

Policymakers must listen to women

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In 2001, we visited wage earners in villages around Bodh Gaya in Bihar who had emerged victorious over a mighty Math in the 1980s. The land had shifted to the tillers after a long struggle led by Jayaprakash Narayan's Sangharsh Vahini. Talking to women 20 years later, we realised that the land that was given to the men as the "head of the household" as per government policy, was already sold off, drunk off, or bartered off. However, in the later phase of the movement, chief minister Lalu Prasad Yadav listened to the women activists and registered the land in the name of women tillers.

The outcome was remarkable. Women held onto their land, amidst impossible poverty and planned to pass it down to their daughters and daughters-in-law. "Men drink, women keep," they remarked.

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We asked these women why they had four children each. They answered that contraception is very difficult to obtain. "You have to take a bus to the taluka place, wait at the government clinic or dispensary for the whole day, listen to their curses and get a few

condoms or pills. Doing this every few days is impossible, as we lose wages and money.” It wasn’t that they wanted more children, they just did not have many options.

Policy makers and the urban upper classes think that the poor need to be made “aware”. They need to be ordered and trained about health, education, superstition, finances, and contraception — against their reluctance to accept development. Hence, while making new policies and passing legislation, the masses are never consulted. Obviously, many new, well-meaning policies fail.

When R D Karve advocated birth control and family planning in 1921 in Mumbai, it was for women to experience their full potential as human beings by being part of an active work force and to enjoy sensual pleasures without the endless cycle of pregnancy and delivery. Do we think women don’t know this? That they like to go through the excruciating pain of childbirth and the debilitating physical condition again and again? Why do they do it?

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In Maharashtra, while working in Osmanabad district, I saw government sterilisation camps routinely conducting the complicated and risky female tubectomy. This is a major surgery with general anaesthesia and requires one month of rest and care. In India, 36 per cent of family planning is done through this method as opposed to 0.3 per cent vasectomy. Vasectomy is so fast and painless that the man can walk home the same day. Logically, this method should be a preferred method of contraception. But, that’s not the case.

The government must take complete responsibility for maternal and infant mortality, which has thankfully improved drastically. India has managed to curtail the risk of women dying in childbirth or related complications in recent years. Yet, many populous states like UP, MP, Rajasthan, Haryana, and West Bengal still have very high maternal mortality. In infant mortality, we are behind not only China and Japan but smaller Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal. If in 2020, mothers and babies face avoidable deaths, what can we say about our development?

Patriarchy ought to be ever present in this debate. In Haryana, I hear from my friends who work in the fields, in cleaning, in security that having a son is mandatory. A sonless mother is no mother. So they continue to give birth to girls — at times three, four, or five — till they ultimately get a boy. They don’t love their daughters any less, but society forces them to have a son. Will this ever be addressed?

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Without changing the circumstances of women’s lives, challenging the social norms, stigma, shame, fears, how will a new policy work?

Feminist research methodology teaches us to “listen to women” rather than foist a policy or legislation on them in a top-down manner. How to listen to women whose life will change by a particular economic or social policy? Simple, ask them. Hear their stories,

note their suggestions and solutions. Make that a research requirement for drafting policy.

There is so much to learn. Poor women manage to hold on to their dignity, despite so little in their possession. Cruelty and labour within the family break their spirit, yet they celebrate festivals with the same family with exuberance. While successive governments keep them away from education and health, they vote in every election and run village panchayats.

Women in India are a wonder. Starting this Women's Day, policy makers would do better by listening to them.

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