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DEVELOPMENT LED BY CORPORATES, NOT WOMEN

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Women Issues

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Workers at a brick kiln factory in West Bengal. File | Photo Credit: PTI

The G20 Summit in Delhi adopted a Declaration which resolved to set up a "working group on the empowerment of women." Given the continuing discrimination against women and girls, this is welcome. But by and large, "working groups" formed in the past have not been implemented. For example, the Sustainable Development Goals have specific targets to address gender gaps. However, as the Declaration itself admits, "At the midway point to 2030, the global progress on SDGs is off-track with only 12% of the targets on track."

The Gender Equality section says, "We encourage women-led development and remain committed to enhancing women's full, equal, effective, and meaningful participation as decision makers for addressing global challenges inclusively and in contributing as active participants in all spheres of society, across all sectors and at all levels of the economy..." The phrase 'women-led development' is striking and is the contribution of the Government of India. But there is no explanation of what this actually means.

This is not an issue of semantics. When phrases like 'women-led development' are used, leaders need to describe the parameters of such a development process, which are different from 'non women-led' development models. The truth is that the development models adopted by countries describing themselves as democracies (mainly developed countries in the West) have led to obscene inequalities between countries, between the rich and the poor within countries, and between men and women. The core of this model remains the discredited 'trickle down theory' in which big business continues to enjoy state subsidies through tax concessions, bank loan write-offs, subsidies in land availability, and cross-country concessions for the free movement of finance capital on the premise that all this will lead to more investment, creation of employment, and so on. The 'no governance is good governance' model has removed government regulation, dismantled and sold off public assets, and privatised strategic industries. All this has been done in the name of reforms. The G20 Declaration reiterates this commitment. It says, "We recognise the critical role of private enterprise in accelerating growth and driving sustainable economic transformations." If the macro model of development remains the same, where does women-led development fit in?

On March 7, the bulletin of the Press Information Bureau listed government schemes meant to benefit women under the headline 'From Women Development to Women-led Development.' Just as reform is the cover for aggressive profit maximising models of capitalism, women-led development schemes conceal the reality of decreasing government investment in projects and schemes meant for women's development. The Gender Budget was started in 2005-2006. What was meant to be a tool to plug the gaps through prioritised investment has been reduced to an accounting exercise. It has two parts. Part A includes schemes which are 100% for women and Part B includes all government schemes where at least one-third of the expenditure is supposedly for women. Women-led development should mean a substantial increase in the total amount of the Gender Budget. It should also reflect in a much bigger component in the expenditure in Part A rather than Part B. However, on both counts, the opposite trend dominates. The total Gender Budget for 2023-2024 was reduced from 5.2% of the total expenditure the previous year to 5%. On average, there has been no substantial increase in the Gender Budget since its inception, which has remained between 4% and 6%. What is of greater concern is that, in 2023-24, the year that the phrase 'women-led development' was used, the expenditure in Part A was at its lowest at around 39% of the total, while Part B made up 61% of expenditure of the Gender Budget. In other words, wholly women-specific schemes are just about 40% of an already inadequate budgetary allocation.

A critical area recognised as being a prerequisite for women's development is her economic independence. However, the share of women in regular waged work fell in India, according to an analysis of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), from 21.9% in 2018-2019 to 15.9% in 2022-2023. Over 95% of women are in the unorganised sector with no job or income security. Most women are employed in flagship schemes of the Central government. Almost one crore women work in Anganwadis, as ASHA workers, as mid-day meal scheme workers, as facilitators, and so on. However, they are the most exploited, they are paid 'allowances" which are below even minimum wages, and not recognised as government employees. According to the PLFS survey, the share of women engaged in agriculture has increased to 64.3% in 2022-23 from 55.3% in 2018-19. This is mainly unpaid work on family farms. The budgetary allocations for paid work mandated by law in rural work projects through MGNREGA has been drastically cut down by the Central government. This mostly has a negative impact on women who constitute between 50% to 80% of workers in several States.

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The reality is that women, particularly Dalits and Adivasis, are bearing the brunt of the economic policies of the Central regime of handing over the national resources to the richest 1% who now control over 40% of the country's wealth. This is corporate-led development, certainly not women-led.

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