capability is the ability or potential to do something to achieve a certain functioning [Nussbaum and Sen 1993].

In her later writings she dispenses with the notion of functioning [Nussbaum 2000 a].<sup>8</sup> In this approach emphasis is placed on the distribution of resources and opportunities to each person. However she argues that this approach will supply definite guidance only if we formulate a definite list of the most central capabilities to elaborate a partial account of social justice, a set of basic entitlements without which no society can lay claim to justice. What is important is that she considers this list as open-ended and subject to ongoing revision and rethinking. Given how often women are treated as members of families, communities and nations and their interests subordinated to the goals of these entities, Nussbaum maintains that what they need is more, not less liberal individualism. They need to be seen and to see themselves as autonomous free human beings capable of making their own choices. I return to this point in the final section on justice.

## A New Agenda for Development

Although there are serious disagreements amongst the protagonists in the debate on gender and development in India, most critiques agree about where to begin their philosophical critique – in this case a rejection of the economic growth model [Shiva 1988:89; Agarwal 1992, 1997; Gadgil and Guha 1994]. Each argues for the need to re-consider the conventional theories of development and to move outside its ethnocentric assumptions. Modernisation theory and its claim that economic prosperity would benefit men and women equally are challenged. What unites these approaches is the view that there is no single valid road to development, namely the western one, and that participatory democracy and respect for nature is crucial to socially and ecologically sustainable development. People should be given far greater access to and control over the natural resource

base of their localities. Finally a human – centred developed which views the centrality of women and other social groups as prime beneficiaries of development is proposed. They believe this is possible by bringing about change in the existing system of values, norms, institutions and procedures. Thus politics is not only limited to bargaining over benefits the state can provide, but rather with the question of the good life along with distributive issues [Verma 2000].

Communitarian/eco-feminists like Vandana Shiva have contributed to a critique of the dominant development model, by questioning the epistemological framework of western science as the only valid way of arriving at knowledge and as the ultimate justification for all institutionalised violence. Along with other scholars working on development, she postulates the need for a 'people's science' in order to develop an alternative model of development with diverse groups.<sup>9</sup> Taking some of these arguments further, studies on impact of changing technologies on women workers have also found that despite all their present gains, there is no significant improvement in women's autonomy, general skills or powers of making production related decisions [Bannerjee and Mitter 1998].

However, some weaknesses can be seen in these writings. As summarised, first, mainstream development is simplified as a single homogenous thrust towards modernisation. Secondly, the interactive process between mainstream and feminist notions of development which influence one another and are further influenced by feminist theories is largely ignored. This leads them to overlook each other's goals. Finally, the common theme is to struggle against the state rather than the holders of private property and that alternative development should perhaps occur against the former through community action.

The anti-globalisation thrust of some feminist research, that partly draws on claims of the de-skilling thesis [Braverman 1974] is deeply antagonistic to capitalist development and private property which has devised technologies to make large sections of women vulnerable. This literature focuses on the growing inequalities that have emerged across the world as increasingly TNCs become the largest employers of women in third world countries. On the one hand, this situation emphasises the inadequacy of merely positing the experience of gender as adequate for accounting for oppression, on the other, by criticising the neo-classical paradigm dominant in the global economy, feminist theorists point out the need for framing some universal notion of distributive justice. But while it is true that capitalist development leads to the marginalisation of women in the economy, efforts need to be made to separate and examine various socio-cultural and economic factors at the local and regional level that may have been responsible for introducing the gender bias in the process. Women's household responsibilities make them less flexible in their approach to work. In short, the gendered construction of women workers makes them especially vulnerable to technological redundancy [Banerjee and Mitter 1998].

Some feminist scholars speak more of environment destruction rather than exploitation, in conceptualising the type of development one is fighting, and have seen consumerism rather than a particular material production system as its cause. Although the interests of the feminist and environment movement are seen as identical, on egalitarianism the latter does not address the question of caste-community exploitation or the question of land reforms in a direct way.

Eco-feminists identify women as natural reproducers affiliated to nature and they condemn science for promoting the domination

of women and nature. Feminist environmentalism aim at participatory planning for development projects but they neglect the way knowledge systems of the North dominate those of the South. The feminist movement inspired by socialist theory puts less stress on preserving an imagined past or the environment or for removing patriarchal biases against women. The liberal feminists stress on gaining equal political and legal power with men and have been making demands on the state (for laws against amniocentesis or sati, giving welfare benefits to poor women, just personal laws etc) to redress inequalities arising out of caste community structures and would neglect patriarchy as an independent force working at several levels in society to dominate women.

Given our discussion above, it is difficult to claim that all the feminist approaches represent a major shift in the development discourse, because understanding of feminist critiques of development vary widely and they lack theoretical cohesion. They reflect certain normative orientations but are in a state of flux. For many scholars, then, feminist critiques of development present a loose profile of critical sensibilities and alternative practices which leave so many areas open that any claim to present an alternative model or paradigm to mainstream development thinking is exaggerated and misplaced [Pieterse 1998].

## Justice and Development

From our discussion it would follow that any defensible feminist theory on development must begin to address itself to two projects: the critique of hegemonic western feminisms and assumptions of conventional economic development.

The assumption of women as an already coherent group with identical interests implies a notion of gender that has to be applied universally. It has been applied specifically to create the category of homogeneous third world women who are oppressed and victims of tradition and patriarchal cultures [Mohanty et al 1991; Narayan 1998: 87-88]. The consequence of this was that culture was viewed as the main cause for oppression of women in third world contexts and communities.

The critique of western feminist theory and their assumptions on culture upset a number of mainstream development theories too.<sup>10</sup> Implicitly, both work with a model of development as progress toward a secular modernity. Moreover as the discussion indicated, liberal and Marxist political theory and development theory has often assumed that once women are educated and engage in 'productive' work, their new-found economic roles would translate into aspirations for self esteem, individual autonomy and freedom.

I argued that feminist critiques of development have with time, questioned some of the fundamental assumptions of feminist political theory. For feminist theorists this critique has a particularly challenging relevance. Feminism is itself a social movement based on an inspiration for greater social justice, most usually articulated in terms of gender equity, however this is conceived of, in various strands of feminist thought. Earlier feminist development theorists assumed this emancipatory goal in the context of conventional meanings of development. Gradually by raising multiple voices against development they radically challenged one of the key foundations of feminism as a unified social movement and political perspective. Further, the portrayal of third world women as an undifferentiated group ignored the diversity of women's lives and overlooked their differences in culture, class and caste and clan status all of which influences their differential access to resources.

Feminist critiques of development have also been successful in subverting the assumptions of conventional economic development. Implicit in the theory and practice of conventional economic development are three assumptions which are indefensible; (i) economic growth is gender-blind and both men and women will benefit equally from it; (ii) traditional western model of a household in which mother, father, and child share common interests are applicable to all; and (iii) within households, the burdens and benefits of poverty and wealth will be distributed equally regardless of gender.

I argued above that due to alternative visions of development some theoretical changes have taken place. It is now recognised that the subordination of women in many countries of the third world has two aspects: first that women as members of households differ in their access to land, means of production and wage incomes. Thus, the conditions of their work are dependent on survival strategies of households in specific relation to land and rural resources. Second, households are not harmonious, egalitarian social units, but hierarchical structures embodying relations of subordination and domination based on gender and age. The subordination of women is commonly expressed in the sex-based division of labour (food processing, fuel and water collection, childcare, care for the elderly and sick), in the control over women's childbearing capacity and nutrition and in the limits placed on women's physical movements. Therefore gaining access to productive assets are not the only issues, expansion of women's capabilities through access to education, health and decision-making processes are also important (Carr et al 1996).

Viewed in this way both the projects emphasise the need for ending gender-based relations of domination and redefining development. A redefinition of development is not only about economic growth but also about distribution of resources and non-distributive issues which promote people's capabilities in society. A redefinition of development should challenge the gender-based division of labour found in the three spheres – home, economy and the community – and provide an egalitarian basis in social arrangements. At the same time it is a mistake to assume that an attitude of moral egalitarianism can diminish injustices and prejudices on its own.

Apart from these two projects, then the starting point for developing a feminist critique of development is in linking gender oppression to multiple theories of justice. What bearing do theories of justice have on our understanding and analysis of development? Development goals of economic growth when combined with moral egalitarianism and notions of justice provide powerful protections against erroneous judgments. For example, a participatory democracy needs to disclose environment risks to nature and differential impact on gender relations while incorporating a wider set of values including injustice, in its decisions about development.

In recent years, feminist theories have reacted critically to various aspects of liberal theory – abstract individualism, rational egoism, and an instrumental conception of social relationships. They have questioned a juridical approach towards justice based on an impersonal rule of law. The impartiality of justice, so understood, encompasses the commitment to treat like cases alike, and enables citizens to regulate their actions according to settled and known rules.

In contrast feminist theories of justice arise out of the recognition of differences that should be located in such a way so as to ensure elimination of gender-based dominations in our

societies. They emphasise the values of care, nurturance and relatedness in women's moral reasoning. They also imply that we should not assume an overarching conception of the good. Instead we should construe goods within particular contexts and begin with women within relationships and communities. Structurally, it may well be that these claims cannot effectively compete with the abstract premises of liberal theory which dictate absolute values such as individual autonomy; these arguments suggest that women must be capable of thinking for themselves and of critically evaluating what others might compel them to do.

However feminist theories of justice would, first of all allow us to condemn female infanticide, sati and other obsolete customs which subject women to physical and mental abuse. In describing some arrangements as unjust, feminist theorists invoke – explicitly or by implication – some conception of justice, and it is necessary at some stage to come to grips with the appropriateness of contemporary theories of justice. However, due to the diversity in women's lives and their culture it is impossible to have a single theory of justice for all times to come.

Therefore, I suggest that we should agree on certain building blocks in developing feminist theories of justice to be context sensitive without pure relativism. Context sensitivity should not turn into communitarian relativism where too many particular local traditions are treated as defining relevant differences. It avoids questions of justice, by building acceptance of all local norms and cultural traditions into the very principles of justice yet those norms (bonded labour, devadasi system, sati, bride burning) are defined mainly by the same powers.

I argue for a theory of justice which is not juridical, but which recognises the cultural membership of women in the community. Cultural membership is an essential component of an individual's moral agency because it defines their ability to pursue a way of life that they can affirm as good. But women must be able to participate in defining the culture in affecting its practices and in deciding how a culture operates and develops.

Many of the problems of distributive justice that confront human beings within nation states now require worldwide efforts for their solution. Thus while it is important to be aware that the search for global justice is naive, the theoretical discourse that focuses on local and contextual problems must evolve some broad understanding of universal notions of injustice. They also need to insist upon the expansion of the public sphere for women who have been excluded from participating in politics or through affirmative action policies to alter the power relations in society and with human rights that transcend nation states and households. But for this they need to focus on redistribution of resources and policies that are rooted in inequalities in the global capitalist order. An account of gender justice would then have to question some norms of international distributive justice too. [\[EW\]](#)

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## Notes

- 1 In the past scholars writing on development in India have been pessimistic of its future status as an alternative paradigm of development but for other factors, see Sheth 1987; Kothari 1988.
- 2 Marxist scholars subscribe to Engels' argument that women's subordination is a consequence of the development of private property and capitalism and that a successful class struggle is required before gender relations can be changed. Many socialist feminists have tried to expand the debate by appreciating the role of reproductive labour. Later on, the radical

- feminist critique of liberal and Marxist feminism argued that patriarchy was the source of inequality and they argued for a development approach that sought to create projects only for women.
- 3 See Verma 2000, p 134 for the argument that exploitation and oppression should be separated while examining gender injustice.
  - 4 Here I refer to Raymond Williams (1988) who explains that tradition is a general process of handing down but only some parts of tradition are selected for respect and duty. Some of these conceptualisations draw on the idea of invented traditions in Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds) (1983).
  - 5 Here I do not examine the problems with feminist empiricism and their claims for providing the norms of a true scientific method. I take up elsewhere ('Feminist Theories and Social Sciences', unpublished paper) the claim that unbiased science of feminists would correct or displace the goals of enlightenment science. Also note that postmodern feminist theorists would not argue that feminist claims are scientifically preferable, as they are more sceptical of science and view knowledge as fluid and contingent.
  - 6 Boserup's (1970) work challenged the argument that benefits from development automatically trickle down to disadvantaged groups. Since then feminist engagement with mainstream development discourse has taken four broad perspectives: the women in development approach, the women and development approach, gender in development and now gender and development. Due to lack of space I do not discuss these in great detail.
  - 7 For various positions on reservations see *Seminar* 1997 and more specifically role on mahila mandals in rural local elected bodies, Das 2000.
  - 8 For Nussbaum's later position see 2003; For a strong critique of Sen's capabilities approach see Cohen 1993. He proposes what he calls equality in access to advantage.
  - 9 Examples of recent positions along these lines can be found in the writings of Ashis Nandy 1987 and Shiv Vishvanathan 1998.
  - 10 A good example is the way the practice of veiling gets translated into oppression of women even though it has been viewed as being voluntarily adopted by urban educated women in countries like Egypt, Malaysia and Indonesia.

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