

Engendering New Visions of Gender

Shilpa Jain

Income generation, microcredit, savings groups, girls' education, female literacy, reproductive health: these are the primary strategies by which women's development is promoted in today's Human or Alternative Development discourse. International mandates like the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) have set the agenda for women's development, an agenda which continues to be carried forward today by national and local Development organizations.¹ In fact, so pervasive is the 'gender issue' that policymakers, academics, and practitioners cannot carry out a survey, write a proposal, fund a project, or evaluate a program without some mention of it. Now, just so everyone can breathe a sigh of relief, gender has too made its way into the discussion on learning societies.

Many might call Development's attention to gender a 'victory for feminism' or a 'victory for women everywhere' (notably, these are not the same thing). But in this article, I seek to argue that the current discourse on gender in Development actually carries on the colonial tradition of 'saving' the brown woman and, as such, is dehumanizing and exploitative. While it is certain that girls and women have a crucial role to play in unfolding learning societies, it is also certain that this will not occur, as long as the means and ends of Status Quo Development continue to be promoted in the name of 'women's development'.

In the second half of this article, I will focus specifically on the area of girls' education. Having had experience working on this issue in several countries, I feel that the case-study of girls' education provides a micro-illustration of what is problematic with the overall 'Women in Development' discourse. I conclude by discussing how the context of learning societies presents a great opportunity for challenging and redefining many oppressive relationships and opens the door for generating new visions of gender for the 21st century.

Suffering from 'Catching Up' Syndrome

Despite the existence of multiple frameworks of feminism — equal rights, cultural, eco, separatist, socialist, Third World — when the issue of gender is brought up in mainstream Development parlance, it calls for 'equality'.² The subtext here is that girls and women have been left behind boys and men and should receive help in order to 'catch up' to them. For example, all of the statistics related to gender in the UNDP Human Development Report (2000) — literacy rate; primary, secondary and tertiary school enrollment; economic activity; unemployment rate; work time; and political participation — rank females against males. The underlying assumption here is that when there is parity between these two figures, then, and only then, will society be on the road to equality.

At first glance, many readers might ask, "Well, what is wrong with that? After all, today we see how women are struggling to make ends meet, how their position is so much worse than that of men. Women are 51% of the world's population, they perform 60% of the world's work, but they accrue only 10% of the world's income and own 1% of the world's land."³ Of course, they need to catch up — that's really what equality is all about!"

The Dominant Understanding of Equality and Development

Such responses illustrate the numerous symptoms of the Catching Up Syndrome. It begins with the way in which equality is conceived — as 'sameness' or equivalence in the world of men. Many gender and development advocates actually state this in no uncertain terms: "In no major field of activity — economics, education, health or government — have women attained *equal* status with men."⁴ It thus seems clear that, on one level, the current discourse on women in development lacks any vision of what women are and can be — both for themselves and to their communities — beyond the narrow notions of what men currently are, what they do, how they live, etc.

On another level, the Catching Up Syndrome promotes a notion of global 'sameness' among women, across all societies. In the beautifully plastic name of equality, this comparative deficit perspective (where women of the South, or women of color, are *always* in need of Development) is slapped on to every cultural and social environment in the world. Although this view may not surprise those of us familiar with globalization rhetoric, it nonetheless deserves to be exposed. The homogenizing standards of gender (and Development at large) first and foremost devalue the importance and relevance of diverse contexts and relationships. Perhaps it shocks Development agents to realize that not every grouping of peoples in the world desires what the UN, World Bank, or

even their own government deem as ‘quality standards of living’ — that maybe (just maybe) not everyone aspires for the wasteful and destructive lifestyle of the rich North.⁵

But worse than its disregard for diversity, is how the Catching Up Syndrome further entrenches unaccountable mega-systems (the State, the Market, the Education System, etc.) as the legitimate arbitrators/facilitators of human progress and justice. Being Developed means having ‘accepted’ the government as the only **real** vehicle for collective decision-making; the market economy as the only **real** outlet for work; schools as the only **real** spaces of learning; and hospitals as the only **real** source of healthcare. Women can only be considered Developed when they meet the official indicators set forth by international agencies and reinforced by national and local organizations. And they can only meet these indicators by fostering or deepening their dependency on these systems.

This is problematic for at least two reasons: First, none of these systems are in the hands of the vast majority of women (or men, for that matter). In other words, women have no serious power or control over them. Therefore, what these systems do, how they do it, the values they operate by, the end results they seek — all must be silently ‘accepted’ if one is to be Developed. Second, the expansion and entrenchment of (il)legitimate systems leads to the degradation of indigenous customs and traditions. Becoming dependent on these mega-systems requires one to simultaneously reject all other ways of interacting, organizing, learning, healing, etc. In fact, these other ways of living are not only deemed irrelevant and outdated, but are indeed seen as barriers to achieving ‘equality’ and ‘success’ in these systems.

With this perspective, the Development discourse extends the colonial discourse of *sati* and *purdah*,⁶ where white British men took up the cause of ‘emancipating’ brown Indian women from the evils of their societies (although these great liberators had no problem repressing women’s movements in Britain). Like their colonial predecessors, Development agents do not make any effort to understand local traditions, much less engage with them in meaningful ways. For example, members of Mahila Samakhya (a government-sponsored women’s NGO) could give me no response, when I asked them to tell me something positive about the village communities they worked in. However, they had no problem rattling off a generic, oft-repeated list of the negative aspects of rural communities.⁷ Quick to label all *paramparas*⁸ as backward, abusive and oppressive, Development agents rarely attempt to encourage serious dialogues among people about their customs. Rather, in the name of freedom and equality, they celebrate individualism and the spread of modern institutions and technologies, often at the cost of destroying interdependent relationships and cultural fabrics.

The Dominant Understanding of Women

To enhance dependency on these mega-systems and further eradicate diverse *paramparas*, Development agents have conveniently ensured that the prescribed indicators of equality and development can only be measured for accuracy by professional ‘experts’. These experts play a dual role. On one level, they determine the parameters by which women (and whole societies) are measured and ranked and, at the same time, they have total control over assessing how women fare within these parameters. Thus they not only contribute to framing the dominant understanding of Development, but they also play a major role in determining the terms by which women are defined and perceived.

On an even more perverse level, these experts take on the extra burden of informing ‘ignorant’ women of how oppressed they are. The assumption is that, without such conscientization, women might never come to such ‘realizations’ on their own. For example, the same members of Mahila Samakhya told me that before they went and explained it to them, the village women did not know how exploited and badly treated they were.⁹ Such a paternalistic perspective towards women not only demeans their intelligences and capacities, but it again belittles all beliefs and practices that do not fit within the urban elite lenses of most women’s NGOs. (It also conveniently ignores the exploitation that goes along with the project of Modern Development.)

Those suffering from Catching Up Syndrome also display symptoms of reductionism. In the vast majority of Development programs, girls and women are only considered in terms of their reproductive or productive capacities. Again, Development agents say this in clear terms: “Women are the key to reducing hunger and poverty, promoting family welfare, finding sustainable solutions to the exploitation of natural resources and contributing to overall economic growth in the Third World.”¹⁰ Indeed, be it an income generation scheme, a family planning program, or

a literacy campaign — nearly every action reinforces the idea that women are either baby-makers or wage-earners, and therefore should be helped to improve their capacities in these (and only these) areas.

The forces of fundamentalism and globalization ('Jihad vs. McWorld'¹¹) help to extend this reductionist and dehumanizing view of women. For example, the global woman is portrayed as an 'empowered' consumer, typically urban and 'educated', while the traditional woman is depicted as the devoted and subservient caretaker of the home and family, the preserver of culture and (by default) of the Nation. By taking over both 'the public' and 'the private',¹² globalization and fundamentalism (two sides of the same coin) equally reduce women and girls and then capitalize on these reductions to serve their own interests. While globalizers typically use the mass media to parade women as aggressive, sexual objects, fundamentalists rely on religious institutions to present them as demure, virtuous objects.¹³ Neither perspective is interested in considering women and girls as full human beings, with infinite potentials, interests, abilities, intelligences, dreams, etc. In fact, such a holistic understanding of women rarely seems to cross the minds of many so-called gender activists.

It is worth noting here that the project of Development collaborates with globalizers to vilify fundamentalism. This 'alliance' proves useful from at least two angles. First, it hinders the emergence of the serious counter-Development, counter-Globalization critiques that might grow out of different understandings of the world, of human beings, and of human life. Second, it provides a moral justification for Development/Globalization, again along the colonizing lines of 'saving' brown and black people from their worst enemies: themselves. Indeed, in the South, we are continuously told that Globalization will help to 'protect' us from the traditionalists — a label which, incidentally, is tacked on to anyone who values any aspect of the past or any of the existing traditions, languages, etc. that have not been crushed by modernization. Of course, this moral high ground not only eases the conscience of globalizers, but it also guarantees them generations of loyal 'subjects', i.e. those women who are forever indebted to globalizers for defending them from fundamentalist attacks.

In the specific case of micro-credit (the latest cure-all for the world's problems), researchers have also found that women have been reduced to sources of capital.¹⁴ Because of the easy access they have to loans, women become equated with income. Men of their communities then use women to extract money from banks, thereby further narrowing women's roles, own expressions and activities and further binding them to the Market as commodities or capital. Not surprisingly, micro-credit (as well as income generation or savings schemes) also reinforces the reductionist view of women as consumers. Such 'benevolent' schemes — which focus on enhancing women's purchasing power and therefore dependency on an unaccountable 'free' Market — help to ensure high profits for those global and national corporations seeking to exploit this substantial part of the rural market.¹⁵

In addition to reducing women to commercial objects, the project of Modern Development reduces women and girls to sheer numbers. They must be 'mobilized' or 'registered' or 'enrolled', so that the Development industry can make their body counts and meet their targets. Indeed, the emphasis in the majority of Development schemes is always on numbers: how many girls have entered schools, how many women belong to savings groups, etc. Thus again, it seems women's physical presence is more important than their full humanity. This is partly a result of how women are perceived and partly a result of the inherent quantitative and 'performance-oriented' nature of Development projects.

The Dominant Understanding of the Solutions

The other means used for Catching Up are problematic for similar reasons. For the most part, highly state-ist, centralized laws and policies are suggested to prompt/enforce actions to ensure greater equality. Rights are demanded from national legislative systems and from UN charters — the right to equal pay; the right to education; the right to safe abortions; the right to political representation — and the police/army are called upon to protect such rights when violated. Indeed, whether from the mainstream or from 'alternative' perspectives on women's development,¹⁶ the legal protection angle has been the primary means by which 'equality' has been pursued. It is usually supplemented by various Development schemes: mobilization campaigns, self-help groups, etc.

Yet, for the most part, these so-called solutions actually exacerbate exploitation and injustice. Not only do they increase women's dependency upon — and hence vulnerability to — mega-systems (for reasons described above), but they also limit understandings of Self and Society. Forced into a 'rights' framework, we only think about how to

make demands on the Government in order to protect ourselves from it — and from each other. We do not seem to understand that perhaps the decisions of that State (along with its partners, the Market, NGOs, Mass Media and Schooling) are contributing to the dire condition of the world's social majorities, both women and men. Perhaps the State does not have it in its interest to 'protect' women; indeed if it did, then why, *even within the State's own paradigms/measures of 'success'*, have women's situations worsened over the last fifty years?¹⁷ In fact, the more one thinks about it, the more it seems that legal recourse actually usurps women's power and jeopardizes them. It manipulates them (and the poor in general) to look at each other as enemies, either fighting over scarce resources or fearing violent attacks from men. In this way, it encourages them to fixate on narrow notions of identity, rather than to reject a System that abuses all of us.¹⁸ And simultaneously it increases the control of the State and its partner-institutions over our lives (who, incidentally, have become richer and more powerful over the last fifty years).

Exposing the rhetoric of rights requires that we also expose the rhetoric of empowerment and choice, which stand alongside it and are just as much of a threat. As one of the most common buzzwords in today's Development discourse, 'empowerment' is often tossed around but rarely defined.¹⁹ I therefore attempt a simple translation: Empowerment occurs when the weaker sections of society (here, women) gain more political and economic power and, thereby, more choices and freedoms. In other words, for Development agents, the term 'empowerment' signifies the acquisition of the money, technology, weaponry, political influence or info-knowledge that the Market and State demand. Note: the emphasis is on **acquisition** (greedy hoarding) of these resources, not on **utilization** of them to challenge/ resist existing systems or create/regenerate more just, meaningful ways of living. Ironically, if women were truly to be 'empowered' by the dominant definition, it would mean that they have accepted the System as it is (or, at the most, have proposed marginal reforms to it) and were working to fuel, fit into, aid and abet it. 'Empowered' women would thus be devoting themselves to whatever it takes to become part of the top 20, of the 80:20 society.²⁰

Similarly, praising 'choices' forces women to be the equivalent of grateful dogs, happily licking the bony handouts of the System. We beam with pride and thank the heavens that

- * "We have a market system that gives us 16 different brands of shampoo to *choose* from!" (even if shampoo has nothing to do with the kinds of happiness we are seeking);
- * "Our democracy lets us *choose* among three different political candidates." (even if they must all bow to the World Bank/IMF/WTO and big corporations);
- * "Our newfound literacy is a godsend, because it gives us the *choice* to organize ourselves!" (even if most organizations are highly dependent on certain institutionalized outlets of the State and can be crushed if at any point they become too demanding);
- * "Look at the *choice* of jobs available to us now that we have finished our schooling." (a statement increasingly less heard in a time of downsizing, glutted labor markets, and cutthroat competition).

What's worse than the actual content of such *choices* is that they dupe us into believing we are free (or freer-now-than-we-were-before).²¹ We fail to expose these exciting 'options' (which are available to us for a limited time only!) for the myths they are. For example, gender activists laud the fact that women have access to more money, via micro-credit or income generation schemes, but they conveniently forget that women have no control over the Market's 'universal' laws of supply and demand. Therefore, they have no way of determining the prices of either their products or of the items they want to purchase. Similarly, the rhetoric on choices effectively distracts us from asking the bigger questions: is choice between starvation and slavery *really* a choice? What about between debilitating dependency on a parasitic Big State or degrading exploitation by a blood-sucking Big Market?

This brings us to the most disastrous symptom of the Catching Up Syndrome: it renders us mute and prevents us from asking the most serious question, **What are we trying to catch up to?** All projects and programs carried out in the name of "women's and girls' development" have as their end goal to mainstream women and girls into the existing System, i.e., to make them accept and be a part of the very same model of Development. But if we recognize how debilitating and dehumanizing these Systems are, and how truly dysfunctional the mainstream is,²² we must ask ourselves why we insist that women and girls be integrated into it. Is it just so they can become as frustrated, alienated and colonized as their fellow men and boys and thereby be on 'equal' terms with them? Or is it to give them the lottery ticket chance to become exploiters and looters too?

What those working in the field of women's and girls' development must start to understand is that **injustice, oppression and exploitation are built into the very nature of Development**. The fact that atrocities are being committed against women and girls at a growing rate, that they are being manipulated by Market and State forces, would not be surprising if one understood the dominant System. While a few researchers (Sen and Grown 1987; Shiva 1988; Simmons 1997) have documented how the nation-state, the market economy, the scientific establishment, the schooling system, the mass media, actually expand women's exploitation and intensify violence against women, this critique appears to be unrecognized on a wider scale. But, just for a moment, stop and think. Their projection of power as material wealth and violence, their endless drive to own and consume, their degradation and negation of diverse ways of knowing and expressing, their objectification and commodification of individuals and collectives: dehumanizing attitudes, goals and processes abound in the institutions of Development. Unfortunately, even when these are recognized, as has been done by various elements of the Indian women's movement, the avenue of redress is always the legislature, the courts, the UN, the education system – all parts of the very same System.²³

Girls' Education: A Case Study in Catching Up

I offer the concrete example of girls' education to elucidate the above analysis. One of the 'hottest' topics in today's Development discourse, girls' education as an issue grew out of the UN Decade for Women and has been reinforced over the last ten years by the Education For All (EFA) campaign. Here, the Catching Up Syndrome re-appears, this time incarnate as an issue of 'equity'. Girls' education advocates define the problem as fewer girls than boys are enrolling in school, remaining in school, and completing school (or, as a corollary, that the female literacy rate is lower than the male literacy rate). In other words, once again, the reference point for girls (or the point that they should aspire to) is boys; and, as the following quotes demonstrate, girls are placed in one of two narrow categories, future baby-makers or future wage-earners, to justify schooling them:

- "Investing in women's education is a sound and cost-effective strategy. A growing body of evidence indicates that primary education and economic productivity result in lower birthrates, later marriages, improved family health and a dramatic decrease in infant mortality."²⁴
- "If girls are not viewed by families and societies as having a critical role in social development and are not provided needed opportunities to learn and grow, they may become mothers with children who are likely to die in infancy... An investment in girls can be considered an investment in national development."²⁵

Indeed, the bulk of girls' education has been justified on the grounds of the 'population problem'; it is believed that girls who go to school and stay for longer periods of time will have fewer babies and thereby help to 'control' the population. Thus, not only are girls effectively blamed for increasing the population, but more importantly, the campaign for universalizing girls' education effectively diverts our attention from asking *real* questions about population: What is the root of the problem? Is it the sheer number of people, or is it the increasing concentration of people in urban areas? Or is it the way in which wealth and resources are distributed? How does the State and Market's daily (and unaccounted for) destruction of resources figure into the equation? Or is population only an issue to distract us from challenging the power structure and the particular model of Development — industrialization, militarism, urbanization, consumerization — adopted by our 'leaders'?²⁶

In recent years, girls' potential as wage-earners also prevails as a reason for schooling them. In the age of globalization, consumerism, and commodification, this justification should come as no surprise. As the World Bank's discussion paper, "Social Gains from Female Education" outlines in the first sentence on its first page, "Female education increases the value of women's time in economic activities by raising labor productivity and wages (with a consequential rise in household incomes and a reduction in poverty)."²⁷ Of course, one must question this statement, as evidence indicates that while education enrollments have increased, relative incomes have declined, and poverty has increased over the last several decades.²⁸ Nevertheless, it is clear that economic gains are to be had when girls become fully schooled and great consumers. (It is only a technicality, I suppose, that the corporations will be the ones who will be gaining, and not the girls themselves.)

In terms of strategies, girls' education advocates lay blame for the lack of 'equality' in one of two places: *supply* (the government is not spending enough money to ensure schooling for girls, and/or schools need to be made more

attractive for them) or *demand* (families/traditions are oppressive; they hold girls back). The former criticism (supply) leads to campaigns for increasing spending to make Education For All or for passing laws and policies that make schools more accessible to girls. It also leads to school reform measures, like changing textbooks to show more images of women in 'power' positions (as doctors, lawyers, political officials, etc.), building latrines for girls, increasing the number of female teachers, training teachers in gender sensitivity, etc. The latter criticism (demand) leads to gender awareness/sensitization campaigns or community mobilization for girls' education.²⁹ Of course, these occur alongside the defamation/demonization of customs and traditions, which are presented as either child labor or child marriage. Both the supply and the demand strategies are incredibly safe, in the sense that they neither threaten the Education System, nor do they alter the Status Quo model of Development. In fact, they bind girls to the System, making them beholden to it for its 'gender sensitivity' and 'generous benefits'.

It should not be surprising that equality is again defined as sameness, that girls have again been reduced to narrow categories, and that the solutions again exacerbate injustice. What is surprising is that many girls' education advocates seem to think that education will enable girls to nurture their full potential and transform the world. But to think that schooling will give girls more opportunities and thereby more 'success' in life demonstrates that such advocates neither know much about education, nor much about the larger political-economic System. They seem to have neglected the fact that schooling devalues and negates the abilities, intelligences, dreams, independence, creativity, etc. of girls and rewards them for being 'well-behaved' (i.e., quiet and subservient).³⁰ Or they have blindly bought into the claim that schools increase girls' 'exposure' to the world (without questioning exactly what type of world we are exposing them to). They also seem to have missed the fact that it is in the interest of the System that girls go to school, for schooling helps to ensure intellectual, emotional and physical dependency. While schools are necessary for girls to enter the mainstream (or, at least, to be indoctrinated with its rhetoric), expanding the dysfunctional mainstream, its values, relationships, goals, etc., is a guaranteed recipe for disaster. Again, I must ask, what are we catching up to?

Curing Ourselves of the Catching Up Syndrome

Rethinking gender for learning societies therefore means, in part, challenging the foundations of a model of Development that breeds hierarchies, injustices, etc. Those working on 'women's development' must begin to see that the culture of Development (like the culture of schooling) is not just anti-women, but anti-human. Not only does this require that we question the goals and processes of this model, but it also forces us to ask fundamental questions about its assumptions: *What is the human being? What is human potential and human dignity? What are meanings of human life?* In other words, instead of taking a band-aid approach to the symptoms, or prescribing Catching Up Syndrome as the cure, women and men, girls and boys, individually and as parts of diverse collectives, must uncover (and recover) spaces to reflect and dialogue on the roots of these crises.

I'm reminded here of a story: *A woman was enjoying a solitary walk on the beach. She looked across the horizon and, much to her horror, discovered that a baby was drowning in the deep ocean waters. Casting off her jacket and shoes, she ran, dove into the ocean, and swam to rescue the baby. Once safe ashore, she began to resuscitate and care for the baby. But then her eyes flitted across the ocean again, and she saw another baby drowning. She left the first baby ashore and dove into the rescue the second. She returned with it, thinking now they were both safe and she would care for them together. But again, she glanced at the ocean and saw another baby drowning. The cycle repeated itself... Pretty soon, she became so busy rescuing the babies and leaving them ashore, that she never stopped to look to see **who was throwing the babies into the ocean in the first place.***

Deeper engagement with the issue of gender thus asks us to clear the haze before our eyes: to critique the definition of equality as 'sameness'; to expose beautiful but totally plastic words; to reject a global framework of gender that binds women to debilitating Systems and reduces them to productive/reproductive 'resources'; to uncover *who/what is throwing women (and men) into the ocean in the first place.* Casting off such colonizing blinders is the first step for rethinking gender for learning societies and *Swaraj*.³¹

As an initial step, we might support women's (and men's) diverse ways of knowing³² and the non-institutionalized powers that they possess, particularly the powers which derive from their own localities and the power to say "No!" Nurturing these knowledges and forms of power can enable women to take on the much-needed roles of resisters against this System. Some evidence exists of such a possibility, in the form of spontaneous struggles and uprisings

by women against particular transgressors of their values and beliefs.³³ Unfortunately, many of these forms of resistance have been immediately co-opted by modern State institutions, like the courts and police, or by urban elite women's movements. But rather than resign these struggles to such fates, or resign women to being complicit agents of the Status Quo, those of us concerned with injustice can help to ensure that spaces of women's resistance have room to breathe, grow, and spread like wildfire.

Engendering New Visions of Gender (Or Living Without the –isms)

Simultaneously, women (and men) in learning societies must together generate new visions of gender. This, in essence, requires dialogue and reflection on identity and relationships, as well as on human and societal potential. But from where will these new visions emerge?

First, I should state from where they will most certainly **not** emerge: planned projects (a.k.a. social engineering) that emphasize replicability and scaling up. I have little faith in or regard for anyone who professes to have a model of 'women-centered development' (the same holds true for those advocates of 'sustainable human development'). Models, by their nature, are anti-diversity, anti-context, and therefore anti-people. They do not ground themselves in diverse "soils of culture,"³⁴ of language, of ecology, of what human beings live and breathe, but rather they dictate a prescription of plastic words, a 'one-size-fits-all' cure-all. At the same time, models neither trust nor respect people to think and do for themselves; that is, to reflect and act without authorities and without carrot-stick incentives. I find it ironic that those concerned with 'gender oppression' perpetuate this paternalistic view of both women and men. Therefore, instead of producing more socially engineered models of gender (more –isms), it may be better to look to diverse *paramparas*, the soils of culture, or the ways of knowing and making-meaning of many of the world's social majorities.

At this moment, I know I will be accused of 'romanticizing tradition', to which I have a few responses: First, I wonder why no one asks the defenders of Development, why do they romanticize it? Why is their belief in the 'end of history', in the superstition that this System will lead to freedom and justice for all, so strong? (Especially when the great emancipatory potential of modernity has yet to materialize in so-called Developed countries.³⁵) Second, I ask why we continue to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. I do not ignore the infringements upon human dignity that occur in various traditions, but I question whether they warrant full-scale rejection of localities, wisdoms, knowledges, etc.³⁶

Unlike modern institutions which condemn human dignity, soils of culture are based on diverse understandings of the human being, of human potential, and of human life. From these soils grow wonderful possibilities of identifying, relating to, living with, and being with one another than stand in stark contrast to mainstream notions of Development. Countless examples of such soils abound in India among the social majorities. I myself have experienced, with my *nanis*, *dadis*, *bhuas*, *chachis*, *masis*, *mamis*,³⁷ the self-organization that women spontaneously engage in during festivals and celebrations (or during hardship and mourning); the love and care afforded in familial and neighborly relationships; the resistance to injustice and exploitation through songs and gatherings; the intelligence and simplicity in sharing and utilizing resources, food, and water. I feel that these and other examples offer ample evidence for re-examining *parampara* through different lenses. Again, the purpose here is not to ignore instances of exploitation, but, through deeper reflections and dialogues, to understand different conceptions of identity, of power, and of relationships, as a basis for **contesting** exploitation.

Rethinking gender for learning societies means re-exploring identity in order to nurture visions of *Swaraj* — for girls, for women, and for larger conceptions of humanity. In other words, a regenerative approach to gender also requires that we see the relationships between men and women from another perspective. In contrast to the coercive and competitive relationship that defines men and women in modern society, a learning society seeking *Swaraj* would emphasize notions of partnership and interdependency. It would recognize that just as most women have been reduced to their reproductive roles, so have most men been reduced to their productive roles. In other words, neither men nor women have had opportunities to uncover and nurture their full human potential, as individuals or as collectives. Rather, they have been forced to compete over scarce crumbs of power and an even scarcer base of resources; they have been forced to fit in a frame of discontentment.

A learning society, however, would deepen existing and create additional emotional, familial, artistic, athletic, ecological, etc. identities to be experienced by men and women alike. The mutual desire to challenge competitive reductionist roles and to cooperatively nurture each other's full human potential would increase the levels of support, trust and faith among men and women. These would form the foundation for a new understanding of 'power', one defined not by hoarding (a zero-sum game) but rather by sharing (interdependence). Such conceptions of identity and power would bolster *Swaraj*.

A final word on practicality (or the other excuse I expect): "All this talk about rethinking gender is fine and good, but it is impractical. We can't reject the System; we have to work within it. And because men and women will always be at odds, let us just do the best we can and help women and girls to catch up." Am I the only one who thinks this sounds ridiculous? That working towards dismantling an unjust model of Development is impractical, but endlessly swimming into the proverbial ocean to treat its symptoms is practical? That nurturing collaboration is impractical, but enhancing antagonism and competition is practical? I often speculate on what provokes this response. Do such critics lack imagination and creativity? Are they too bogged down by cynicism or fear? Or are they so wedded to the System (and the 'benefits' they derive from it) that they do not seek to risk their jobs and status by dismantling it?

I would like to take this opportunity to invite the critics to engage with two processes that I myself have been involved in over the past several years. The first is start unlearning many of the assumptions, stereotypes and biases around gender that plague today's education and development discourses. This unlearning can be carried out in a number of ways: by engaging with the excellent existing research that demonstrates the real impacts of Education and Development on women; by pursuing a research-for-action agenda that seeks to more deeply understand local conceptions of equality, power, and identity; and by meeting 'ordinary' women from a position of humility, with the active desire to learn from and with them about their realities on their terms. Second, one can experiment with ways of living and being that grow from such experiences, to build new understandings of justice, relationships, and full potential through reflective and creative dialogues and actions. If those concerned with gender actively pursued these and other concrete opportunities, they would quickly realize why learning societies seeking *Swaraj* should not limit its possibilities.

Endnotes

¹ For example, this agenda in 1975 included: "increase in literacy; equal access to education at all levels; increased employment opportunities; equal opportunity to vote and seek elected office; and increased social services" (World Plan of Action, International Women's Year, 1975); in M. Buvinic and S. Yudelman, p.37. As will be demonstrated below, essentially the same agenda remains today.

² Most introductory books or courses in women's studies cover these different feminisms. Though other forms of feminism exist, these are arguably the most prominent. See bell hooks, *Feminist Thought: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 2000) for more information.

³ Statistics quoted from Anoop Babani, *Humanscape*, March 1999, p.42.

⁴ From M. Buvinic and S. Yudelman, p.9. Emphasis mine.

⁵ I should clarify that by North and South, I do not refer to geographic location, but instead to two distinct populations: the world's wealthy elite (who, as 15% of the world's population, collectively possess 85% of the world's wealth) and the world's social majorities, respectively.

⁶ *Sati* is the practice of widow self-immolation; *pardah* is the practice of secluding women in domestic quarters.

⁷ Conversation with Mahila Samakhya members in Lucknow, January 7, 2001.

⁸ *Parampara* encompasses languages, festivals, customs, environments, values, beliefs; it is a broader term than culture and is often translated as 'living traditions' or 'traditions of living'.

⁹ Conversation with Mahila Samakhya members in Lucknow, January 7, 2001.

¹⁰ M. Buvinic and S. Yudelman, p.20.

¹¹ Reference to book of the same name: Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

¹² Notably, a number of feminists have tried to demonstrate the connection between the public and the private, as heard in the phrase, “The personal is political.” This has several meanings: that what we do in our personal lives has political effects, that what enters into the political arena is (and often should be) personal, and most importantly, that the distinction made between the two is highly superficial and should be eradicated. Unfortunately, neither Development agents nor globalization gurus/fundamentalists respect this understanding; rather, they have tried to increase their reach over both areas and further enhance the divide between them.

¹³ The media in India, like the media in much of the rest of world, offer primarily two perspectives on women: sexy MTV veejays-beauty queens-film actresses or domestic wives-mothers-mother-in-laws.

¹⁴ See for details, Aminur Rahman, Women and Microcredit in Rural Bangladesh: Anthropological Study of the Rhetoric and Realities of Grameen Bank Lending. 1999.

¹⁵ In When Corporations Rule the World (1995), David Korten shares the example of the aggressive marketing strategies the Avon corporation used with women in rural Brazil to manipulate them to prioritize cosmetics as one of their basic needs (p.154).

¹⁶ Ironically, while a few gender activists criticize the mainstream approach to gender and mainstream model of Development, most of these revert to the same model or approach by asking for greater protection by the State, in the form of more laws, more regulation, more enforcement. See K. Bhasin and N.S. Khan’s “Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia” for examples of this critique and retraction.

¹⁷ Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) explains, “The almost uniform conclusion of the [UN Decade for Women]’s research is that with a few exceptions, women’s relative access to economic resources, incomes and employment has worsened, their burden of work has increased, and their relative and even absolute health, nutritional and educational status has declined.” Quoted in T. Macchiwalla, p.40. This situation has only worsened in the last decade, with the effects of globalization, SAPs, etc.

¹⁸ The destructive, dehumanizing and colonizing nature of Development has been documented by a number of people, including by Otieno-Hongo and Ochien’g’s article in this compilation.

¹⁹ For example, the Indo-Dutch Evaluation of the Mahila Samakhya Program, “Together We Are Powerful: Voices from the Mahila Sanghas” (1997), uses the word ‘empowerment’ 24 times in its seven page executive summary, but never explicitly defines it. It is used in conjunction with education, development, learning, economics, personal change, mobility, visibility, bargaining power, environmental awareness...

²⁰ Short form of the ratio that 80% of the world’s wealth is owned by roughly 20% of the world’s people, and 20% of the world’s wealth is shared among 80% of the world’s people.

²¹ Nobel Prize Laureate, economist Amartya Sen has furthered this attitude, with his loud cheers for the free market, representative democracy, mass education, and mass media. See the recent article about him, “A Kerala Experience” in Frontline, January 19, 2001, for details.

²² The dysfunction of the mainstream is in the news every day. Its greedy individualism, violence, self-destruction, crass environmental negligence, etc. are hardly enviable.

²³ Lokayan Bulletin’s “Women – Towards Beijing: Voices from India” (July-October 1996) offers some examples of this approach, p.38 and p.64.

²⁴ M. Buvinic and S. Yudelman, p.54.

²⁵ K. Kurz and C. Prather, p.1.

²⁶ As Wolfgang Sachs recently commented at the conference on “Building Learning Societies” in Hanover, Germany (September 2000), “I don’t think there is a population problem – unless you mean that there are too many Americans in the world today.”

²⁷ K. Subbarao and L. Raney, p.vii.

²⁸ See Michel Chossudovsky’s scathing analysis, The Globalization of Poverty: Impacts of IMF and World Banks Reforms (Malaysia: Third World Network, 1997) for more information on this.

²⁹ All of the above sets of solutions are presented in the Government of India/UNICEF’s booklet “Future Strategies for Universalizing Girls’ Education in South Asia,” among other places.

³⁰ Roger Jeffery and Patricia Jeffery (1996) show that in many cases schooling actually reinforces gender based bias and makes girls more submissive: “the content of school curricula, the subject choices for girls, and the demeanor expected of girls in school — none of which are designed to increase girls’ autonomy.”

³¹ *Swaraj* literally means ‘Self-rule’ or ‘rule over the Self’, where Self is understood in the larger sense of individual, community, and the divine. Both Gandhiji and Tagore elaborated on this concept when envisioning what India should strive for in the future.

³² “Women’s Ways of Knowing”, a piece of research that has been conducted on this issue in the US, adds to our understanding of the diversity of knowledge systems.

³³ See Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia (1987) or accounts of the Chipko movement for examples of such spontaneous resistance.

³⁴ See Munir Fasheh’s article in this compilation for further elucidation of this term.

³⁵ For example, in the US, the ‘richest’ country in the world, 35 million people do not have healthcare; 1% of the population owns 35% of the wealth; and one-fourth of children lives in poverty. For more information on US injustice, see Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States 1492—Present (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

³⁶ We can recall how Gandhiji challenged the oppression related to untouchability, but at the same time, saw an active and constructive place for an improved caste system in an India committed to *Swaraj*.

³⁷ Each of these connotes a distinct and important relationship with different female family members; unfortunately, they do not translate well in English, which only offers the limited ‘grandmother’ or ‘aunt’.

REFERENCES

- Babani, A. “Human Index”, in Humanscape. March 1999.
- Belenky, M. et al. Women’s Ways of Knowing. New York: Basic Books, 1997 ed.
- Bhasin, K. and N.S. Khan. Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999 ed.
- Broft, D. et al. “‘Together We Are Powerful’: Voices from the Mahila Sanghas.” The Hague: Indo-Dutch Evaluation by Nuffic, 1997.
- Buvinic, M. and S. Yudelman. Women, Poverty and Progress in the Third World. New York: Foreign Policy Association/International Center for Research on Women, 1989.
- Crewe, E. and E. Harrison. Whose Development?: An Ethnography of Aid. London and New York: Zed Books, 1998.
- Jeffery, R. and A. Basu, Eds. Girls’ Schooling, Women’s Autonomy, and Fertility Change in South Asia. Sage Publications, 1996.
- Korten, D. When Corporations Rule the World. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1995.
- Kothari, S. et al. Women – Towards Beijing: Voices from India. New Delhi: Lokayan Bulletin, July-October 1996.
- Kurz, K. and C. Prather. Improving the Quality of Life of Girls. New York: UNICEF, 1995.
- Macchiwalla, T. “Some Policy Perspectives on Women, Gender and Development” in Exchanges, No.27, December 1999.
- Ong, A. Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia. Albany: SUNY Press, 1987.
- Sen, G. and C. Grown. Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives. New York: Monthly Review Press/DAWN, 1987.
- Shiva, V. Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development in India. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995 ed.
- Subbarao, K. and L. Raney. Social Gains from Female Education: A Cross-National Study. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1993.
- Vishwa Yuvak Kendra. Future Strategies for Universalizing Girls Education in South Asia. New Delhi: Government of India/UNICEF, 1990-91.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shilpa Jain <shilpa@swaraj.org> is a learning activist with Shikshantar. She has conducted research in several areas (globalization, democratic living, creativity, conflict transformation, systemic change, community participation,

Panchayati Raj and Gram Sabhas, girls' education) and recently completed a study on Rabindranath Tagore's innovations in *shiksha*. Shilpa also loves learning with/from youth and children and has extensive experience doing so around issues of self-esteem, creativity, collaboration, identity, and conflict resolution.