

**Woman Transient: A Foray into the Experiences of**  
**Women in the Urban centre**

**Name: Urbee Bhowmik**

**M.A. Development Studies**

**Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai**

**Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata**

Society and the human world have always been characterised by certain modes of thought, certain ways of being and certain explanatory models. Existences might be seemingly independent and individualistic, but these find meaning in the broader context of the manner in which society and the human world is arranged and structured. Broader paradigms (Kuhn, 1962) lend meaning to apparently inane and trivial actions and it is in this coherence of the micro and the macro that society and the world continues to function. Quite notably, there are, often, multiple paradigms and modes of explanation which exist in parallel spheres of being. However, only one or allied explanatory models can dominate human thought and existence – which paradigm comes to shape people's lives most tangibly is decided by a number of accompanying factors that altogether give rise to a particular set of circumstances, which become the final arbiter to declare the winner. It has been observed across spatial and temporal variations that the explanatory model varies. With the rising force of the arguments of globalization, certain ideas might still appear to be omnipresent in this regard; yet, specific local factors, undeniably, shape ideas and new local variants, with little resemblance to the original are created. Thus, it may be put succinctly as a paradigm or a model comes to capture and mould the imagination of the people at a particular cross-section of time and space.

Development can be said to have captured the imaginations of much of the contemporary world for a sizeable length of modern and contemporary history. The word 'development' was, before the emergence of a particular milestone, used in the sense of progress and evolution – of societies, of the animal body and of the organism. Thus, it was a movement, mostly unilinear, with not so strong a tinge of positive normative meaning attached to it, as yet. However, a particular event in the annals of history added a completely new and radically altering dimension to the term 'development'. President Harry Truman of the United States of America in his inaugural speech of 1949 used the term 'underdeveloped areas' (Truman, 1949) to refer to such areas as in need of financial aid to improve and lift the dismal conditions they were believed to be leading their lives in. The sweeping description employed by Truman was, in fact, quite revealing, and kick-started the beginning of a whole new political project. Truman had also painted the United States as the master benefactor in this respect, possessing the adequate material resources, technical know-how and industrial and scientific equipments to power a process whereby, areas of the world lacking these tools and suffering from, what were considered ailments and afflictions due to insufficient economic prowess, would gradually emerge out of their abysmal conditions and emulate the

civilisational model of the West, the latter being construed to be the epitome of modern humanity. The ‘underdeveloped areas’ were considered to be economically stagnant, failing to display the kind of growth that came to be associated with development, that which the United States as well as other nations in the West had come to achieve; they were portrayed as in urgent need of development, passive recipients, who in their wait for development aid, had nothing but to thank the United States administration for the charity and philanthropy of the latter, aimed at making the world a better and more equitable place.

The connotation of development that consequently came to take root was one that could accommodate only one model of growth – that of the West, powered by forces as had been of the West, and in a unilinear and progressive way, a shift that was necessarily positive and desirable. Any deviation was merely a disturbance, due to inadequate knowledge of the situation, that was to be summarily dismantled and the process of development put back on track. Thus, it came to be established that development was supreme in importance, and all other affairs were relegated to the background. They were to be submitted to the cause of development, which had the right to dictate the matters of the day. Development, thus, can do no wrong and whatever casualties occur are worth a sacrifice for development. This is best reflected in the manner in which political parties often succeed in placing mass appeal by adopting the agenda of development onto their manifesto; in fact, in India, development has largely been a middle-class dream, explaining their readiness to lay down their affiliations to the faction that holds the greatest promise for this.

Development, like many other aspects of the modern, is predominantly constitutive of a constant tendency towards movement and growth. The present global social structure, undoubtedly, shaped by capitalism, is marked by a strong aversion to stagnation and inactivity. Society as much as human life is to be continuously on the move. This incessant need to shift, and progressively, is what brings migration, as a field of work into focus. Migration, possibly one of the oldest facets of human society, refers to the movement of people from one area to another. Yet, this simple definition comes to assume complex layers of meaning when it is placed and viewed in context – of space and time as well as other causal factors that filter the experiences of migration.

Several incidents of migration have gone down in the annals of history – forced or voluntary. Thus, the (mythic?) exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt led by Moses, the bulk forced migration of Africans as slaves into America, the mass exodus triggered by the Partition of

India as well as the recent incident of Rohingya exodus into Bangladesh and other places, following a brutal military crackdown on the community in Myanmar. Migration, as is evident, might be triggered by different kinds of phenomena – development-induced displacement, political factors like genocidal conditions as well as the more commonly heard of economic push and pull factors like actual or perceived presence of greater development as well as better economic opportunities in the destination than in one's home area. However, one aspect of migration, emblematic of the broader spirit of migration, is the massive change that occurs in the lives of the migrants. The large-scale alteration that their life undergoes ensures that substantial modifications are wrought on to community life as well as the relationships among the people of those communities and their experiences of it.

Society is fractured along several lines of stratification, gender being among the predominant ones. Sexual and gender identities fixate the lives and experiences of each individual in specific spatio-temporal contextualities; gendered imaginations shape social fabrics; and a person can hardly escape the cage of life-stories one's gender results in. Part of the entire bogey of social problems that advancing modernity is hailed to resolve on its way, gender is conspicuous by its absence, from several issues, within which it owes a rightful place in terms of complicity in militating against the sufferer. However, gender needs to be acknowledged for the enormous role it plays in human existence; further, what needs adequate recognition is the novel forms in which inequalities like these reinvigorate and adapt themselves to changing circumstances.

Gender, for the longest time, failed to be accounted for within the discourse of development – the specific ways in which gender shapes the experiences of development of people had been invisibilised, thereby, failing to provide adequate space to the particularity of women's experiences. Development is gendered, both in the procedural as well as substantive senses of the term – panning out in ways that are, alleged to be, more often than not masculinist and neo-colonialist, the effects of development are also coloured by gender. Gradually, however, with the growing campaigning and spread of awareness by feminists and gender activists, development thinkers and practitioners came to realise this crucial aspect of the phenomenon. The gendering of development was called for and given proper place in terms of the adoption of the Gender and Development (GAD) approach and/or the Women in Development (WID) approach. International efforts were captured by the formation of bodies like UN Women and UNIFEM, as well as the declaration of 1975-85 as the UN Decade for Women. A sustainable development goal (SDG 5) was also formulated as an aim to gender inequality. Quite notably,

gender concerns are made out to be solely women's concerns and masculinity issues have been ignored for the longest time in this respect. However, any issue, in order to be explored fully and in its complete sense in terms of gender, needs to factor in both men's as well as women's experiences so that a comprehensive account of the situation can be woven.

Certain perspectives and key themes emerge from a brief glance at the different works as well as an observation of the dominant themes and ideas parading the field of development. A sense of fear and consternation is often articulated by thinkers who bring gender concerns into the question of development – one of co-option by governance regimes (Rai, 2008). Gender politics and feminism emerged and grew denouncing the structuring of the world along gender and sexual lines, coloured by patriarchal beliefs; a streak of radicalism has often been the hallmark of gender ideologies. However, development commences by accepting and taking for granted the world in which it is to operate. This very conciliatory nature of the phenomenon of development is what meets head-on with feminist theory and activism, a process Rai (2008) terms the de-politicisation of gender.

According to Rai (2008), the inclusion of women in the discourse and agenda of development has occurred in waves. The initial phase was marked by simply an addition of women to what was, and perhaps continues to be, a man's world – more of a gesture of tokenism than adequate inclusion, it was in keeping with the broader demands and achievements in first-wave feminism. Thus, indeed, feminism had been co-opted and induced to take up the mantle and the language of development, Statism and governance. Gradually, through, further campaigns and awareness-spreading initiatives, women were in a very slow and steady manner allowed to be represented in a manner reflective of the reality – actors in struggles against oppression. Thus, the task became one of extracting women from the policy and discursive frames as objects and ensuring that women's subjectivities are placed centre-stage. Women themselves embarked on various modes of struggle as well as empowerment – within oneself (conscientization), with others (women's groups, movements and networks) and for change (transformative politics). Rai (2008) thus calls for an inspection of underlying biases of socio-economic contexts and political institutions.

Gender and development (GAD) as an approach has brought within its fold several issues like accommodation of gender concerns in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG 3); social and biological reproduction, differential attitudes of states towards family planning and variations in access to education and housing; differences in health of women across differing

life-stages, experiences of violence in the lives of women filtered by different factors like social and economic location; and gender roles vis-a-vis natural disasters in rural as well as urban areas (Momsen, 2004). One major problem, for example, continues to be in the field of work, whereby, with the rise of the service sector and the burgeoning of the care economy, a feminisation of work has occurred – women increasingly come to take up these roles which play on assumptions of women's primary roles as sexual as well mental carers and nurturers. These are, however, peripheral jobs with low security, low wages, and low prestige and are reported to inflict considerable harm on women. Thus, despite women getting accommodated in the workspace on the face of it, gender hierarchies get perpetuated in the work sphere, with women still huddled at the bottom of the ladder.

The different initiatives by the number of world bodies have often met mixed success (Momsen, 2004). The Millennium Development Goal 3 of promoting gender equality and empowering women has focussed on eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education. In this respect, for example, education has been, intriguingly, perceived to be as has been shown on reports, considered the panacea for all ills. The United Nations declared several 10-year periods as the Development Decades – 1976-1985 was termed the UN Decade for Women. Another example of mixed results, the UN Decade for Women, while hardly altered anything and failed to make any major interventions into a system perpetuating patriarchy, was, however, to be credited with the sharp limelight into which gender and women's concerns vis-a-vis development was brought; a general consensus emerged that gender could no longer be ignored while raising the issue of development – all these different perspectives needed to be woven together.

Momsen (2004) provides an overview of the major approaches to the question of gender and development that have occurred through successive periods – the welfare approach, the Women in Development (WID) approach, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, the Women and Development (WAD) approach, the efficiency approach, the empowerment approach, the Gender and the Environment (GED) approach and finally, the rise of the process of mainstreaming gender inequality. Division of labour and roles in the households economy have been shown by studies to be the crucial factors in this regard. In fact, distribution of benefits to communities also follows highly gendered patterns.

In fact, as urbanization expands due to increasing impoverishment of rural life and growing perception of the concentration of jobs and opportunities in the urban centre, the study of the

urban comes to assume importance. Development professionals as well as policy makers tend to consider rural and urban areas as distinct, ignoring the synergies between these. Urban-rural linkages are particularly dense in semi-urban centres where economies are in a constant state of flux and fragmented institutions, complex social structures and mobility are the order of the day (Momsen, 2004).

The collision and incompatibility of feminist theorising and gender and development approaches is clearly reflected by the clear distinction many feminist practitioners have made between the standpoints of the feminist approach to development and that of a Women and Development approach. While demands to consider gender concerns within the development paradigm have often been met with claims that women are already included, more nuanced feminist concerns have hardly been included in the sphere of development, marking out a very clear line between the two (Pearson and Jackson, 1998).

An important caveat with respect to the question of gender and development is the specific way in which it rose with the arrival of Third World feminism. While feminists from the West as well as other affluent parts of the world were criticised by feminists from within the countries of the proverbial Third World regarding their pre-occupation with civil and political matters, the latter group raised consciousness regarding the dire material straits in which women of the Third world found themselves. Further, the need to represent one's own identity and the question of standpoint came to assume ever more importance. Thus, the various approaches to gender and development were the handiwork of the Third World feminists who were more concerned with bringing socio-economic issues to the fore (Pearson and Jackson, 1998).

Migration and development can be found to be linked through different kinds of ties, different ways in which one influences the other or, in fact, both influence each other in specific ways. Migration, the number of people moving from one place to another, in what forms and doing what affects the kind of development that is going to be attempted for those areas – often, the low levels of development aimed for these areas only serve to perpetuate the myths regarding migrants being dirty and unhygienic. Development can lead to forced migration or even, what is seen as voluntary migration, whereby, people migrate with an eye to better opportunities at their destination offered by the promises of greater economic development. Quite notably, while migrants have often played a crucial role in bringing and fostering the development of a particular region, they are the ones who have been most

deprived of the beneficial effects of development, neglected by the entire model which occurs in a world beyond their reach. Thus, for example, three crucial arenas where migration affects development are the impact of labour mobility on domestic labour flows, the impact of migration on productivity in the domestic economy and the impact of remittance flows. Certain issues with respect to migration that development has often to grapple with include the oft-repeated concern of brain drain, involving highly-skilled migrants (HSM), organising the recruitment of low and medium-skilled workers and mobilising and channelling remittances for development. Thus, while countries of origin face issues of macro-economic management, human resource management, financing higher education, infrastructure and regional and South-South cooperation.

When the lens of gender is placed on the question of migration, certain key themes and facets can be observed. When an entire community gets re-established somewhere else, its relationalities suffer major structural alterations. Thus, gender hierarchies may not carry the same appearance and redeeming features might be noticeable in certain respects; however, these inequalities only tend to reinvigorate themselves and adapt themselves to changed circumstances and give rise to newer forms of inequalities.

At the very outset, the discourse of migration customarily engages in pathologising decontextualised, essentialist and organic categories of migrants – an objectifying view in which people are seen only in terms of certain categories for which they stand in. In this respect, it is noteworthy that migration discourses pan out within broader international relations regimes, thereby, reproducing gender inequalities. The focus placed on migrants' sexual lives, once again, falls squarely on the perceived sexual transgressions of the women of the community (Palmary et al., 2010). Sexual acts perceived to not be in line with the general or dominant ethos of the society lead to heavy prices being extracted from women engaging in such behaviours. Women, thus, find their place within the paradigm of development, only as protected and dependents of society, passive, politically non-articulate and non-participating (Zavos, 2010), a binary of pathologised women or normalised absence.

Parpart et al. (2006) make a point substantially important in the context of discussions on migrants and identity and citizenship. According to them, the construction of cultural connections and identifications across borders and the conception of the home as multi-local by migrant women lead to contestations and challenges to existing nation-state based notions of citizenship and societal membership, simultaneously giving rise to a richer, more multi-

layered notion of citizenship. This is resonant of the larger processes of uprooting from one's specific local identities and multiple affiliations that are simultaneously built as a result of migration – the result is a situation, whereby, one's identity, in contrast to and instead of being rooted in a specific spatio-temporal location is rather left floating across multiple spaces and junctions in time. This phenomenon is also highly empowering as individuals acquire some amount of potential to frame their own identities by selectively putting together an assortment of pieces they gather from the multiple identities, thereby, gaining the capacity to redefine themselves in the process. In fact, Tatsoglu and Dobrowolsky (2006) make a crucial point regarding governance and legal-administrative lapses with respect to women and migration. Women constitute, proven by studies and surveys, a major section of the migrant population. However, when rules and regulations fail to take note of this, they only end up excluding women from the ambit of law. Women, on the other hand, end up trapped in policy webs and situations of illegal migration.

What gets reflected over and over again through mainstream migration discussions is that migration is essentially a male phenomenon, women merely following and leading lives in the shadow of these migrant men (Thapan, 2006). However, interestingly, there might be regional variations in the causes that allow women to migrate. Families, admittedly, for one thing do exert a lot of control over the decisions as to whether women are to be allowed to migrate or not (Thapan, 2006). What needs clear articulation is the importance of an understanding of the social structures and relations to the understanding of the woman migrant's experiences, which fails explanation as oriented simply towards the material. Women do exert choice and agency in deciding whether they want to partake in processes of migration, but the extent and peculiar nature of that agential action needs to be examined too (Thapan, 2006).

A migrant woman negotiates her identity in complex and nuanced ways. Her identity is constrained by structural factors like the presence of the state as well as societal rules and regulations, both of the home as well as the host country. However, freedom also lies in the fact that she is not completely rooted in any one area, hence, her identity retains fluidity. It is at the active intersection and interface of these two phenomena that her actual and real identity is realised (Thapan, 2006). A noteworthy aspect of women's migration is the specific gender roles they are pushed into even when they migrate in their independent capacity and their migrant identity is undermined and placed in relegation to the primary gendered identity (Behera, 2006).

A significant way in which feminist theorising aligns with women's migration experiences is the blurring of distinction between the public and the private (Behera, 2006). Distinctions between the public and the private, otherwise vehemently maintained in a migrant woman's life, can hardly sustain itself in a mode of lifestyle always changing. The woman is compelled to accept some parts of the public as private, while the private often becomes amenable to interferences and penetration by elements of the public. This inter-mixing often leads to dilution and formation of novel societal rules and regulations.

Social legitimacy, according to Oishi (2005), is crucial in fostering female migration – women's increasing urban-rural mobility transforms gender norms within communities and this transformation is what drives female migration by acting as social legitimacy. This, according to her, is the macro-micro link in migration, the macro being broader structural factors like the role of the state and micro being factors like individual autonomy. Thus, Oishi (2005) feels that the patterns and causal mechanisms of women's migration can be explained by an "integrative approach" (pg. 14). This is to club the impact of globalization, the absence of an international migration regime, gendered migration policies and women's autonomy in public and private spheres. Oishi (2005) feels, however, that the structural and subjective dimensions to empowerment need to be distinguished from each other. Migrant women, often stuck in forms of work that fail to provide them with security, proper wages and working conditions, still express feelings of empowerment and satisfaction that cannot be denied from a different standpoint; rather, the focus should be shifted towards increasing structural empowerment while retaining the appreciation of subjective feelings of empowerment emergent from the voices of migrant women.

Methodological questions remain in research and studies related to issues like migration and experiences related to it. Sensitive issues, which concern personal and intimate details of an individual's life, can hardly be captured without running risks of voyeurism and exoticisation. On the other hand, the academic exercise of researching people's life stories often deprives the people themselves of their voices and an option to present a comprehensive and holistic picture of their lives that does not remain unnecessarily biased in terms of doctrines. In this respect, the humanistic method of research which places people's voices at the high pedestal and employs innovative methods like oral histories and life stories reflects the need to understand critical issues like role conflicts in research settings, ethical dilemmas and the complex issue of non-narrability of pain. These factors need to be kept in mind and sensitive research conducted inquiring into the experiences of migrant women that can help throw

some light on the authentic and true experiences of such sections of population that can later pave the way for the formulation of frameworks of action that attempt to improve the life experiences of migrant women and migrant communities at large.

## **Bibliography**

- Behera, Navnita Chandha (2006). ‘Introduction’. In Navnita Chadha Behera (Ed.), *Gender, Conflict and Migration*. New Delhi: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Kuhn, Thomas (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Momsen, Janet (2004). *Gender and Development*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Oishi, Nana (2005). *Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies, and Labor Migration in Asia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Palmary, Ingrid, Erica Burman, Khatidja Chantler and Peace Kiguwa (2010). ‘Gender and Migration: Feminist Interventions’. In Palmary et al. (Eds.) *Gender and Migration: Feminist Interventions*. London: Zed Books.
- Pearson, Ruth and Cecile Jackson (1998). ‘Introduction: Interrogating development: feminism, gender and policy’. In Ruth Pearson and Cecile Jackson (Eds.) *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Rai, Shirin (2008). *The Gender Politics of Development*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Tastsoglu, Evangelia and Alexandra Dobrowolsky (2006). ‘Crossing Boundaries and Making Connections’. In Evangelia Tastsoglu and Alexandra Dobrowolsky (Eds.) *Women, Migration and Citizenship: Making Local, National and Transnational Connections*. Hampshire: Ashgate.
- Thapan, Meenakshi (2006). ‘Series Introduction’. In Navnita Chadha Behera (Ed.) *Gender, Conflict and Migration*. New Delhi: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Zavos, Alexandra (2010). ‘Gender, migration and anti-racist politics in the continued project of the nation’. In Palmary, Ingrid, Erica Burman, Khatidja Chantler and Peace Kiguwa (Eds.) *Gender and Migration: Feminist Interventions*. London: Zed Books.