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Introduction

In the context of adopting human development as the ultimate goal of all our developmental efforts, empowerment of women and development of children gains priority on the country's development agenda. Women and Children together constitute 65.6 per cent of the country's total population and account for 673.80 million (as projected) in 2001.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Women, as an independent target group, account for 495.74 million and represent 48.3 per cent of country's total population, as per the 2001 Census. Empowering women as a process demands a life-cycle approach. Therefore, every stage of their life counts as a priority in the planning process. Depending upon the developmental needs at every stage, female population has been categorised into 5 distinct sub-groups (population as projected for 2001).

They include: Girl children in the age-group 0-14 years who account for 171.50 million (34.6 per cent), deserve special attention because of the gender bias and discrimination they suffer from at such a tender age;

Adolescent girls in the age-group 15-19 years who account for 52.14 million (10.5 per cent) are very sensitive from the viewpoint of planning because of the preparatory stage for their future productive and reproductive roles in the society and family, respectively;

Women in the reproductive age-group 15-44 years numbering 233.72 million (47.1 per cent) need special care and attention because of their reproductive needs;

Women in the economically active agegroup 15-59 years, who account for 289.40 million (58.4 per cent), have different demands like those of education/ training,

employment, income generation and participation in the developmental process, decision making etc.; and

The elderly women in the age-group 60+ years numbering 34.87 million (7.0 per cent), have limited needs mainly relating to health, financial and emotional support.

The country's concern in safeguarding the rights and privileges of women found its best expression in the Constitution of India. While Article 14 confers equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social spheres, Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste etc. and Article 15(3) empowers the State to make affirmative discrimination in favour of women. Similarly, Article 16 provides for equality of opportunities in the matter of public appointments for all citizens; Article 39 stipulates that the State shall direct its policy towards providing men and women equally the right to means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work; Article 42 directs the State to make provisions for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief; and Article 51(A)(e) imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. To make this de-jure equality into a de-facto one, many policies and programmes were put into action from time to time, besides enacting/enforcing special legislations, in favour of women.

POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES: A REVIEW

Development of women has been receiving attention of the Government right from the very First Plan (1951-56). But, the same has been treated as a subject of 'welfare' and clubbed together with the welfare of the disadvantaged groups like destitute, disabled, aged, etc. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB), set up in 1953, acts as an Apex Body at national level to promote voluntary action at various levels, especially at the grassroots, to take up welfare-related activities for women and children. The Second to Fifth Plans (1956-79) continued to reflect the very same welfare approach, besides giving priority to women's education, and launching measures to improve maternal and child health services, supplementary feeding for children and expectant and nursing mothers.

The shift in the approach from 'welfare' to 'development' of women could take place only in the Sixth Plan (1980-85). Accordingly, the Sixth Plan adopted a multi-disciplinary approach with a special thrust on the three core sectors of health, education and employment. In the Seventh Plan (1985-90), the developmental

programmes continued with the major objective of raising their economic and social status and bringing them into the mainstream of national development. A significant step in this direction was to identify/promote the 'Beneficiary Oriented Schemes' (BOS) in various developmental sectors which extended direct benefits to women. The thrust on generation of both skilled and unskilled employment through proper education and vocational training continued. The Eighth Plan (1992-97), with human development as its major focus, played a very important role in the development of women. It promised to ensure that benefits of development from different sectors do not by-pass women, implement special programmes to complement the general development programmes and to monitor the flow of benefits to women from other development sectors and enable women to function as equal partners and participants in the development process.

The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) made two significant changes in the conceptual strategy of planning for women. Firstly, 'Empowerment of Women' became one of the nine primary objectives of the Ninth Plan. To this effect, the Approach of the Plan was to create an enabling environment where women could freely exercise their rights both within and outside home, as equal partners along with men. Secondly, the Plan attempted 'convergence of existing services' available in both women-specific and women-related sectors. To this effect, it directed both the centre and the states to adopt a special strategy of 'Women's Component Plan' (WCP) through which not less than 30 per cent of funds/benefits flow to women from all the general development sectors. It also suggested that a special vigil be kept on the flow of the earmarked funds/benefits through an effective mechanism to ensure that the proposed strategy brings forth a holistic approach towards empowering women.

To ensure that other general developmental sectors do not by-pass women and benefits from these sectors continue to flow to them, a special mechanism of monitoring the 27 BOS for women was put into action in 1986, at the instance of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The same continues to be an effective instrument till today. Sector/scheme-wise achievements under women-specific and women-related sectors of health, nutrition, education, labour, rural development, urban development, science and technology and women and child development are detailed in the following paragraphs:

The National Health Policy 2001 (Draft) promises to ensure increased access to women to basic health care and commits highest priority to the funding of the identified programmes relating to women's health. During the Ninth Plan period, several new initiatives were taken as part of the Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) Programme (1997), in order to make it broad-based and clientfriendly. All the interventions of the erstwhile programme of Child Survival and Safe Motherhood (CSSM) became part of RCH. During this period, the focus shifted from the individualised vertical interventions to a more holistic integrated life-cycle approach with more attention to reproductive health care. This includes access to essential obstetric care during the entire period of pregnancy, provision of emergency obstetric care as close to the community as possible, improving and expanding early and safe abortion services and provision for treatment of Reproductive Tract Infections/Sexually Transmitted Infections (RTI/STI) cases at the sub-district level.