Gender Equalisation through Feminist Finance

RITU DEWAN

The onslaught on the rights of women, both as economic agents and as citizens, is based on the interlocking of macroeconomic policies with prevailing patriarchal structures, the foundations of which need to be unravelled, visibilised, and visualised with the primary purpose of combatting the ongoing process of gendered de-equalisation. It is in this context that the concept of "feminist finance" is articulated, especially in relation to the emergent non-enabler role of the state.

Ritu Dewan (*dewan.ritu@gmail.com*) is a retired director of the School of Economics and Public Policy, University of Mumbai, Maharashtra.

Responses across academics and activists to the increasing onslaughts on women's rights have been many and varied. Yet, what appears to be missing is the macroeconomic fundamentals. This article explores the violation of women's rights and bodily integrity from a finance angle, what I term as "feminist finance." The purpose here is to delineate the macro-patriarchal construct of the state (Dewan 2011) and, subsequently, its policies, and to identify how this construct not only trivialises, but also negates women both as economic agents as well as citizens, thereby enforcing gender de-equalisation at multiple levels. This article makes the mechanisms of de-equalisation visible with the hope that these will be confronted and combatted, so that all genders can claim the public from the republic.

Conceptual Issues

In the developing countries, the theorisation of economics tends to overlook the gendered economic and extra-economic ground realities. The most basic fact being that, for the majority of the people, particularly those below the "poverty line," it is the household that is the unit of production and, therefore, of gendered analysis. Take for example, agriculture, which is the largest sector of work with more women being involved in informal activities. If the motive force for participating in agricultural production is that of subsistence and survival, and not "profit," then no household can be non-productive or unproductive, and no family member, especially women, will refrain from production activities. Whether this is recognised or not is the problem of data systems, and of the methodological and conceptual biases contained in the very definition of "work" and "worker" as perceived in the context of a "market" economy.

Added to this is women's all-pervading performative roles not only in production, but also in consumption, distribution, and reproduction of goods and services, and the maintenance and, of course, reproduction of the labour force. The integration of patriarchy in the prevailing system of production is organic, and one cannot exist without the other in the current stage and pattern of growth. This dialectical dependency—each feeding into the other and thereby continuously getting reinforced—manifests itself in several classic ways: When dowry is given precedence over permitting a woman to inherit, own, and control productive assets, through the backward bending supply curve that implies reduction in women's participation in the labour force in inverse proportion to the increase in family income (often perceived as "male" income), the withdrawal of women from the workforce, even if for a few days, during the process of reproduction of the future labour force, and/or the age at marriage which involves the transfer and control of a woman's labour from her maternal household, that is, the very basis of patrilocality.

There are of course several stylised facts: the market or non-market and the formal or informal divide with a larger proportion of women located outside the explicit identified binary structures. This is equally true of capital accruing to an economy with women's empowerment being restricted only to microfinance. Concomitant to this is her simultaneous alienation from access to the nation's natural resources despite having a closer economic and extra-economic connect with especially those resources that are commonly held. Her lower levels of attainment accompanied by high levels of deprivation inevitably intensifies this alienation.

The state, market, community, and household combine and simultaneously compete to control the labour of women in various ways. The benefits of such controls to all four of these entities are ubiquitous and myriad at macro, meso, and micro levels, and operate through several interlinked ways and methods.

One, upholding a particular form of household with the woman combining the roles of the chief caregiver as well as "emergency" (but, secondary) earner during times of distress and exigency ensures cheap reproduction of labour power with women as the proverbial reserve army.

Two, the subordination of women takes place within the productive and reproductive process through the denial of ownership of land and productive assets, and non-recognition as productive labour.

Three, at the macro and meso levels, a corroborating extension occurs where women are termed as "volunteers" in the job market when they are employed as accredited social health activist (ASHA) and *aanganwadi* workers, and now under new categories called *pashu sakhis*, *bank sakhis*, *krishi sakhis*.

Four, a form of household in which women provide unpaid services is supported, and their income-augmenting and saving activities are not recognised.

Five, underpaid, unpaid and care work is depended on to fill gaps in public expenditure and "genderless" macroeconomic policies.

Six, there is interlocking of production and reproduction at the four fundamental levels through economic and extra-economic structures in the sphere of non-domestic work, in domestic work and motherhood, by socialisation through ideological and cultural practices, beliefs and traditions, and by organisation of private lives and control of sexuality.

Seven, women's interests are suppressed by giving little access to political representation.

Eight, oppression and exploitation are reinforced through the lack of response to violence both sexual and "extra-sexual."

The State as a Non-enabler

One of the issues of debate is about which term best defines the nature of women's involvement in economic activities in a developing economy—work, employment, labour, livelihood—or if it combines all. This complex gendered "labour" continuum is intricate and interconnected especially in the absence of enabling conditions: duration in terms of time, distribution of time between the various forms of economic and extra-economic tasks, allocation of time between a range of activities that extend from income-earning to income-augmenting to income-saving, and non-recognition and even non-acceptance of production and consumption-related activities as activities. It is, thus, essential to understand the agglomeration, aggregation, multiplicity, and synchronicity that characterise women's work across the continuum. A continuum that contains various interlinked forms of labour—paid, underpaid, unpaid household, unpaid family care, and all that lies outside the boundary of exchange value—a concept that goes beyond the somewhat simplistic market/non-market binary, and often extends into that of use value, particularly in an informal and developing economy.

It is in this context that the role of the state as an enabler assumes significance. This is not to say that the state has retreated per se, but in fact to assert that it has withdrawn from the public sphere, primarily to enter into the private non-household sphere. The state has retracted especially from provisioning of public goods and from its obligation to remove the constraints that exist on the visualisation of women's contribution to the economy. The latest and most clear illustration of this is the interim budget of the current financial year. The attempt here is not to provide a gender budgetary analysis of the allocations, but to highlight specific aspects that articulate the non-enabler perspective.

The de-equalisation of women in probably the single-most important economic policy document of a financial year has to be viewed in the broader context of the prevailing economic reality, which itself is highly gendered. The debate on gross domestic product (GDP) attainment figures ignore the contribution of women. There is non-availability of information on employment, especially when women's work participation rate has been consistently declining (ILO 2019), work is being increasingly informalised (ILO 2018), and the economy still has to recover from the aftermath of the double whammy of demonetisation and the problematic implementation of the goods and services tax. And, most essentially, the attacks on women's empowerment and their very existence are increasing by the day (NCRB 2016; UNW 2019). A "big" scheme benefiting small/marginal farmers and also unorganised workers has been announced (*EPW* 2019). The rural initiative, which leaves out of its ambit the majority of the rural poor, who are landless labourers and tenant farmers, envisages a direct transfer of ₹6,000 per year from December 2018 to every farmer owning less than 2 hectares of land, with the total cost to the exchequer being ₹95,000 crore. Calculations have already been made that this scheme amounts to about ₹3 per day and will in no way whatsoever alleviate or address agrarian distress. What is utterly unacceptable is the linking of the ₹20,000 crore to be distributed retrospectively for the last quarter of the current financial year of December 2018 to March 2019 with the fiscal target not being achieved, implying that it is the poor and vulnerable who are responsible for the fiscal deficit (GoI 2019a). For women, of course, this scheme has lesser relevance, in view of the fact that even today they are not recognised as farmers.

The assurance of the contribution of 12% of salary of fresh employees towards the Employee Provident Fund scheme does have a gendered benefit, in that the contribution of women has been decreased to 8% for the first three years (GoI 2019b). In the context of the current state of work and labour rights, however, manifested most clearly in the several Labour Codes, this appears to be rather impossible. Besides, the increase of informalisation, application of labour laws in an increasingly restricted manner, rise in temporariness, lack of job contracts, massive shift to self-employment, and the very problematic definition of work and worker are constraining to its materialisation.

Women have been short-changed even in the schemes and allocations applicable specifically to them. While the total budget allocation for the Ministry of Women and Child Development—which by definition reinforces the perception of women being primarily reproductive agents rather than contributing to the national economy—has been enhanced by 18%. Women-exclusive allocations, however, have actually been reduced by 5% from ₹4,271 crore in 2018–19 to ₹4,078 crore in 2019–20; an absolutely minuscule amount indeed to attain even minimal levels of gender parity for the 66.2 crore Indian women. Even as reproductive agents, women have got short shrift.

Although the overall allocation for the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (the erstwhile Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana, 2010) has been doubled from ₹1,200 crore, it still stands at a pathetic ₹2,500 crore, and that too in a country that witnesses an average of 34 births every single minute. In addition, of course, is the fact that there are a large number of conditionalities involved in being considered eligible for this scheme, apart from the ubiquitous Aadhaar card.

On the other hand, the interim budget has sought to increase the programme component of the National Nutrition Mission by a paltry ₹400 crore, combined with an additional ₹4,500 crore under the umbrella Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme. This lack of concern for even the basic physical quality of the future workforce is, to say the least, not merely lamentable, but cynical. At the same time, it points out to the fact that the state views children merely as "children of a family," but not as a part of the future workforce of a nation, and thereby fails to demonstrate adequate sincerity towards children and childcare, including all aspects of childhood, which are perceived as the responsibility of the state.

A major challenge today is to increase the involvement of women in visible wage-earning activities, especially by removing constraints on their participation. One such important constraint that has been identified and universally accepted is the care of children. Yet, the allocations to the National Creche Scheme have been enhanced by a mere ₹20 crore to ₹50 crore. Other such cynical allocations are the much-touted "tripling" of the Working Women Hostel Scheme from ₹52 crore to ₹165 crore, the ₹35 crore rise in the Mahila Shakti Kendra Scheme to ₹150 crore, an additional ₹10 crore for rescued trafficked women to total a meagre ₹30 crore, and another ₹7 crore to the total of ₹15 crore now for homes for widows. This grand total of ₹410 crore promised for the next 12 months is almost half of the ₹750 crore for cow welfare under the Rashtriya Gokul Mission allocated for the four months of this financial year itself. That is, ₹187.5 crore per month for cow welfare, compared to ₹34.2 crore per month for women welfare (GoI 2019b).

A central constraint on women's participation in the workforce is the amount of time they are compelled to spend on unpaid and unrecognised labour, particularly on cooking, which not only involves drudgery, but also has a huge negative impact on health. The direct benefit transfer (DBT) for liquid petroleum gas or LPG (PAHAL) was introduced in 2013, with the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) being launched in 2016. While not analysing the implementation of this scheme with all its positives and negatives, what is most objectionable is it having been termed as a women's scheme. The consequence of doing so has resulted not only in the reinforcement of the gender divide by reasserting that only women are responsible for the consumption needs of the household, it also negates the burden faced by single male migrants who perform this task. Combined with PMUY is the Direct Benefit Transfer in Kerosene (DBTK) launched in April in the same year. What this scheme does is to reduce the subsidies on the price of kerosene and to withdraw its availability once a household comes under the PMUY. With the sharp increase in the prices of cylinders and the withdrawal of kerosene from the public distribution system, poorer households have been compelled to revert to collecting firewood and even plastic waste, thereby increasing drudgery, time poverty, and negative health impacts (Dewan 2017).

One of the central components of feminist finance would, therefore, be the identification, unravelling, and analysis of what I would term as the "fiscal unpaid labour." The gap due to the withdrawal of the state's provisioning of public goods combined with a consistent reduction in development funds is counterproductive for gendered empowerment and, hence, development justice. This gap is increasingly filled by women's—and poorer men's—unpaid labour. The state thereby transfers its obligations to women, adding heavily to their burden and by creating a "new" macroeconomic constraint on their work and time capacities, both quantitatively and qualitatively. And, if to this is added the state's non-concern, if not its retraction from commitment towards gender parity, the perpetration, reinforcement, and normalisation of gendered inequalities become consequential.

Gender-based Violence

There has been a rise in the violence against women and girls. And, the response of the state has generally been silence. This indifference is articulated most visibly in the reduction in financial allocations. For instance, the support and rehabilitation system for women in distress called the Swadhar Greh Scheme has registered a 47% decline, the scheme for prevention of trafficking and rescue has been halved, the women helpline has witnessed a 38% decline, the Nirbhaya Fund is heavily underspent, more than half of the already meagre allocation to the much touted "beti bachao, beti padhao" is spent on media promotion only, the scheme for restorative justice to rape victims is non-operational, and the acid attack victim's welfare fund is yet to be introduced (CBGA 2019).

What is not visibilised or even recognised is the macroeconomic basis of violence, and violation of human and gender rights. The immediate policy reaction whenever issues of gender-based violence are highlighted is what I term as a "municipality response;" increase closed-circuit television cameras, light up darkened areas, introduce mobile-based safety apps, and the problem will automatically disappear. Issues of sexual harassment at the workplace are all the more complex, particularly in the context of the redefinition of work and workers that is currently underway through the dramatic "reforms" being introduced in labour structures, both formal and informal, via the initiation of the proposed Labour Codes and even otherwise (Ministry of Labour and Employment 2019). Added to this is the urgent need to redefine work, worker, and workplace, where the dominant forms of income-earning activities lie in contractual labour, self-employment, and home-based work.

The roots of violence need to be perceived within the macro-patriarchal construct, that the basis of such violence is determined by both the patriarchal structures as well as the dominant growth paradigm, with the two combining and colluding to ensure that women and their rights are subsumed and subordinated. Among the most gender-blind yet virtually unresearched policies are those relating to the physical infrastructure, for example, gender differentials and gender specificity in the context of physical mobility. Gender differentials in physical mobility incorporate at least seven components: intensity of usage, purposes of trips, travel patterns, distances travelled, frequency intensity, modes of transport, and of course economic and extra-economic constraints on mobility.

Gender specificity relates to the reality that women are primarily head-loaders and rarely use carts. They can access local markets, probably in keeping with the "limits" within which they are compelled to function. They use inter- and intra-village as well as slum roads and paths more than men. More women than men utilise non-motorised transport, they walk more, and, of course, face more severe issues of security (Dewan 2012). The result is consequently not only a gender-blind, but also a people-blind physical infrastructure policy.

Other illustrations in this context include the withdrawal of the state from provision of public goods, especially public transport (RUPE 2018), which is always more regulated and, hence, safer, initiation of policies and new business models that give wide-ranging powers to private transport corporates and operators, and introduction of toll taxes and cesses that makes fares unaffordable and, hence, increases the dependency on unregulated means of mobility.

Three new "sites" of sexual violence have emerged, all located in the labour-capital structures as a fallout of macroeconomic policies: the privatisation of public transport, the utter neglect of the rural sector, and demonetisation. Sexual exploitation is being increasingly incorporated not only into employment contracts, but also mobility patterns. I cite merely three illustrations here, all of them reflecting macroeconomic institutionalisation of gender-based violence that is becoming increasingly normalised, and all of them with a strong anti-feminist finance foundation.

The reduction of investment in public transport, especially in rural regions, combined with an increase in fares and the introduction of toll taxes have made travel unaffordable, especially for those who are compelled to migrate on a daily basis to nearby areas. Highways and roads are often dotted with groups of men and women attempting to hitch rides on trucks and other private vehicles. Women workers, having to leave home only after completing their unpaid care work, are not accompanied by males. These women-only groups are often taken advantage of by those operating private vehicles, who insist that they sit crowded into the front cabins (Dewan 2003).

In rural and peri-urban areas, work, especially for the migrants, is often attained through what is termed as the *jodi* system: the contractor employs a couple for a period of time. This couple is normally a male and a female, with sometimes two men constituting a jodi. But, a jodi of two women is unacceptable, based on the perception that women are less skilled and less productive than men (Dewan 2003). As agrarian distress intensifies and the dearth of livelihood opportunities increases, even a tiny plot of land has to be nurtured even more intensely so as to assure at least some food for the family. Consequently, in several regions, the wife of the cultivator stays back to tend the land and to also look after the children and the aged. However, the man cannot find employment unless he has a *jodi-daar*. The option therefore is to form a "couple" with another woman, predictably from among the most marginalised communities. After several months away, the couple returns, the woman often pregnant. The child of course has no legal or social standing in the feudal community structure. As a result, several of these women—a significant number of them mere girls—have now resorted to having their uterus removed. Having personally witnessed these incidents, I cannot even begin to explain the trauma that these women go through having been negated, neglected, dehumanised, and de-equalised for the rest of their lives.

Among the several disastrous consequences of demonetisation is the appalling increase in the violence against women, both in private and public spheres. This is not to imply that sexual exploitation had not existed earlier, but that it has now become more widespread and will certainly result in further destruction of values of gender equality. Women who had put aside small amounts of money were subjected to domestic violence, these tiny amounts being forcibly snatched to spend on purchasing basic food items and also on alcohol "to reduce the pain and mental agony of the provider who could no longer provide" (Dewan and Sehgal 2018).

Another form of violence against women has emerged in the areas of living and livelihoods, which had not existed before demonetisation. Acceptance of sexual violence has now become the basis of getting work. This is manifested in several ways: "healthier" women being selected for work, girls being employed in preference over older women, reformation of groups of women workers waiting at *nakas* according to "attractiveness" and youth instead of region and language as earlier, and a blatant demand for women workers "who do not mind drinking." The first few weeks after the announcement of demonetisation were so desperate that families were compelled to "sell" their daughters and sisters for a few hours every day. These girls, several of them barely teenagers, were taken by family members to the gates of industrial units and estates, where deals were struck with the watchmen of these units that had closed down due to the lack of "new" money. The hourly "rate" of such services was obviously negotiated at less than the illegal note of ₹500 (Dewan and Sehgal 2018).

The impact of the emergence of such new forms of violence against women as well as its reinforcement in the wake of demonetisation has massive ramifications that have already begun buttressing existing patriarchal divides and deepening the oppression and exploitation of women. The process of normalisation is well underway. Sexual violence has become a precondition for employment, with the female workers being viewed through a sexually exploitative lens. While the family is viewing wives, daughters and sisters as a source of "easy earnings," they are simultaneously condemned for participating in this "income-earning activity." Increasingly, "singleness" of women is being perceived as them being "able, available and willing."

Feminist Finance

The fundamental purpose of this article is to visibilise and thereby attain a deeper understanding of the patriarchal underpinnings of the macroeconomic architecture, specifically in the context of the growth strategies and policies beyond the gender budget perspective, and to locate the analysis and hence the advocacy resulting in action within a feminist perception of finance. The intention is certainly not to view the analysis of allocations and resources in a reductionist manner, but to extend the argument beyond calculations and locate them in the fundamentals underlying the very basis of the economy and the society.

Several suggestions can be put forward here: apply all methods of gender responsive budgeting to all allocations in all ministries and departments; evaluate resource raising and revenue strategies through a feminist finance lens; make the techniques of monitoring and evaluation more sophisticated; enhance the public provisioning of services, especially for the women; decrease user fees while simultaneously increasing subsidies for all public goods, including food, health, education, water, energy, and transport; and evolve and apply gender-disaggregated ratio analysis of access to all public goods.

Further, evaluation of all "development" projects, especially those relating to physical infrastructure involving displacement and relocation through a strong gender lens, and inclusion of indicators like the gender equality attainment scale in the methodology for resource distribution is required. It is necessary to universalise and ensure the social protection to all without conditionalities, including women and men who render massive amounts of unpaid labour in a largely informal economy. The foremost form of exclusion—the Aadhaar card—must be removed. The application of a gender-sensitive choice of commodities under the various rates of the GST, and analysis of the implicit and explicit impacts of prices of essential commodities, especially resulting from newer forms of indirect taxes on employment in general and women's employment in particular, is required.

Not just financial equity in resources between different local bodies, but also some standards of equality between local bodies in their performance of providing a minimum standard of the basic services that form their mandate should be considered. The number of females in the 0–6 age group should be included as the basis for determining the relative shares of the states from the divisible pool of resources, so that this indicator acts as an incentive for states that show progress in improving the corporate social responsibility (CSR) over a period of time. Also, the maternal mortality rate, child sex ratio, incidence of crimes against women, etc, should be incorporated into fund formulae, while it should be ensured that states are not rewarded for increasing their pool of own resources through receipts from taxes and levies on alcohol.

Conditionalities such as the training of elected representatives and staffs should be incorporated in the performance component of the grant for local bodies, with a specific conditionality being the number of elected women representatives trained. And, of course, it should be ensured that the state takes full responsibility for public provisioning, without blaming people's behavioural patterns for the lack of fulfilment of stated goals.

To this longlist should be added the need to especially focus on the issues of single women, widening the definition from the basically cultural category of female-headed households to all women and other genders who are out of the macro-patriarchal slot, and who confront labour, life, and livelihoods with all the marginalisation, vulnerability, deprivation, and destitution that accompany "singleness."

There are a large number of additional issues that need to be reperceived and reexamined through the perspective of feminist finance, such as the capital–labour ratios, increase in the profits at the cost of wages, the trade regimes and the international trade in goods and services both globally and regionally, and the trade deficits, balance of payments, exchange rates and the commodity conditionalities. The global and regional value chains whose existence and profits depend on the employment and exploitation of women, inflation and inflation targeting, digitalisation as a form of exclusion (particularly in the context of high illiteracy levels among the poor and marginalised), and the impact of DBT and CCT on levels of gendered attainment. The list is long. It is hoped that the assertion that finance through a feminist perspective can function as an equaliser in order to offset the prevailing process of gender de-equalisation is extended and that this debate is deepened so as to enable all genders to claim the public from our republic.

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