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By Dr Vandana Shiva

Dr Vandana Shiva: Empowering women

Written on the train from Punjab, India

I have spent all day with 300 women from rural Punjab who had gathered for a Public Hearing organised for the National Commission for Women to assess the impact of globalisation on women in agriculture.

Punjab: home of the green revolution

Punjab is the breadbasket of India. It is the home of the green revolution. But farmers of Punjab are committing suicide because behind the “growth” and “development” of commercial industrial farming is a huge financial debt burden that farmers can no longer carry, and is growing ecological burden that the earth can no longer carry.

The biodiversity of Punjab has disappeared, and been replaced by monocultures of wheat and rice. Diseases and pests have exploded, and with them the use of pesticides. Chemicals also need massive inputs of water. Over use of water for chemical farming has led to desertification.

In terms of health, or farmers incomes, the green revolution has not created “growth”, it has created poverty and under development.

Devaluation of women

Women have paid the highest price. As chemicals from farming, women were devalued. Combined with patriarchal values this “development” induced devaluation of women in agriculture has led to a new violence in the form of female feticide. Gender discrimination mutates into women’s dispensability under a “development” which excludes and devalues women.

In the 1961 census, there were 976 girls for 1000 boys in India, in 1991, the figure was 945 and by 2001 it had dropped to 927. The economically “developed” regions of Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat have the highest number of missing girls due to female feticide.

Agriculture systems, which are women centered and earth centered, are also more productive. 300 units of inputs produce 100 units of output in industrial agriculture,

while ecological systems in which women participate use only 5 units of input to produce 100 units of output.

The displacement of women from agriculture disempowers women and reduces food security. Food systems evolved by women based on biodiversity based production rather than chemical based production produce hundreds of times more food, with better nutrition, quality, and taste.

Women friendly alternatives

The Millennium Development Goals ignore these women friendly alternatives which would not just halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

Women can remove hunger not just by 50% - they would remove it by 100% both because their knowledge system and technologies produce more while using less, but also because in our value system it is unacceptable that in 2015, 500 million should continue to go hungry.

This patriarchal logic of exclusion is not acceptable to us. Nor is the defining of poverty and wealth on the basis of \$1 a day indicator. Even when our wealth production is not counted in dollars, we are providing food and water. And an income of \$1 a day is meaningless indicator of development if the cost of living is being pushed up to \$10 a day with corporate monopolies on seeds and water because of patents and privatisation.

Meeting people's needs

People can meet their needs for food and water in self-provisioning, sustenance economies at less than a \$1 a day, and farmers can be pushed to suicides, and women and children to hunger at more than a \$1 a day because the cost of living outstrips earnings.

High cost, low output, low return agriculture is at the root of growing hunger, because (a) farmers do not grow diverse crops for their needs (b) they sell what they grow to pay back debts. Higher "growth" does not translate into higher food entitlements and less hunger.

In India, starvation deaths have re-emerged for the first time since the Great Bengal Famine of 1942, which killed two million people because food security systems have been dismantled. People starved when 65 million tonnes of food grain were rotting as "surplus".

Women's contribution

The MDG indicators are misplaced because they ignore women's contribution to food security.

Goal No. 3 aimed at gender equality and empowering women actually sees the reduced role of women in agriculture as an indicator of women's empowerment. However as the India's experience shows, displacement of women from productive roles in agriculture goes hand in hand with women's devaluation and eventually their dispensability.

We need to strengthen women's role in agriculture both to remove hunger and empower women. We need to redefine development from women's perspective to ensure no one goes hungry or thirsty on this planet.

As Gandhi said, "the earth has enough for everyone's needs, but not for some people's greed."