UNIT 3  FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

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Structure

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Women’s role in the development process to bring about change in their lives has a long history. Feminist scholars have been producing empirical knowledge and theoretical concepts on women and social change since the 1970s. The Feminist struggle continues to play an important role in bringing women’s issues both into the international paradigms and local discourses. Hence, it becomes essential to understand social transformation from a feminist perspective. The unit will look at social change as a consequence of feminist struggle and the critique of social change or modernization process that completely silenced women’s role in development.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Define and analyse what is social change;
- Discuss feminist perspective on change and development;
- Understand social change as a result of feminist activism; and
- Critically engage with the notion of women’s empowerment with the help of a few case studies.
3.3 DEFINING SOCIAL CHANGE

Social transformation in relation to women has manifested across social structures including race/caste, class, tribe, family and so on. Feminist account of social change primarily aims at bringing a gender egalitarian society. Feminists have argued that women are active agents of social change. Across societies, change has been visible in both public and private spheres for example, mothers in the workforce, nuclear family and the changing division of labour, political participation and evolving laws on marriage, divorce, and abortion. Feminist movements have argued for altering the place of women in the society and the formation of women’s agency. In the book ‘Women’s Agency and Social Change’, Meeta Deka (2013) writes, “most historical analysis about social change—revolts, movements or organizations—are totally gender absent” (p. xxiii). These revolts and movements have never acknowledged the role of women in social change, therefore feminist scholarship since 1960s began to theorize gender concepts by revisiting history, social institutions and structures. The approach to study women’s experiences and everyday struggle has made gender a powerful tool to analyze social change. Feminist understanding of social change is about re-visiting social institutions, power structures, disciplines, and methodology through a gender lens. Feminist movements have been creating awareness about gender constructs and facilitating women’s role in the change process.

Feminist Conception of Change

According to Karl Mannheim (1959), a generation can be conceptualized as an agent of social change similar to class. To quote, “to become an agent of social change, a generation must become aware of itself as a generation, as a “generation of actuality” capable of bringing about change, and participate in a movement to bring about that change” (Stevenson, 2011, p. 131). In a similar sense, women in the 1970s and 80s became aware of their differential position in the society and participated in the women’s movement as a strategy to bring about changes. As part of the movement, women consensually rejected their traditionally defined roles as mothers or nurturers in the domestic sphere. Second Wave feminists you may have read in MWG 001 engaged in grass-roots activism, articulated the diverse needs and concerns of women, and worked strategically to bring about a spectrum of changes in work sphere, political participation and within the institution of family.

During the 1970s and 80s, feminist movement in the West redefined ‘women’ as a political category to question women’s position, role and image in social institutions. With this political agenda, feminist movement paved the way towards progressive social change.
Feminist perspective on change can include questions such as: how did women make unique contribution in social movements, how does one make a connection between feminist movements and the dynamics of change in class, race, ethnicity, and finally the role of grass root feminist activism and social change. These three questions are going to be discussed in succeeding sections of the unit. Feminism’s focus on social change and transformation is the organizing principle of development studies yet the relationship between these two disciplines offer similarities and contestations. Feminist engagement with social change has created new political space for women in institutions, policy and processes to bring gender justice in the society. As a consequence, forums such Development Alternative with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), international networks and women activist groups emerged to reposition women’s issues in the wider spectrum of socio-economic and political changes. As a new form of political voice, feminism has “succeeded in lending visibility to demands for change, creating constituencies that span diverse contexts, and alliances between those working at different sites of development, policy and practice” (Cornwall, 2007, p.3).

Feminist struggle over social change get manifested through different expressions at the levels of grass-root movements, development institutions and policies and programmes. Let us look at some of the country specific case studies to understand social change from a gender perspective. To quote, “For women’s rights, the turning point does not come until the early 1960s as the state’s views on gender at the beginning of the process of ‘modernization’ remained trenchantly conservative, with no concept that any fundamental improvement in the legal and social status of women was either necessary or desirable” (Connolly, 1996, cited in Connolly, 2003, p.66).

This was the period in which policies and programmes specific to Women in Development were completely influenced by the state with a view to project women as the beneficiaries of the various development programmes. Connolly conceptualized the gender regime of 1950s as conservative period in which women’s right was articulated in relation to the public policy. In 1950s, Ireland like all other Western European countries was conservative to the extent of negating women as workers, activists of political liberation movement and as heads of the household. The new social welfare system in the postwar period primarily put women as central to the institution of family; thereby making them financially dependent upon the husband. The general expression of state-led women centric public policy across Western Europe and other countries was based on the principle of maintaining gender order. For instance in Ireland, the family law regime vested authority and power upon the husband and women were curtailed from education and public employment. The social change with regard to women in the
postwar period was completely based on the agreement of gender order, and gender contract.

By the end of 1950s, the gender regime of Western Europe was in a state of crisis. To quote Connolly ‘for Irish feminists in the early decades of the 20th century, the case for enhancing the status of women was based primarily on a strong idea of gender difference, the unique contribution of women to society (and potentially to public life) and the need to place an equal value on male and female attributes’ (2003, p. 68). Although women were not visible in the public life, their rights were articulated around the concepts of equality and difference. Certain visible changes were marked in Western Europe with regard to women’s rights. For example, widows could resort to court to claim maintenance from their husband’s estate, women could get equal pay and protection from violence. Similar changes were visible in third world countries as well.

Feminism can be described as a new cultural and political force emphasizing on the role of women as subject of social change. It dealt with personalized and privatized experiences of individual women to address the women’s question in domains of family and other institutions. The book by Angela McRobbie, The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change (2009) described that in the post-feminist era, the idea of feminism is well adopted by the young women in spheres of education, sexuality, fashion-beauty industry, and globalization of economy and that young women tend to be more gender aware (Scharff, 2009). The post-feminist era can be referred as a new gender regime in which the young women having feminist consciousness working as agents for social change. In the global south, feminist movements could mobilize women to talk about women’s issues within the discourse of rights and citizenship. Let us look at some of debates on social change and development within different feminist streams.

Activity:

*Identify the specific nature of change which was conceptualized by the second and third wave feminism.*
3.4 FEMINIST STREAMS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

You may have read about different waves of feminism in the Course MWG-001 which discussed the three waves of feminism in detail. Now, we will study these different strands of feminism as analytical tools (heuristic devices) to understand the nature of social change brought by women’s movement internationally or globally. Feminism in general has placed women as the subject of enquiry and as agents of accumulating knowledge on gender. This proposition has brought social transformations both at the level of theory and praxis. Feminism has spearheaded the change process by critiquing the process of knowledge acquisition and challenged the hegemony of men’s experience in the social institutions (Thorne, 1987). Let us look at the three feminist waves and its focus on the nature/dimension of change.

a) **First Wave Feminism:** It emerged in 19th century and feminists demanded inclusion of women in the public space/sphere by giving women their right to vote.

b) **Second Wave Feminism:** The feminist movement from the 1960s upto the early 1980s highlighted the notion ‘personal is political’. They argued for women’s equal access to public life in the domains of education, paid work and contraceptive technologies. Women’s movement in India had reference to second wave feminism of the West. Women’s movement in India re-visited the social institutions of caste, class, religion and family from a feminist perspective. According to Barrie Thorne (1987), feminists have conceptualised women as ‘active subjects’ of enquiry and allowed them to exercise their agency and diversity. For instance, within the sociology of occupation and profession, women were simply relegated to the margins of class structure and domestic space by assuming them to be static. On the contrary, men were given the direct access to production and class struggle, and hence became the agents of social change (p. 88). Therefore, feminists of this period challenged the construction of two separate gender spheres and broadened the definition of work by including visible and invisible labour. Women were re-conceptualized as active subjects by highlighting the following three themes:

1) women’s subordination to men is basic to their experiences;

2) women are defined in relation to their social category and not by their individual status; and

3) women are the actors and participants in all social institutions, hence the study of gender needs to be the basis for conceptualizing private and public institutions. (refer Thorne, 1987, p. 89).
c) **Third Wave Feminism:** It emerged in the 1980s to challenge the dominant nature of white western feminism and demanded the intersection between gender, race, class, ethnic identity and sexuality. These three feminist waves had inherent implications for social change by challenging the existing social institutions such as class, race, caste, education, family, marriage and political establishments which were inherently patriarchal in nature. Within these feminist waves, various forms of feminist discourses developed and looked at social change from a feminist’s theoretical lens. Moreover, different types of feminism believed in empowering women as agents of social change. Under the Third Wave Feminism, let us discuss two types of feminist discourses which initiated the process of change through women’s struggle.

d) **Cultural Feminism:** Cultural feminism celebrated the role of women as nurturer and caregiver. Protagonists of cultural feminism defended women’s position as closer to nature vis-à-vis men who are alienated from nature. Cultural feminism was much supported by Indian feminists like Vandana Shiva for celebrating the closer link between women’s body and the ecology.

e) **Eco-feminism:** Eco-feminism emerged as a powerful discourse in the mid 1970s as a response to the growing population and environmental destruction in the global south. Eco-feminism rests with the assumption that there are critical inter-linkages between women and ecology as these two categories succumb to male domination. Eco-feminists like Mary Daly, Susan Griffin and Starhawk went against “male culture for its aggression, individualism and hierarchical thinking” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 162). Different movements across the globe such as Chipko movement in India, Green Belt movement in Kenya, and Anti-Militarist movement in Europe are largely referred to as eco-feminist movements. The discourse of eco-feminism explored the interconnection between ecology, gender, class, race and ethnicity which bear the common thread of multiple dominance and oppression. It is a form of social movement that led to the realization that freedom for women can not be achieved by isolating their everyday struggle from the larger ecological struggle to preserve nature. For in stance, the Chipko movement in India signified peasant women’s role in the ecological struggle while going against the so called mainstream development. Women’s direct action of hugging trees to prevent their logging by the commercial firms expressed the gender difference in the field of ecological concern. To quote Mellor 1997:

Vandana Shiva argues that, as the movement developed, it exposed gender differences in the approach to development within the local communities.
While men wanted to create local commercial development by planting trees, women wanted to maintain and plant trees for fuel wood and fodder. It was at this point, Shiva argues, that the Chipko movement became "ecological and feminist." (p. 198).

The eco-feminist theory has brought into focus the question of how do the dominant development model neglects concerns of women and nature. On an international platform, ecofeminism allows feminist intervention into the development studies. According to Sturgeon, it is important to look at specific organizations like Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) which voiced women's issues within UN deliberations over the interconnection between environment and women. Eco-feminism allows women's intervention in shifting developmental focus to specify women's role in environment and development process. This has brought social change not only in women's lives but also provided platforms to both southern and northern women to equally participate in the development process. Change was brought through uneven and contested processes of negotiations between women's movement, UN bureaucracy and state structures. Eventually, development paradigms have emerged in alliance with feminist movements to bring out change in both praxis and policy.

**Women's Movement and Change in India: A Cross-Cultural Understanding**

Indian feminist movement was a conglomeration of diverse organizations and activities. India like the West, saw the emergence of feminists movements in the early twentieth century. In 1977, when the State Emergency was lifted, many women's groups started to function in different cities of India and openly articulated women's needs. As these groups consisted of women from different sections of society, they often faced the problem of organization and representation. Moreover, most of these women's groups developed networks with left, working-class, tribal, anti-caste movements and questioned women's oppression. In 1978, the first socialist-feminist conference was held in Mumbai and between 1979-80, women's groups started campaigns across India on issues of dowry death, rape, and unionizing women workers. The campaign against dowry death began in 1979 in Delhi and for the first time, the institution of family was projected as the site of women's oppression. The private/public binary was questioned by the women's groups in India and demanded state intervention to investigate dowry deaths. In India, three major campaigns such as: agitation against dowry murder, campaign against a rape by the police, and formation of women's trade union (SEWA) can reflect upon the relationship between feminism and social change. To summarize, women's movement in India had debated on two fundamental questions: women's representation and women's oppression which generated change in society.
Women created local level women’s associations and national level women’s associations such as All India Women’s Conference (Gangoli 2008). Though these organizations were working on women’s issues like women’s education and livelihood, they were less active immediately after independence. Feminist movements towards late 1970s became actively involved in women’s question and primarily focused on issues pertaining to violence against women perpetuated by the state agencies. The major campaign of the women’s groups was against the gang rape of a tribal girl by a group of policemen. This campaign highlighted various repressive mechanisms of the state agencies in dealing with violence against women and including cases of custodial rape (Gangoli, 2008). Simultaneously, anti-rape campaigns started in other states by different women’s groups. It reflects an inter-linkage between movements and the process of social change. What made Indian women’s movement different from the Western feminist movement is their constant struggle to fight against domestic violence while challenging the cultural notions and the politico-social institutions of India.

Feminists perceived social change by challenging such institutions and other organizations like trade unions as well. As articulated by Gangoli (2008), women have played an important role in the trade union movements, however women worker’s issues were never been given a space in the trade union struggles. The trade unions always functioned with the assumption that by focusing on women’s issues will divide the working class ideology. Feminists saw the struggle of trade union to be inherently patriarchal in nature that believed in the protection of the family structure and the position of the male worker. They raised questions against issues of domestic violence and sexual abuse which were hardly articulated by the trade union organizations. Feminist intervention was continuous in bringing change in the existing social structures.

Raka Ray (2000) in her book ‘Fields of Protest’ discussed the engagement of women’s movement in two cities of India, Bombay and Calcutta. She argues that it is the political field in which women’s movements of every city were embedded that determined the nature of women’s empowerment. Political field comprises of actors such as: state, political parties and women’s organization which are connected with each other in both friendly and oppositional manner. Hence the women’s question was differently articulated in Bombay and Calcutta. Let us look at the table below which shows the responses of thirty women activists in each city regarding important women’s issues in Calcutta and Bombay.
Table 3.1: Issues Important to Women in Calcutta and Bombay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Calcutta</th>
<th>Bombay</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment and Poverty</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against women</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>1:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consciousness</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>3:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and skill acquisition</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family-related Issues</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>1:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious fundamentalism</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>——</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low social status</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer issues</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>——</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State co-optation</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adopted from Ray (2000), p. 24*

The above table clearly shows the differential approach in the women’s movement in Bombay and Calcutta with regard to their focus of women’s issues. In Bombay, women’s movement has primarily focused on ‘violence against women’ as the cause of concern. On the other hand, women’s activists in Calcutta were concerned about employment and poverty eradication which has direct linkage with the state and economy. Ray (2000) argued that women’s movement in Bombay was influenced by the second wave feminism of the West; hence has been able to question the patriarchal power structure within the institutions of family. In Calcutta, feminism has challenged the state and economy by questioning the sexual division of labour within the family. This empirical study shows us the difference in perspectives between women’s movements which were located in specific socio-cultural, demographic and economic climates. For instance, women’s groups in Calcutta are politically affiliated organizations therefore their presence was felt in mainstream and oppositional politics. In Bombay, women’s groups are autonomous in nature, they operated in the protest field. Thus, social change is defined and demarcated in relation to the time, space and political climate in which each women’s movement is embedded.

**A Case of Maharashtra**

Padma Anagol (2013) in her book entitled, ‘The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920’ discussed the growth of women’s movement in India and its focus on social change. She looked at the growth of feminism from the
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period 1870-1920 which generated a movement of social reform from a feminist perspective. The first generation of Hindu female reformers belonged to the Prarthana Samaj which was headed primarily by the men. This social reform movement saw the institutions like widowhood and early marriage as areas of reform and as a result, several women were imparted education informally within the family. In the early half of 1870s, around 50-70 women gathered in the Prarthana Samaj to listen to lectures that led to the formation of Women’s Society in Maharashtra. The content of the lectures made women conscious about the gender ideology in the society and inspired women to learn other disciplines and form similar women’s groups to impart education and consciousness. Arya Mahila Samaj was the first women’s institution in Maharashtra that functioned with a proper organizational structure and ideology. The organization had two objectives;

1) To free women from being victimized by tradition;
2) To uplift them from their current social position as dependent beings.

The creation of a Women’s Press was conceptualized by the women reformers as the next step towards women’s empowerment. It was realized that women needed to be provided with a space to express their opinion freely about education, domestic affairs, religious and national identities. Women’s Press was in Marathi language and managed by women which allowed them to express their views without being rephrased by the menfolk. This shows that in India, feminism has developed in diverse fare and through the lived experiences of women. As Anagol (2013) argued, the awareness of women as a specific group and developing the women’s network or sisterhood were the two defining features of Indian feminism and social change.

3.5 WOMEN, DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE: INTER-RELATIONS AND CRITIQUE

Let us now understand the process of change in relation to development discourses starting from Women in Development (WID) in contestation with Gender and Development (GAD) which you have already read in the previous unit.

In the early 1970s, WID approach emerged as a shift in development studies to include women in the economic progress. The approach emphasized the invisible position of women as mothers and wives. The work of Ester Boserup recognised women as an economic unit in the agricultural sector. She criticized the mainstream development model of the Third World which failed to include women’s role in the modernization process in spite of their contribution in the agricultural and commodity production.“Boserup’s goal was to use development efforts to increase gender equity in Third World societies, as part and parcel of the process of modernization” (cited in Sturgeon, 2003, p. 97). WID paradigm was intertwined with international
feminist movement to disseminate policies of the Western state to the Third World countries. Therefore, many women-centric development projects helped in enhancing the stereotypical image of women as home makers and nurturers. Under the welfare approach, women were seen as passive agents of development or change. Boserup’s argues that women in the agricultural sector were eventually relegated to the periphery with the process of modernization and mechanization. She concluded that the introduction of new agricultural technologies had altered the sexual division of labour in the developing countries by displacing them from their traditional occupation. Boserup work became instrumental in recognizing WID as a significant field within development studies. Subsequently, separate sectors, departments and programmes were evolved within the field of Women in Development.

After the first UN conference on Women in Development in 1975, separate ministries were created in developing countries to put forth the women centric plans and policies at the National level. Under the Women’s Decade (1976-1985), Forward Looking Strategy (FLS) was formulated to bring about gender equality in the development process. As a result, equity approach came into existence with a view to integrate women into the economic growth. Emphasis was given to the intertwined relationship between women and poverty eradication. Therefore, women were targeted in the development programmes and attention was paid towards their access to education, training, and resources. The notion of equity was adopted form the Western feminist movements to induce change among the women of South. Later, the demand for gender equity was connected to the economic efficiency of the countries under the ‘anti-poverty’ approach. This approach projected women as valuable resources which need to be used for economic development of the country. With the expansion of the WID field, women were slowly integrated in the development process and often tapped as economic units by the state. Certain issues such as: women’s increasing workload, their extent of participation in the decision-making bodies, unequal wages etc. remained unanswered within the WID field.

3.5.1 Development Alternative with Women for a New Era (DAWN)

During the period of 1980s, feminists in the South emerged as an organized agency to critically analysis the deteriorating situation of women without any economic and ecological resources. In 1984, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) was created as a critique to WID’s Western development model of women’s empowerment. Many southern feminists argued that under the WID approaches, women were simply added to the existing policies and programmes rather than studying women as a political subject of enquiry (Sturgeon, 2003). Precisely, the DAWN approach focused on the alternative development model of women’s empowerment. It looked into the question of women’s autonomy/agency as a means to
gaining control over their bodies, sexualities and other productive resources like land (Braidotti et.al, 1994). Establishing women’s autonomous organization was seen as a significant step towards positioning women’s demands and issues with regard gender equality and equity. DAWN was seen as an alternative movement to challenge patriarchy that is rooted in institutions including family, state and the international bodies. DAWN and other women’s group from the Global South re-conceptualized this as Empowerment Approach, however, the approach had never gained support from the local and global institutions due to their inherent patriarchal structures (Braidotti et.al, 1994). Feminist groups within DAWN had an argument that the feminist movement in the South had on its own history of social change since 19th century. To quote Charkiewicz and Wieringa (2004) “DAWN having been an important force for political change, feminism in the South has grown within struggles for national liberation from colonialism, as well as in peasants’ and workers’ struggles” (p.116). DAWN was created with a view to understand women’s issues across structures of race, class, and regional differences.

This position was a critique of the materialist/positivist approaches of development and social change. On the other hand, the protagonists of DAWN approach argued, social change can come through linking the micro-level experiences of women in South with the macro-development paradigm. Their methodology of change was holistic, de-centralizing, and inclusive in nature. The DAWN members not only questioned the top-down approach of mainstream development paradigm but also provided the basis for exploring women’s multiple subordination. It linked women’s empowerment within the wider process of social, economic and political changes. For instance, the liberal distinctions between the private and public spheres, household and economy were questioned and dismantled. DAWN approach discussed women’s empowerment in relation to women’s increasing access to power. It discusses that women’s access to power will translate to men’s loss of power. Women’s control over material and non-material resources is a way of bringing social change in relation to gender.

Many of its principles got reflected in GAD approach to bring about gender-equity in spheres of political, economic and social domains. Several research works were undertaken under the three key areas including; reproductive rights, alternative economic model, and women and ecology. Under women and ecology, a strong inter-linkage was made between environmental crisis and the economic growth model of the South. To quote Peggy Antrobus “Third World woman’s first environment is her body. If her child is dying, it is useless to talk to her about trees” (Charkiewicz and wierina, 2004, P. 119). This quote suggests that every environmental crisis has its root cause in the growing economic disparities between South and North. For instance, GATT regulation, militarism, cash crop cultivation will have negative bearings on the environment and the women in particular.
3.5.2 Women and Development Policies: Understanding the Nature of Change

The policies of the Government of India in the five year plans between 1950-1980 perceived women as passive recipients of welfare programmes. From the Sixth Plan (1980-1985) onwards, policies were formulated according to the perspectives emerging at the international level. The government considered women as active agents of change and adopted empowerment approach, efficiency approach, equity approach and anti-poverty approach and some programmes based on welfare approach. In the Eleventh Plan, socio-economic development policies clearly reflected the rights-based approach and addressed the gender and social protection for women and marginalized. One such programme is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (MGNREGA), introduced in 2006 in 200 districts in the first phase, and subsequently throughout the country. The programme has many significant women related components like one-third quota for women, provisions of multi-layered monitoring and accountability procedures, the household basis of offered employment, crèche facilities and minimum employment guarantee in a year (100 days). Overall the programme was developed on the rights-based approach to bring changes in the lives and livelihoods of women and marginalized.

With regard to wages, the programme has provision for equal wage under the provisions of the Equal Remuneration Act (1976). Wages must be deposited in the bank/post office account of the worker. At the time of opening of the accounts, the Gram Panchayat (implementing agency) needs to spell out the difference of choice between individual and joint account. Female members of the family may be encouraged to open separate accounts if the family is headed by a male. The Programme also considers single member families as households. Along with one third of the workers, women representation should be ensured in monitoring committees and local level committees for social audit.

While analyzing the gendered impacts of the programme, high rates of women’s participation are reported in Kerala and Rajasthan. This success is due to programme implementation, levels of public awareness, local organizational networks and economic status of villagers. (Sudarshan, 2011). The Kerala government linked its existing Kudambashree (poverty alleviation programme) with MGNREGA. Kudambashree programme was started in 1998 and it created neighbourhood groups made of several households living below poverty line consisting of women. These women groups engaged in micro enterprise to improve the livelihood of the family. Women workers were mobilized into self help groups, work sites were managed by women, flexible working hours were given. Women’s previous experience of project management and working together further strengthened their position (Sudarshan, 2011).
A study conducted by Ashok Pankaj and Rukmini Tankha (2010) found that the women have benefitted as workers in this programme. MGNREGA has provided paid employment opportunities for women and it made them to emerge as change agents. Independent and monetized earnings increased their consumption choices and reduced economic dependence. They could visibly contribute to the household earnings and this resulted in increasing their bargaining capacity within the household. Apart from household level decision-making, women’s participation at the community level has significantly increased. A number of women participated in the gram sabha and ward sabha meetings, interacted with gram panchayat officials and government officials after the implementation of the programme. The study also pointed out that under this programme, women’s issues were raised with regard to increasing workload, physical and emotional strains at the work and difficulties for lactating mothers.

The above case study clearly reflects that the gender-sensitive design of the programme will bring change. At the same time there are bottlenecks also. These include women’s low bargaining capacity, increasing work load, illiteracy, power relations and lack of knowledge. Active participation of civil society and awareness on rights may bring change.

3.5.3 Critique of Change: The Case of Micro-finance

The history of women’s empowerment is interwoven with the policy intervention and women’s movement at large. The two development paradigms WID and GAD incorporated feminist thoughts and positive interventions were made towards empowering women. Under WID approach, policy intervention was made with regard to measuring women’s work and their access to education and employment. However, this approach was criticized due to its isolation from the social context in which gender identities, roles and relationships are formed. On the other hand, GAD paradigm emerged from the subjective experiences of grass-roots women. It focuses on how social structures influence the gender relation. According to Moser (1993), women’s experience of domination will differ in relation to their race, class, culture, economic position, and region (Drolet, 2010). Economic empowerment of women was connected with the social condition as it informs and influences the decision making process in the household. As a result, various programmes were launched in the mid 1990s as key initiatives of the state to improve the economic situation for women. The most significant programme was micro-finance which was linked directly with women’s livelihood security while granting women’s right to saving, credit, pension and insurance. Micro-finance was initiated with the vision to link up empowerment with women’s social, economic and political concerns. On the other hand, there is a growing body of literature critiquing the micro-finance programmes on the account that they have brought drudgery to women in the developing countries. 1990s saw the diffusion of Grameen
Bank model across developing countries. Feminists and development critics started to examine the two-fold aims of the micro-finance system, i.e., how the programme helps in reducing poverty and simultaneously brings women's empowerment. The programme and micro-credit schemes were criticized on the grounds that it was not possible to make a difference between women's empowerment and the caste/class/religion and community interplay in which women's interests are subordinated. Several studies were carried out on accessing the interrelationship between micro-credit programmes and empowerment. According to Kalpana (1997), the micro-credit services are primarily influenced by the socio-economic structure of the region, hence it is significant to analyse change with bearing in mind to what extent women have been able to deconstruct the power structures within the household and community levels. Let us look at one case study of micro-credit programmes in South India which has looked at women's empowerment and change from a feminist critical perspective.

Box 3.1: Case Study of Micro-credit Programme

The study examines a model of micro-credit delivery in South India. The study draws upon an anthropological enquiry of women's experience with micro-credit services in three villages of Tamil Nadu. 27 Self Help Groups (SHGs) were covered under this study. SHGs used to face barriers with regard to their access to institutional credit. Group leader's interface with a diverse range of institutional players such as bank, local administration, and NGOs has been an uneasy experience. SHGs were often threatened by the banks on the account of loan repayment. An elderly widow withdrew her membership from SHGs when she asked to repay her deceased husband's overdue loan. It was observed that woman's gendered and household related identities were often used by the banks as a strategy of loan repayment. An understanding of embodied gender identities of women as responsible for the repayment of husband's loan goes across all the institutions including banks, government bureaucracies, NGOs, and households. Bank officials pressure on individuals for loan repayment leads to inter-group conflict among, and intra-household tensions. SHGs sometimes used diverse strategies to realize loans from the bank. To quote, 'some groups deceived the bank officials by providing a letter declaring that the women (with overdue on the loans of their male kin) had quit the group, even when they continued to remain members' (Kalpana 1997, p. 59). Providing false letters and names are commonly adopted by the women members to secure loans from the bank. Women in the groups equally face high risks with regard to owning a collective enterprise. SHGs have also played a transformative role in negotiating with the state agencies and to some extent have been able to challenge patriarchies with the household and community. The role of women as transformative agents needs to be acknowledged and further
research undertaken. The ethnographic study found that institutions are not sensitive enough to deal with the women of poor communities. More so, institutions at various levels approach women members with stereotypical gender identities and roles.

1) Women were used as ‘soft targets’ within the household in accessing credit.

2) Women's financial independence was subordinated under the larger household interest.

3) Micro-credit programmes have failed to acknowledge the power dynamics between the market, state, and the community.

4) Empowerment was conceptualized in isolation of social structure.

5) Most micro-finance programs incorporated more than one agenda of development; hence an uneasy relationship often exists amongst the different stakeholders.

Activity:

Take any government programme to discuss nature of change from a feminist perspective.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

The unit discusses social change from a feminist perspective. It reflects that change needs to be conceptualized as a process in which women are active agents or natural participants. The unit interconnects change, women’s movement and development in the analysis to show the pattern of change in different time periods. Acknowledging women as agents of change, formation of women’s agency and formulation of women-inclusive policies are the three dimensions of social change. The discussion on feminist movement and women’s movement in India shows the actual struggle of women in theorizing the change process.
3.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss the contribution of women’s movement in creating women as subject in the process of social change.

2) Formation of women’s agency is an important aspect of social change. Explain.

3) Analyse the relationship between women, change and development. Use examples from other academic/research articles to write the answer.

3.8 REFERENCES


3.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Cornwall, A, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead (Eds.). (2008), Feminism in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges. New Delhi: Zuban