

What has changed for girls in India in the decade since Beijing and Cairo?

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“It is no longer our resources that limit our decisions; it is our decisions that limit our resources.”

--U Thant

What happened to the ‘D’ in ICPD ?

Whatever happened to justice in development? Somewhere in the 1990s’ chronicle of summits and mega-conferences, more words were set on paper, but less of them were put into practice. Along the way, it seemed that open market forces were finally pushing the concept of people-centric progress aside in favour of new and misplaced ideas of how to make development profitable. The sub-themes of justice – class, ethnicity and caste, community, gender, age, ‘normalcy’ and special-ness – have all suffered from the side-lining. Alongside these, the concepts of ‘too much’ and ‘enough’ – and even ‘sustainable’ -- raise more questions than they answer.

Sometimes, it helps to tell a story in order to illustrate a truth. In October 1994, the conservatives had a very busy time at Cairo. In the lobbies and corridors of the International Conference on Population and Development, they sped from delegation to delegation raising the alarm that abortion would destroy our morals and imperil the world. Representatives of the Holy See were visibly among them. Equally energetic and mobile were the lobbyists of some industrialised countries, and the international financial institutions. The poor, they said, must behave themselves and stop adding to the babies of the world; at risk were their next tranches of international aid and loans.

Contraception of all kinds had to be promoted; abortion was part of women’s right to choice. The women’s organisations at the NGO Forum fell into conservative-liberal arguments and chased the government delegates.

The murmurs grew into a flood of emotional debate. The Grand Mufti of Egypt had to be summoned to try and calm the waters on abortion. He addressed the gathering at the NGO Forum; the bra-burners and the veiled women continued to glare at each other. He made his diplomatic noises in the official area; the arguments continued to push aside the scheduled sessions. The ordained days of the conference came and went.

The official Indian delegation was one of the few that came across to the NGO area to provide briefings and insights about the inter-governmental proceedings. Some of the South Asian NGOs asked how the NAM bloc of countries was faring in getting its agenda across. The Indian delegates shared their anguish at the fragmenting of the NAM lobby: the abortion debate was splitting the Third World countries into pro and con camps; the World Bank, IMF and others were pressuring NAM countries individually to fall in line with First World propositions or face reductions in external funding. A critical aim of the NAM effort at the start of ICPD had been to insist on balancing the issues of population and development, and to work for final commitments in which the non-negotiables of development provided a context for population control goals and measures set for populous, lower-income countries. Part of this aim was to challenge barriers to economic migration and access to the world’s resources. But the furore around abortion was eating up time, and masking the lobbying going on to set limits for population growth without establishing obligations for development support. Time was running out for meaningful completion of all the unfinished discussions.

In the end, ICPD shelved many of the urgent development issues that were on its agenda. It mailed

them off to the next mega-conference, the March 1995 World Summit for Social Development. Among these issues were Internal and International Migration. The whole question of resources and international cooperation was hurriedly noted, but not addressed.

At some stage, a minority voice arose: NGOs began to ask what had become of the 'D' in ICPD. Was population planning a factor of development – or was development something that could only happen if numbers were controlled? The message seemed to be: control the numbers first. Whose numbers? Those of the poor. What about consumption and unequal control of resources? What about them? It seemed that the population-walas had won. It transpired that nobody had won. The question of 'D' has still not been answered.

In June 2000, the Government of India wrote in its country report: “Since the early 1990s, the government has recast many of its child-focused projects. The effort has been to ensure streamlining of delivery mechanisms to ensure [that] girls, particularly from economically and socially disadvantaged families [,] benefit. These efforts have accelerated post-Beijing. Most important [,] the years since Beijing have shown that investments made in the earliest years of a girl’s life ensure the greatest returns, for the child, the family, society and the country.”

(‘PFA: Five Years After – an Assessment’ Govt of India, June 2000)

Question: When will India move from ‘effort’ to achievement?

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, Section L – the last 10 pages in the 125-page listing of substantive areas of concern – focuses on the needs and rights of girl children. The positioning only reaffirms that the negotiating parties failed to acknowledge who exactly composes the majority in the female of the human species – and where in the polarised world of rich and poor that majority actually struggles to survive. The 1994 ICPD is popularly blamed for positioning the poor as those who must curb their numbers while the rich feast on global resources, and put all women and girls in the frame of reproductive functions and reproductive health rights. Did these international events do a grave disservice to the poor and put their children at risk- especially their daughters?

The 1991 Census of India had already shown what the 2001 Census was subsequently to confirm: that the most chronic onslaught on the female Indian, and the most sinister erosion of her prospects, lay in the steady decline of the female to male sex ratio in the 0-6 year age group. What was the expectation of women’s rights if the very first birthright – to be born and to survive birth – was denied? What was the expectation of political or governmental action to secure such fundamental rights if all the State could say about this ominous scenario was that “son preference” is widespread?

In the 1994-95 run-up to Beijing, African women’s organisations meeting in Dakar (Senegal) had raised a strong call for attention to this age group, and they sustained their advocacy into and through the World Conference. The Government of India has repeatedly laid claim to having pushed the girl child’s cause in the preparatory negotiations on the PFA, and reiterated this claim in its Country Report for the Beijing Plus Five review. The Report said India “led the struggle for inclusion of a separate chapter highlighting the importance of investing in the girl child” in the PFA. All very laudable, but having shown such leadership abroad, what was the government able to do at home? The report of 1995-2000 that India carried to the UN review was replete with platitudes and good intentions

It is important now to examine Cairo priorities in the context of Beijing. In June 2000, the UN published the Beijing plus Five Outcome Decisions and Document. It is worth recalling what it had to say about girls. A little of what it listed in ‘achievements’ had been secured for girl children in India; almost everything it listed as ‘obstacles’ applied to the Indian situation.

Para # 32. Achievements. Some progress was made in primary and, to a lesser extent, secondary and tertiary education for girls, owing to the creation of a more gender sensitive school environment, improved educational infrastructure, increased enrolment and retention, support mechanisms for pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers, increased non-formal education opportunities and enhanced attendance at science and technology classes. Increased attention was given to the health of the girl child, including the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents. An increasing number of countries introduced legislation to ban female genital mutilation and imposed heavier penalties on those involved in sexual abuse, trafficking and all other forms of exploitation of the girl child, including for commercial ends. A recent achievement has been the adoption of the optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Para # 33. Obstacles. The persistence of poverty, discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls, negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls, as well as negative stereotyping of girls and boys, which limits girls' potential, and inadequate awareness of the specific situation of the girl child, child labour and the heavy 10 Resolution 54/263, annex I. burden of domestic responsibilities on girls, inadequate nutrition and access to health services, and lack of finance, which often prevent them from pursuing and completing their education and training, have contributed to a lack of opportunities and possibilities for girls to become confident and self-reliant, and independent adults. Poverty, lack of parental support and guidance, lack of information and education, abuse and all forms of exploitation of, and violence against, the girl child in many cases result in unwanted pregnancies and transmission of HIV, which may also lead to a restriction of educational opportunities. Programmes for the girl child were hindered by a lack of or an insufficient allocation of financial and human resources. There were few established national mechanisms to implement policies and programmes for the girl child and, in some cases; coordination among responsible institutions was insufficient. The increased awareness of the health needs, including the sexual and reproductive health needs, of adolescents has not yet resulted in sufficient provision of necessary information and services. Despite advances in legal protection, there is increased sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of the girl child. Adolescents continue to lack the education and service needed to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality.

(B+5 Outcome Document, 2000)

Comments:

The outcome document of 2000 assumes that girls survive birth; in India there is no surety of this.

The most telling report of the 1991-2001 decade, published after the B+5 review, is the 2001 National Census and its chilling data on the female-male ratio in the 0-6 group. The declining sex ratio in this age group was visible in the 1971, 1981 and 1991 Census figures. The 2001 Census confirmed that the downward trend continues.

Q: What would be the 2005 figure? Nothing has been done to effectively arrest this trend.

Overall:F/M sex ratio (all ages):
1901: 972/1000
1991: 927/1000

0-19 group :F/M ratio:
1981: 925/1000
1991: 919/1000

Govt of India: 'PFA: Five Years After' (Country Report for B+5, June 2000).

In reporting these figures, GOI did not cite the F/M ratio for the 0-6 age group, where the worst decline was occurring. In the GOI country report on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it again failed to cite the worsening 0-6 juvenile sex ration as the most critical concern, contenting itself with overall female/male data. In its 2002-2003 annual performance report, the Department of Women and Child Development posted some notable failures in improvements in girl child survival indicators, but admitted that “performance gaps still persist between the existing and expected levels to be achieved” (for 2005 and 2015). On survival, nutrition and health, all it could report was that efforts had not resulted in hoped-for improvements.

In fact, the 0-6 figures were alarming enough to note, from Census to Census:

0-6 F/M Ratio:
1991: 945/1000
2001: 927/1000

The figures for the 0-4 age group tell the same story:

0-4 F/M Ratio:
1981: 961/1000
1991: 955/1000
2001: ? /1000

B+5 NGO Country Report “What has changed for women and girls in India since 1995?”

Where does one seek the honest appraisal of the girl child’s situation ? In government policy, woman and children have separate national policies. In government programming, the girl child seems to drift between the two portfolios. In the women’s “sector,” the issue stands at the end of the line in reporting on women – from government, and also to a significant extent among NGOs. In reporting on the child, it is often subsumed into general assessments on children overall, but the data of disparity and denial are all too visible. In assessing the status and condition of girl children for Beijing Plus 10, the GOI reviews and reports on child rights provide a good deal of information, and a significant lack of remorse at what has not been done. The most recent UN review of India’s implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in January 2004 highlighted concerns that discrimination against girl children has not reduced. For the second time running, the India report was rightly criticised for being descriptive rather than analytical, narrating failures rather than successes, and listing good intentions instead of admitting that it had not done its home-work.

Key rights issues for girls:
Survival
Protection
Development
Participation
Image and Identity
Non-discrimination

The four standard aspects of human rights are all at risk in the situation of the Indian girl child. They were at risk in 1975 (IWY), in 1995 (Beijing), in 2000 (B+5) – and they continue to be at risk. Added to these is the issue of image and identity, where the female of the species already bears the burden of gender bias. At base is the issue of discrimination and equal access.

Survival:

All too often, the girl infant does not survive pregnancy. In its June 2000 Country Report on women, GOI said: "Female foeticide is the most extreme form of discrimination against girls," adding, "that one in four girls will not live to see her 15th birthday is a serious concern." While it is probably inaccurate of GOI to have clubbed these two points, since foeticide is not the only cause of non-survival, the below-15 life expectancy is indeed a serious concern. **What can GOI report in 2005?**

In its 2000 Report, GOI had the gall to cite a cradle scheme in Tamil Nadu, with State adoption of unwanted girl babies, as a model means of "reversing the sex ratio trend." It is unclear what kind of progress update GOI will now provide on how the sex ratio trend has been reversed.

The GOI 2000 Report said "45 per cent of adolescent girls are under-nourished." It goes on to say, "Nutritional anaemia combined with early child-bearing, puts adolescent girls at risk of maternal mortality and morbidity." It also reported that "girls in India marry young. About 40 per cent are married before the legal age of marriage, 18 years." The Tenth Five-Year Plan subsequently reported that 47.8 per cent of adolescent married girls suffer from moderate to severe anaemia. **What will GOI report on teen malnutrition, early marriage and mortality in 2005? Has any data been collected and studied on the age profile of maternal deaths? Have any of the figures reduced?**

Childhood anaemia is reported to affect 75 per cent of all young children. Anaemia incidence among the 6-month to 35-month group is higher than that for women in the age range of 15-49 years – a divide of 52 per cent and 74.3 per cent. National Family Health Survey data of 1998-99 showed three-fourths of all children in the 0-3 year age group afflicted with anaemia, with 10 states recording between 70 and 79 per cent, four states recording between 80 and 83 per cent, and one reporting 99 per cent. Has anything changed in the years since? Has anyone found out – or enquired -- how many of these are girls? Chances are that they outnumber boys among those who are chronically under-fed and under-protected against illness. Studies years ago indicated that girls who are sick are brought to health centres and hospitals much later than boys. **Has this changed?** Social attitudes dictate poorer feeding and less overall care for girl children

Interestingly, in spite of having a national action plan to carry out the objectives of the SAARC Decade for the Girl Child (1990-2000), and in spite of reporting in that concluding year, GOI found nothing to say about the regional decade. It erroneously mentioned the 1991-2000 national plan as a response to the 1990 World Summit on Children, which it was not. That the plan was a poor one, unfairly skewed towards safe motherhood, is another matter. In the 2000 Country Report, GOI spoke of what this national plan "guides," in the present tense, not what it had achieved.

Protection:

On trafficking and sale of women and girls, the 2000 Report mentions only 1991 data: but nothing on more recent information. All available information on the past 5 years indicates that prevention and control measures have not worked, and that the demand for younger and younger girl children in the sex trade has steadily increased. The persisting belief that sex with a young 'virgin' is not only more pleasurable but also safe from HIV/AIDS adds to the market value of children in prostitution. Despite demands for a special section on children in the ITPA, this provision has still not been made. The Central Advisory Committee on Child Prostitution (set up in 1998) prepared a plan of action to monitor the success of preventive and rehabilitative measures> There was nothing to report in 2000; there may still be nothing new to say, since the implementation mechanism is still not in place. What has changed in the seven years since a 1997 study that said 25 per cent of all rape cases were of girls below 16 years of age ?

The GOI 2000 Report said laws had been amended to offer special protections to girl children, citing the JJ Act (1986) and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation)Act (1986), and the 1993 amendment to

the Hindu Succession Act. Apart from the fact that all 3 legislations pre-dated Beijing-1995, the 2003-2004 facts and trends are not reassuring. In child labour, girls are increasingly targeted for un-protected work. The estimates indicate that the graph of female child labour is rising, and that girls are replacing boys in many occupations that have shifted from visible workplaces to homes in order to dodge the law. Girls in domestic labour, with the attendant sexual abuse, are a large and unprotected workforce. Among street children, many of whom are from displaced Dalit and tribal families, girls are vulnerable to all forms of violence and exploitation. These situations have not improved or lessened since 2000, or since 1995.

Development:

Girls continue to come end-of-the-line or among the last to benefit from most social development measures. Family attitudes limit their access even to available services, and generally socialize them not to ask.

The Government's move to make education a fundamental right for all children aged between 6 and 14 years, and to make schooling free and compulsory to elementary level, could obviously help to capture the large proportion of girls out of school or dropping out. But it robs children below six years from the head start that would be critical especially for girls. Reports indicate that girls who do get enrolled are still dropping out in large numbers. **What affirmative action, and with what impact, will GOI report now?**

The Balika Samridhi Yojana, launched in 1997, had reportedly benefited girl babies in 2.5 million low-income families when reported in 2000. But what of the millions of other girl babies born to the poor? Are they only to look for cradle schemes?

The Kasturba Gandhi Shiksha Yojana was also announced in 1997 to provide state subsidies for the education of daughters; no one has heard what has happened to it. Girls in some parts of the country have benefited through education schemes like Lok Jumbish, Shiksha Karmi, and Shiksha Samakhya, but nothing has happened on a national scale.

Child marriages continue, in defiance of the law. This imprisons very small girl children in an unacceptable bond. Is there no enforcement? Civil registration – of births, deaths, marriages – continues to be very low. How are child marriages going to be prevented? And why does Indian law permit the 18-year-old girl to marry but bars boys from marriage until 21 years? The Government apparently has no view on this, and certainly no plans.

Participation:

The Integrated Child Development Services programme acquired a peculiar add-on in the mid-1990s, with the introduction of a scheme for adolescent girls; the scheme was re-named Kishori Shakti Yojana (girls' empowerment plan) in 2001, and is now sanctioned in 2000 of the 5652 ICDS project areas. It selects a few girls in the community from among school drop-outs, in the age range of 11-18 years, and offers them a sort of attachment to the ICDS unit, reportedly giving them a chance to learn how to be little helpers and to acquire some know-how about health and nutrition. The stated aim is to help them to become 'social animators.'

The State has its own views about what youth and adolescents should do with their time and talents. The National Youth Policy of 2003 coexists uneasily with the 2001 Report on Adolescents prepared for the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-2007). India questionably includes people from 15 to 35 in 'youth,' People from 10 to 19 years are included in 'adolescents.' The Youth Policy targets its constituency for family planning education and promotion. It fails to see the social protective action imperatives in the fact that 36 per cent of married adolescents in the age range of 13 to 16 years, and 64 per cent of those in the 17 to 19 age group are "already mothers or pregnant with their first child" (Report on Adolescents). The Working

Group on Adolescents seemed blithely unworried about children's right to be freed from labour when it recommended "dignified and lucrative work for girls." While the Group also recommended access to information and to social justice processes, the Tenth Plan decided to focus more on instructing young people on their duties to community, society and the nation. The Youth Policy also underlines 'dedication to community service' and 'commitment to the goals of development programmes,' without apparently having much to suggest about changing the conventional roles of women and men. 'Female adolescents' are recognised as a priority target group, but the policy is silent on what they would be targeted for. **The Tenth Plan will come up for mid-term review in 2005: how will it score on social justice for adolescent girls?**

Image, Identity and the Right to Equality:

At every stage of childhood, through all the initial years of development, a person either learns, and grows, to be an actor or an adjunct. If the needed foundation investments are made, the girl child prospers as a person. That is the cornerstone of human rights and advancement for women. Sans such investments, what does Society construct, and what does the State ensure?

In 2001, GOI announced the National Policy on the Empowerment of Women, as part of its response to the directives of Beijing Plus Five. It contained a sub-section promising to address and redress the deficits in the situation of the girl child. In the section on operational strategies, the policy went on to promise 'measurable goals to be achieved by 2010.' **What happened?** Has India reached the half-way mark in achieving the changes pledged? Overall, in examining the girl child's deserved status and the roles she could play, can India's B+10 report truthfully say she is on the road to empowerment?

In policies, plans and their guiding perspectives and commitments, what determines status and role? Does any policy commitment override any other? Are girl children only to grow up to be 'safe mothers' in a 'weaker section of society,' or can they dream of becoming free citizens of a democracy? What institutional mechanisms are in place, and to what goals are they directed?

Girl children are socialised to a certain self-image, and to acceptance of a service role. Early learning in the family and household weans them away from choice. What egalitarian, non-conservative norms has State policy sought to set, and how far has State action established these?

In the disadvantaged populations marginalised by class, caste, community, and ethnicity, girls are doubly entrapped. What has changed in the 10 years since Beijing?

India provides no role model as the 2004 and 2005 reviews take place. Perhaps, like some of its neighbours, it could provide a valuable warning. In a region which is home to most of the world's children, where girls are more deprived than anywhere else, and where the young are at least equal in number to their elders, the ICPD and Beijing decadal assessments are challenged to recognise their own priority.

Beijing Plus 10 and ICPD 1994-2004 Decade review process: Focus on the Girl Child

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