

## **Psychological & Structural Challenges for Women Posed by New Liberal Policies: A Study of Punjab after 1991**

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### **Abstract**

The introduction of New Liberal Policies also affected the socio-economic and demographic features of the state of Punjab. This has presented new challenges for the women section of the society. The two major political parties, which have been ruling Punjab ever since its inception are from the same feudal dynasties, are concerned here is regarding the fact that these ruling parties keep coming back to power on rotation and have been alleged to be using the liberal policy framework for formulating such policies so as to fulfill their ulterior motives.. As a result the application of new liberal policies have suffered setback. This is more apparent when we look at the regional disparities in terms of employment opportunities as well as its utilization. This can be studied with special reference to the prevailing dominant mind set of the men folk. The underlying objectives of the new liberal policies had been based on the frame work provided by the developed countries of the west. But the rigid and orthodox belief system along with social taboos do not provide enough scope for the new liberal policies to take root in Punjab, more so in the case of women. There still exist vast discrepancies with regard to participation of women in successful implementation of new liberal policies. This paper aims at highlighting the structural & psychological challenges for women that impede the very process of women empowerment and contrasting picture has emerged of rural & urban areas. For this analysis we have made use of data taken from various fields of occupation as well as of different regions of Punjab.

**Keywords:** educational opportunities, state investment, social transformation, WTO regime

## **INTRODUCTION**

Punjab is considered as one of the economically developed state in India. Per capita income of Punjab is much higher and the people living below poverty line are marginal, if we compare with the other states of the Indian Union. Other indicators of development also show its respectable position. On an all India comparison, out of 25 states, Punjab ranks sixth in Human Development Index (HDI) but is 16<sup>th</sup> as far as the Gender Development Index (GDI) is concerned. Thus, the state has the highest negative differential in the HDI and GDI. This indicates that gender equality cannot be linked to income level alone<sup>i</sup>. It is observed that change causes conflict because it creates new relationships between functions and people. Structural changes in an economic condition occur when an industry or market changes how it functions or operates. Its psychological challenges are far more acute for women workers. By liberalization in India, it means, the opening of trade by reduction of import duties and removal of quantitative restrictions. It also means entering the WTO regime. Along with easing of restrictions on external trade, there has also been a removal of some internal restrictions on movement of commodities. At the same time, there has been a considerable loosening of the licensing systems, especially on the private sector of firms, as well as lifting of reservations for many products. At the same time there has been an integration of production globally, but also across the country internally. There has been rapid privatization of Government owned companies, of state or community held resources, of hitherto reserved area like banking and insurance. Along with this, there has been deregulation of labour protection leading to massive growth of contract labour and sub-contracting<sup>ii</sup>.

The present analysis is aimed at studying the structural and psychological challenges faced by women in Punjab after the liberalization era of 1991. After the liberalization policies of 1991, there occurred expansion and diversification of production both in industry and agriculture. The liberalization policies in Punjab were unable to change the social status of women even though various constitutional and legislative measures and economic initiatives like land reforms created conducive opportunities for social transformation. However, the process of social transformation could not acquire the expected dynamism. This was mainly a result of discriminatory practices which had a bearing on the issues relating to distributive justice, like allowing equitable access to economic and educational opportunities for women.

### **Structural Features**

The structural disequilibrium as reflected in the unequal position of women in terms of land, income and assets had a bearing on their access to education, health and other avenues of capacity building mechanism. In India, number of female workers in rural area in 1991 was 26.72 percent of total population as compared to 30.98 percent of total population in urban area in 1991. This shows that there did not exist vast discrepancies among the rural and urban areas. Here an aspect which needs to be considered is that in the state of Punjab, in rural areas, number of female workers was 4.37 percent, in 1991 and in 2001, it rose significantly to 23.15 percent. In urban areas, the number of female workers was 4.48 percent and in 2001, rose only by a mere 9.74 percent. The overall

female work participation rates increased and this rise was much more significant for rural Punjab compared to urban Punjab. Notwithstanding the high level of development as a result of liberalization policies, Punjab has the lowest female workforce participation rate in the country<sup>iii</sup>.

### **Rural Sector**

Punjab was viewed as the most dynamic and progressive state of the country, particularly for its successes in the agrarian sector. The Green Revolution was successful in other parts of India as well, but it was Punjab that it primarily came to be identified with. Introduction of liberalization and globalization during the early 1990s further increased pressure of the agrarian economy. The “new” economic policy advocated withdrawal of the state from economic sphere, leaving it to the logic of market forces. While it might be a good thing for the industry to be allowed to freely import the latest technology from abroad or have a competitive atmosphere, leaving the agricultural sector to vagaries of free market could prove disastrous. Small landholders cultivate most of the land in India and they often have to borrow from various sources for investments in the cultivation of cash crops<sup>iv</sup>. The cycle of agricultural production is such that virtually the entire farm yield comes to the market simultaneously. In a completely free and open market, the indebted small cultivator would obviously find it hard to bargain with the mighty trader. However, the support price regime for food grain crops had been a great help to the farmers. The benefits of agrarian development have primarily accrued to those sectors of rural society which already possessed substantial resources like land and capital. In contrast to rich cultivators, small and marginal farmers have fared poorly in green revolution.

Punjabi society is both patrilineal and patrilocal and social reactions to breaches are very strong. Deprived of land and capital and stifled by social and cultural taboos restricting their agricultural activities, social contract with unrelated men and women and moving freely outside the home, the role of women of all categories in agricultural productions has always remained secondary to that of men. Since in the village structure most of the outside work is performed by men, the task of transmission of knowledge about the high yielding varieties of crops too, has become entrusted to men and being so transmitted it has become man-to-man affair. As the supervisory personnel were also men, the interaction with the market became further male-centered in relation to buying and selling of produce, purchase of fertilizers, interaction with govt. personnel, banks etc. for loans, buying of tractors, threshers etc., payment of bills.. These gapes of information and knowledge between men and women have reinforce the already well entrenched patriarchal structures and created and exclusion for the women. In the agricultural sector men have taken over from women those activities in which technology has substituted machinery for manual labour. All other labour intensive tasks are still left to women. Therefore, the introduction of tractors, harvesters, insecticides, weedicides, hormone accelerators, high yielding variety seeds and mechanical cotton pickers has meant that tasks traditionally performed by women and on which many women depend for their livelihood have been appropriated<sup>v</sup>.

**Urban Sector**

Changes after the liberalization policies of 1991 resulted in the expansion and diversification of production both in industry and agriculture. Indeed, an entirely new class of women entrepreneurs has come up with the support system from the government. A variety of promotional policies were followed by the government to achieve this success. This led to the understanding of the interlinkage between techno-economic change centering on patterns of production and earning a living and social transformation relevant to women's lives, socio-economic positions, maintenance and change of lifestyles and social identities<sup>vi</sup>. What is noteworthy is that given the role of women as primary care-givers in the household, they tend to be concentrated in the informal economy as self-employed workers and owners of small businesses as this allows them to combine work and family responsibilities. Liberalization policies had impact both on women's formal and informal labour market participation and on their unpaid domestic labour.

**Psychological challenges**

Liberalisation has brought along with itself a commercial and consumerist mindset. More and more women are being made to go out and seek jobs to cope with the ever-increasing demands on their household expenses. This is either voluntary or due to pressures from the men-folk in their families. Now that a large number of women are part of the corporate workforce one cannot ignore the rather dismal picture of their situations at work. There is enough evidence that women are paid less than men for the same work. Coupled with gender discrimination in wage differentials is inequality in access to superior positions and promotions. Women are often seen in the lower categories of the job hierarchy. Discrimination exists not only in terms of wages but also in terms of access to employment. Often women are found concentrated in occupations where the wage rates, as well as working conditions are poor and substandard. Low levels of skill on entry, lack of access to on the job training, employment histories punctuated by time spent bearing and raising children, time off to care for family members and the assumption that men are the primary earners all contribute to the implicit assumption that women should be paid less than men. Various studies have shown that technical change has eliminated many jobs traditionally performed by women and alternative job opportunities have not been created for women at the same rate as for men<sup>vii</sup>. In sectors where liberalization has increased employment women workers are getting paid less than men and, in most cases, much below the minimum wage. It is unjust that a worker spends many hours at difficult work and does not even earn enough to feed herself and her family. It is surprising, that even when opportunities have increased, women are earning a pittance. One study shows many large companies are subcontracting work to small factories and to home based workers. The women are earning barely Rs.500 per month, whereas the minimum wage is Rs. 1500 and a male worker in a private sector factory doing the same work would earn at least Rs. 3000. Another area of expanding opportunities is in services of all types. Personal services such as domestic work, cleaning and cooking services and care of children and the elderly, is increasing rapidly in the urban areas. Most of these

services are provided by women. However, even in these areas, the earnings remain low and work remains irregular. Health services are another area of expansion. India has always had a very large private medical sector, especially for non-hospital care. The slowing down of state investment in the hospital sector was in itself a signal to the private sector, and the state supported this by giving subsidies, soft loans, duty and tax exemptions, etc. Secondly, the earlier introduction of modern health care in the rural areas by the state through the setting up of PHCs and cottage hospitals had paved the way for the private sector, by creating a market for modern health care in the peripheral regions. A large number of women workers are employed in the construction industry. According to NSSO Survey (1993-94), 4.17 per cent of all male workers and 1.27 per cent of all female workers were engaged in construction activity. Among women construction workers more than 98 per cent are casual workers, whereas the proportion of casual workers among women workers in all industries together is far less, about 75 per cent. In Construction under the prevailing WTO regime, the essential requirement of global tendering has facilitated the entry of many large companies in the Indian construction scene in a big way. The presence of some of these companies is increasingly visible in many infrastructure development projects being undertaken under government funding as well as under bilateral/multilateral assistance arrangements. With increased mechanisation, there would be massive displacement of labour in nearly all construction operations. Women labour would be completely eliminated from the main operations in which they have been traditionally deployed, namely, soil digging and carrying, carrying inputs in concrete mixing and placing, concrete curing and brick carrying. It is estimated that the overall deployment of labour will become 1/50th to 1/5th of the earlier numbers. Obviously manual labour, and especially the women workers, would be increasingly eliminated from the construction sites. With the coming of Globalisation and liberalization, new technologies and fast changing markets tend to make existing skills obsolete and required up-gradation, new skills and multi-skilling. It put a premium on skills-requiring high levels of education, often out of the reach of the women workers.

### **Women in Punjab-Demographic and other features**

The data obtained from the Census of India, 2001 shows a clear picture of development indicators in Punjab. The average sex ratio of 0-6 yr. children is 846 female per 1000 male. 10 districts are falling below in the state average and out of 10, 7 districts are from *Malwa* and three from *Majha*. The second finding is that the male-female ratio above the age of six years is 893 female per 1000 male in average. 11 districts fall from the state average rate and the ten districts are from *Malwa* and one from *Majha*. Third finding indicates towards disparities in average literacy rate of female in Punjab which 71.3 and 10 districts are lagging behind out of these 9 are from *Malwa* and one from *Majha*. Average male literacy ratio which is 81.5 shows the similar results, 11 districts are below the average out of which 9 are from *Malwa* and two from *Majha*. Furthermore the average common male-female ratio which stands at 76.7 also witnesses that 10 districts are under the average out of those 9 belongs to *Malwa* region and one to *Majha*. The overall literacy rate of Punjab has more than doubled in last thirty years.

Female literacy rate has increase at a much rapid pace then male literacy. It is generally believed that greater urbanization would create more educational opportunities for women<sup>viii</sup>. This is true only to a very limited extent in Punjab. Ludhiana, notwithstanding its high level of industrialization and urbanization ranks at fourth place in literacy, while Hoshiarpur, where industrialization is relatively a new phenomena, ranks at the top. Rural-urban differentials are considerable for over all literacy as well as male and female literacy. However, the rural-urban gap in female literacy is much higher as compared to the male literacy. The same is true at the district level. The rural-urban gap in female education is most glaring in Mansa district and lowest in Hoshiarpur.

The history of India shows many types of discrimination and atrocities against women. Punjab is also not an exception. These atrocities are started from womb. Sex selection and female infanticide are so common in this stage. Thanks to the technological advancement infanticide now has acquired marginal place in the list of crime against women. Mal nutrition is more visible in rural area and more or less in urban as well. Childhood position is not so gloomy. The gender biased society neglect females from basic medical cares, sexual abuse and physical violence. There is a big tale of adulthood atrocities against women e.g. early marriage, early pregnancy, sexual violence, domestic violence, dowry harassment, harassment due to infertility/failure to produce sons, desertion, and witch hunt. 'Predominantly an agrarian society in which women, though actively participating in agricultural activity along with their men folk, have been mainly entrusted with the domestic chores, bearing of sons and rearing them'<sup>ix</sup>. The relevance of women's education to social, economic, cultural and political development of the individual, family, community and nation is universally acknowledged. Apart from direct development benefits of education for women, improvement in overall social and economic indices, smaller families and reproduced infant mortality, improved quality of life, enhanced economic productivity and improvement in the family health are some of the areas which benefit from improvement in female education.

The data made available by the Census of India, 2001 shows here that the decade back census and the latest data are more or less similar in facts and findings. The revolutionary changes in the status of women are far behind. The rural urban gap and regional disparities in Punjab show the culture of deprivation in the state. Seven districts of Punjab are behind from average sex ratio of state. Here rural urban gap also prevail but positive in nature because average sex ratio and the child sex ratio of rural female is more than the urban female. The female literacy rate in nine districts is less than the average of the state in which eight district fall in Malwa region and one in *Majha*. The rural urban gap in literacy rate also prevails in the all districts of Punjab and Malwa is backward in this context also. The work participation of rural female is more than average rate of state in each and every district. Here are some hidden factors for rural women's higher participation in work. The females of rural Punjab are involved in low profile work such as agricultural labourers, domestic workers and newly enacted NREGA (MGNREGA) scheme is also one of the sources of attraction for such employment.

**Remedial measures-some suggestions**

Any scheme of social security which has to benefit women workers must be decentralised, flexible, user responsive, contributory and open to multi-financing, keeping in mind their special needs. Child Care needs to be made the responsibility not only of the woman worker, but also of the family and of the state. A statutory scheme for the implementation of maternity entitlements should be provided which would cover all women, under an income criterion. The scheme should provide financial support for childbirth and childcare and breastfeeding in the first few months of the child's life. The funds should be multi-sourced including a combination of employer, employee and state contributions, through cesses and through community contributions. It can be linked with the maternal and child health provisions of the public health system. Welfare Funds are shown to be the most effective way in reaching social security to workers without a clear employer-employee relationship. However, they should also be more women-sensitive and their structure should be changed to make them more decentralised, reach more benefits and become more efficient. There are a number of successful micro-insurance schemes which could be up scaled.

**Conclusion**

Women workers continue to be at the receiving end of policies often getting victimised in the process. They have no say in the formulation of the policies as they have no voice in economic affairs. Perhaps the most important actions are to help these women to organise and to help their organisations to get representation to policy making forums. In India today there are in fact many organisations of women workers, but they tend to work against many odds. It is necessary to recognise that these organisations exist to help them to grow and to give them a voice. It is necessary to avoid the growing inequality and social discontent that is coming about due to the changes through liberalization.

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<sup>i</sup>Punjab Human Development Report 2004  
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<sup>iv</sup>Aman Sidhu, *Debt and Death in Rural India: The Punjab Story*, Sage: New Delhi, 2011

<sup>v</sup>Research Foundation Science &Technology New Delhi, *Impact of WTO on Women in Agriculture National Commission for Women New Delhi 2005*

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<sup>viii</sup> Census of India 2011

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