

# Building a New Kerala

## Ideas and Reflections



### **Women and Gender Policy after the Deluge: Some Reflections**

**J. Devika**

**Research Unit on Local Self Governments**  
**RULSG-Policy Pointers Series : 4**

**CDS**   
Thiruvananthapuram

---

## Women and Gender Policy after the Deluge: Some Reflections

J. Devika

### Reexamining Fundamentals

Generally speaking, the Great Deluge of 2018 has brought to the surface several searing truths about the way we manage our society and economy, so much so that it is impossible to rebuild Kerala in any sustainable way without examining the fundamentals of our approach towards development, growth, and welfare and indeed, gender. It is by now evident that single-cause explanations (which seem to be a-plenty) are of no use in making sense of the disaster and its aftermath, and that the nature of its complexity indicates that this challenge is likely to recur. In other words, preparedness, both in the economic and social sense, cannot be but a key aspect of our rebuilding effort.

Where do women figure in these discussions? In a society in which lower-middle class and poor women have been powerfully mobilized for public welfare work, the most common response is to point out the importance of involving them in relief and reconstruction. How exactly this should happen is the moot point. From a feminist policy perspective, it appears that the reexamination of the fundamentals of policy aimed at women, and not merely extending pre-existing practices, is called for.

-----

Government policy aimed at women in Kerala since the 1990s has had broadly liberal moorings. The focus has mostly been on the individual informal sector woman worker/housewife, and women's collectives formed (the self-help groups) have been conceived of as groups of (individual) women representing the needs of their families. Also, however nuanced particular policy documents may sound, on the ground, the distinction between practical needs and strategic interests has been honoured. Over time, a consensus seems to have been reached among officials at least about what women's practical needs are – that they refer to material resources needed for the reproduction of the family on daily and generational bases. Kudumbashree is widely identified as the network assuring access to such resources. However, there has been no

consensus about women's strategic interests – at best, they are conceived entirely in sexual-protectionist terms, about safeguarding women and girls from sexual violence. Though the Kudumbashree has, over the years, produced many 'unintended consequences' that challenge both the form and content of patriarchy in Kerala, women members have increasingly had to perform governmental labour (poorly rewarded tasks for the local government) as well as provisioning labour (for their families, serving to connect them with the welfare system) in return.

The post-devastation scenario cannot justify the mere extension/continuation of the above. On the one hand, the experience of rescue and relief upturned the fundamental distinctions and assumptions of the framework underlying it. The learnings this produced are valuable; they must be used to re-orient women-centred policy. On the other, new practical situations, of loss and recovery, seem to call for a rethinking of welfare aimed at women in Kerala.

-----

First, the distinction implicit in Kerala's policy addressing women – the divide between their practical needs and strategic interests – needs to be completely rethought or abandoned. This is in the light of our heightened sense of awareness of the ecological fragility of Kerala. This division has taken shape under local circumstances, and therefore much that would be classified under strategic gender interests elsewhere figured under practical gender needs here, and vice-versa. For instance, access to credit, which many consider to be a strategic gender interest which would alter the structure of patriarchy in favour of women in the long-run, seems to be perceived as a practical gender need here, tied as it is to the need of family sustenance. Also, till recently, issues such as mobility, physical movement and fitness, and sartorial choices were commonly and implicitly treated as women's strategic interests, ostensibly because in Kerala's context they counted as part of women's control over their bodies. It is not surprising that there is no consensus around conceding this, since women's bodies have long been subject to the cultural control of caste-communities, and this has either been bolstered by or at least poorly challenged by, the dominant left.

What the disaster teaches us is that freedoms such as the above are *practical survival needs*, and no more strategic gender interests. From the many reports and images of the

---

rescue effort, it was apparent that few women in Kerala have the physical preparedness to survive such a disaster: they tend to be physically unfit, and lacking basic skills to survive moving water such as the ability to swim. Put in a different way, the extent to which women in Kerala are constrained physically by culture was glaringly evident. Women in Kerala, in order to be 'respectable', have to carry their bodies in prescribed ways that affect bodily mobility; their sartorial choices are overwhelmingly dictated by culture. In other words, policy focused on women will have to begin to see at least these aspects of women's control over their bodies as non-negotiable, given our awareness of living in an ecologically-fragile area prone to climate change phenomena.

Also, the rescue and relief phases clearly reveal the significance of collectiveness as a life-saving quality. This prompts perhaps a rethinking of the liberal-individualist foundations of Kudumbashree, and considering ways in which the self-help group can be thought of as based on a notion of collective interests that go beyond individual and rational-choice logic. This may also be necessary considering the huge psychological costs that individual women, many of who have lost all their possessions, have paid. Similarly, ecological self-awareness which also questions the fundamentals of liberal-individualism seems to be unavoidable for our sustainable future and hence needs to be central to evolving notions of collectivity.

-----

Among rehabilitation measures aimed at households, interest-free loans to Kudumbashree women have been given prominence. Research from experiences of post-disaster transformation from around the world shows that women suffer more, and bear greater health consequences. Also, the burdens of rebuilding, both economic and psychological, often falls heavier on them, and that governments also tend to rely more on them. All these four propositions are most likely to apply to Kerala. Kerala has a history in which women were progressively removed from productive work and 'housewifed', and at present, a very large proportion of women here tend to identify with their domestic spaces and surroundings. The numbers of women who provision their households single-handedly are high in Kerala. Thus it is only to be expected that women may put in excessive labour to salvage their spaces, ignoring the psychological trauma and bodily ailments, and despite many images of male volunteers cleaning houses, it is women who will inevitably take a larger burden of cleaning and maintaining

the flood-ravaged dwellings. And given that Malayali women are deeply engaged in governmental labour and possess the necessary skills for it, it is only likely that the government will place a larger burden of reconstruction on them.

Therefore it may be important to recognize that interest-free loans alone will not suffice, or indeed it may not be the appropriate response to help badly-affected women who may already be deeply in debt. Rehabilitation for them must take into account necessarily the inequalities among the survivors and respond to their different needs. For example, for the most disadvantaged, especially among the tribal communities, it may be necessary to ensure free housing, domestic and work implements and essential furniture, free insurance and health care, as well as increased rations and livelihood support. The lower middle-class women may need, besides interest-free loans, low-priced or free-of-cost restoration of homes, free basic health care, stable livelihoods, and reduced tax burdens on essential medicines and domestic appliances. They may be mobilized as groups and offered training and credit to take advantage of the opportunities for gainful labour opened up by post-flood reconstruction. Perhaps it is also necessary to do this in ways that wear thin the division between practical gender needs and strategic interests: for example, more specialized training in electric, plumbing, and electronic work for specific groups of women be preceded by a mass campaign for general technical literacy among women. Also, it may require the government to assure that at least half of all employment opportunities and work contracts generated in the public and private sectors in post-disaster rehabilitation work be set apart for women, and all policy documents necessarily contain detailed gender-impact statements.

Secondly, it is important to make sure that the mental trauma suffered is not individualized and pathologized excessively. While the present strategy of making available trained (or sometimes, semi-trained) counsellors may be useful, it is necessary in the long run to develop women's self-help groups into collectives capable of psychological healing. In other words, the liberal-individualist foundations of our women-centred welfare system will have to be rethought; so also the significance of neoliberalized welfare in an ecologically-fragile society.

-----

However, perhaps fundamental to women's full and fair participation in the post-flood rehabilitation and reconstruction is the rejuvenation of Kerala's local government system, particularly of the Grama Sabha. In Kerala, women are mass-mobilized mainly at the level of the local self-government, and if they must play a substantial role going beyond mere presence and exercising voice, then the planning process needs to begin from the Grama Sabha. Indeed, all proposals, including those indicated in the preceding section, must pass the scrutiny of women's Grama Sabhas which need to be convened all over the state.

This, then, would be an opportunity to infuse new democratic energies into an institution which is now reduced to a welfare-distribution meeting that works more or less mechanically. Far from just poor and lower middle-class women attending, the Grama Sabha could be transformed into a genuinely-deliberative space where the experiences and observations of women about the rescue and relief, as well as their suggestions and needs during reconstruction and rehabilitation may be articulated. A major step would be to mobilize special Grama Sabhas of women all over Kerala's local bodies to prepare 'Survivor Reports' which document women's experiences and their vision of rebuilding Kerala, which could then form the backbone for a new approach to welfare and infrastructure.

----

In short, we need to take this opportunity to acknowledge that women's practical survival needs and see that these remain beyond the practical needs/strategic interests divide; we also should rethink post-flood rebuilding as if women mattered, and addressing inequalities and diversities among affected women. Most importantly, we need to make sure that women's energy and labour are not overused in rehabilitation while they remain unheard in the larger discussions on long-term reconstruction.

## **J Devika**

[Professor, Centre for Development Studies]



**Research Unit on Local Self Governments**  
**Centre for Development Studies**

Prasanth Nagar, Ulloor, Thiruvananthapuram - 695011, Kerala, India  
Tel: +91-471- 2774200, 2448881, 2448412 Fax: +91-471- 2447137  
[www.cds.edu](http://www.cds.edu)