

Empowerment of Women in Tirhut Division

Chandni chavala NET, JRF

B.R.A. Bihar University,

Muzaffarpur

The need of the hour is to empower women so that they can make an informed choice in birth control and go ahead in life for their betterment. Every mother dreams of the best for her offspring, whatever her own economic status. That may not be possible today in every household, but it is imperative that the state or country keeps this goal in sight.

Tirhut division of Bihar has been famous since time immemorial due to the influence of the legendary mother Sita, saint king Janaka and seer Valmiki, hence it is an awakened geographical entity. In this region women have been getting honour of the highest order.

This division occupies about 18% geographical area of Bihar having 20% share in Bihar's total population. The density of population as per 2011 census was 1302 persons per km² and literacy rate of male and female was 73% and 53.5% respectively, almost near the average of Bihar.

In an agrarian region where rate of decadal growth of population exceeds 28, role of women becomes even more important. In this context the study of empowerment of women has been taken into consideration. Women in Tirhut division of Bihar are a mixed lot: Some are well in control of their destinies, others depend to a large extent on their husbands or fathers and brothers, and yet others are denied even the freedom of thought. Somewhere along the line there are also women who actually run their households single-handedly, not because perchance they are separated or widowed, but because their men would have it so. This is a predominant feature of the below-poverty-line (BPL) families.

Women from the upper strata of society are more aware of the advantages of restricted families; those living in extreme poverty have little, if any say, in planning their families. In fact, it can be safely asserted that there is no planning. Conception happens by accident, and pregnancy is gone through because it must have been ordained so. Worse, such families may not want to exercise birth control, for every additional child can mean supplementary income when he or she grows up by working in the fields, shops or homes, or even begging. The spending on such children is of course negligible, and neglect of their health and value systems almost criminal.

A 104 million strong population is the only milestone in family planning that Bihar seems to have succeeded in attaining, others like social and family welfare being still distant dots on the horizon. The population growth rate has come down merely a notch, hovering round the spending on population control measures is inversely proportional to the success achieved, and the small family norm is still anathema to a vast number of Indians. The fact that in the last six years alone, population has grown tremendously must have shocked only a few. On May 11, 2011 the figure officially stood at a dreaded 2.4 crores. Even that, however, does not seem daunting enough. The country's population control budget, which was a measly Rs. 65 lakh at one time, now stands at a whopping Rs. 3,520 Crore. The outcome is no different, in Bihar too. In the fifties, sixties and seventies, the population grew at an alarming 2.5 percent per annum. In the nineties, the growth remained at the same level. But the base had by then become massive already.

The National Population Policy, unveiled on February 15, 2000, targets 1 percent growth by the year 2045. Adequate measures, implemented effectively, will in large measure dictate the success of the policy. In fact, the Policy unequivocally declares that "India's current annual increase in population of 15.5 million is large enough to neutralise efforts to conserve the resource endowment and environment".

Social security, possible abroad because of limited populations, is an impossible alternative as of now. The next best option would be to impart more knowledge and opportunity to those who can effectively exploit them. Women can be made more aware of the need to control families by resorting to literacy drives and educative campaigns. It is equally important to endow them with the power to execute their will the will to withstand social and family pressure, and to assert their right to control the growth of their families. Emotional and economic security stems from strong family bonds, which get weakened when women cannot feed their young ones because of inadequate family incomes. The search for employment takes them away from home, leaving their children prey to neglect, hunger, disease and even exploitation. In extreme cases, women are even forced into prostitution.

The answer may not lie in taking jobs to women, but it can certainly ease their burdens, if enough employment avenues were available closer to home, rational training programmes conducted that can lead to assured incomes with flexibility in work hours, child-care centres set up, etc. Well kept, conveniently located day-care homes, dedicated train or bus services to commercial centres, more congenial work environments, etc., are all major factors that can both encourage full-time working women and increase their productivity levels.

Important Aspect

An important aspect that must not be lost sight of is the health of women. Pressures of finances and work lead in most cases to neglect of health. The girl child, especially in poorer households, is the first casualty when it comes to an axe on spending. As she grows older, her responsibilities force her to neglect her health even more. This, in turn, affects her childbearing capability. Malnutrition, lack of prenatal care and inadequate medical attention during childbirth compound the dangers. A women's welfare organisation has in fact pointed out that barely 25 per cent births in the country take place under medical supervision.

Indeed statistics put deaths related to pregnancy/childbirth in India at a regrettable 330 a day. A recent report, quoting the "State of the World's Mothers 2000" study compiled by "Save the Children," says maternal mortality rates are the lowest in Norway, followed by Canada and Australia. The highest rate among 106 nations listed in the study is in Niger: one out of nine women die in childbirth, while in Norway it is one in 7,300. India ranks 85th in this safety chart (one in every 22 women die in childbirth) a poor showing by any standard.

Linkage

The report has highlighted the linkage between maternal mortality and female education as well as access to family planning services. The population policy has devoted considerable attention to the empowerment of women for achieving the goal of population control.

These facts are recognised in the National Population Policy document as well. It aims at reducing the maternal mortality ratio to below 100 per one lakh live births:

"Maternal mortality is not merely a health disadvantage; it is a matter of social injustice. Low social and economic status of girls and women limits their access to education, good nutrition, as well as money to pay for health care and family planning services. The extent of maternal mortality is an indicator of disparity and inequity in access to appropriate health care and nutrition services throughout a lifetime, and particularly during pregnancy and child-birth, and is a crucial factor contributing to high maternal mortality," it avers.

Programmes for safe motherhood, universal immunisation, child survival and oral rehydration have been combined into an integrated reproductive and child health programme, which also includes promoting management of sexual and reproduction-related infections. It admits that women's health ah. Nutrition problems can be largely prevented or mitigated through low cost interventions designed for low income settings.

The Policy has sought the active cooperation of voluntary non. government organisations and the private sector for collaborating in community and government programmes through specific commitments in the areas of basic reproductive and child health care, basic education and in securing higher levels of women's participation in the paid workforce.

Among the operational strategies enumerated in the Policy statement, one is to “empower women, pursue programmes of social a forestation to facilitate access to fuel wood and fodder. Similarly, pursue drinking water schemes for increasing access to potable water. This will reduce long absences from home and the need for large numbers of children to perform such tasks”. The Policy also envisages that in any reward scheme intended for household levels, “priority may be given to energy saving devices such as solar cookers, or provision of sanitation facilities, or extension of telephone lines. This will empower households, in particular women.”

Timely Access

The Policy has highlighted the relevance of improving the technical skills of maternal and child health care providers. At the same time, it acknowledges that providing the means without timely access to them would defeat the very purpose of the exercise. Stress has therefore been laid on the need to ensure adequate transportation at village, sub centre and zila parishad levels to reach primary and community health centres. “Identifying women at risk is meaningful only if women with complications can reach emergency care in time”, it points out.

These can be found in both the Urban slums and satellite colonies that mushroom around middle-class localities, but also in rural areas where joblessness is widespread. Women may be tilling the land, working as domestic helps for upper-class households, or performing the most menial tasks -just to sustain their children and drunken or drug-addicted husbands.

At the end of it all, it can be summed up in one phrase: economic empowerment. In whatever measure a woman is able to, her role in earning for the family is gradually increasing. For the wealthier ones, it could be a means for self-fulfilment and self-sufficiency; for the middle-class woman it could be as much a career need as a supplementary income for the family. The lower-class wife, mother or daughter is the real working woman invariably struggling for the family’s daily bread. Society has an obligation to improve the economic lot of all women, because that is the prerequisite for its holistic development. It need not necessarily arise from jobs for women. It can come about with employment for those men who are willing to work but have no gainful avenue. Those who are able-bodied but prefer to let their women toil even as they themselves indulge in wasteful pursuits, need to be redeemed from such sloth.

Even the humblest housewife could contribute better to the national effort by purely managing her home finances better, if only her husband earns enough to feed their family and to save some for future exigencies. If she can be spared for working away from home, the additional income adds to the family’s financial strength. She can look after her children better, guarding jealously the privileges that a decent income can bestow. She will need to depend less on larger numbers of children to beg or to work at wayside tea shops. Her economic independence, whether through her own contribution or stemming solely from her husband’s income, will enable her to justify a small family. It will be her health and her hearth that will be the deciding factors, and she can afford to take a decisive stand. She could be in a position to weigh her options in terms of the number of children she can rear within her means, and afford for them a healthy and decent life.

The middle-class woman is probably the most divided, for her career almost always has to play second fiddle to the family’s need for funds. Caught in the dilemma of family v/s career, she opts less for saving and career progression and more for meeting expenses towards education and consumer goods. Government policy has ensured some compulsory savings where salaried persons are concerned. Tax incentives for even non-salaried incomes exist in the form of provident fund exemptions, national saving certificates, insurance covers, etc. May be the time has come to advise some women-oriented tax-saving schemes that offer them special opportunities to hoard up some a disposable surplus. Changing fortunes, family tensions or social pressures can land the less fortunate women in dire straits.

Efforts must also be made to set up office and commercial complexes closer to residential clusters, with women living close by being preferred for jobs there. This may sound somewhat skewed in favour of women, but many of them who can afford to work when their children are away, cannot do so because of the long commuting hours.

Conclusion

The small-income family that does not fall in the tax net does not have the necessary incentive to save, and mostly ends up in debt and disaster. There is an urgent need to instil a sense of belonging to the nation among the poorer sections of society, which can come about only if there is a widespread recognition of the fact that every adult has both a right and a duty to put in labour and be paid for it. A conducive environment that encourages this by true practice can lessen crime and corruption and bring economic prosperity in turn. The government has framed some well-intentioned schemes, and in small ways they are bringing about an economic and social improvement in women's status. Through self-help groups and self-employment schemes, many a woman has declared herself much better off financially. It needs a more concerted, all-round effort by both government agencies and corporate as well as individuals to ensure that such opportunities multiply and bring out the best through community development.

Self-sufficient mothers, who run their homes efficiently, may earn by packaging foodstuffs at home or by working on computers in offices, assuredly impart a sense of confidence and self-reliance among their young ones too. The coming generations can be confident, self-sustaining citizens who are not a drain on the country's assets, but are valuable assets in themselves.

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