

UNIT 15 CASE STUDY: INDIVIDUAL RESISTANCE

Structure

- 15.0 Aims and Purpose
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Constitutional Provisions Affecting Women
 - 15.2.1 The Reality
- 15.3 Some Illustrations
 - 15.3.1 Women in Construction
- 15.4 The Protest
 - 15.4.1 Women's Narratives: Case Study-I
- 15.5 The Role of NGOs
 - 15.5.1 Case Study-II
 - 15.5.2 Case Study-III
- 15.6 Concluding Remarks
- 15.7 Clarification of the Terms Used
- 15.8 Some Useful Readings

15.0 AIMS AND PURPOSE

When we talk of women and development, we have to remember that the problems of women in India are not uniform, that 80% of them live in the rural areas; 90% of women workers are in the unorganised sector; 83% of them are in agriculture and construction.

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- understand the unequal status of women;
- understand how the development policies have further widened inequalities;
- understand the role of NGOs at the grass root level; and
- analyse how the NGOs have been spreading awareness.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Development planning is a political process and that it is the ideological perspective of the planners which make them decide about the allocation of resources and implementation of strategies.

It is a well-known fact that various policies adopted for agricultural modernization and industrial growth have further widened inequalities between different sections of people. It is the women who have been the worst victims of such widened inequalities.

Why the concerns of women have not been integrated in the development initiatives for long? What is the nature of women's voices in this regard? Let us examine some of these issues.

15.2 CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AFFECTING WOMEN

Indian women are beneficiaries of the rights guaranteed under the constitution in the same manner as Indian men. Article 14 ensures that the state shall not deny to any person equality

before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them. However, Article 15(3) empowers the state to make any "special provision for women and children", overriding the fundamental obligation of non-discrimination among citizens inter-alia of sex. This provision has enabled the state to make special provisions for women, particularly in the field of labour legislation like the Factories Act, this Mines Act, etc.

Some provisions of the Directive Principles of State Policy concern women indirectly or by necessary implication. The constitution guarantees its citizens equal opportunities and no discrimination takes place on the basis of race, religion, creed or sex. In India, however, there prevails a long gap between the constitutional mandate and women's reality.

15.2.1 The Reality

It was in 1974 that the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) came forward with their findings about the state of affairs actually prevalent. The CSWI has revealed the truth—that the vast majority of Indian women are yet to experience the equalities of legal status and opportunities guaranteed by our constitution. They have been victims of the patriarchal social order. Till today, the situation remains the same.

Against the backdrop of pervasive gender inequality, it becomes imperative to examine the extent to which women are in control of their lives; the extent to which they have an equal voice in matters affecting themselves and their families; control over material and other resources, access to knowledge and information.

Though the magnitude and the complexity of the problem defies any single women's efforts for an impacting change, yet individual voices of concern and resistance is an important beginning. It has the potential for large-scale mobilisation against gender discrimination. It is important to learn not just 'about' women but 'from' themselves. This unit documents voices of protest from individual women and their detailed narratives.

15.3 SOME ILLUSTRATIONS

15.3.1 Women in Construction

In the cities and towns, we find women workers in great numbers — breaking stones, digging the earth, carrying bricks, carrying soil, contributing in the construction of roads, houses, shopping complex, school, colleges and the list seems to be never ending. If you ask them about their life-pattern, you would come to know where they come from, what made them come to the cities, whether their children go to schools, the school which were built by them with their blood and sweat. You would come to know most of them have no homes, they live by the road side, in the make shift home and after the construction, they move on to yet another construction site.

And if you ask them how much they earn and compare the wage with the wages earned by the men-folk, you would realise the great disparity that exists in the wages between men and women. And if you go deeper into the problem, you would come to know that the money which is due to them are not paid to them as per law. You would come to know that much less is being paid to them and the 'daily wage' is actually not paid daily, but every fortnight or sometimes after one or two months.

After the whole day's work, they all would queue up in front of the "meth" (accountant) and on receiving the money they would put their "thumb print" in the register in all trust. They did not have any idea about the kind of mal-practices going on regarding the payment of wages. There were moments when some of women would voice discontent about the unequal payments made to them and to their men-folk. However, most of their discontent remain unexpressed. As earning a livelihood is the priority they are all there at the construction site, breaking stones, carrying the soil, digging the earth. They have no choice.

However inspite of such limitations there are women's voices. We will narrate a case here. It was in the 1991-92 that the construction of the Agra National High Way to Palawale had

begun. There were construction workers men and women from the nearby villages of Jaipur like Khedi, Palawale, Khokala who were employed for the work. They belonged to communities like Koli, Bohai, Shoki.

It was in one of the “Awareness Camp for Women” run by an NGO called **Bal Rashmi Society** in Jaipur that the women became conscious of their right to equal wages. It was further revealed that the “meth” was involved in an exploitative tactic in which he would ask these women to put their thumb print against fictitious names and would not pay them anything, saying they have not worked at all. Thereby the “meth” would take the money depriving the workers.

15.4 THE PROTEST

Let us listen to a woman, who had voiced her protest and find out whether the protest had led to any kind of positive settlement.

15.4.1 Women’s Narratives: Case Study I

Choti Devi Says: “I come from village Palawale. One day my husband came home and told me that we would be working at the road construction site, I felt relieved. I thought to myself we would save some money to buy clothes for our children. We haven't been able to buy them clothes for a long time. Every time we get work at construction sites, I tell myself we would buy clothes for our children. But the wages do not let us. There are times, when the amount of wages given to us are too meagre to feed our children properly. Our children also have become habituated to sleep empty stomach. The basic things needed to survive—food, clothes, home—we are unable to provide to our children. During rains, the rain water seeps through our hut. We have been planning to do something about it but the money we earn is spent in providing food only, that too not wholesome food. There are times when our children suffer diarrhoea after having eaten some unknown fruits from the nearby bush. The older children, however, do not commit such mistakes because they already have gone through hunger which teaches them about different plants and wild fruits, which ones are to be eaten, which ones are to be avoided.

My eldest daughter looks after the little ones. She is their mother in the real sense.

When the road from Agra to Palawale was being built, we began to work there. We reached in the morning at the construction site and worked till evening. When we came home, we were so tired that our body felt like logs. In the end when the “meth” (accountant) gave us money, I felt sometimes that why it was less than our men-folk. I thought to myself we all worked from dawn to evening and do the same work but when it came to wages, we were paid less. They would be given Rs. 27 and we would be given sometimes Rs. 18 and sometimes Rs. 20.

And then one day, the meth didn't give us any money, saying we haven't worked at all. He asked us to put our thumb print and we did. That he said he would give us the money the next day. And the next day he said, “How can I give you money? You haven't worked at all.” We were absolutely stunned. The whole week, we had worked so hard and now he refused to give us our due. Some of us were really angry and we began to fight with that “meth” who never even looked at us and just left the place, carrying the money in the bag, the money which we had earned with our sweat and blood”.

Further, *Choti Devi Says:* “I come from Khedi village where the Bal Rashmi Society has a home for the homeless children, Bal Rashmi Society meets the women in the villages and tell us how to take care of our health, our children; why we should send our children to school, about the laws which says men and women should get equal pay for equal work. When I started working at the Palawale road construction site, I used to grumble when Rs. 18 was paid to women and Rs. 27 to the men. But that time, we never thought about any kind of protest. Every morning we have to reach the site and it would be late evening when we could go back home. Where is the time to do anything else? But when the “meth” didn't pay anything, saying we haven't worked at all we decided to go to **Bal Rashmi Society** and do something about it.

With the help of **Bal Rashmi Society**, we did protest. The **Bal Rashmi Society** went to the Tehsildar who asked the “meth” to show the register, but unfortunately when he saw our names didn’t enter in the register, he also began to speak the same language as that of the meth. Then we realized what the meth had done. He had entered some other names in the register and against those names, our thumb prints were taken. And so claiming we had not worked, he had taken the whole amount of money.

The **Bal Rashmi Society** took the case to the High Court but as there was no evidence, the order was given in favour of the “meth”. Since we couldn’t read, we had put our thumb print against some other names. And in the case of payment, the amount of wages, shown in the register was much more than what was paid to us.

Through the **Bal Rashmi Society** has not been able to give any immediate relief to the women workers like Choti Devi, it gave them enormous confidence to raise voice against injustice. Choti Devi says, “Now, we are aware of the fact that we can not be asked to work for more than eight hours. Moreover, the “meth” in many places has stopped abusing us because he knows we won’t take it.

Another interesting thing that has happened is that our men-folk have accepted the fact that we should be paid equal wages for equal work. Initially, they protested saying men should be paid more wages than women. They claimed that they worked more than women. It hurt their ego that they were paid equal wages like us. We would say “OK, you dig the earth-but what about us, when we carry the earth the whole day, constantly on our head?” Now, they are also aware of the fact that there exists a law which says men and women should be paid equal wages and this awareness was brought about by **Bal Rashmi Society**”.

15.5 THE ROLE OF NGOS

In our country, there are several non-governmental organisations engaged in developmental work, related to women and children. **Bal Rashmi Society** is one of the NGO’s set up in 1972, in Jaipur. It was set up by Mrs. Alice Garg, who wanted every child to grow up in a healthy atmosphere, where no one would be exploited, and no one would die due to a lack of basic needs in life.

The society was set up to work for the children but gradually it expanded and took the whole family into its fold. It has a home for the homeless children at Khedi, near Jaipur, and has been working both in the urban and rural areas through awareness camps and non-formal education centre in Jaipur district and Bhilwara, Dausa and Tonk districts of Rajasthan. The beneficiaries are from the communities of scavengers and from the Baitwar, Kotis, Sansis, Kajairs and Bhils Castes and tribes. It was in 1981 that **Bal Rashmi Society** constructed around 200 homes for them in urban slums and it was the effort of **Bal Rashmi Society** that safe drinking water, sanitation and electricity were made available. For their children, schools were started in the slums of Jaipur. All these had a positive effect on their life-style.

In distant villages, **Bal Rashmi Society** had organised women’s awareness camps in which they are made aware of their rights-economic, social and political.

Bal Rashmi Society has been working at the priority area related to women’s empowerment. There is equal participation and the programmes are taken to their door step.

It is the income generation programme which has made a positive change in the lives of women. **Bal Rashmi** makes project based loans available to them from Rashtriya Mahila Kosh and it is this economic independence which has supported the women in finding a voice of their own, in their family, in their community. Let us listen to some more of the women’s voices.

15.5.1 Case Study-II

Lachma Bai says: “I come from village Lalpura, I am one of the several women who were benefited by the loan given to us by **Bal Rashmi Society**. In our village there are money lenders who charge exorbitant interest. In the past we had to take loan from them only. I still shudder at the thought of the plight we had to undergo while repaying the loan. It seemed

never ending and that all our life we would have to pay back the interest. We worked day and night and still had very little money left to feed our children. It was during **Nukta** function that we had to take the loan to feed the village various traditional food and sweets. Sometimes we were to take loan for rituals concerning the departed soul. Later, we were to repay the loan with a high rate of interest”.

“And then I came to the know about **Bal Rashmi Society** which had held a meeting in our village. They told us about how to take care of our health, to become aware of laws which are there to benefit us. And then said they would give us loan at 4% rate of interest. I couldn’t believe my ears. They also said they would give loans to women and I was so very happy. I came back home, told my husband about **Bal Rashmi Society**. He didn’t believe it. You see, men don’t believe when their wives say something which they themselves have not heard before. They think we women are fools”.

“However, after talking to other men in the village, when he came home, he looked convinced. And that day, for the first time in my life, I took part in the discussion about what we would do with the money. I suggested that we would buy a pair of goat with that money and the goat dung which sells at a good price to make “khaad” would help us to pay back our loan quickly so that we would be able to lead our lives without the constant worry about the loan.

We initially purchased 2 goats. Now these have multiplied to 13. It was with that loan money which was made available to us by **Bal Rashmi Society** at such minimal interest rate that we were able to pay back to the money lender in our village. Now, we are free from the pressure of the loan. The goat has been proved to be of immense value to us. The milk and the manure (goat shit) have helped us to lead a life, unthinkable in the past. We are able to send our children to school. We are able to give them food to our content. You see, when they ask for some more snack or one more chapati and when we are able to give them what they ask for, we feel very happy. Our eldest daughter had seen the worst when she was growing up. We could not afford to fill even that tiny stomach. But now, things are better. And we hope things would get better with the passage of time and never go worse”.

15.5.2 Case Study-III

Shima Bai Says: “If a decade ago, I was told that I could do business on my own, I would have laughed at the thought itself. And now, I am on my own, and in reality I have my own business to run.

It was Dhanno bai who told me about “**Bal Rashmi Society**” how it had helped her to seek justice in the court of law, how her husband started paying money every month for the daughter’s maintenance. You see, Dhanno had been thrown out of the house along with her daughter, by her husband, she didn’t know where to go, how to bring up her six year old daughter. And then, she came to know about **Bal Rashmi Society**. She went to the society and it was the society which got her maintenance money from her husband for the daughter.

When my husband passed away, I was at the mercy of my sons and daughters-in-law, I wasn’t treated well and I had to think how to earn some money so that I wouldn’t be a burden on them.

When Dhanno told me that **Bal Rashmi Society** makes loans available to women at 4% rate of interest, I decided to go for it and do some business.

Dhanno told me about other women who all had started business of their own, and then I decided to have a fruit stall. I took the loan from **Bal Rashmi Society** and started a fruit stall in my village **Kanota**, at the Bus Stop. From Jaipur, I buy fruits and sell them at Kanota.

It began to sell so well that I paid all the loan money within a short period. And now both of my sons help me in the business. My daughters-in-law would now get food for me during day time at the fruit stall.”

15.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Documentation of individual women's voice against discrimination is important to comprehend the complexity of the problem and the resistance faced by them. It widely reflects that the forces against women are multiple and deep-rooted. To be empowered, it is necessary for women to interact and organise themselves. These case studies suggest that individual women have the courage to take the risk and to voice their resistance. What they need is only the alternative initiatives and organising efforts.

15.7 CLARIFICATION OF THE TERMS USED

Scribe : A learned writer

Documentation : Process of systematically collecting and organising documents of specific areas.

15.8 SOME USEFUL READINGS

Sinha, G. P. and Ranade, S.N. (1975) *Women Construction Workers*, Delhi; Allied Publishers.

Anand Suchitra et. al. (1986) *Women at Work in India: A Bibliography*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.