

THE INVISIBLE BURDEN CARRIERS

By Moin Qazi

It is an image of resilience: women bending over rice fields, women bending over to lift sacks, bending over to tend children, bending over to draw water from wells, bending over a patch of embroidery, bending over all the time. A woman's work is never done. The most vivid image of village women is that of a woman as a daily wage farm labour, or on a family plot, legs straight, her body forming a V as hour after hour she is bent over double, hoeing, sowing, weeding, day in and day out, under clear skies and hot sun. Sometimes this work is done with a baby on her back and the only rest might be when the infant cries in hunger and mother finds a place at the edge of the field to nurse her child. She can be in her field as early as 5-30 a.m. and she will work until midday when the sun, high in the sky and burning hot, is too harsh to work under. Men will help with seasonal tasks; clearing the land, for example, ploughing the fields particularly if the plough is drawn by cattle. The image of women producers is reaped millions of times throughout the vast terrain. It is this huge and invisible workforce, which forms the backbone of our economy. And, alas the gruelling nature of work that the 'second sex' does not appear in any statistical records.

The concentration of land ownership, agricultural mechanization and the falling growth rate in the agricultural sector has meant that surplus male labour has been forced to move to urban centres. This migration has altered gender relations to some extent. Male out-migration has meant that women have had to assume additional responsibility for agriculture and other household production. In addition to traditional household and agricultural activities, women have moved into non-traditional spheres, such as managerial activities related to farm activity. This work entails hiring labour to cultivate land, supervising crop harvesting and sale, and decisions regarding cropping patterns.

However, growing awareness of energy and environment problems has led the government to promote new technologies like biogas plants, fuel wood plantations, smokeless stoves, latrines and hand pumps. But most of these programmes have been a

dismal failure. This is because women were seldom involved either when the technology was being developed or when it was being disseminated

For instance, when a community biogas plant was set up in a village in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, the plant came to a grinding halt in less than a year. The village women were very critical of the plant because it was decided without consulting them. The gas supply was limited to two hours in the morning, when they were out working in the fields. The women also complained that the gas did not even provide 25 percent of their fuel needs, forcing them to go in search of wood, instead of the dung cakes they normally used. Further, the new technology increased their dependence on men, even for routine cleaning of the burners.

But where women have been involved in environmental projects, the success rate has been very high. The famous Chipko movement, where hill women hugged trees to prevent contractors from felling them, is typical of women's keen interest in preserving their environment. Since its birth over a decade ago, Chipko has grown into a women-based movement for community tree-planting and a kind of watch-dog village committee against illegal felling of trees, and has spread to other regions of the country as well.

The "typical" Indian woman, representing about 75 percent of the four hundred million women and female children in India, lives in a village. She comes from a small peasant family that owns less than an acre of land, or from a landless family that depends on the whims of big farmers for sporadic work and wages. Most of them can neither read nor write, although she would like to, and has rarely travelled more than twenty miles from her place of birth. In many cases she does not know who the prime minister of India is and cannot identify her country on a map. Sometimes she does not know about the existence of her own village panchayat, or governing council, but even if she does, she is rarely aware that there is a place reserved for a woman member, because only men attend the meetings. She does not own land in her own name, or even jointly with her husband. She believes that she catches colds and fevers from evil spirits that lurk in trees. Her occupation is field work, chiefly harvesting, planting and weeding, for which she often receives less than twenty rupees a day – in many cases, half the wage that a man receives for the same amount of work.

From 5 a.m. in the morning, she is up and around, working about house, taking care of the family and the whims of her husband. Millions of such women are also wage-earners, working the whole day in the farm. Back home in the evening, it is back to cooking and more chores. Yet, these women match their male folk in everything – hard work, initiative, patience and adjustment. At the economically lower end of the strata, women are saddled with husbands who only drink and help produce children, but they still work from dawn to dusk providing succour to their families, including a drinking allowance to errant husbands.

She has to juggle this labour with her other full-time job, the care of the house and the children. Her husband does not help her; indeed he does not even consider what she does at home as work. A village woman starts her life from scratch every day. Even a single chapatti, the Indian flat bread, has behind it a chain of drudgery that has not changed in thousands of years. To make chapatti, a woman needs water, which is often several miles away by foot. She also needs wheat, which she must harvest by scythe, under a blazing sun, in a back-breaking bent-forward motion, and then grind by hand. To cook the bread she needs fuel, either firewood, which she collects herself, or cow-dung cakes, which she makes herself. To get the dung she must feed the cow, and to feed the cow she must walk several miles to collect suitable grasses (this assumes that the family is lucky enough to even have a cow; many do not). The bread is at last prepared over a small mud stove built into the dirt floor of her hut. While she cooks, she breast feeds one child and watches three others. If she fails in any of these tasks, or performs them too slowly, her husband often feels it is his prerogative to beat her. And yet invariably she considers her husband a god. Years of servitude have taken their toll. The village woman wants and needs love, compassion and understanding.

Caught in the vortex of the vicious cycle of poverty and ignorance and bounded by traditional practices women face illiteracy as the single biggest problem. These are women who are faceless, voiceless and hapless. And it is time their faces, voices and problems come out in the open. While economic disempowerment and traditional practices are significant issues, it is illiteracy that poses the overarching problems for women. These debilitate women to the extent that they are handicapped. And when attitudes harden in

society, the overall atmosphere becomes intimidating and the women find it difficult to assert themselves.

A number of factors restrict women's initiatives in managing natural resources, though given an opportunity, they have proved themselves competent resources managers and protectors. They have also not shied away from adopting and adapting to new technologies. Within homes and in their communities, women and girls face socio-cultural barriers, besides being burdened with the drudgery of heavy workloads. For instance, the plough belongs to the male domain and it is a social sin for women to use it. Again, in a patriarchal society, women are forbidden from entering "public spaces" and donning decision-making roles within communities. Effecting comprehensive change from a woman's point of view calls for a transformation of gender relations, not merely superficial attention to "women's needs". The biggest myth is that the rural woman is part of her land's wealth. Yes, but only to the extent of generating it. Women provide 33 percent of the work force, 70 percent of the agricultural workers, 90 percent of household water and fuel wood, 80 percent of food storage, 90 percent of the hoeing and weeding work and 60 percent of the harvesting and marketing activities. (FAO Data, 1997).

The Indian woman has moved out from the kitchen, only to be shackled by other obstructions such as inheritances laws for agricultural land in favour of men, preference for sons, early marriage, female seclusion from decision making etc. Few rural women own or control land and this handicaps them in warding off poverty for themselves and their families. She is a victim of not just these circumstances, but of social attitudes. She is a victim not of culture as much as of its digression. Yet, somewhere, the woman is trying to emerge. The urban woman may present a different picture to a certain extent. But it is the rural woman whose visage has to change if the country at large has to reflect a healthy, non-complex female gender composition. The house cannot move without her. Take family planning. Take education, caring or bearing children, which have been conventional duties.

The rural woman may have moved out of traditional roles, only to bear responsibility for half of the world's food production and produce 60 to 80 percent of food in most developing countries. Women are the mainstay of small-scale agriculture, the farm labour force and day-to-day family subsistence. In rural areas it is the women who produce

secondary crops, gather food and firewood, process, store and prepare family food and fetch water for the family.

This is her condition in the age of women empowerment, in an age when local self governments have already granted her 33 percent reservation and when a debate for special reservation in national politics is storming all platforms. Probably, the basic ill is that her empowerment itself has been viewed narrowly. Its practical implementation has been lost in its voluble cacophony. Financial empowerment gave her the freedom to step out of the house and work. But not for her own freedom or pleasure. Only to add to the family income or decrease her husband's and other male member's share of work on the farm.

Women suffer the most due to poverty. Unlike a man, a woman is doubly exploited. She suffers gender discrimination as a member of the family because she has to feed the other members first. She herself has to starve if there is no food left, she also suffers class discrimination as a member of a poor family which itself is a disadvantaged entity.

The work that women do is largely in the reproductive sphere (i.e. it is not paid) and therefore does not appear in the statistics of macro-economic analyses. Since colonial times development planners have used imported notions of gender, i.e., they assumed a western model of a nuclear family with male breadwinner and dependant housewife. This was highly inaccurate and thus the major role that women play in southern economics was ignored. In reality women are, and always have been, heavily involved in reproductive, productive and community work (often referred to as "the triple burden").

Women tend to carry out a multiplicity of tasks simultaneously (eg: caring for children while working in the fields) which are hard to quantify. By contrast men tend to carry out singular tasks and their work is therefore easier to quantify. Because women's work is not fully appreciated, their time and work capacity is assumed to be elastic. In other words wherever cuts are made women will cope and make up the shortfall. Women do cope, but work longer and longer hours, and suffer increasing health problems in order to provide for their families.

