

**REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF  
ROUNDTABLE ON  
“RETHINKING THE DISCOURSE ON WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT”**

Organised by Centre for Gender Studies at IHD, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and  
Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE)

7 December 2019, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab

Women’s economic empowerment, particularly in the context of declining female labour force participation in India, has pushed research to investigate issues such as the role of restrictive cultural norms in measurement of women’s work, forms of women’s unpaid work, lack of suitable jobs, low human capital investment, among others. A strand of research in poverty and economic development has also positioned ‘empowerment’ in a way that disconnects it from the structural drivers of unemployment, poverty, and disempowerment. Discussions around macroeconomic policies, trade regimes, low social protection especially for informal sector workers, low expenditure on health care are often left out of the framing of women’s economic empowerment. Discussions on power that are core to the very idea of empowerment are also sometimes missing in more recent work rooted in behavioural economics. Women’s collective solidarity economies receive little mention. However, globally the discourse around women’s economic empowerment has expanded thanks to the future of work discussions, the ILO’s widening the definition of ‘work’ to include women’s unpaid work, and its resolution on violence and work that goes beyond sexual harassment. Hence there is a felt need to re-invigorate discussions on women’s economic empowerment in India and shape a research and policy agenda.

In this background, a Roundtable on ‘Rethinking the Discourse on Women’s Economic Empowerment’ was organised by the Centre for Gender Studies at the Institute for Human Development (IHD), Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Initiatives for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE) on 7 December 2019 at Patiala, Punjab during the 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE). The Roundtable was moderated by Dr Yamini Atmavilas, India Lead for Gender Equality, India Country Office, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Professor Ritu Dewan, Vice-President, Indian Society of Labour Economics. The list of participants at the Roundtable is attached as Appendix.

## ROUNDTABLE PROCEEDINGS

At the outset, Professor Ritu Dewan, Vice President, ISLE, President, IAWS (2014-17), and co-moderator of the Roundtable, welcomed all the participants. She stated that the fundamental purpose of the Roundtable was to bring together those who have been working on women's empowerment issues, to amalgamate the work done, and to discuss whether the approach to women empowerment needs to be reconceptualised and linked more strongly to the lived realities of the marginalized and the vulnerable. She emphasized that, as a consequence, integration of academic research, advocacy and action is required. This was followed by introductory remarks by the Centre for Gender Studies, IHD, IWWAGE, and BMGF, on behalf of the organising team of the Roundtable.

Professor Aasha Kapur Mehta, Visiting Professor and Chairperson, Centre for Gender Studies, IHD, introduced the Centre for Gender studies which was set up in the memory of Professor Preet Rustagi. She said that the newly created Centre has been working in the domain of domestic work, violence and entrepreneurship from the perspective of women in the informal sector, gender discrimination among children below six years of age in dimensions such as mortality, malnutrition, anaemia, morbidity, health seeking, etc., and female workforce participation. Professor Tanuka Endow, Coordinator of the IHD Centre for Gender Studies, also referred to the panel on care and labour market organized by the Centre in partnership with International Development Research Centre, Canada at the 60th ISLE conference at Mumbai in December 2018.

Dr Yamini Atmavilas, on behalf of BMGF, stated that the basic purpose of the Roundtable was to take a look at women's economic empowerment in the present context.

Dr Sona Mitra, Principal Economist, IWWAGE, LEAD at Krea University introduced the work at these organizations which revolves around economic empowerment, highlighting issues such as ensuring women's work participation after balancing unpaid work, quality of employment, wage employment and government policy.

Following this, Dr Atmavilas introduced the theme of the Roundtable. She made a presentation and spoke about identifying gaps in the current framing around Women's Economic Empowerment and exploring the areas where there is an incomplete set of indicators. At present the framework is based on voice/ collective voice and agency. Standard approaches to work are based on interrelation among labour market, social policy, micro credit and social norms. Acknowledging that academia, advocacy and action are the three pillars of empowerment, Dr Atmavilas made an initial presentation outlining the broad approaches to women's economic empowerment based on labour market, social policy/social protection, micro-credit and social

norms focused on behavioural norms. She then posed four questions for the Roundtable participants to address:

- What are the missing areas of women's economic empowerment?
- Are theories adequately reflecting women's positioning in market/state/household and other institutions?
- Is there a new way of defining these relationships that reflect reality in India?
- How does inter-sectionality figure in the discourse on women's economic empowerment and how do we integrate it in theorizing on women's economic empowerment?

The participants in the Roundtable gave their views on the theme following the presentation by Dr Atmavilas. It clearly emerged that women's economic empowerment needs to be conceptualized and understood beyond conventional labour market, employment and even care variables. The main takeaways from the discussions are summarised below.

- It needs to be recognized that women's economic empowerment is a dynamic concept and we need to look at its trajectory.
- In the context of drastic decline in women's work in rural India, as has emerged from the latest PLFS survey, there was a discussion on reduction in opportunities for work due to mechanisation as also the impact of a new law regarding prevention of cruelty to livestock on livestock rearing.
- Despite feminization of agriculture, women are unable to access benefits from agricultural interventions and schemes, or participate in training programmes as these are designed for men. This male-bias persists at the top too, and women are not involved in designing macro policies.
- Since women are a heterogeneous category, intersectionality is an important issue to consider when looking at women's economic empowerment, in order to give it a sharper focus. The empowerment potential of different forms of employment and income opportunities must be examined to reflect reality in India. In many ways empowerment is also class-driven and it can be critically probed whether women want to be empowered.
- Instead of using the word 'empowerment' since it gets reduced to sets of what men and women do and has an individualistic connotation whereas the issue is more a structural one, an alternative might be to use accountability, inclusion, non-discrimination. An approach of 'equality' could be adopted.
- Research should focus on the low levels of empowerment, and this should be discussed in the context of the economic, political and social environment as captured by low and declining female labour force participation in India and the backlash being faced by women on account of self-assertion.

- This backlash is at a time when women's freedom has been under attack during the last one decade or so, undermining women's empowerment in other ways. Despite disempowerment, women have increased their self-assertion, reflected in parts in the increasing violence against them.
- Asset distribution and women's access to economic resources, including private and common assets, are extremely important for empowerment. The importance of bargaining power within the household, which depends on property ownership, should be emphasised. While agency of women is important, it should come alongside entitlement.
- The link between violence, property rights and access to common property resources needs further examination. In Punjab, a movement by dalit women for control over common assets was recently thwarted by politicians who opened the land up to the corporate sector to take on lease. Further, in the labour market, social perception is also very important.
- Violence against women has been ubiquitous and not only affects women in the domestic sphere but also at the workplace and in public spheres. Violence is a major barrier that women are facing. Not only is violence extremely disempowering, but it has escalated in extent and form in recent years. The need to address this urgently was supported by all the participants at the Roundtable.
- Given the context of Victorian morality and Brahmanical purity, it is important to understand the origin of patriarchy and change the narrative that uses a purity lens to control women's sexuality. Laws such as guardianship, rape, etc. are patriarchal and this needs to be understood and legal revisions undertaken to support women empowerment. 'Sisterhood' of women in the same space has been seen to be powerful in terms of helping women in crisis and empowering them psychologically and emotionally.
- The need to look at the intergenerational aspect as the aspirations of the younger generation vis-à-vis the issue of empowerment according to field data, which varies substantially from the older generations' view, was highlighted.
- Hierarchy in knowledge also shapes and controls empowerment.
- In the context of culture and tradition, in villages where women do not speak in the presence of men, efforts should be made to hold a Mahila Sabha prior to Gram Sabhas so that women's priorities can be included while taking decisions in the Gram Sabha. However, while this may be a short term solution, in the context of empowerment, efforts will need to be made to shake up the system and change the balance of power, so that women raise their concerns in the Gram Sabha.
- An approach of looking at the spaces women have found for themselves in terms of feeling empowered, can be adopted. For instance, registration of land in the name of women, and ration card issues in the name of women have helped as has the alcohol ban in Bihar. However, the work opportunity in rural areas and in NREGA is shrinking for women.

- State-wise diversity should be explored such as the puzzle regarding how a patriarchal state such as Kerala succeeded in making a success of a programme such as ‘Kudumbashree’.

### **Shaping a future agenda based on the Roundtable Discussion**

- Existing research on women’s economic empowerment, and its wider linkages with gender and social relations needs to be looked at and further be built upon.
- Ways of addressing Care Work that impacts women, and its relationship with women’s work in the labour market can form part of the future agenda.
- A framework for a future workshop could be ‘structures of patriarchy with link between paid and unpaid work’. The context is the present widespread violence against everyone including women.
- The ISLE could create a Working Group around this issue, which would maintain some continuity in the work, for instance by organizing workshops or other activities between the Annual Conferences. If the Working Group is set up, it can be connected to the Centre for Gender Studies at IHD. This Working Group could also influence the themes chosen for the ISLE conference, supporting topics that are important for gender equality and women's empowerment. As an illustration, the issue of minimum wages is important in its own right but is of particular significance for women since they are more likely than men to be paid low wages.

## Appendix: ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

### Moderators

**Yamini Atnavilas**, India Lead for Gender Equality, India Country Office, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

**Ritu Dewan**, Vice President, ISLE; President, IAWS (2014-17)

### Participants

**Bina Agarwal**, Professor of Development Economics and Environment, Global Development Institute, University of Manchester; Former Director and Professor, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi

**Amit Basole**, Associate Professor of Economics, Azim Premji University, Bangalore

**Amrita Datta**, Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad

**Jayati Ghosh**, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

**Soumya Kapoor**, Head, Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE), LEAD at Krea University

**Govind Kelkar**, Senior Advisor, Landesa, New Delhi

**Sona Mitra**, Principal Economist, Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE), LEAD at Krea University

**Indrani Mazumdar**, Professor, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi

**Dev Nathan**, Visiting Professor, Institute for Human Development, Delhi

**Subhalakshami Nandi**, Deputy Regional Director, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) Asia Office, New Delhi

**Nitya Nangalia**, Project Lead, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA Bharat)

**Neeta Pillai**, Acting Director & Professor, Centre for Women's and Development Studies, Delhi

**Janine Rodgers**, Visiting Sr. Fellow, Institute for Human Development, Delhi

**Gerry Rodgers**, President, 61<sup>st</sup> ISLE Conference and Former Director, International Institute of Labour Studies, Geneva

**Hema Swaminathan**, Chairperson, Centre for Public Policy, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore

**Navsharan Singh**, Senior Program Officer, Women's Rights and Citizenship Program, International Development Research Centre, New Delhi

**Ravi Srivastava**, Professor and Director, Centre for Employment Studies, IHD, Delhi

**Nisha Srivastava**, Former Professor, Department of Economics, Allahabad University, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh

**Padmini Swaminathan**, Independent Researcher and Former Director, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai

**Dipa Sinha**, Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi

**Nandita Gupta**, Documentary Filmmaker

**Jeemol Unni**, Professor of Economics, Amrut Mody School of Management, Ahmedabad University

**Aasha Kapur Mehta**, Visiting Professor and Chairperson, Centre for Gender Studies, Institute for Human Development, Delhi

**Tanuka Endow**, Professor and Coordinator, Centre for Gender Studies, IHD