

Gender Mainstreaming in Social Protection

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Gender mainstreaming has become a buzzword in development discourse in the 21st century. The volume under review is a timely publication in the context of the ever increasing pauperisation and immiserisation of millions of people, especially women and children. Naila Kabeer has performed a daunting task in examining the effect of economic globalisation on gender relations for a large majority of the poor around the world and the affirmative actions taken by the nation states.

Growing informalisation of paid work is a marked feature of neoliberal globalisation and nation states everywhere are vying with each other to cut costs instead of promoting healthy competition to ensure social security measures for their workforce. Human miseries have increased due to massive cuts in the social sector budgets and privatisation of the education, health and energy sectors. Millions have lost their jobs, with poor women being the most vulnerable due to gender-related constraints that limit their efforts to overcome the labour market's disadvantages through their own efforts. Hence, the author demands measures for the retooling of workers rendered unemployed due to structural adjustment policies, so that they can find jobs in different sectors.

Mainstreaming Gender in Social Protection for Informal Economy

by Naila Kabeer (*London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2008; pp xviii + 411, price not mentioned.*)

Based on the official revelations of country profiles of the developing world, the author points out, "Public work programmes that provide employment during slack seasons at wages that are generally below those that prevail in the agricultural labour markets have tended to draw in younger, unmarried women." And that "the youngest workers in the informal economy in many developing countries are children. Some combine paid and unpaid activities with school attendance" (p xvi).

For the Vulnerable

In chapter 1, "Risk, Vulnerability and Social Protection: International Perspective", the author makes a strong case in favour of social security provisions on the premise that to get a decent job is a human right. There should be universal standards for wages, work conditions, occupational health and safety, environmental concerns, reproductive rights of women and protective labour laws applicable to all nation states on this planet. She argues, "Social protection strategies are made up of measures for risk reduction, risk mitigation and risk coping" (p 11). She criticises

the World Bank approach to social protection that stems from a concern with the vulnerability of the poor in the face of diverse risks and a belief that markets are the best means of helping them manage these.

Chapter 2, "Gender and Trends in the Global Labour Force: New and Persisting Forms of Vulnerability", delineates feminisation of the workforce as well as feminisation of poverty. It analyses the "geography of gender" and patterns of economic activity that capture the paid and unpaid work of women which is central to the gender analysis of labour force participation and the key to gender-sensitive design of social protection of workers in the unorganised, highly competitive, labour-intensive sector of the global economy. Through case studies of the manufacturing, agricultural and fisheries sectors, the author proves that it is the power of the prevailing ideologies about women's responsibility for childcare and domestic work and their establishment as the norm in labour market institutions that explains the restricted nature of women's choices as much as the actual burden that such responsibilities represent for individual women (p 53).

The struggle for survival and the grind of work are captured in chapter 3, "Gender, Life Course and Livelihoods: Analytical Framework and Empirical Insights". It highlights the fact that the search for survival and security is not governed by purely individual motivation, rather, it is carried out through cooperation between individuals in different spheres of society and the governed, at least in part, by the prevailing rules, norms and conventions defined by hierarchical relationships in

these spheres. Wage labour has emerged as a significant component of the livelihood activities of poorer households in the African context, while in the Asian countries the manufacturing sector absorbs young women workers in small-scale industries, special economic zones, export processing zones and free trade zones. In Latin America, women's participation in the labour markets has had a positive effect in terms of an increase in their bargaining power in the household and enhanced personal and economic autonomy. However, in all developing countries, old age brings extreme insecurity for poor women.

Chapter 4 is devoted to child workers and makes a strong plea for attention, care and resources to the developmental needs of children who are deprived of childhood due to early entry (sometimes at as early as five years) into economic activity. In order to prevent child labour, South Africa started the Child Support Grant to biological parents as well as foster parents/caregivers. Meals in school programmes in some countries in Africa, and in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan combine the goals of reducing child labour and promoting school enrolment, reducing dropout rates and increasing retention rates in schools as well as address nutritional deficits in children that are going to affect their health, development and cognitive abilities. It also ensures higher enrolment and retention of girls in the schools. Conditional cash transfers were pioneered in Latin America and now the Indian government too has started this form of incentives to ensure that the female foetus is not killed, and girls are educated and looked after.

Alternative approaches to employment-based social protection are critically evaluated in chapter 5. Public works programmes to address the disruptions or fluctuations in income flows have been supply-driven and demand-led. For example, in the famine/drought relief programmes during the colonial period, subsistence wages provided in such employment attracted the poorest of the poor. In the Employment Guarantee Scheme programme in India, many of the beneficiaries are women from predominantly female-headed households (widows, deserted wives, divorced and single women). In

India, the legislative status of the primary right to work, together with subsidiary rights such as humane work conditions, payment by cheque, medical aid, crèche, etc, and the right to information have facilitated a nationwide movement of the toiling poor. The author rightly expresses serious concern in these words, "One would not expect employment programmes to solve years of cultural and other barriers to women being treated equally in the workforce. Yet, if such programmes serve to segregate women as 'inferior' labour, then their design should be seriously reconsidered" (p 169). She also observes that where both cash-for-work and food-for-work employment are offered, it is common to find men dominating the rolls in the former and women in the latter. Due to demands from community-based organisations, women's groups and gender economists, women's quota for both project management and employment have been ensured.

Self-help and Peer Pressure

Chapter 6 on "Financial Services for Women in the Informal Economy: Protecting and Promoting Livelihoods" brings to the fore microfinance as a highly versatile policy instrument. Microfinance through self-help groups (SHGs) has proved to be a strategic measure for organising women in groups and promoting savings and thrift to gain access to institutional credit for socio-economic development and empowerment. It empowers women since it instills a perception of strength, self-reliance and confidence when the poverty trap is broken. The entire process of forming a group, of functioning in a sustained manner, of regulating finances, and being mutually accountable, is in itself projected as empowering. An important dimension of SHGs is the peer pressure, which the members of a group exert amongst themselves, and which acts as a substitute for formal collateral in that it is taken as the guarantee for loan repayment. Two important features of this model are self-selection of group members that bypasses the adverse selection problem and peer monitoring. The author provides case studies of a number of such organisations in India and other developing countries showing the empowering impact of micro-finance in terms of reduction in domestic violence,

improved social status of women and increase in income.

Pensions and transfers as social protection in old age are discussed in the context of gender and old age insecurity in chapter 7. Contributory public pension schemes such as pay-as-you-go (PAYGO) schemes entail inter-generational funding so that contributions of the economically active generation finance the pensions of the currently retired. Social security reforms in several Latin American countries have brought about considerable changes in incentives for women to participate in labour markets, to save and to use the social security system as a channel for their savings. Three important components of the concept of social security for women are:

- (1) Promotional component that aims at improving endowments, exchange entitlements, real incomes and social consumption.
- (2) Preventive component that seeks to avert deprivation in more specific ways.
- (3) Protective component that ensures relief against deprivation.

The author profiles social security measures that look after overall needs – employment, sustainable income, ownership of assets, food, healthcare, childcare, maternity care, old age support, housing and other locally-defined needs (transport, water and skills) in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Economic and social securities are directly linked because economic security is a primary means by which people are able to obtain social security. Social security is a means to increase and maintain productivity.

Chapter 8 makes a strong plea in favour of organising for social protection in the informal economy with a rights-based perspective. The author avers, "International campaigns have tended to organise their strategies around global value chains, focusing their attention on wage workers in the 'traded' sectors of the global economy" (p 279). So far, the trade union movement has focused only on the organised sector, mostly on adult male labour, and has hardly done anything for women workers and almost nothing for child workers. In the 21st century, the trade union movement is becoming active as far as the unorganised sector is concerned as current processes of economic globalisation are dismantling the organised sector

and forcing informalisation of the workforce. The exclusion of a large majority of workers who happen to be in the informal sector from trade union membership has induced the International Labour Organisation and International Confederation of Trade Unions to conflate the right to organise with the right to join a trade union. Progressive unions have formed women's cells/caucuses to deal with women-specific problems. Women employees oppose the patriarchal structure of trade unions, the prejudices of male leaders who treat women as an auxiliary labour force that can be hired last at the time of economic expansion and fired first at the time of economic recession, the division of labour within unions that appoints men as leaders and women as supporters, the unsuitable time and place of union meetings. In women's unions such as Self-Employed Women's Association, women's role in collective bargaining is prominent and we see the reflection of women's aspirations

and demands in the charter of demands. Trade unions have to accept that multi-tasking by women workers: cooking, cleaning, caring and wage work are extremely important not only for the working class household but also for the economy. They must take up demands of equal wages for equal work, shelter and labour standards.


The author shows that workers from lower caste and ethnic and religious minority communities are victims of the most exploitative, stigmatised and demeaning form of work and are "excluded" from developmental efforts. Hence, it is most important to organise the migrant workers, who are "doubly excluded" in the informal economy. Domestic workers' unions in South Africa and India, waste pickers' associations started by women's organisations and migrant workers' groups throughout the industrialised world have an inspiring record in improving the work conditions and quality of life of their members.

Transnational activism has proved Karl Marx right by establishing global solidarity and struggle. International women's networks such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, Committee of Asian Women, and Homenet have given voice to the concerns of informal women workers.

In the concluding chapter 9, the author moves towards a "generative" model of social protection by making links to macro-economic development and social policies that address the need for broadbased service provision, for an equitable regulatory framework and for sustainable generation of livelihood opportunities.

This well-documented volume is a must read for development economists, gender experts, women's studies scholars, trade union workers, professionals in non-governmental organisations, activists in social movements and political parties and lawyers in human rights movements.

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