

Reforms with a Female Face: Gender, Liberalization, and Economic Policy in Andhra Pradesh, India

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Summary. — The state of Andhra Pradesh, India, provides a case study of a liberalization program with an emphasis on women's empowerment. Based on the state budget data and fieldwork data from two villages, this paper investigates the content of this policy regime to argue that women's empowerment policies were ultimately constrained by the policy context of liberalization. The state lowered shares of expenditure upon social reproduction and the substantive content of women's empowerment policy was reduced to a thrift and micro-credit program. Fieldwork data indicate, the latter lacks administrative support and relies upon the expenditure of time and resources by participants themselves, re-emphasizing class and caste inequalities among women and undermining the broader project of empowerment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During 1996–2004, the southern state of Andhra Pradesh led the “second generation of reforms” in India, being termed at one point the “state that would reform India” (The Economist, 2000). Interestingly, this period also saw a change in the state's position toward gender. From being largely silent on the subject of women, official documents began to emphasize women's empowerment as an important goal of state policy.¹ Andhra Pradesh during this period thus appears to exemplify the gender-aware liberalization program promised by the World Bank's “Engendering Development” report (World Bank, 2001).

This paper focuses on the content of this unusual policy agenda. I find that while feminists urge states to increase spending on social reproduction so as to reduce the burden of reproductive labor that falls upon women (Elson & Cagatay, 2000), state shares of expenditure on these categories in Andhra Pradesh fell during this period. In this environment of reduced state social provisioning, the primary component of “reforms with a female face” lay in a

widely publicized women's thrift and micro-credit program.²

There is now a substantial literature evaluating the impact of NGO-led micro-credit upon poverty alleviation and women's empowerment. This paper, however, specifically addresses the state's own program.³ In comparison to other micro-credit programs, the state's program provides little administrative or financial assistance to participants, shifting program costs onto the participants themselves. Fieldwork data indicate that as a result successful beneficiaries are those with the resources to bear these costs, rather than land-poor, lower caste women.

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2. WOMEN AND ECONOMIC POLICY IN ANDHRA PRADESH

Andhra Pradesh initiated a liberalization program in response to a fiscal crisis in 1995.⁴ At the time, the government and World Bank promised that while direct welfare schemes would be cut back, the poor would not be forgotten. In particular, the government promised to concentrate on women as the poorest of the poor. The then chief minister further announced that the state's objective was to transform all gendered power structures saying, for example, that "all the efforts of the government were directed at empowering women by economic, social and political uplift" (*The Hindu*, 2002). Given the history of male-biased government policies in India (*Agarwal*, 1998), the official attention to women in post-liberalization Andhra Pradesh stands out.

In part the state's focus on women reflected the increased emphasis on gender within lending agencies such as the World Bank. However, while other regions in India also adopted liberalization policies, none promoted women's empowerment to the same degree. Part of the explanation for this focus on women thus lies in the region's internal political context. For more than a decade, one of the two main political parties in the state, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), had recognized and appealed to women as an important electoral constituency (*Suri*, 2002). However, the political "voice" of women was sharply heightened after a rural women's grassroots movement against the state sponsored sale of alcohol led to the TDP's return to power in 1994 and the declaration of state-wide prohibition that year. Many of the policies later promoted as part of "reforms with a female face" were in fact announced at this point, including the first push by the state to promote women's micro-credit (*GoAP*, various years-a).

Prohibition, however, also contributed to the fiscal crisis that took the state to the World Bank. Despite having thanked women for ensuring the TDP win two years earlier, the policy change that inaugurated liberalization in the region was the lifting of prohibition in 1996, significantly without any consultation with women's groups. As the post-liberalization state sought to ensure its political survival, focusing on women as its beneficiaries had the potential to compensate for letting down this constituency and establish legitimacy within local politics while simultaneously securing the support of external funding agencies. Interest-

ingly, therefore, a specific political conjuncture meant that women's empowerment policies could help smooth the transition to liberalization in Andhra Pradesh.⁵

Contrasting the ways in which women were addressed by the state in the pre- and post-liberalization periods helps bring to light the possibilities and limitations of "reforms with a female face." In the period from 1983 to 1993, the TDP instituted a "regime of populism" (*DaCorta & Venkateswarulu*, 1999) marked by direct welfare schemes aimed at the poor, including the provision of subsidized rice and housing. The schemes were, however, administered through male heads of households and women were marginalized as direct beneficiaries. Programs such as pensions for widows and maternity allowance for female agricultural laborers were announced, but had very small budgetary allocations (*GoAP*, various years-a). During this period, therefore, the state failed to recognize women as economic agents equally with men. What stands out about the post-liberalization focus on women in Andhra Pradesh is precisely this recognition of women as autonomous economic actors and agents of development.

And yet, feminists have also argued that the given women's primary responsibility for ensuring social reproduction, state policies that subsidize the costs of social reproduction are an important aspect of engendered development policy (*Power*, 2004). Indeed, the most important feminist critique of structural adjustment has been the increased cost of social reproduction borne by women as the state withdraws (*Elson*, 1991; *Sparr*, 1994). Thus, to the extent that the "populism" of the pre-liberalization state helped subsidize these costs, there may have been indirect benefits to women. It is important therefore to look at the policy content of "reforms with a female face" within the wider context of changing state social provisioning.

The growing literature on "gender-budgeting" suggests using the existing gender division of labor to isolate expenditure categories that subsidize the tasks of social reproduction usually borne by rural women—for example, the care of the sick and elderly or the collection of water and fuel for the home (*Budlender, Elson, Hewitt, & Mukhopadhyay*, 2002; *Elson*, 1999). State expenditures may not of course translate into benefits on the ground given leakages due to corruption or flawed conception and implementation of projects. However, inso-

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