

Deserted and Single Women: Right to Livelihood and Dignity

Workshop Jointly organized by IAWS and Rural Campus, TISS, Tuljapur

24-25th February, 2012

Summary of the Transactions

Objectives in the Concept Note Circulated Earlier

1. To bring together organizations working on the issues of Deserted and Single women in Maharashtra and Gujarat and learn from each other the strategies for organizing and discuss the steps for consolidation at the state level as well as national level.
2. To share experience of the lawyers working with women who are victims of violence as well as who want to take legal action in case of desertion or separation.
3. To encourage the faculty of Women's Studies Centres newly established in Maharashtra to help undertake small localized surveys to contribute to the data on this issue.

Overview of the Fulfillment of the Objectives

Maharashtra has a legacy of localized movements of deserted women in different parts, since 1986 onwards and quite a few achievements have been noted in terms of getting demands sanctioned at the policy level as well as individual level. Nari Samata Manch in Pune had expanded the definition of single women to include unmarried, separated, divorced, widows and deserted women to organize a gathering under the title, 'Aparajita' i.e. 'Undefeated'. The testimonies were later published in a book form.

Nature of these organizations vary from place to place and also depending upon the background of the organizers, such as NGOs, political parties, local charismatic leaders etc. Some organizations are totally dedicated to this issue and some are working towards more than one issue, or organizing the women as a part of the union activities. All these organizations do come together whenever there is a need to discuss and protest against the government policies and put up a common front. This platform is called Sampark Samiti. It is a very loose network and reasonably active to carry out activities with broad feminist framework. Previously, I used to participate in the Sampark Samiti meetings as a part of a group called Stree Uvach and Maitrini. But since both the groups wound up I participate in this platform as an individual. As a faculty at Women's Studies Centre at TISS I could raise funds for carrying out small survey of deserted women associated with an organization near Kasegaon, Dist of Sangali where Seema kulkarni was associated at both levels; academic and activist.

Against this background the workshop was planned at Tuljapur, where the strategies for going forward would be discussed by the concerned organizations. I had personally talked to many participants in this respect since I knew about the barriers many have for coming together. How to raise the funds for all the networking activities is the main issue for many, since they don't believe in accepting the funds from the foreign funding agencies. It is o.k. to raise funds from time to time for some campaign or other under the banner of Sampark Samiti but to have a permanent fund to run a campaign on deserted women's issue has to be considered carefully. I had expected that at least this workshop will trigger their wish and thought process for new strategies to go forward.

Ginny Shrivastav in her opening address described the work being done at the national level and she also invited the organizations to join the national forum. Shilpa Kashelkar and Usha Kale, from Ekal Mahila Adhikar Manch, Maharashtra state forum from Maharashtra presented their functioning methodology where single women themselves become the executive committee members and run the organisation and the others remain as facilitators (Sahyogi individuals and organizations). None of the participants responded positively or negatively to their presentations. To me it appears that the major issue is whether the nature of the national forum is NGO coalition, where the funding can come from any source or should it be a political process pressurizing political parties to take up the issue into their agendas. Nobody has given the sufficient thought to the process of network building and its nature in Maharashtra. Although it has to be agreed upon that there was not sufficient time during the workshop for these serious deliberations, there was a possibility to show willingness to discuss these issues soon.

At the end of the workshop it was decided that a meeting of Sampark Samiti will be soon be convened. The mood could be concluded in words of Seema Kulkarni that, "since the movement has evolved quite early in Maharashtra, it has its own dynamics and the process of consolidation would be quite different than the one appearing in other states, where National Forum is taking initiative to reach out to the individuals and organizations and bring them into the fold of the national umbrella. Maharashtra may take different course." I wish it happens soon.

Unfortunately, from Gujarat two women Hansaben and Gomatiben belonging to WGWO (Working Group for Women and Land Ownership) reached late, i.e. next day early morning and hence their presentations were very brief and that too took place only in one group. Their experience of working for widows' rights to land could not be elaborated or no deliberation could take place whether it is feasible in Maharashtra or not. I was very keen to take this issue forward. But by the time they spoke, it was time for many to leave for their destination. Many had traveled for 10-15 hours and hence we had to stop before lunch on the second day. Tuljapur was very comfortable venue but very far off to reach. That proved to be a time constraint for longer deliberations.

Lawyers' Contribution

There were five lawyers who were already involved either in fighting the cases of deserted women, or in training of the organizations and their activists about the laws which are useful for fighting the cases. Flavia Agnes had ran the programme to sensitise the women lawyers in the mofussil areas, who could be useful to the organizations for

fighting some of the cases of the deserted women. I tried to contact them but none showed much interest. Lawyers' session was good and insightful. All of them made offer to help and train the activists and also women's studies faculty wherever they are.

Women's Studies Centres

The first day there were panel discussions for all the categories of participants. Next day there was separate sessions for two categories; organizations and academics. It was here we were expecting some motivation to take up responsibility for conducting small studies, workshop, field activities etc. Seema Kulkarni had offered to give out the questionnaire prepared for her study with Pune University. Her paper in EPW was circulated to all of them

Out of 24 centres in Maharashtra only seven were represented. Two of them were TISS and Pune University, who had already participated in studies on the question of deserted women. There were representatives from the WSC of ILS Law college in Pune, who are very active in the women's movement in Pune. Out of the rest one was from North Maharashtra University, and others were from colleges. They showed some interest in taking this issue up and talking to their colleagues about conducting surveys as a part of the students' curriculum activity. On the whole the picture was a little dismal. I had taken personal interest in talking to the principals of these colleges and thus getting names of the specific teacher who is in charge of the centre and conveying her how useful this workshop will be for her, apart from an opportunity to do some academic activity of conducting survey, she would get connected with the women's organizations and the movement. In fact I had thought that the names of TISS and also IAWS were quite luring for them since they will get a certificate of attendance from the academic institution. I guess may be the timing was wrong (end of the teaching session) or the funds have gone in the wrong hands without much investigation from UGC. There is a lack of motivation with the principals of many colleges and so is the dearth of motivated faculty. I had made a commitment to help to those faculty members who expressed interest to pursue the matter further in terms of carrying out surveys on these issues.