

## Report on Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum II

### 'Empowering Women through Skill development - Challenges and Opportunities'

24<sup>th</sup> of April 2012

The Institute Of Social Studies Trust (ISST), in association with Heinrich Boll Foundation (India), hosted the second Gender and Economic Policy Forum on 'Empowering Women through Skill development - Challenges and Opportunities' on 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2012 at India HabitatCentre, New Delhi on '

The panelists were **Dr Vanita Viswanath**, CEO Udyogini, an organization providing business development services to poor women in the backward and remote regions of India, **Mr Dilip Chenoy**, CEO and MD, National Skill Development Corporation, a not-for-profit company set up by the finance ministry as the country's first public private partnership on skill development, **Dr Santosh Mehrotra**, Director-General, Institute of Applied Manpower Research, the only autonomous research institute of the Planning Commission, with the rank of Permanent Secretary, Government of India, and **Paul Comyn**, Senior Vocational Training & Skills Development Specialist, Decent Work Team for South Asia, ILO. The key note address was given by Mr Mani Shankar Aiyar, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha.

Mr Mani Shankar Aiyar opened the discussion in his inimitable style, with thought-provoking ideas on economic growth and poverty, decentralisation and democracy. Mr Aiyar urged that skill development needs to be oriented towards the kind of skill that women and men already know. So essentially, the need was to upgrade skills rather than provide altogether new ones that would be alien to the labour force in an area. He connected skill development among women to their ability to become effective and sincere members of SHGs. This, he argued, would then take them forward on the empowerment route. Mr Aiyar emphasised the need to use existing institutions of governance, provided in the Constitution, for creating a mass movement of, by, and for women.

The first panelist, Dr Viswanath, argued that empowerment practice has to go beyond its focus on women to gender. The area of skill development needs to look at both skill training programmes and the process of employment. Training programmes must look at aspirational needs in relation to traditional and non-traditional vocational skills, and also take care of access to information about programs, and other support means such as transportation and safety, schedules, counseling. The employment process must ensure screening of prospective employers for gender-sensitivity and provide product-specific package of support for self-employment.

Skill development is the first step in moving women towards the employment and economic sustainability zone. The next is measuring progress and incentives of such skill development

initiatives in ensuring sustainability and quality of employment. Enrolment and placement alone will not suffice. Monitoring and studies of dropouts from the formal sector employment are required to inform corrections, disaggregation of quality assurance measures in policy implementation consistent with gender equality perspective and frameworks.

Dilip Chenoy in his presentation provided numbers on the female workforce in India - 148 million overall with 135 million in the informal sector and just 13 million in the formal sector. Another 3.5 million female workers are added every year in the informal sector.

Chenoy drew the audience's attention to the need to skill the swelling population of women workers in the informal sector characterised by low earning, low productivity, poor working conditions and lack of social protection. The aim is not merely to prepare them for jobs, but also to improve the performance of women workers through enhancing the quality of work in which they are engaged. This would require building a conducive ecosystem of skill development for the women workforce keeping in mind present days' challenges. Some of the major challenges are (i) the large number of women who need to be trained since currently only 2% of the female workforce is formally trained, (ii) inadequacies in the quality and relevance of TVET (technical, vocational employment training in India), (iii) inadequate Infrastructure, acute shortage of trained women workers, poor quality of training, (iv) lack of mechanisms to judge and certify quality, (v) inequity in access to TVET for women (vi) low level of education of potential women trainees that limits training of women in the formal sector, (vii) lack of recognition of prior learning of potential women trainees (viii) relatively high opportunity cost of learning involved for training women.

Keeping in mind the complex ground reality for most women (low literacy levels, binding local customs and traditions, constraints regarding hours of work, unfamiliarity with recent technologies or innovations in the trade and at the same time non-traditional aspirations of newer generations of girls in India), Mr Chenoy emphasized the need for creating flexible skill training programmes. The task of skilling 500 million persons by 2022 is not an easy one, unless backed by a process of identification, mobilization and targeting of women beneficiaries. Complementary actions are needed to enhance the ability of women to access decent employment opportunities through skill training and respond to existing and emerging job opportunities.

Dr Comyn from the ILO pointed to gender differences in access to education and training. There is low social value attached to girls' education and women are considered secondary income earners. Therefore, due to the general occupational segregation under largely accepted gender roles such child rearing, household chores primarily for women, the time that women can give or are allowed to devote to skill training and economic activities is conditional and limited.

Dr Comyn reiterated the point about gender mainstreaming. A sustainable skill development programme aims to take on board both women's as well men's concerns and experiences. These should form an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of

policies and the programmes on skill training and development. The key strategy for women's empowerment and gender equality is to combine policy and institutions at the local level. To support programmes on skill development it is essential to look into other deficiencies such as low level of literacy and existing social conditions for women. Therefore the training may have to incorporate teaching of basic skills such as numeracy, problem solving, communication, learning to learn, and team work and, other deeply impacting skill such as behavioural skills, including building self-esteem, self-organizational and negotiating capacity for employment purpose. Issues of identity, autonomy, leadership, rights and responsibilities, entrepreneurial and business management skills, increasing awareness on gender are to be relevant issues not only for women but also for men. He drew attention to the low level of apprenticeship in India and the need for its reform.

Dr Santosh Mehrotra, commenting on the demographic change taking place in India, urged taking action through skill training as one of the most necessary step forward to reap the benefits of India's present demographic profile as this would enable a scaling up of economic growth. But this huge task would require inviting the private sectors to join the TVET programme by providing trainings, trainers, designing curriculum, providing internships, certifying training programmes and arranging for placements. Even though skill development was given recognition in the 11<sup>th</sup> Five-year Plan, the working population of women remains low in a tradition-bound country like ours. He reiterated the need for radically revamping the outdated Apprenticeship Act, 1961 as the nature of the Indian economy had changed dramatically since the time of formulation of the Act. In the case of ITIs, for instance, there are few trades corresponding to the trainings available.

Women account for only 9 per cent of the enrolment in the skill training sector. Part of the reason for this is cultural. Parents hesitate to send their daughters to far away training centres; these centres lack basic infrastructural facilities such as hostels, toilets. The task ahead is to get (i) formal certification of the training programmes, (ii) bring changes into the Apprenticeship Act, (iii) de-decentralise decision making in the ITI system to absorb local needs and to make skills imparted at training centres responsive to the needs of local industry, (iv) focus on increasing SHGs and expanding cluster development as most of the female working force are involved in home-based work, (v) recognise the need for a paradigm shift in existing knowledge on women's aspirations and skill needs (vi) make ITI programmes affordable since many of those joining these vocational training courses are youth from low income groups and drop outs from school or college.

The main concerns and challenges in transforming skill training and development programmes into a tool for empowerment of women that emerged from the Forum discussions are listed below:

- i. Identifying and changing basic and nuanced socio-cultural values with a view to eliminate existing biases that women in the country face.

- ii. Providing basic infrastructure for skill training institutes.
- iii. Making the skill training system more accommodating and flexible for women and other low income trainees by designing skill training courses keeping in mind their problems and needs, such as the limitations imposed by women's inability to spare more than four hours a day on an average for training/employment.
- iv. Ensuring the quality of training and certification of skill training courses match the acceptable market standards.
- v. Revisiting the Apprenticeship Act to develop a healthy relation between skills and practice.
- vi. Connecting skill training programmes with employment so that these programmes become a means to women's empowerment through economic independence.
- vii. Recognising the structural changes in the Indian economy and changing gender norms of our society indicating slowly but steadily changing life-style aspirations of the present generation women.
- viii. The key strategy for women's empowerment and gender equality is to make skill training policy formulation and institutions concurrent to best fit the context of reality to capture the needs and problems of potential and enrolled women trainees, starting from the local level of implementation.