

Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women

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Abstract: The term “housewives” relates to so many duties at the same time – a cook, a domestic helper, a mother, a wife, a daughter and most importantly a manager. But all this work is not considered to be the work of economic output and not counted in the GDP of a nation. The work done by them is without any salary or holidays. It is even hard to imagine a day when this “homemaker” will go on the indefinite strike. Considering that this situation is more prominent in India, the Ministry of Women and Child Development proposed for a reform which would make husbands pay a compulsory share of their salaries to their housewives in order to make her economically independent. The said reform is being discussed in paper- objective of the reform as per the ministry, the debates on the proposal of such reform, the things which can be kept in mind if any such reform is to come in being, the social reaction on the proposal of reform, and the response of the judiciary that weather this reform would be the real solution to the problem. Lastly, it has been supplemented by the view of various dignitaries on the proposal of the Ministry.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

When it comes to working hard, the average urban Indian homemaker, or “housewife” as she’s still routinely referred to, puts most of us to shame. She’s everything to everyone — the dutiful wife, caring mother and daughter-in-law; the cook, cleaner, and manager. Managing domestic help can be a full time job in itself and doesn’t substitute for the everyday drudgery of housework that a housewife still performs. Housewives help ensure the smooth functioning of households, but the work they perform (whether cooking, cleaning, or raising kids) isn’t recorded as economic activity. A 2011 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study, sampling 26 OECD member countries plus the emerging economies of India, China and South Africa, found that women overall spend an average of 4.5 hours a day doing unpaid work, roughly 2.5 hours more than men . Women from Turkey, Mexico and India spend nearly five hours more a day on unpaid work than men. India has one of the largest gender gaps in unpaid work, where men spend less than one hour per day on household chores. This is less than China and South Africa (1.5 hours) and Italy, Mexico, Portugal and Spain, and Turkey (two hours) .

The Ministry of Women and Child Development in India seems to think so. With the rationale of empowering women, the ministry is considering a draft bill that would try to put an economic value to women’s contribution to the household. As a first step, it requires measuring the value of all of that unpaid work. Problematic though it might be in practice, measuring the value of unpaid work at home is conceptually correct and well worth trying.

1.2. The Condition of Housewives in India

Indian housewife are women whose main occupation are running or managing the family's home—caring for and educating her children, cooking and storing food, buying goods the family needs in day to day life, cleaning and maintaining the home, making clothes for the family, etc.—and who are not employed outside the home. Such scenario gives Indian housewives economically weaker position. They have to ask for money for all their basic need from their husbands, the situation is worsened when husbands do not cooperate and wives are left with no option but to suffer. The second option available to them is asking for financial help from their birth parents, but that encourages problems of dowry demands later resulting into harassment at home such situation makes the Indian housewives more prone to economic backwardness. This made the Ministry of Women and Child Development to think about bringing in such a reform.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE BILL

This bill is mainly proposed to bring about the improvement in the status and position of household women in India and to recognize the productive role of women. To ensure such an improvement, a policy which promotes social justice and gender equality was needed and this sole purpose is to be served by this bill. This bill particularly claims to aim at ensuring economic empowerment to housewives for their overall development and betterment of the family. As of now, India is considered to be a backward country in terms of human development index and this bill would not only bring about equality for women but also an increase in the human development index of the country as the status of women will be raised. Not only their status will be raised but they will also be financially sound and secured which in turn will lead to the progress of the nation. The gender budgeting as it is termed would lead to a better and progressive society as it is an exercise to translate gender commitments of the government into budgetary commitments.

3. EVOLUTION OF THE BILL

During a press conference called by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Minister of State, Krishna Tirath, proposed the formulation of a bill through which a certain percentage of a husband's salary would be compulsorily transferred to his wife's bank account to compensate her for all the domestic work she performs for the family. According to the Minister, this percentage of husbands' salaries would not be taxed and would provide women the much needed source of income to run the household better, and more importantly, to spend on her own, personal consumption. In a later clarification, the Minister identified this payment as an "honorarium" and not a salary which is to be paid to wives for all the services they otherwise render for free.

3.1. Full Votes From Women

One obvious clear phenomenon is, maximum women will surely rule in favour of the bill. Because they know the value of their works and managing household activities is surely a harder burden than becoming a CEO of a company. Admit it or not, a house is

built and maintained by a good housewife. So, the women are very much pleased with this proposed bill which they assume to be the best insurance policy for them and assure themselves to get its highest benefit once it is approved in the Parliament. However, ever since the bill has been said to be proposed, it is under debate that whether such a bill will help women or degrade their position in the household.

Things Which Can Be Considered While Framing Such A Bill

If such a bill is to be passed, the following things can be kept in mind while framing it:

For such a bill the “wife” should be woman who lives in same domestic establishment with her legally married husband, is homebound and is dependent of her husband’s salary. This should be done as women who are working and are not dependent on their husbands can not be termed as economically backward, moreover a working women already contributes to the GDP of the nation. Husband’s salary should include not only his regular salary but also the income from the static sources as defined in Income Tax Act , 1961- such as agricultural land, rents etc. For the regulation of such a law, there has to be an authoritative body to keep check on the implementation procedure. At this stage there are two things which can be done, either to handle the regulatory part to the existing body such as National Commission for Women or to form an entire new Commission for regulation. However, cannot be handled to the NCW due to number of cases already pending there. But also a formation of new commission will add to the procedural formalities. In any case if a new commission is to be formed the constitution of this commission can be similar to that of National Commission for Women with central government having the authority to form it.. The guidelines for the officers of the commission, there salaries and allowances to be paid out of the grants, vacancies , proceedings of the commission, committees of the commission, procedure to be regulated by the commission, functions of the commission all these should be specified and easy for a layman to follow. Finance, account and audits of the commission shall also be looked upon. However setting up of a commission only at state centre level would not be sufficient considering the large population of India, therefore similar authoritative bodies have to be formed at the state level and district level as well.

3.2. The Possible Outcomes

Well, suppose we have got the bill approved. Then what can be the next? Feeling of oneness or a feeling with self ego that rules the familial atmosphere? Many women will definitely rejoice being independent in expenditure which will slowly and gradually lead to the collapse in marital life. Even if the bill is approved, wives are still meant to create an atmosphere filled with same love, affection and caring for each other as ever. This will certainly help in milk the true dividends from the said bill.

Again, we know the financial earning standard of a common Indian man. When he starts to pay his wife on a monthly basis, it only creates an owner-worker hierarchy feeling and unnecessary frictions in the familial relations. This bill is not really a monetary empowerment for women; rather it will degrade the concept of husband-wife bondage for sure. In my opinion, although the bill seems to create a realm of monetary freedom for women, it will also bring about many miseries in addition as free gifts.

3.3. Some Notable Points for Indian Housewives

Women are known for the bearing and rearing of children and the onward progress of the family as well. These two are defined as the basic duties of Indian housewives. That will definitely add to the perfection of the bill. Let me finalize here with some points:

- The government should not also stop making larger employment opportunities for women.
- Never ever be that selfish in your behavior inside the family which will cause a break in relationship.
- This bill should not encourage the women to stop education and be over confident.
- The government should secure special reserve quota for women in all types of appointment and fix equal scale of salary for both male and female.
- The government should not leave everything to the husbands and be escaped from responsibility.
- The government should try in establishing women aid centers or small work groups that suit to the Indian housewives in all major and minor villages and towns of the country and thereby provide earning facilities to women and making them self dependent rather than causing to breaking a relationship.

3.4. The Response of The Judiciary

The response of the judiciary has been ambivalent. On one hand, the Supreme Court of India has in a number of cases held that personal laws of parties are not susceptible to fundamental rights under the Constitution and therefore they cannot be challenged on the ground that they are in violation of fundamental rights especially those guaranteed under Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Constitution of India (Krishna Singh Vs. Mathura Ahir (AIR 1980 SC 707)). On the other hand, in a number of other cases the Supreme Court has tested personal laws on the touchstone of fundamental rights and read down the laws or interpreted them so as to make them consistent with fundamental rights. Though in these decisions the personal laws under challenge may not have been struck down, but the fact that the decisions were on merits go to show that though enactment of a uniform civil code may require legislative intervention but the discriminatory aspects of personal laws can definitely be challenged as being violative of the fundamental rights of women under Articles 14 and 15 and can be struck down (Anil Kumar Mhasi Vs. Union of India (1994 5 SCC 704)). In fact in one case the Supreme Court has held that personal laws, to the extent that they are in violation of the fundamental rights, are void (Masilamani Mudaliar Vs. Idol of Sri Swaminathaswami Thirukoil (1996 8 SCC 525)). In some judgments the Supreme Court has expressly recommended to the State to carry out its obligation under Article 44 of the Constitution and formulate a uniform civil code (Textile Mazdur Union Vs. P.R. Ramkrishnan (1983 1 SCC 224)). There is a definite swing is towards a uniform civil code and one can see that the courts are going to play a significant role to usher it in. Another heartening trend is that the Indian courts are increasingly relying on international standards, derived from various international declarations and conventions. For instance: (Jolly George Verghese & Anr. v. State Bank of India: AIR 1980 SC 470). Specifically CEDAW has been referred to and relied upon by the Supreme Court of India in some judgments (Vishaka & Ors. v. State of Rajasthan & Ors.: AIR 1997 SC 3011). These

lines of judgments give a firm basis for the women of India to demand gender justice and equal rights on par with international standards.

4. CONCLUSION

This being the reality surrounding women's unpaid, domestic labour, where does the actual solution lie? Does it lie in redistributing limited family incomes between husband and wife, or, in redistributing the national income so as to enhance individual family incomes, and hence, the woman's share within the improved family consumption? Importantly, while pressing for valuation of women's domestic labour, the progressive women's movement has always argued that if the value of unpaid housework is paid but does not add to or increase the total household income, such remuneration amounts to nothing. Hence, one of the most important conclusions reached on this question of unpaid domestic labour is that the state should pay for it, especially by providing women gainful employment, special funding, subsidised home appliances, free health care, etc. In this way, women would earn through an independent source of income and be freed of an overt dependence on the family structure for their consumption. There would also be a gradual undermining of the sexual division of labour which has resulted in women being tied to their homes and unable to do little else.

Of course, what has not won much attention so far is the fact that the proposed legislation posits wages for housework rather than employment for women as a long-term solution. Indeed, questions have been raised whether the proposed legislation is implementable, but not whether it does the needful.

Views on the Proposed Bill By Various Dignitaries:

Ranjana Kumari is the Director of the New Delhi-based Centre for Social Research.

"The women's movement in India and around the world has for long been arguing that the housework women do is an economic activity. But its economic value was never recognized and it passed off largely as an unproductive work unlike the one people do in factories and offices which is called productive work that brings progress and prosperity. It's great that we are now going to evaluate it, recognize its importance and women's contribution in the nation building process." But it doesn't make any economic or social sense, says Kumari.

"What is a woman going to do with the money? Maybe there's some odd woman who squanders it but any sensible wife in a marriage that stays and survives as a marriage is going to ensure that the money he gives her is put away or spent. Most of the women I know would probably put it away for a rainy day or save it for something or help him out. He would look after the welfare of everybody in the house. So why is there a problem? It's about reform, it's about moving forward.

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