

INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES FOR WOMEN

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Today governmental and non-governmental organisations have established 'women's projects', in many cases with foreign funding, and tailored to the prevailing ideology of foreign funders that-

(1) money should be channeled to women's projects, preferably among the poorest of the poor.

(2) that the projects should not only be income generating, but also be "grass roots" and 'action oriented', two key words in development conditionality.

What is clear is that there is a genuine concern among these liberal feminists that something should be done to raise the economic and social status of women. In this sense, the reformers are well-intentioned. But the 'projects' for women are by definition limited. To begin with, many of them are confined to traditional areas, especially the ubiquitous 'sewing classes' which exist at all levels - at the level of the community centres run by the government, the religious charitable organisations, the trade unions, the Mahila Samitis and by numerous other groups. In the 19th century, destitute women, and orphans were taught to sew, as were the girls of the smartest schools in Colombo. The ideology of women as seamstresses persists and the sewing classes proliferate, irrespective of the demand on the market for the end product. Where women's projects venture beyond sewing, they take to poultry rearing, growing vegetables and flowers, batik making, bee keeping, cookery, and if very daring into bicycle and radio repairs.

While no one objects to women generating some income for themselves, the limitations of such projects are evident. First, arises the question of how much income can actually be generated. Second, who benefits by the additional income and third, What changes does it make in the subordinate status of women?

Within this approach, there is a tacit assumption that the status of women can be improved by making them economically active members of society and even in a restricted sense, economically independent. Besides the income-generating activities on a self-employment basis, there is also an emphasis on drawing women into the labour force - e.g. into tourist related activities, into the Free Trade Zone, into West Asia - but there is no questioning of the traditional patriarchal structures of society. Therefore, the relative economic independence of the woman does not contribute to her emancipation. She in fact,

becomes doubly oppressed. She has to bear the double burden of wage work and unpaid domestic labour. The developmental approach may therefore result in the 'double day' and in binding woman more to her subordinate status. Women are, in fact, being integrated into a process of development that still continues to be exploitative and oppressive as it is male-dominated and male-oriented.

The ideology behind this movement can be thus summarised; women continue in a subordinate status because they are not

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DOWRY DEATHS AND BRIDE BURNING

On December 2, 1980 a young housewife in an advanced stage of pregnancy, died in a Delhi hospital of burn injuries. A Delhi Sessions Court decreed that it was not an accident and sentenced the perpetrators of the crime, her mother-in-law, the husband, and his brother to death, creating legal history. That was the first sentence of capital punishment for a dowry murder. The Delhi High Court, however, set aside the verdict and acquitted all three accused. Later the Supreme Court reversed the High Court judgment in part and upheld the observations and findings of the Additional Sessions Judge. It has sentenced the mother-in-law and the husband to life imprisonment and acquitted the brother, giving him the benefit of the doubt.

This verdict is significant on many counts. For one thing, it is a vindication of the stand taken by women's groups all over India and should strengthen their consistent struggles against bride burning and dowry deaths. It will also go a long way in proving a deterrent by setting a legal precedent and will, it is hoped, strengthen the anti-dowry movement.

In modifying the sentence imposed by the sessions court the two justices have held that while "in a suitable case of bride burning death sentences may not be improper", in this case, especially because of the acquittal by the High Court and because of the time lag, "we do not think it would be proper to restore the death sentence as a necessary corollary to the finding of guilty".

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integrated enough into the process of economic growth; if they are and if they achieve a degree of economic independence, then their status and role will be improved. In Sri Lanka in the past decade this ideology has worked for policies involving more women in the organised modern sector, equal pay for equal work, equal access to employment, equality for women in terms of benefits in the state sector, more self-employment for women etc. While this has certainly contributed towards some economic independence for women and towards the emergence of more women from the domestic into the public sphere, it has remained rooted within the limitations of a patriarchal society.

When Delhi High Court reversed the Sessions Court's verdict, there was a furore among women activists who had been campaigning to draw attention to dowry deaths. The Federation of Women Lawyers, Nari Rakshata Samiti, Saheli, Mahila Dakshita Samiti and eight other women's organisations became interveners in the appeal in the Supreme Court.

The High Court had not only acquitted the accused but had also expressed cynical doubts about the evidence of the neighbours. It had also remarked, in support of its verdict, "that the evil of dowry has been in vogue in our society since time immemorial and shall take time to be curbed". The judgement had caused an angry reaction among women's groups and the anti-dowry movement across the country.

The case has come as a tremendous morale booster to these organisations which have been consistently and vigilantly fighting to highlight and build up a deterrent against dowry killings. For every dowry death that comes to the attention of the press there are dozens of others which are never investigated. The large number of young women who died due to burns in city hospitals alone is too large to be accounted for by 'accidents'. Besides this, the number of women who have to suffer a lifetime of physical and mental torture, for reasons of not having brought in enough dowry would run into millions. Only a thousand-odd dowry deaths have been registered officially in 1982-84. Even among these only a small proportion will be investigated thoroughly enough to substantiate a court case.