

## Summary of the Report

### *Mapping Gender Training in Tamil Nadu*

*The report based on the study “Mapping Gender Training in Tamil Nadu” is authored by V.Geetha with inputs from Salai Selvam, Ponni Arasu and Meena Gopal. This summary of the report is prepared by Rekha Pappu (Higher Education Cell, Bangalore).*

**Background:** The development sector is one of the domains where in the name of “gender training” considerable discussion on, and dissemination of, issues and themes related to women takes place. However, no thoroughgoing study of the gender training programmes organized within civil society groups or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has thus far been carried out. Given this lacunae in our present understanding of a major site at which gender issues are discussed, the Higher Education Cell commissioned a study to examine gender training programmes. The study was to examine the training programmes organized by NGOs in Tamil Nadu in terms of their history, modalities (including content and pedagogy), influence and impact. It began with an awareness of the notion predominant outside the NGO sector that gender training is devoid of links both with the women’s movement as well as the local situations and that it is largely an imposition by funders. The study therefore also sought to verify this impression while mapping the theory and praxis of gender training by focusing on the specific context of Tamil Nadu.

*The Research Team:* The study, carried out between October 2008 and February 2010, was taken up by a team of four researchers: V.Geetha (Coordinator), Salai Selvam, Ponni Arasu and Meena Gopal (Consultant). All the members involved in the study have been working with women’s groups and NGOs for many years. They also have an active and ongoing engagement with institutions of higher education.

*Research Approach:* The research method adopted by the study involved identifying and acquiring relevant documents as well as talking to/interviewing those involved in gender training; including resource persons, the people in organizations that conduct the training, report and manual writers and wherever possible, present and past ‘students’ of the training programmes. The report, following from the study, draws upon the documents and the extensive narratives of the women interviewed to write a history of gender training. It also describes the different ways in which women became politicised, inhabited the world of voluntarism and adapted themselves to the requirements of working within structured approaches to development.

*Relevance of the Study:* The study and its findings are addressed to women’s groups, NGOs offering gender training programmes and consultants on gender issues. Women’s Studies scholars too would benefit from an understanding of how critical feminist vocabulary is developed in a regional language, Tamil in this instance. By focussing on how the term “gender” is understood and deployed in the growing sector of social action (as the NGO sector is now being referred to), the study draws critical attention to the areas of overlap and difference between the field of Women’s Studies and the functioning of NGOs, thereby relevant to the self-understanding of both the sectors.

## Summary of the Report:

The report comprises of three sections. The first section tracks the many elements that together constitute the pre-history of gender training; the second section combines the double tasks of assessing the gender training manuals produced by international agencies as well as of reviewing the frameworks adopted by the gender training programmes vis-à-vis the premises of Women's Studies; the last section details the gender training practices of some select organizations in Tamil Nadu and concludes with a comprehensive evaluation of the role of gender training within the development sector.

*I. Women, Training and Social Change:* The first section titled "Women, Training and Social Change" begins by addressing the question: "what were the discursive and political concerns of the world of Tamil voluntary sector?" The section focuses on the *voluntary sector* as a critical sphere of influence in its effort to trace the pre-history of gender training in Tamil Nadu. The inquiry therefore proceeds with an examination of the various trajectories through which groups and individuals (especially women) became politicized in the 1970s and 80s in particular. Social workers inspired by Christian ideals, Left radical groups, trade unionists, women's groups and Gandhian organizations are identified as being prominent among those who sought to transform society in the direction of greater social egalitarianism in Tamil Nadu during this period. The report also points out that there were other activities and influences (albeit disparate) that were as critical in the process of politicizing individuals and groups, such as:

- Literacy and adult education programmes
- Student and women's movements
- Campaigns on land issues
- Experiences of harassment
- Experiences of recognizing the split between the public and the private spheres and of negotiating it
- Organization of self-employed women
- Reading women's magazines and writing for them
- Participation in workshops and conferences of various kinds and finally
- Recognition of the women's question at the global level.

The section also refers to the varied pedagogic models that were available for social and political activists during the 1970s and 80s; models that were to become the prototypes for the gender training programmes taken up within the NGO sector in a later period. In particular, the study mentions the influence on training programmes of the social analysis model developed by the Indian Social Institute in Bangalore. It is identified as the earliest version of a pedagogy that was modular and therefore transferable across contexts. Four other pedagogic models are invoked by the report as being significant in the imprint they leave on training programmes developed later:

- The Frierean model that treated the subject of learning as an active participant who could and does modify what he or she is taught;
- The Gandhian model which sought to instill in both the teacher and the learner values of selflessness and moral rectitude;

- The Saul Alinsky model developed by the Chicago-based communist organizer, which counseled building mass movements based on non-violence using role plays, case studies and group work; and
- The Marxist model that allowed one to critically comprehend social totality.

The report refers to the subsequent and gradual decline of the earlier phase of voluntarism following from the fact that many groups, including women's groups, opt for NGOisation in the 1990s due to a combination of reasons. The apathy of the Indian state, the demands of public work, the exigencies of funding, the existence of discrimination and chauvinism in the voluntary sector, the absence of enabling and progressive politics that could recognize the importance of the women's question are cited as being among the reasons for the shift made by women's groups. Within such a context, the Beijing conference of 1995 is identified by the report as having a galvanizing effect on groups that were active in addressing women's issues.

The report points out that the Beijing conference also had the effect of nuancing the concept of "gender" differently from its earlier use. As a result of this reconceptualisation, the rights of women were now defined more or less exclusively in relation to men. Moreover, over a period of time in which this latter definition of gender became widespread, a distinction also came to be made between practical and strategic gender needs with greater attention being paid to the former at the expense of the latter. Practical gender needs were addressed to questions of access while strategic gender needs would necessarily have to examine women's structural relationship to men. Not surprisingly, the new understanding of gender impacted the manner in which gender training programmes were conducted by NGOs in India. Training programmes that had begun on the eve of the Beijing conference continued in the post-Beijing phase as useful modes of introducing gender issues within the development sector.

It is in this context of internationalization that the report moves on in the next section to look closely at gender training manuals produced for global use. The critical significance of the report's first section thus lies in the manner of its plotting the reference points for the gender training programmes as they emerge in the context of the NGO sector within Tamil Nadu.

*II Gender Training as a Knowledge System:* The second section of the report provides an assessment of international approaches to gender training since the frames developed in these global contexts have a profound impact on the understanding and practice of gender training within the local context as well, Tamil Nadu in this instance. The section also discusses the similarities and differences between gender training and Women's Studies.

The section on "Gender Training as a Knowledge System" begins with an examination of five modules on gender and comments on their understanding of key concepts such as "sex, gender and gender relations," "gender equity and equality," "development and empowerment," "gender mainstreaming" etc. After reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the international frameworks, the section foregrounds some key issues for consideration:

- Conceptual inconsistencies are an inescapable aspect of critical thinking and rather than ignoring or simplifying them, it might be more productive to foreground the fluidity of concepts;

- Historical progression of concepts need not be seen as a linear exercise but as a process that is incorporative in nature requiring therefore the adoption of useful aspects of older frameworks while critically and continually assessing newer ones; and
- Working through the connections between various social processes and concepts is more important than mere listing of factors that influence the understanding of gender.

The conclusion from the review of the international manuals for training is that the experiences of the local trainers need to inform the training practices much more than they presently do. Moreover, connections between different issues need to be drawn and closer engagement with social movements fostered. The review also highlights the changed configuration arising from the fact that gender training programmes are now addressed to men as distinct from an earlier situation where women were the only addressees of the training programmes. The report attributes this changed situation to two factors: i) the conceptual shift accomplished in relation to the understanding of the notion of gender and ii) the increasing importance given to HIV and AIDS related issues.

In its attempt to understand how gender training programmes that take place within the NGO sector align with other related practices, the study contrasts such programmes with the work taken up by Women's Studies Centres. The report notes that while the NGO sector privileges knowledge, the development sector emphasizes social action; accordingly their pedagogic models too vary. The two sectors are similar, however, in certain other aspects such as the epistemic importance they accord to the category "experience," the efforts to probe the links between different kinds of marginalization and the attempts at undermining hierarchical patterns existing in different locations. The limited nature of the interaction between the two spheres notwithstanding, the report suggests that feminist interventions in relation to development economics have in fact impacted practices of gender training.

*III. Gender Training Practices:* The final section of the report describes the gender training programmes offered by two major training and documentation centres in Tamil Nadu, viz. Ekta: Resource Centre for Women, Madurai; and Initiatives: Women In Development (IWID), Chennai. The section also includes references to gender training practices of a few other institutions as well, some of which do not assume social transformation to be their fundamental aim but are nonetheless interested in 'empowering' women.

Reviewing the different training programmes conducted by Ekta over a period of a decade, the study notes the difference in emphasis and approach between the workshops conducted by Ekta prior to the Beijing conference and those organized in the post-Beijing phase. The report points out that Ekta accorded the highest importance to training programmes from its very inception since it believed in the close connection that exists between knowledge and action. While the earlier sessions were open ended and oriented towards consciousness raising, the workshops organized after 1995 were relatively more structured and geared towards capacity building. The report observes that "[I]n the first phase, the group took its cues from local struggles and debates, whereas in the latter phase it chose to work with tools and ideas garnered in international fora. If the first phase addressed their [women's] concerns at both home and work contexts, the second phase has largely sought to address them in relation to what they do at work or in public life."

Drawing upon interviews with members of five other groups, the study also notes that there are as many models of gender training as the trainers. However a set of common assumptions mark all these training sessions, such as the continued reliance on experience sharing. In relation to the sustained practice of calling upon women's experiences as part of the training, the study concludes that often times the empirical material is not made to carry out the further labour of illustrating a larger pattern or idea or argument. Instead it is yoked to a justice delivery mode (where the law for instance is invoked) and not towards building analytical abilities.

The report points out that the social and cultural contexts that shape experience are not always taken up for analyses. Extending the existing critique of gender training that it lacks political understanding (since among other things it often substitutes formulaic solutions for lively contentious debates), the study points to another critical absence that needs to be addressed. This pertains to the fact that the training sessions remain inadequate in terms of producing a framework for examining the inter-relationality between gender, class and caste. Most often attempts at exploring the connections between these categories is diluted through a rather quick adoption of the "atrocities approach". Within such training exercises, gender as an analytical factor is presented as a given that needs to be protested against or deployed and not as something that needs to be examined in its everyday functioning.

The study of the two new-generation (or post-feminist) organizations, i.e. Nalamdana and the Tamil Nadu State Resource Centre, reveal further interesting aspects of gender training. The newer groups (that is those that do not claim the legacy of the women's movement but work to empower women) seem to have inherited a moment in which they take up issues of sexuality, choice, desire, stigma etc. with an ease that distinguishes them from the older groups. The emphasis of organisations such as Nalamdana is to bring about behavioural change by presenting the specific and concrete steps that individuals need to adopt.

The most interesting aspect of the gender training manuals that the State Resource Centre produce is that they are rooted in the everyday lives of the constituency of women that they address. The report attributes this feature to the fact that the language felicity achieved by the State in the process of its carrying out all transactions in Tamil enables it to develop an idiom and explain concepts in a simple and direct manner.

The report pays close attention to the question of language as it emerges in the context of gender training where terms borrowed from an alien milieu are sought to be adapted to local situations. One of the major blocks identified by the study in internalizing and using terms that may well have foreign origins is the disconnect with the cultural world of Tamil Nadu. According to the study, the "voluntary sector remained isolated from larger cultural concerns and debates. And so when terms and ideas were to be discussed and communicated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, groups relied on dictionary, rather than on history, on the literal meanings of terms and words, rather than on the social and cultural worlds in which these words were going to eventually circulate."

## **Recommendations:**

The report emphasizes the importance of the space created for training such that structured learning opportunities are made available to those who might otherwise have been excluded from educational systems and processes. It therefore concludes with observations that could make the entire process more relevant and enriching. However, the report deliberately avoids adopting a prescriptive approach towards the NGO sector. Consequently, instead of making a set of recommendations, it provides an assessment of the status of gender within the gender training programmes and raises some questions for consideration.

The questions raised and the observations made within the report are recast in this summary of the report as the following recommendations:

- The everyday lives of the trainees need to figure more centrally in the training sessions such that experience sharing is not limited to creating a sense of participation but is accorded conceptual value;
- Gender training when restricted to communicating a set of concepts through a standard bag of tools is less effective than when it seeks to work towards building critical and analytical understanding that can bring about social change;
- Large scale debates that can catch public imagination need to be initiated through the gender training sessions;
- Gender cannot merely become a category to create sexual harmony but must also be used to identify and challenge sexual tensions and conflicts within the society;
- Gender training needs to be understood as a point of arrival in a complex history of feminist knowledge creation and as such it needs to show greater awareness about its own history;
- Simulated situations within training sessions will not lead to learning unless they seek to develop new practices in actual and lived contexts; and finally
- Gender training programmes need to rethink their use of tools and symbols since symbols work if they carry with them rich historical or cultural associations or if they anticipate the shape of the new world that is being sought.