

Locating Social Exclusion in the Narratives of Female headed households

Abstract- The term Social Exclusion though primarily used in economic jargon to denote a host of vulnerabilities evoked by poverty, it also denotes an *identity-based* forms of disadvantage, which reflects the cultural devaluation of groups and categories of people in a society by virtue of *who they are*, or rather, who they are perceived to be. The present paper will look into the myriad faces of identity crisis in the realities of the poverty stricken female headed households (FHHs). The paper has three focal points. At first an attempt is made to understand social exclusion from the dominant developmental lexicon. Then the focus will be to contextualise the debate of Feminization of poverty and rising numbers of Female headed households in the gamut of Social Exclusion. It will critique whether poverty and joblessness by itself makes these families disadvantageous or whether female headship add on to their vulnerabilities making them all the more marginalised. The next part of the paper will critique the cultural identity of Female headed households. It will aim to demystify the orthodoxies centered around these households as a disadvantaged category. The skewed representation of them in the developmental discourse creates an exclusionary and marginalised image of these households in contrast to the male headed families.

Key words- Social Exclusion, Female headed household, poverty and exclusion.

Introduction

'No man is an island entire of himself' -John Donne.

Identities are narratives that people tell about who they are and who they are not. Our identities can never be homogenous or discrete. They intersect with multiple axes of power operating at economic, kinship, familial, regional, geographic, linguistic, ethnic, age and gender hierarchies. When one's affiliation to these multiple categories are equally marginalised, it results in a collective 'identity disregard', a phenomenon termed as 'social exclusion'. Though primarily used in economic jargon to denote a host of vulnerabilities largely compounded by poverty, social exclusion also denotes an *identity-based* forms of disadvantage, 'disadvantage which reflects the cultural devaluation of groups and categories of people in a society by virtue of *who they are*, or rather, who they are perceived to be' (Naila Kabbeer). The present paper will look into the myriad faces of identity crisis in the realities of the poverty stricken female headed/ female maintained households (FHHs /FMHs).

The paper is categorised into 3 parts. The first part will look into social exclusion from the developmental discourse. Then there will be an attempt to contextualise the debate of Feminization of poverty and rising numbers of Female headed households in the gamut of Social Exclusion. It will critique whether poverty and joblessness by itself makes these families disadvantageous or whether female headship add on to their vulnerabilities making them all the more marginalised. The next part of the paper will critique the cultural identity of Female headed households. It will aim to demystify the orthodoxies centered around these households as a disadvantaged category. The skewed representation of them in the developmental discourse creates an exclusionary and marginalised image of these households in contrast to the male headed families. It will contend whether these households bear the testimony of dreadful deprivation, unique to it or whether they are the sites of benevolence.

Social exclusion in the lexicon of developmental discourse-

The concept of Social exclusion is Eurocentric in origin. The idea of social exclusion was first developed in France by Rene Lenoir in 1970s in the aftermath of SAP. Social exclusion denotes various types of disadvantages. It is both a process as well as a condition or state. The process of exclusion denotes the ways in which the individuals or groups become excluded in the society. As a state or condition, it denotes the most disadvantaged people or social groups,. In short it captures both 'becoming' and 'being excluded. it refers to the lack of participation in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of the people the society, whether in economic, social, cultural and political arenas in. Involves denial of rights, resources, goods, services

The analytical concept of social exclusion surfaced in the backdrop of increasing unemployment and economic marginality in the late 20th century. The European foundation gives the definition of social exclusion as "The process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live." Here the term full participation is very important as exclusion denotes the other end of the spectrum that is isolation.

Pioneering Development agencies like the Institute of International labour Studies, the Asian Development bank, The Inter American Development Bank, the World Bank paid increasing focus on social exclusion as an interlinkage to studies on poverty, inequality and social injustice. The concept of social exclusion became integrated in the developmental policy, a necessary epithet of understanding the multidimensionality of poverty. Social exclusion

denotes a multiple and overlapping disadvantageous situation, that is beyond just the economic marginalisation. It is holistic, all encompassing concept that involves income, assets, education, health, dignity and voice. Amartya Sen (2000) has postulated the multidimensionality of poverty and social exclusion by linking them with capability approach. Sen adds that the proper space for social evaluation is that of functionings. Not only material resources, such as money, food or housing, matter but also social attributes, such as access to education and healthcare or meaningful relations with friends and relatives. In this context, deprivation and poverty are not simply measured by a lack of monetary resources but by a more comprehensive concept involving the entire quality of life of an individual. The capability set of a person provides information on the set of functionings that a person could achieve. Deprivation and poverty can then be defined as a condition in which a person is deprived of the essentials for reaching a minimum standard of well-being and life. One of the analytical factor identified by Sen (2000) is that of active and passive forms of exclusion (and unfavourable inclusion). He points to the fact that the language of exclusion is very problematic and unfavourable inclusion can be exclusionary in reality

The interlinkage between Gendered Poverty, Female Headed Households And Social Exclusion

The term, Female headed itself denotes a non- normative category, juxtaposed with the mainstreamed male headed or normal families. The concept that headship is bestowed upon women, and not male, is exclusionary. These households are seen as pathological ones where women will invariably fail in catering their reproductive and remunerative roles. The cultural stereotyping of these households as the 'poorest of the poor', 'the triply burdened' and as the 'disadvantaged ones' in the dominant developmental discourse creates a disparaged and stigmatised image.

Poverty and social exclusion are not coterminous concepts. Poverty lies at the heart of Social exclusion. Social exclusion is a complex, heterogeneous phenomenon and cannot be defined solely in terms of low income and joblessness. As many studies have shown, the deprivation suffered by the poorest ones is multi faceted and multi dimensional, affecting the material, emotional, psycho social well being of the individuals. Social exclusion offers a bridge between the concept of poverty and that of inequality, that involves around distribution of resources. As there is a wide range of literature centred around social exclusion and poverty, but the analogy between gendered poverty and social exclusion needs to be contended further. The concept of Feminization of poverty, of marginalisation, of under class, and of social exclusion are integrated notions. Social exclusion, as we all know has not only a material but also a socio cultural and psychological base. The entry of women into wage earning for supporting their households due to sudden fall of income, (because of men's unemployment) is seen as a 'cultural anomaly' as it alters the age old gendered norm of division of labour. It involves an 'identity based form of disadvantage'. Social exclusion draws an attention to the varied overlapping form of disadvantage, to the experience of those women, who in addition to their poverty face discrimination by virtue of their identity, undermining their capacity to participate in the economic, social and political functioning of their society on equal terms. Women, of these households have to bear the onerous task of care giving and wage earning. The structural constrains within the households, the gender division of labour, the exploitative capitalist wage market, low literacy rate, lesser access to varied avenues of income earning, declining kinship support system all add to the marginality of the female heads. But the truth lies in the fact that these marginalities by itself do not lead to social exclusion. Social exclusion is a process of extreme isolation, when most of the life opportunities become extremely bleak, processes that cause capability deprivation. 'Factors such as inequality and relational poverty; exclusion from the labour market, the credit market, or health care; gender-related exclusions and inequality; and food-market poverty can all cause capability deprivation' (Sen 2000). Inequality and relational poverty occur when an individual is unable to take part in the normal life of the community because, as Adam Smith put it, the individual is unable 'to appear in public without shame' (Sen 2000). Apart from women's misappropriate burden in the labour market there is a holistic set of circumscription, of life situations caused by men's joblessness. With hardly any other avenues of income, these men are in the midst of acute capability deprivation. The de facto female heads (headship in the presence of the male heads) in the context of caste based, rural and peri- urban locales of India face multiple trials and tribulations. Though these women serve as the new economic agent, still they fail to 'challenge the status quo of gender power' within and outside the household. (Sen and Batliwala, 1997). Their every day realities remain as 'isolated struggles of survival'. Working in the unorganised labour force as daily wage earners, these women are not a collective whole, but dispersed individuals who are in an equally disadvantageous life situation. They remain invisible in the labour market, doubly burdened in the families and lack the entitlement to move out of the exploitative situation. There is a deep sense of resignation, fatalist and defeatist mindset among all the family members. Loss of male employment not only puts the family's economic position at stake but also marginalises the family socially. It creates an ambivalent position for the household, since the cultural base of male breadwinning is at stake. These families become secluded from social relations, from the wider kith and kin as they are unable to maintain social reciprocity, not only because of their economic marginality but also by their social and emotional vulnerability. There is deep seated sense of shamefulness, of vulnerability, of reduced self confidence which results in gradual withdrawal from the mainstream community life. The other types of FHHs (de jure FHHs) that are enumerated in the developmental discourse as the most exclusionary ones are those households that are headed by widows, deserted, separated and divorced women. Households headed by the widows fall

in the category of the most marginalised since they are culturally ostracised, socially isolated and economically challenged. The divorced and the deserted women led families are regarded as the pathogenic ones, a social misfit and a bane on the hegemonic family discourse. These families suffer from severe 'identity crisis'. A number of empirical evidences shows the relation between poverty stricken female headed households and social exclusion. Analysis by Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa (2003) depicts that female headed households are poorer than male headed households in urban areas but in rural areas, the association with greater poverty and social exclusion was only found for female heads who widowed or divorced. In Bangladesh, panel data covering rural households between 1994 and 2001 from two districts found that female-headed households, particularly those with no adult members, together with households which had ill and disabled members are most likely to have remained in poverty over the period (Kabeer, 2004). The Participatory Poverty assessment carried out in Pakistan in 2003 reported that female headed households and widows, particularly with young dependents are the most vulnerable and marginalised in all the provinces.

Naila Kabeer (2004) points out that gender constitutes specific form of categorical exclusion in conditions of poverty. The intersection of gender inequality and economic deprivation means that women from poor households represents a particular category of the multiple – disadvantage. In most of the cases in the sub Saharan, South Asian and Middle east and Arab world, women are not only disadvantageous to men in relation to literacy, education, earning and unemployment, but also in relation to physical well being and life expectancy.

Conclusion

From the previous discussion we can come to the conclusion that social exclusion covers a very multi dimensional, and overlapping space of deprivation, vulnerability and marginality that is beyond the simplistic 'inclusion' vs 'exclusion' or 'insiders' vs 'outsiders' binaries. The boundaries of exclusion and inclusion is not rigid but a fluid one where multiple levels of disadvantages of which gender, caste, race, ethnicity, spatial remoteness, and poverty intersect and intervene mutually. Thus though a Female headed poverty stricken Dalit household living in the fringes of a remote rural area can easily be bracketed under a categorical form of social exclusion but the narratives of these subaltern lives are much beyond these discursive labelling. The practise and process of getting socially excluded over the years because of repeated capability failure calls for a very nuanced understanding of the marginal lives as social exclusion denotes the extreme end of the spectrum of living a well deserving human life.

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