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The Neoliberal Push and Women-Led Farm Households: Understanding the Need for Gender Mainstreaming in Policy and Planning

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Abstract

Early in 2017, the government of India attempted to further neoliberal reforms in the agrarian sector in the form of three bills which were cleared in Parliament in 2020 through a voice vote. The three farm laws sorted relaxation in the state-centric restrictions over the sale and purchase of farm produce. The laws guaranteed corporations and private players direct access to the produce, bypassing the Agricultural Produce Market Committee- a bargaining space for the farmers and the buyers regulated by the state government. The restrictions on storage and stocking of goods were eased. With the globalization of finance and the emergence of neo-transactional structures, the ambition of glitch-free trade at reduced costs became indispensable. The resolutions were at par with the neo-liberal ambitions seeking a further withdrawal of the state with the least interference from the pricing and procurement institutions.

India, a surplus economy, has excellent potential in the international markets. With the rapid technological progress, the world has become an integrated financial capital seeking speedier production and delivery of goods. However, the preparedness of agrarian families for these expansive reforms was overlooked. Much worse is the condition of the women-led families who grow up in an extremely patriarchal set-up and weaker bargaining position. This paper analyses what these laws could have entailed on the lives of eighty farm widows interviewed during a four-year-long engagement with the field in Vidharbha, the region with the highest suicide rates amongst farmers and agrarian laborers in Asia.

Keywords: Gender Mainstreaming, Bargaining Power, Decision Making Power, Capability Deprivation, Agrarian Crisis, Neoliberalism, Farm Laws

INTRODUCTION

Early in 2017, the government of India pushed a set of neoliberal reforms for the agrarian sector. The three bills sorted relaxation in government restrictions on the sale and purchase of farm produce. The Act guaranteed large corporations and private players direct access to the farm produce, bypassing the Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) and mandis. The restrictions on storage and stocking of goods were eased. With the globalisation of finance and the emergence of neo-transactional structures, the ambition of glitch-free trade at reduced costs has become indispensable.

The consumer market holds promise of enormous returns nationally and globally, for which the speedier pace of production, procurement, transaction and supply is a prerequisite. The reforms were aimed at

bypassing the older institutions connecting corporates directly to the farmers and conducting trade through a two-party agreement. The resolutions of the three laws were at par with the neo-liberal ambitions seeking a further withdrawal of the state with the least interference from the pricing and procurement institutions. The bills overrode essential federal and legislative structures, and the administrative officers were given the responsibility of dispute resolution for resolving conflict between the farmer and the corporates within one to three months.

India, a surplus economy, has excellent potential for reaping benefits in the international markets. With the rapid technological progress, the world has become an integrated financial capital seeking speedier production and delivery of goods. In a rapidly changing market, the competitiveness of various countries in terms of conquering technology and the pace of production for attaining monopoly is dictating the terms of the future. In this context, experts see an immense potential in the Indian agricultural market, a surplus agriculture economy, and active participation and integration with the private and global players. However, imitation of these trends is not at par with the circumstances farmers of India are reeling in. Much worse is the condition of the women-led families who grow up in a highly patriarchal set-up and have weaker bargaining positions. This paper analyses what these laws could have entailed to the lives of eighty farmer widows interviewed during one-and-a-half-year-long fieldwork in Vidharbha. It analyses their bargaining position vis-a-vis their families and the state.

Discussion

In July 2020, the three contentious farm bills deemed essential for modernising procurement, pricing, sale and storage of the farm produce were passed through a voice vote in the Indian Parliament. The bills were formally repealed on March 21, 2022 after a one and half year of farmers protest. Decimating the old structure, the government proposed establishing a new 'transparent' 'barrier-free' and 'efficient' inter-state and intra-state trading model. The ambition was to construct a simpler system in place of the complex and decrepit ones currently facilitating the agri-space. The new farm laws were formulated considering the evolving trends in the global market. India, a surplus agriculture economy, was said to have great potential in the international food market. (PTI, 2020) The move to open the market was seen as an attempt to plough a fertile field for corporate interests. The essential federal and legislative structures were deemed redundant, reducing the power and promise of decentralisation.

Farmers were exposed to a riskier structure. In its attempt to provide an unsophisticated and sailable chain of procurement, pricing and storage to the companies, the state reduced the negotiating power of farmers, diminishing the possibility of a just exchange. The laws widely pronounced as unconstitutional attracted protests from the farmers' unions. While millions of farmers braved through a pandemic and the extreme weather conditions of New Delhi, the resolution meetings failed to address their concerns. The subsequent months saw massive participation of women stationing themselves in the camps bordering the capital, addressing media, stage and their community. (PTI, 2021) The participation of women, however, attracted patriarchal sentiments of SA Bobde, the then Chief Justice of India, appealing women and elderly to return to the comfort of their homes rather than protesting in the public eye. (Sarda, 2021)

The state's attempt to invisibilise women farmers is a normalised practice. Gender blind policies and institutions tend to eclipse the indispensable workforce that sustains the significant workload of agri-

production. Institutions take farmers as a homogenous category ignoring the varied bodily and intellectual struggles being relayed by people of different genders in their everyday lives. Planned actions, legislations, policies and programs bear significant repercussion in people's lives. Feminists have resounded the need for gender mainstreaming by making considerations derived out of experiences and lived realities of women an integral parameter of formulating design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programs. However, nothing is getting translated in planning.

The TIME magazine soon published a cover story with imposing captures of women farmers leading and directing the protest. (Bhowmick 2021) The piece voiced the narrative of the other side, stating the appeal of patriarchal. Women farmers questioned the state 'Who are we if not farmers?' (Bhowmick 2021) Since independence, agriculture has seen extreme shifts and crises leading to the violation of fundamental human rights of those involved in agriculture. A girl-child raised through ideals of a patriarchy commits herself to the institution of marriage on a presupposed ground of guaranteed fending by the male counterpart. The crisis that later enfolds limits negotiating power of the farmer's family as a unit, for one member, unexposed to the structures of market and state, is unable to navigate through the complexities and tardiness of the system.

The environmental and humanitarian crisis created by the green revolution, the subsequent policies promulgated after the Dunkel Draft Reform and the opening up of the agrarian sector post-liberalisation were significant attempts at connecting the farmers to global technological innovations and structures. However, a newer world and an ever-emerging market increasingly boast a greater need for transformation. The reforms introduced post-1991 have had insufferable consequences on the lives of farmer's families, depriving generations of a dignified life. This devastation has become acute; the agrarian distress has constricted small and medium farmers at the mercy of debt and loans from banks and private money lenders because of the rising cost of agricultural input. The unseen in the crisis is always the female counterpart, whose non-recognition as a farmer limits her negotiating power with the state. Like most bills, the new farm laws failed to understand the peculiar and conspicuous struggles that emerge through intersections of gender and caste.

Braving through state and market mechanisms after migration or the death of their partner, the women counterpart of a farming family begin educating themselves about transactions that occur outside the farming premises. The state also presupposes that the 'bargaining power' of a female farmer, who has been denied education, has been raised with the motive of tendering the private realm of a man's life, is married before age, and has limited interaction with the outside world; is at par with private players and the corporates for brokering a deal. (Agarwal 1986,1) The presupposition is also that digital technology has interspersed and reached the remotest corners, and the female farmers are well versed in the technicalities of the agreements and transactions made on the digital platform.

The Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020 seek to provide an 'ecosystem' for farmers and traders to 'enjoy a freedom of choice.' The term choice here entails the large market at the farmers' disposal for trading the goods. The corporate houses work according to neo-finance's mechanisms, which are speedier, dynamic, government-supported and infrastructurally sound. Huge investments are being made by the middle class in the market, making the expansion of privatisation

desirable. According to the Act, the private players are expected to get into a written contract with the farmers. The agreement becomes an essential part of the Act. This is even when corporate houses are said to be 'bolstering' their in-house legal teams. (Vyas 2018)

This includes Reliance Industries, which has vested interests in the agri-market. Adani Industries has agreed to construct two silos worth Rs 80 crores. (PTI 2016) Their storage facilities have a capacity of 75,000 tons. (PTI 2016) Adani Wilmer- the giant multinational conglomerate with ties with the giants like the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Chile for the exports of fruits, an untapped global market. (PTI 2017) The company boast refrigeration units that control the amount of oxygen consumed by the fruits. The machines also control the ripening rate of fruit. Adani's also have distribution channels running across all major states of India. (Bal 2021) The interest in the Indian agri-market is enormous. The agreement, therefore, through smart clauses might have outdone the wits of farmers.

A significant concern of the economists was that companies prefer collaborating with a few large landholding farmers over multiple smallholding farmers. (Ghosh, 2020) Economic Survey of India 2019-2020 situates over 27.9% of women farmers as marginal and smallholding cultivators out of the total operational holding cultivated by women. (Premkumar, 2020) The long-term agreement between private players and the large landholders would isolate the marginal and small landholding women. The Act dictates agreement and transaction to be conferring 'outside the physical premises of markets.' If the Agricultural Produce Market Commitee (APMC) cease to exist, their options for a fair deal will be limited. Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMC) is the marketing board established by the state governments in order to eliminate the exploitation incidences of the farmers by the intermediaries, where they are forced to sell their produce at extremely low prices.

Maharashtra has allowed private companies to set up an alternate market outside APMCs and has issued Direct Marketing Licences (DMLs) to grocery retailers like Big Basket and Reliance Fresh. According to the Maharashtra APMC, the price of produce is still being guided according to the Mandi rates. (Biswas, 2020) The parameters that would have guided the production cost in the private markets without APMCs were unclear. A report released by Mahila Kisaan Adhikaar Manch- a collective (MAKAAM) in June 2020 says, out of the total surveyed, over 74 per cent of women continued selling their produce to the private players since they are shy to approach the male-dominated APMCs. (Premkumar, 2020) However, the price determined at the APMCs provided an approximation of the value they can incur out of their produce. (Biswas, 2020) With the massive infrastructure, the multinational companies could have manipulated the price leaving farmers at the mercy of corporates. (PTI, 2016)

The act also gave a mutual share of responsibility for the crop quality, grade and standard to the private players and the farmers. This includes pesticide and residue standards. It is a known fact that the environmental damage induced in Punjab due to the massive cultivation of water-intensive paddy cannot be reversed. Punjab urgently needs to cease the production of one-third of rice cultivation. However, Adanis brokered a deal of 400,000 million tonnes of rice with China a few months after the farm Laws were unconstitutionally passed in the Parliament. By the time farmers were sitting in protest Adanis had already exported 100,000 million tonnes of rice. (Ghoshal, 2021) Huge demand and feigning market might influence the climate-averse crop patterns. (Bal, 2021) This mutuality might as well get exploitative since

the farmer and the private player will be on unequal playing fields. The agreement that a woman farmer would have encompassed these aspects, which, if done maliciously, might have exposed her to greater risks.

The law had proposed an electronic medium for trade between the farmer and buyer. The aim is of 'direct buying and selling through online portals.' Though the laws stand repealed, a conscious effort to collate the untidily and inadequately registered records on digitised platforms is underway. The central government is setting up an application comprising a digital 'stack' of agri-datasets, including information on landholding, crop-holding, agri-credit and insurance details. (Vyas, 2018) The concern is therefore over the representation of women in data and the access and articulation of the tardy electronic medium by them.

The primary concern of experts is not only on the accuracy of the dataset and data protection laws but also on the limited digital literacy of rural India. (Vyas, 2018) Due to the dysfunctional primary education system, most women farmers can barely read. So, even for making nominal calculations or reading a brand's name, they need a man's assistance. Since women have rarely been allowed to enter the market spaces as a part of the social norm, women farmers take up these duties with a sense of shame and embarrassment. Experts also believe that the move will open a new market for businessmen. In a state where literacy amongst women is a significant concern, a leap to digital education is ambitious.

Women farmers will get more invisibilised in digital data. Even when the imagined farmer of digital India stands exposed to greater risks, the option of judicial recourse has been blocked. Not that a female farmer can swiftly access court and receive justice. But approaching a Sub District Magistrate and getting a reconciliation board-formed is hardly an amicable solution. The Bar Council of Delhi has called the transfer of legislative power to administrative bodies "dangerous and a blunder." (Sainath, 2020)The clause contradicting Article 32 of guaranteeing the right to constitutional remedies was posited as unconstitutional.

Material and Methods

The study was conducted from April 2018 to May 2023 to understand the lives of farmers' widows who committed suicide in the drought-prone regions of Maharashtra. It was stalled briefly during the pandemic and was resumed soon after the restrictions were relaxed. The focus of the interviews was to understand the 'capability deprivation' instilled in women through the gender-biased cultural and institutional machinery. (Sen 2009: 254) The questionnaire was divided into three parts – early life, married life and widowed life. Institutions like family and state have been taken into close consideration to understand their role in shaping respondents' lives.

The rising cost of agricultural inputs and the inadequate returns from the market has wreaked havoc on the lives of the farmers. The immediate causes of suicide in these villages vary from inability to pay for medical expenses, the cost of children's education, getting daughters married (which involves paying dowries), the immense burden of not being able to feed one's family, and innumerable other things required for the well-being and 'capability development' of citizens.

Women farmers who have been widowed due to an agrarian crisis are trying to cope with circumstances rather bravely. They are enablers: sending their children to school, keeping the house, providing support to the state by working in the agrarian and allied sectors, constructing houses for their parents or in-laws, and looking after the medical expenses of the old and the young around them, ensuring a daily supply of food for others while themselves going hungry.

Most respondents were from Karanja (Lad), Washim district, Maharashtra though the research extended to a few villages of Yavatmal. The block got Asia's first APMC in 1886 and boasted an old railway line called the Shakuntala express. The narrow-gauge line was built to carry cotton from Vidharbha to Mumbai, from where it was shipped to Manchester, spinning 32 per cent of the world's cotton. One such centre for cotton production became Karanja, where the steam engine ran across 190 km in 20 hours, covering all major cotton-producing areas. (Pal, 2016)

The love affair of the international market with the small cotton-growing region of Karanja, which is situated in the middle of the cluster of four districts with the highest rates of suicide, is still ceaseless. The rain-fed fields of Washim district are thirsted over by the 67 per cent of cotton fields yearly. Rest is seeded with soybean, tur, peanut and jowar. Karanja, meanwhile, remains the block with one the highest suicide rates. A cluster of almost 167 villages surrounds the tehsil office. The area is populated with nomadic tribes, including Banzara, Jeera Mari, Dhangar, Chitrakathi, mainly in ghettoes. Farmer suicide is rampant in these tribes, who mostly do not own suitable land size and work as agrarian labourers.

Many of these tribes were criminalised from 1871 till 1947. Their traditional occupation was lost in the process, and in 1947, they were included under de-notified tribe. There is a generational deprivation these families have been reeling with, which began with the loss of traditional occupation, landlessness for generations, and resorting to ill-paying labour-work on the fields of the higher caste from which they were paid enough to buy non-arable, unirrigated land. Due to non-exposure to the mainstream economic institutions and education system, they begin lives with a limited sense of what they can do or become.

The course of the fieldwork extended from April 2018 to May 2023. In the span, eighty widows were interviewed. The paper analyses how these widows were brought up in the rural regions of Maharashtra and if their bargaining power is at par with the neo-liberal ambitions of the state. Even though the neo-liberal push is highly desirable and necessary, the dismal relative capacity to understand, negotiate and broker a profitable deal will put women, and farmers, at a peculiar disadvantage. Respondents have emerged from the crisis and re-made their lives as enablers, functioning as independent entities involved in farming and other vacancies. In this newfound independence, they experience an acute sense of inefficiency for working in the public sphere and sustaining the private sphere.

The attempt to analyse data in the context of the new repealed farm laws is to understand how prepared are the women farmer for the neo-liberal policies. This study begins by understanding the early stages of the respondents' life when various mechanisms – such as education, family support, gender-role played by the primary members, restrictions and freedom to act, cultural practices, motivation for future roles etc. – shape a person's understanding of life to be lived. Traditionally, daughters are tutored by mothers to

become homemakers, and petty subsistence labourers and sons are trained by fathers for the bigger world. The process allows women little understanding of operating in the public sphere.

The skill-set required for functioning and thriving in the public world is abysmally developed, leading to capability deprivation and near-total economic dependence. Thus, the daughters are brought up with the understanding that their world will be limited only to the private sphere, and they will never have to venture out and negotiate in the public sphere, which is primarily a male-designed, male-dominated and male-administered world. In the district of Maharashtra, this study is focused on women being married at a very early age, mostly soon after they attain puberty. Respondents were also married before they could understand the immensity of the new phase in their lives. On the other hand, her in-laws see her as a means of extracting dowry and providing for grandchildren. Incapable of tending to their own lives, respondents are simply transferred to big and small families. The presented account comes from the peculiar details that emerged in each narrative.

Discussion

The Parent's Home

The eighty widows born in an unabashedly patriarchal set-up were raised with a shrunken understanding of what women can do and become. The making of a woman begins much before a child is born. The legitimisation of limiting them to the feminine, motherly, family-keeping duties is normalised. The average of interviewed women was forty years. Therefore, the recounted childhood was majorly in pre-liberal India, extending to the post-liberal one. The amount of food they were provided to eat, the labour, decision-making power, education, health and age of marriage have been taken as primary indicators to identify the capability-building parameters. It is also essential to understand the kind of families widows were bred in so that we know the point of deprivation that not only arises from familial structures but also from the other intersecting institutions which affect them, the market being one.They come from an already deprived family where daughters are seen as temporary family members therefore seen as a bad investment.

What does it mean to be born into a family of a small landholding farmer or a farm labourer in pre-liberal India? The father toils for almost eight hours to earn Rs 70-80 while the mother manages Rs 25-30. This is during the sowing and harvesting seasons. When there were long spells of rain or drought, they could not get jobs on the farms either. The families then had to search for odd jobs at construction sites and brick kilns or become labourers in the informal sector in the nearest town. Till 2015, the wage stipulated by the government for field labour was Rs 70-100 for men and Rs 25-50 for women. It has recently been revised. Therefore the average monthly income of respondents' maternal families was between zero (in non-season) and Rs 3000, in which they had to tend to a family of six to seven on average.

The widows also recounted uncertainty in the job market during their childhood, due to which parents were often forced to send them to work to generate the desperately needed money. Forty-eight women of the eighty had begun toiling in their fields by the age of fourteen. The girl child would leave for her in-laws' house anyway and is therefore treated as a poor investment. In times of crisis, like heavy rains and droughts, they did not get work, due to which they ended up sleeping hungry, managing food or taking loans from relatives and neighbours, which added to the burden.

On the other hand, widows whose fathers had landholding, however meagre, had the burden of caring for their lands. Farming requires fertilisers, pesticides, urea, sprinklers, seeds, electricity, tractor, labour, etc. The landowner had to take loans from relatives or moneylenders and banks. The women recalled the loss incurred by their fathers to be immense, while in times of natural crises, they suffered a near-total loss of the amount invested. With no immediate relief measures taken by the government, these fathers became distressed due to the heavy interest rate on loans charged by moneylenders. In the face of such losses, many families did not even have enough to look after their health or nutritional care. Children had to leave schooling for labouring in the field. Women have taken odd jobs and often worked double or triple shifts. Even when women form a significant part of the workforce, they get the least to eat. About 48 women said that due to the difficult time, most of them got only two meals a day and had to sleep hungry in times of crisis.

The duties of womanhood are taught to girls from infancy. It was, therefore, essential to understand the way these daughters were brought up to embrace household as their destiny. This understanding also comes from observing their parents' roles in daily life. As with the eighty interviewed, a typical day for a woman in rural India involves the same routine since childhood. (except two teachers) It comprises getting up before sunrise, cleaning and feeding the cattle, milking the cow, cleaning the house, coating the floor with the cow-dung slurry, getting the wooden hearth ready for cooking, cooking for five member on average, serving the food, cleaning the utensils, washing the clothes of each member in the family, taking a bath, going to the field (often an hour's walk), working for 6 to 8 hours, do some additional labour for 3 to 4 hours if husband has a farm, walk home, filling and carrying the water, collecting cow-dung for plastering the floor, collecting wood for cooking, cooking dinner and then finally hitting bed in preparation for the next day.

While men can get up, ask for tea, ask for warm water, ask for food, reach the farm by walking or on a motorcycle, work for 6 for 8 hours, return and get involved in discussions, and enjoy some leisure time with the other men till the dinner is ready and served and go off to sleep. Even the minor work of fetching vegetables, groceries, and filling water is carried out by the woman of the household. She only has access to those public spaces required for housekeeping or adding to the family income. A girl child in rural India begins labouring on-field and keeping the house from 10 to 12 while the entitlements she has in decision-making and controlling money are almost nil.

Since childhood, respondents took up jobs that required them to sit on the field, harvest crops, sow seeds, fertilise the soil, weeding, and pluck cotton from the plant. This work is not any lighter than what men do. Many women, who have worked as labourers entire lives, complain of having severe back and knee aches. While this is the only access to the public sphere the daughters have in a rural set-up, sons are taught to run machinery, drive tractors, purchase farm inputs from the market, use them on the field, and travel to cities and towns to sell the produce, access all the government agencies and interact with them.

There is well-documented research highlighting gender inequality and male bias against women farmers' access to technical information, credit, extension services, critical inputs such as fertilisers and water, and marketing. The lack of exposure to actual economic affairs makes women ill-prepared for the bigger world. None of the respondents claimed that their brothers were made to toil equally at household keeping

activity that comes as an extra burden to these girls at a very young age. They work as farm labourers and housekeepers, looking after siblings and parents for about 16 to 18 hours a day. Daughters are not even given any training in skill set development for making extra income and therefore meeting their needs independently. Out of the 80 respondents, only one widow said she was trained in tailoring before marriage by her mother, as she used to help her in stitching. This diminishes the possibility of acquiring a job.

Education, which forms the foundation of a person's life, was denied to women. Poverty became the biggest reason for the discontinuance of schooling. Also, many women stated hunger overpowering the desire to get educated, due to which they had to become the extra labour from which money and food were acquired. Women also had to get into an early marriage due to poverty. They began seeing themselves as a burden on the family and saw marriage as a favourable resort. As they could not access schools and colleges, the development of essential capability through which critical and rational understanding is developed was stunted. Education also becomes a medium of meddling in the mainstream economic medium. It is also essential to understand how much say respondents have in matters at home. They lack bargaining power in intra- and extra-household affairs and suffer 'participatory exclusion' in decision-making. (Agarwal 2001: 1623)

That woman should not have any say in the matters of the family is also naturalised by how their mothers conduct themselves. In cases where the mother used to make decisions, the respondent had either a differently abled husband or an alcoholic one. In homes where a male member died young, mothers took over the responsibility of making decisions until their sons grew up to become the next breadwinners. This puts women at a terrible disadvantage, affecting their confidence and sense of standing in the family and, therefore, the world.

It affects the idea of empowerment; men's and women's understanding of the world becomes very different from each other's. Women recounted their mothers playing a dormant role in decision making, operating in the agrarian economy without any landholding, being limited to the household and silently agreeing. The decision-making power in the family and on the farm gives men a sense of entitlement, confidence and standing, whereas its denial makes women excessively subservient. It is essential to understand the process by which this disempowerment is brought about – exclusion from important economic and domestic matters is made normal and desirable in women since childhood. Subservience becomes the key to balanced and happy family life.

Even the matters of marriage and choice of groom, respondents were never consulted. The reasons are many: the number of daughters the father had to marry; the amount of dowry demanded; the fear of losing a match which stigmatised a girl in a rural set-up; the timely marriage of a daughter girl to avoid deviancy into a love affair and elopement that could bring bad name to family; removal of an extra mouth to feed. Respondents were seen as temporary members who would move to someone else's house.

Giving dowry to the groom's family still determines the course of a woman's life. Marriage alliances are made according to status, class and caste. Families of farm labourers who live a hand-to-mouth existence have little to give to their daughters. Parents begin making provisions from her very young age, thus diverting resources that could have been used for giving her access to the most fundamental capability-

building institutions and agencies. She is schooled lesser than the boys, is exposed less to the economic world, does not have land or property on her name and therefore has no sense of security. The women grew up sensitive to this and sensitive to the fact that their marriage can mean the ruin of their natal family. Returning to their father's house after domestic abuse or their husband's death became a tough choice.

Since the average family income in the house of a farm labourer and a small farmer is less than Rs 5000/month, the practice of dowry came with the added burden of arranging loans and repayment of large sums with added interest. Deprivations, therefore, occur for unburdening the girl off the father's shoulder for good. Widows, in many cases, said that they married out of guilt of being unable to be helpful to the family and living as a burden. Thus, marriage was not out of love but concern for the family's suffering.

Deprived of fundamental capability-building opportunities, respondents were transferred to big or small joint families at 14-15. They began tending to their families, repeating the same routine as their mothers. The transfer in marriage does not create any favourable opportunity for her. She is burdened with responsibilities with little space to grow as a person. Apart from daily chores, 59 resumed working as farm labourers and providing labour in their husband's fields. Due to marriage at a young age, respondents also underwent premature deliveries or gave birth to still-borns. Others suffered from reproductive dysfunctions due to inadequate nutritional food and the burden of work at home and in the field.

Life after husband's death

The idea of ‘well-being and freedom’ for an Indian woman is always in a relational context with the family. (Sen 2009: 286) She has to worry about her in-laws' approval, her husband's standing in society, her children's future and her family's honour before deciding on her interest. As we have seen in the first part, a woman's ability to negotiate in family and other spaces is stunted – compliance and adjustments are all she has been tutored in. Her imagination has not been developed to cope with the economic and social institutions and agencies surrounding her, due to which she finds herself incapable of functioning autonomously in the public and the private sphere. The ability to critically reflect on what has been forcibly and vehemently thrust upon her is stunted.

Many of respondents whom the state has not nourished in different areas are reeling through the struggles left by their husbands in an enabled way by providing shelter, education and food to their children, looking after medical expenses of their in-laws, marrying off their daughters, and leading a life that requires her to keep family's honour intact. Nevertheless, the time lost from childhood till youth, which is decisive in providing a premise for making a stable and autonomous life, makes the struggle unimaginably brutal for them. Due to illiteracy, non-exposure to the functioning of the market, banks and other bureaucratic spaces, the novelty in decision making in the family and public sphere, stunted bargaining power, and patriarchal family and social life, respondents struggle through multiple negotiations.

She is incapable of thinking beyond her family or children, which is not a laidback understanding of leading one's life, but the compromises and sacrifices made in the garb of being a responsible wife, mother, daughter and daughter-in-law limit the desires and dreams she can pamper and attend to. Discrimination is rooted in traditional values. Lack of companionship, hindrance in remarriage, childbearing responsibilities, control of sexuality, victimisation, violence and psychosocial adjustment to own family

and society becomes a daily struggle of these farmers' widows. Harassment by the money lenders is constant.

It is argued that the gender gap in the ownership and control of property is the single most significant contributor to the denial of economic well-being, social welfare and empowerment in South Asia. This issue has, however, received almost malignant neglect, particularly in rural India, by the policymakers, activists and academicians. Worse, there is little awareness of women's property rights (Agarwal 1995: 3). Land ownership was passed on to all women only after the death of her husband, only to be transferred to the son after he attained adulthood (in few cases). A total of 53 widows, however, continued working as agrarian labourers.

Widowhood deprives a woman of multiple cultural and social rights, but matters are worse for a farmer's widow. There are barren fields to be ploughed, debts to be paid, and the family to be fed. She becomes the sole administrator of both the public and the private spheres. Due to the non-development of her capabilities, she has to begin anew learning like a novice at the age of forty (average age). The ploughing of barren land is connected with the male-dominated market spaces for buying the agrarian inputs and selling the produce.

Since women have never been allowed to enter the market spaces as a part of the social norm, widows take up these duties with a sense of embarrassment. Understanding the kind of pesticide, fertilisers, seeds, farm machinery, etc., she has to buy is difficult. Though many women have studied till Std VII and Std X, due to the non-detention scheme of the state where students cannot be held back till middle school, and the dysfunctional primary education system, respondents can barely read and write. So, even for making nominal calculations or reading a brand's name, they need a man's assistance. In 26 cases, women seek help from their brothers to understand the functioning of the market. Though women are involved in subsistence labour in farmlands, the major decision of crops to be sown, seed brands to be tapped, agrarian inputs to be utilised and the cost of harvest are predominantly taken by men.

From whatever understanding she gains, she begins her new life with great caution. Brothers or in-laws can give only limited help as they have their own families to look after. Getting too much into conversation with other males can also disrepute the widow. As a net outcome, she has to fend for herself as best as she can. The crops are sold through intermediaries or directly to government agencies. All these exercises that come easy to the male farmer become an obstacle race for an ill-exposed widow. Getting acquainted with the functioning of this economic sphere takes years. She feels ashamed to venture into market spaces and negotiate deals, mainly because fewer women interact with the marketplace.

Then there are natural calamities like drought, excess rainfall, pest infestations, hailstorms that damage the crops, and so on. The circle becomes vicious, as a woman has to reinvest in the same land for running the family. Since the farm crisis has been around for more than two decades, widows have taken up odd jobs apart from working in fields to help their dependents survive. They work as agrarian labourers after coming from the field. The area where they are employed is mainly 1 to 2 hours away from where they have to go walking. In non-season, many widows often work double and triple shifts to keep the family going.

The average monthly income from all these jobs provides them with Rs 3000 to Rs 4500. She has to manage family, her children's education, and medical expenses and is also supposed to celebrate festivals. There have been about – cases in which women do not have land in their names. In such a scenario, the widows are seen reeling through a state of absolute penury, and survival becomes possible through the odd jobs. In days of extreme rainfall, when even fields, construction sites, brick kilns and other spaces fail to give them employment, they have to sit at home looking at the bleak future, praying they can help their children with food. Several months go by in this state in rural India for widows. They have to ask for money from relatives and neighbours in such a scenario to feed their kids.
It is the struggle for survival women are reeling through and the added burden of debt. While relief can be provided for liquidating bank debts, there is no relief for money taken from private sources. The compensation offered by the government for drought relief is also dependent on various criteria, an important one being ownership of land in the name of the one who has committed suicide. This criterion alone renders many widows ineligible for compensation but the responsibility for clearing the loan would remain. In such a scenario, widows unable to get compensation are left with zero resources to begin a new life. There have been 32 cases of harassment where respondents complained that constant visits from moneylenders and the demand for money in public put pressure on them.

Even in cases where women got the compensation, the government placed about 70 per cent of it in fixed deposits. Therefore she had to borrow from relatives, take loans from neighbours or labour every day and pay off the moneylenders. The women were unaware of the amount of loan husband took. It was after the moneylenders' visit that they learned about the loan amount. They were forced to repay the debt even though no written document proved any such transaction or the amount of money taken. Women excluded from decision-making in a patriarchal family are considered unfit to make financial decisions and are never told about any matter related to the public sphere. Only 51 women weren’t aware about the amount of loan taken by their husbands.

Housekeeping remains her area in which she has been tutored to excel. With the help of her daughters, she takes care of home-feeding children, sheltering them, tending to their health, and educating them through primary and higher education. Getting their daughters married makes her save money for her personal needs. Deprivations in their own lives invigorate understanding of the importance of significant institutions and agencies that can enable her children in the public sphere with a sense of standing.

Community help remains a significant form of financial support for respondents, but the patriarchal notions of limiting a woman to a few hours of work, timings of accessing the public sphere, the connections a woman can make with men for help, migrating back to the father's house remain points of deprivation. There is a loss of companionship in the lives of widows at a very young age. Those who are extremely old have no choice but to sit in the corner of the house, hoping for the help of food and medicines from the kids they have nurtured throughout their lives singlehandedly.

Apart from the Niradhar Scheme that provides pension to widows who do not have a son, that too meagre amount of Rs 700/month half of which is taken by the middleman, no other scheme is assisting the old widows. In the face of various struggles, they must take care of everything singlehandedly. Respondents

believe men to be the foundation of their lives, and the loss of this 'aadhaar' (support) has led to several vulnerabilities. Remarriage is not even thought of as it is considered an immoral thing. Of the 80 respondents, only two remarried, one in her family to the husband's younger brother, because a few Adivasi communities like Banjaras accept it.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to analyse how the state has failed in maintaining these capability-building indicators. Even today, the policies are being determined by taking farmers as a homogenous category, conveniently blindsiding the deprivations that arise from gender and caste intersections. The preparedness of agrarian families for these expansive reforms was overlooked. Thus, the requirement is to gender-mainstream women's daily struggles and make inclusive and sensitive policies.

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