



Institute of Social Sciences

Twenty-Second Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations

April 24-25, 2015

Theme:

Violence against Women: Role of Panchayats

Venue

Nazir Saab Hall, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi

Supported by



Mrs. Sharmila Tagore (3rd from Left) presenting Outstanding Women Panchayat Leader awards to Ms. Priyanka Kumari, President, Katkamdag Gram Panchayat, Jharkhand and Mrs. Tapaswini Nayak, Sarpanch, Bhagbatchandrapur Gram Panchayat, Odisha (4th & 5th from Left). Others in the picture are (from Left) Dr. Santosh Singh, Dr. George Mathew, Dr. Bidyut Mohanty and Dr Ash Narain Roy

Report

The Theme:

Keeping the importance of the year 2015 in mind, it was decided that the women from the panchayats as leaders of the village community should be made aware on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, next year Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs), and Beijing +20 provisions. Since all of them are important for the well-being of women at different stages of their lives and are being revisited in 2015; it was important to spread this message throughout India.

The United Nations had a series of meetings and asked every member country to report on the progress with regard to gender equity. Assessment of the South Asia report of MDGs showed that India in particular has made some progress in the areas of education and reduction in poverty ratio but the absolute number of poor is very high. The most distressing point to note is that both declarations (CEDAW and Beijing +20) pointed to an increase in violence against women. Laws exist *albeit* with lax degrees of implementation. It is partly due to the fact that women have become more assertive with increased reporting of violence by the media and cases taken to the police. It is also important to know as to why in spite of strong measures, such as, political visibility of women in panchayats, creating micro credit groups, violence has detrimentally increased against women. This has been happening in spite of women's progress in terms of education, professional achievement, public visibility etc. Due to the presence of nearly one million elected representatives every five years at the grassroots level, it became imperative to create awareness among them regarding the existence of various laws related violence against women, so that the elected leaders can in turn tell other women in the villages. Similarly, Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) also wanted to evaluate the perception of violence – both private and public — through the lenses of women as leaders.

Keeping this in view, ISS organized a two-day event called Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations to mark the ratification of the Seventy-third Constitution



Elected Women Representatives from 20 states

Amendment Act in 1992-93. This year's celebrations focused on the theme: Elimination of all forms of violence against women: Role of Panchayats.

Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations

Since 1994, every year the event is organized thematically. In the past few years, the focus has been on: sanitation, drinking water, child rights and other similar issues which impact their daily lives. Experts from various fields are invited to address the gathering and discuss their concerns with the elected women representative (EWRs). In the process, the elected women representatives gained significantly through their learning and from each other's experience. The programme also taught the women on how to carry the message forward.

Every year the Institute brings together large number of EWRs to New Delhi from all over the country; from Jammu and Kashmir to Tamil Nadu as well as North Eastern states to mark this historic day. To fulfill our objective of creating awareness among large number of Elected Women Representatives, the Institute takes all efforts to get many ward members belonging to the tribals, Scheduled Castes, and Other Backward Classes. They are the ones who are most excluded and the reservation for women in panchayats is the big step for their inclusion. Therefore we pay more attention to them.

This year we got district panchayat members sponsored by the Uttarakhand Government and experts on local government system from Nepal. More than 300 elected women Panchayat members participated in this year's celebrations from 20 states.

Inaugural Session

The inaugural session of the two-day Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations began with a lot of fanfare and enthusiasm on 24 April 2015. The inaugural session commenced with an invocation by Jagori, a voluntary organisation working on women's



Welcome Song by Jagori, New Delhi

issues. The song written by Kamla Bhasin, a firebrand feminist, was an inspirational one on how all the women can come together and rise through dance and achieve their rights.

Welcoming the delegates, Dr. Ash Narain Roy, Director, ISS highlighted the bond between the elected women representatives and ISS saying that violence is not unique to India alone. He further emphasized that violence against women manifests itself in various forms and magnitude and is widespread particularly among the women, dalits, tribals and other marginalised sections of the community. Further, he wondered as to why violence persists against women even though they themselves are an epitome of 'Ahimsa' as Gandhiji had visualized them.

In his introductory remarks, Dr. George Mathew, Chairman of the ISS, greeted the women present in the meeting and wondered as to why violence against women persists in spite of progress on several fronts. He hoped and passionately stated that "we can end violence soon". He urged all the women to start a campaign at the village, block, district, state and national level.



Mrs. Sharmila Tagore

Inaugurating the conference, **Mrs. Sharmila Tagore**, the Goodwill Ambassador, UNICEF said that there should be zero tolerance regarding domestic violence. In fact, she suggested that the incidence of violence should be discussed in the Mahila Sabha or Gram Sabha. Speaking on the issue of domestic violence, she said there was nothing masculine about a man beating his wife. Further she said, "Today I appeal to you to take up a very important issue which is plaguing us today and that is domestic violence and domestic violence alone in a subtler way. You must put an end to domestic violence. You play an important role here. For all the women in your panchayat, you are a ray of hope". Condemning the patriarchal mindset, she said that it restricts the mobility and freedom of the women in the society. She urged all

the panchayat leaders to act firmly to stop violence against women in their respective villages. She also underlined the need to include men in their endeavor.

Outstanding Women Panchayat Leaders Award

Every year the Institute awards the elected women representatives for their outstanding contributions through their invaluable community leadership services in their Panchayats. This year, awards were presented to two elected women representatives one each from Bihar and Odisha. Ms. Priyanka Kumari, the President of gram panchayat, Hazaribagh, Bihar ensured drinking water supply to all the households and progressively worked to secure women's rights.

While accepting the award she thanked the Institute and said that the award would help in boosting 'my endeavor to serve the villagers in general and women in particular'. Ms. Tapaswini Nayak, tribal Sarpanch from Mayurbhanj, Odisha contributed in improving the lives of tribal communities in her village by utilizing money given through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Ms. Nayak was appreciated for her struggle against social discrimination against the tribal communities. Ms. Tapaswini was thankful to the Institute for recognizing her achievements and said 'I come from a very poor family and my father and brothers never supported me in sending to

school. But my mother always fought for me to get educated. After her death I had to support my family and got married very early and started supporting my husband's family as well. So the villagers requested me to contest the election and that was how I got elected and vowed to ensure their additional livelihood by using the MGNREGS money. You will be happy to know that because of my effort, our panchayat has received the best performing panchayats under the flagship program'. The awards were presented by Ms. Tagore during the inaugural session.

Dr. Bidyut Mohanty, Head, Women's Studies, ISS, proposed a vote of thanks to the speakers and delegates present there after telling the purpose of taking that particular theme namely, Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women and Role of Panchayat.



From Left to Right: Dr. George Mathew, Mrs. Sharmila Tagore, Dr. Bidyut Mohanty & Dr. Ash Narain Roy

Keynote Address

Delivering the keynote address, Ms. Kavita Krishnan, Secretary All India Progressive Women's Association elaborated on the factors leading to structural violence on the lines of caste, class, ethnicity and patriarchy. She said, from time immemorial violence has perpetuated against Dalit women and takes various forms, such as, discriminations in terms of wage rates and access to basic services. She urged all the women present to lead struggles against the patriarchy, social discrimination and narrow mindedness to get liberated. Presiding over the session, Ms. Rita Sarin, Country Director Hunger Project, narrated different aspects of CEDAW and highlighted the role of elected women representatives to create awareness among other women of the area.

The address was followed by a question and answer session, wherein panchayat representatives shared their experiences about their problems, the relentless struggle faced by them and their achievements. It was interesting to note that participants were keen to learn about various laws prevalent nationally as well as internationally, so that they can take steps to curb violence in their villages by punishing the culprits. Some of them noted that woman inflicts violence against other women. They also shared their experiment as to



Ms. Rita Sarin and Ms. Kavita Krishnan

how they have been successful in forming women's group to tackle various types of violence against women. Some women also emphasized the need to inculcate value and moral-based education to both boys and girls.

In her closing remarks, Ms. Kavita Krishnan appreciated the women's relentless efforts in managing their work efficiently. She urged the women to take a broader view of our cultural and traditional practices which curtail their constitutional and legal rights. She appealed to all the women present to join together and fight against the traditional and conservative thinking, particularly on *Jati* and caste, which are deeply rooted in our culture.

Thematic Sessions

The thematic sessions were held in the afternoon, wherein the participants were organized into four working groups, each group representing three to four states. Each group discussed one of the following themes:

1. Gender related Acts and the Role of Panchayats;
2. Violence faced by women in panchayats;
3. Violence against women panchayat leaders in the society;
4. Perception of violence by the panchayat leaders.

The thematic sessions were chaired by Ms. Madhu Bala, Manager, Programme, Jagori, New Delhi; Ms. Savitry Ray, Assistant Professor, CWDS, New Delhi; Ms. Suparna Ganguly, Senior Faculty, SIPRD and Dr. Anuja Agrawal, Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi. The summary of these discussions were presented by the rapporteurs on 25 April, 2015.



Ms. Madhu Bala



Ms. Savitry Ray



Ms. Sparna Ganguly



Ms. Anuja Agrawal

Plenary Sessions

In the first plenary session on *Challenges faced by women in Panchayats*, Prof. Sunita Reddy and Prof. Sanghmitra Acharya, JNU took the debate forward.

Prof. Sanghmitra Acharya raised a few issues and problems which the women face in their day to day lives. On education, she said that there is a stark gender gap between boys and girls. She further emphasized that girls are withdrawn from the school before they reach eighth class. The reasons she quoted were:

- Parents may not have adequate money to educate both the children. So preference is always given to boys to continue their education.
- The schools woefully lack toilets facilities for the girl child. And so nearly 50 per cent of the girls stop attending the school after 8th class.

On the issue of decentralisation, she appreciated that over the years, this process has gathered momentum in India, but highlighted that the formal participation of women does



From left to Right: Dr. Sunita Reddy, Prof. Uma Chakravarti, Mr. Nagendra Prasad Rijal (Nepal), and Prof. Sanghmitra Acharya

not necessarily lead to their meaningful participation. In several villages, only a symbolic participation takes place, implying that even today the system of Sarpanch-Pati is still a common practice, where women are treated merely as rubber stamps.

Mr. Nagendra Prasad Rijal, Chairman of *Sakcham*, Nepal discussed the functioning of local government in Nepal and how women are still dormant even after the revolution!

Prof. Uma Chakravarti a feminist thinker showed a short documentary film of a woman protagonist to point out as to how the structural violence of State is so brutal, it erases every form of protest and women have to be careful about that.

Dr. Sunita Reddy, in her closing remarks, reiterated the fact told by Ms. Madhu Bala to hear the news regularly. This, she said would create awareness about the magnitude and forms of violence occurring in different parts of the country. This understanding, she said would enable the women to unite together and create a platform to exchange views, ideas and notions.

The day's programme ended with the cultural programme by **Nishant Natya Manch** and **Space Theatre Ensemble**. Both the organizations focused on the issues of violence against women. Nishant performed a short play *Gaddha* or a pit. The story was written by the famous Urdu writer Krishan Chander. Name of the original story was TOHA. Later on, the story was adopted by various street-play groups to give their own messages.

The story: A woman fell in a pit while trying to escape from her husband's physical torture. Everybody such as, foreign researcher, social worker, political leader, religious leader and other so called benevolent individual saw her but nobody came to her rescue. Finally the women came together and lifted her from the pit. This came with a message which also became clear during the whole program that unity brings strength.

Space Theatre on the other hand Ensemble's repertoire consisted of performing poetry, treating its performance as both a musical score and as a text that suggested an abstraction



Cultural Programme by Nishant Natya Manch

of bodily movement. The group, which takes the arts to younger people, performed on the theme decrying violence against women. What was unique about the performance is that there was no use of language in it.

Day Two

On the second day the program started with a plenary session on the theme: *Relevance of CEDAW and Violence Related Acts in India*. Ms. Sehjo Singh, ActionAid chaired the



Ms. Sehjo Singh, Ms. Seema Gaikwad and Ms. Savita Singh

session and speakers were: Ms. Seema Gaikwad VSO, New Delhi and Prof. Savita Singh, IGNOU, New Delhi

All three of them narrated various aspects of CEDAW and the progress that India has made in the achieving gender equity. All three of them pointed out that in the field of violence, India has failed miserably. The session was followed by discussions, wherein, the participants from a few states shared their experience. At the end the session, Ms. Sehjo Singh asked the participants to pledge that “when we fight for our rights, we must also fight against *jati* and patriarchy. She also raised the issue of female foeticide and expressed her concern that the number of female children would decline further in the coming decades if proper steps are not taken right now.

She also asked the organizers “If daughters become non-existent after ten years how would you be able to invite them for your program?”

During the next plenary session, there was a mono-acting demonstration by Ms. Sushma from Vidarva, Maharashtra on female foeticide. This was followed by a short presentation on women’s issues and a *Rabindra Sangeeta* by Dr. Suparna Ganguli, Senior faculty in SIPRD who chaired the session and Ms. Pravleen from Jagori was the speaker. Focusing on various manifestations of structural violence, patriarchal societal norms and women’s



Ms. Pravleen and Dr. Suparna Ganguli

protest through the use of folklore as well as boycotting the generally accepted notion of beauty, Pravleen elaborated the objectives of One Billion Rising Campaign. She also sang some Rajasthani folklores to substantiate her points.

The last plenary session was on theme: *Violence in Panchayats: How do Women Cope up?* The session was chaired by Dr. Bidyut

Mohanty and speakers of the sessions were: Ms. Srijana Ghemire, Government officer working on local Governments, Nepal and Dr. Avneet Kaur, Lecturer, Indraprastha (IP) College, Delhi University. Ms. Ghemire spoke about the functioning of the local government system and status of women in Nepal. She also tried to give a comparative perspective on the status of women in Nepal and India. Relating this to violence, she said that in Nepal the uneducated and unemployed women bear the brunt of violence more than the educated and employed women. She urged that if the government and the private sector are serious to stop violence, the first and the foremost step would be to educate women and men and provide them employment.

On the other hand, Dr. Kaur narrated her experience of going to several villages and interviewing several mahila Sarpanches. She explained the difference between gender and sex. While explaining the difference between the two, she spoke about the mind-set of men and women in the society. Her observations, further, focused on importance of educating the females. She emphasized that unless the government takes a serious and strong action, there can be no change in the society.

After that, women wanted to ask questions and also wanted to share their achievements as to how have they prevented violence which was taking place in their panchayats effectively. By that time one could feel that women present there were electrically surcharged by the stimulating speeches.



Dr. Bidyut Mohanty, Ms. Srijana Ghemire (Nepal) and Dr. Avneet Kaur

Women from Manipur, West Bengal, Uttarakhand and Jammu and Kashmir came forward and expressed their views and concerns. As for example, Manju Negi the Zilla Parishad member of Uttarakhand, pointed out that she has come alone and is staying with her friends who belong to same zilla parishad to learn from them. She narrated her experience as to how she fought against the rapist and married him and is living happily now. The delegates were sponsored by the government of Uttarakhand. West Bengal Zilla Parishad member of West Midnapur shared her own story, just because she is a Muslim, some villagers spread wrong words against her. But she rebutted and said 'first I am the daughter and daughter-in-law of the village, later I am a Muslim. Fortunately, villagers did not cast vote to me to win and I have been serving well since then. I have come on my own and I did not get invitation from ISS. She thanked her guide also for giving her the information. She learnt a lot here in the meeting.

A delegate from Odisha expressed her deep concern about men spending the entire earnings on alcohol consumption, leading to women being beaten up in their villages. In order to tackle this menace, they formed women's group and demolished the liquor shop.

Open House Discussion

The next session was the open session chaired by Dr. Babita Verma, Associate Professor, Laksmibai College, Delhi University and was moderated by Mr. Shripal Jain, Editor of *Panchayati Raj Update*, a monthly news bulletin published by the Institute of Social Sciences. During this session the reports of group discussions were presented. Women representatives from Manipur and Bihar came to the stage and narrated their experiences. A representative from Manipur said that in their state they have formed mother's group to check the drug addiction of their sons and they also send them to jail to get them de-addicted. She also pointed out that women are very much visible in the market and they have a strong say about the property matters but still so far as the functioning of local government system is concerned they remain almost invisible.



Mr. Shripal Jain and Dr. Babita Verma

Valedictory Session

The two-day programme concluded with a Valedictory Session on the theme: *Emerging Issues on Violence against Women in the Twenty-first Century and Role of panchayats.*

Mr. Shaleen Rakesh Executive Director, VSO, New Delhi chaired the session and talked about the activities of VSO at length and asked various NGOs to get linked with global campaign to promote political empowerment of women.



Mr. Shaleen Rakesh and Prof. Imrana Qadeer

Speaking on the occasion, Prof. Imrana Qadeer Visiting Professor, Council for Social Development New Delhi, talked about the kind of health related violence women face throughout their life cycle because of their so called inferior social and economic status. As women leaders, only they can redress that anomaly which still persists in the rural setting.

In his closing remarks, Dr. George Mathew thanked all the participants from various parts of the country and Nepal. He specially mentioned that one of the most significant outcomes of this year's programme is the resolution to launch a nation wide campaign to combat violence against women which will be launched from every panchayat in the country.

The deliberations and discussions during the conference were appreciated by women leaders, speakers, civil society members and media persons as informative and educative. For many, violence has been a part of their lives, but during the discussions they learnt that it should not be tolerated. They resolved to take the learning from the conference to their villages, work place and home to end violence against women.

The programme came to a close with the National Anthem. ■