

Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative, Bangladesh

***A Summary Report on the Focus Group Discussion with Women held in
Dhaka on Thursday, 30 November, 2000***

The focus group discussion with women, aimed at validating the findings with the experiences of women regarding the adjustment policies, was held in conference hall of CIRDP in Dhaka on Thursday, 30 November 2000. The one-day-meet was organised by Karmajibi Nari with the assistance of the SAPRI secretariat. ----- participants- from housewives to labourers, small traders to farmers' activists, university teachers to politicians – participated in the deliberations.

Ms. Shireen Akter, Executive Director of Karmajibi Nari and member of the Steering Committee chaired the discussion while Dr. Nasreen Khundker presented the findings of the study. Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, Study Director, Bangladesh SAPRI moderated the session.

Discussion

The participants opined that the changes brought about by the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) impacted upon the lives of women, but the framework lacked in-built mechanism in addressing and advancing interests of women and even did not reprimand male-female discrimination in income structure. The framework, according to women, restrained from incorporation of core issues such as empowerment, although some 'soft' issues were added in the package, in response to criticism. The elements of SAP - trade liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, withdrawal of subsidy in agricultural sector etc. - impacted on the lives of women.

The emphasis of export orientation had improved women's employment in industrial sector and provided 1.5 million women employment in the garment sector. It was contended that the policy of trade liberalisation affected women employment in small and cottage industries such as handloom, jute, clothing, etc. SAP affected adversely the working women and the women peasants in the rural area. They did not get their right wages and price of their produce.

The participants observed that SAP was unable to leave positive impact on the lives of women as a whole. The privatisation drive caused unemployment of women at a faster rate than men. They claimed that the retrenched workers had not been able to secure reemployment. It was stated that the loss of job of a woman impacted directly on her family more than that of a man since women act as the manger of household. The women had to bear burnt of male retrenchment which not only impacted on the income level, but also aggravated stress.

The participants contended that real wages for women had declined. They said that gender differentials in wages still remain high. The same applies to the gender differential in wages, though this is somewhat lower in the RMG industry, the average female wage being around 70 percent of the average male wages. The gender differentials reflect structural

factors such as gender segregation of the job market by occupations and by skills, and the under-representation of women in higher paying occupations and skill grades, due to economy wide disparities in education and training, women's disadvantaged position within the household etc.

It was pointed out that SAP did not cover social sector i.e. health and education. So it was difficult to single out direct impact of SAP on social sector. Health of pregnant women had substantially improved, but it was contended that this improvement had not been the result of SAP, rather it had been the success of the NGOs.

The participants said that interventionist measures such as the micro-credit programme of Grameen Bank and other NGOs have made an important impact in terms of increasing the income opportunities of women through self employment.

The participants claimed that the situation of poverty and nutrition did not show any significant improvement in the lives of the poor, particularly the "hardcore" poor. The nutritional status was also argued to be worse in rural areas, and somewhat better for boys compared to girls.

Dwelling on the safety nets such as the vulnerable group development programme, the participants said that these programmes were in operation with limited coverage.

Arguing that the Bank had always 'intervened' the internal affairs of Bangladesh, the participants argued that the WB remained silent on the safety of workers in the factories and industries. They said that there was a psychological omission of women in the mindset of the WB.

In the garment sector most of the women worker had been devoid of having any rightful contract. They were unskilled and low paid. Noting that most of the garment factories do not adhere to the labour laws, the participants observed that the physical design of the most of garment factory was flawed, with no fire escape path, unhealthy working environment and moral and sexual insecurity.

Response from the WB

WB never said against trade unions as it always respected the ILO convention. In Bangladesh like other South Asian countries there are good labour laws, but it remained short of being implemented. Privatisation had been proved to be conducive for the GOB's effort of economic progress. In response to other question about the accidents in the factories the bank representative said that there was no relation between SAP and these accidents.

Recommendations

The participants opined that the economy should be guided by an appropriate macro policy regime, focussing not only on efficiency, but also on equality. The opined that efficiency did not imply simply a change of ownership i.e. privatisation, but a much wider set of measures including better regulation of markets, and organisational support and interventions in support of women.

The participants suggested that industrial restructuring should not focus simply on privatisation or rationalising the labour force, but also on modernising the capital equipment, better supply of raw materials including electricity, improved management practices and better industrial relations to increase productivity and efficiency of the industries concerned.

While both men and women workers would stand to gain from such policies, there is need to devise additional schemes for displaced women workers in urban and rural areas.

The participants are of the opinion of increased spending in social sector, particularly, expenditure on health, and improving the quality and access to education and health care for women.