

XIth National Conference, 2005: Dona Paula, Goa
President's address

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Distinguished Guests, Fellow Delegates and Colleagues,

It gives me immense pleasure to extend a very warm welcome to all of you to this beautiful city of Goa. The National Conference of IAWS has always been a joyous and stimulating experience. All of us who have been part of this journey know that it is an occasion to join hands, express our solidarity and also reflect on our achievements and failures, our strengths and our weaknesses. The issues confronting women's movement pose many challenges and to address them we need both organizational strength and a strong resolve to work together. We hope that engagements at this interactive forum will provide fresh insights; lead to reframing of several issues and pose new questions.

The recent Beijing+10 assessment of the advancement of women at the 49th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, clearly shows not only the yawning gaps which still exist between the commitments made and the achievements, but also the global resistance to women's rights by conservative forces and agendas. Neo-liberalism and economic globalization through trade, financial capital and multinational corporations has created 'flexible labour markets' and has resulted in the decrease in the autonomy of national economies. The Conference discussed the implications of export and trade-led growth. An OXFAM Study in 12 countries titled 'Trading Away Our Rights: Women Working in Global Supply Chain' (2004) points out that 'globalisation has drawn millions of women into paid employment... Such work is fuelling national export growth but women workers are systematically being denied benefits and forced to work at high speed, for low wages in unhealthy conditions'. New trade regimes and marketization of economy have led to increased gender inequalities and exploitation of women's unpaid and undervalued labour. It has undermined poor women's work, livelihood options, food security, and has increased their vulnerabilities. The statement issued by the Group of 77 and China on this occasion stated that 'globalised environment has resulted in shrinking economies and declining employment rates making it difficult for women particularly those in developing countries from enjoying equality within human rights framework envisioned in Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and Cairo Declaration. Globalisation reinforces imbalances and increases welfare gaps'.

The review of the 2000 Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) scheduled in September 2005 has overshadowed the commitments made in Beijing Platform for Action. In this period of transition, shrinking state responsibility, ascendancy of market forces, there is a need to not only reconceptualise issues facing women but also reflect on our strategies to engage the state in more meaningful ways. The Political Declaration adopted at the 49th Session of CSW emphasized the strong links between BPFA and the Millennium Declaration

and stated that time-bound millennium Development Goals would not be achieved without achieving equality of women.

The year 2004 marked the completion of 25 years of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and gave us an opportunity to reflect on the progress made on the commitment to gender equality. Feminist discourses have used international conventions like CEDAW and CRC (India being signatory to them) to engage state processes and structures and build on their mobilization strategies. It has also been argued that human rights law only takes into cognizance violations committed by the States and ignoring such violations in the private sphere. Concept of right goes beyond its legalistic connotation.

The theme of the XIth National Conference 'Sovereignty, Citizenship and Gender' raises some fundamental issues. The notion of citizenship is the source of political identity and gives a judicial status. Citizenship rights emanate from the Constitution and legal framework but are experienced by women in different socio-economic categories differently. The state presents citizenship rights in a universalistic term. The universal and neutral understanding of citizenship remains problematic, as the rights are heterogeneous and unequally enjoyed by marginalized groups because of historical, social, cultural and economic reasons.

A variety of experiences are grounded in cultural differences and identities. Living in complex and plural societies entails participation in multiple discourses.

Politics of alliance and coalition building and politics of protest around ethnic, caste, class and gender identities have generated new questions. Over the years, systems of power that have emerged in our society have created tensions between universality of rights and cultural pluralism and have kept at bay the culture of secular human liberties essential for a just and equitable society. Political pluralism is marked by constant struggles between centralism and federalism, centralization and democratic decentralization of power, between secular democracy and fundamentalism. There are several contradictions that have remained unresolved within our democratic system.

Struggles of women (peasant, tribals and dalits) for claiming their rights and entitlements clearly indicate that there are many layers of citizenship rights. Unequal relations of power mediate these rights. Gains made through their struggles are often not institutionalized to create new citizenship rights and entitlements. Identities of caste, kinship, ethnicity and religion often determine inclusions and exclusions in multiple ways. Struggles of marginalized groups are not only for redistribution of resources but also to create conditions and mechanisms necessary for the exercise of rights and creating spaces for people's initiatives. Women's transformational politics begins with their day-to-day problems and their collective strength and capacity to negotiate with structures of power.

Feminists concerned with active citizenship have argued that it requires material and social conditions to enable them to enjoy their rights and negotiate their entitlements. Poverty is a by-product of denial of certain basic rights and deprivations (like stable income, health care, access to education and productive resources). Erosion of welfare state and a patchwork of services for the poor have failed to address the basic needs of women. Addressing the issues of survival and security reopens the debate on socio-economic basis of citizenship; the relationship between the state, markets and the household and the basic conditions necessary for the exercise of

citizenship rights. Women's disproportionate representation in an informal sector and low-paid jobs, declining financial flows for meeting basic health care, basic needs and services and declining standards in poor women's access to water, sanitation, housing and food, call for more focused strategies.

Citizenship rights cannot be dependent on the goodwill of the state as they form the fundamental basis of democracy. The concepts of rights, equality and justice provide the normative basis to question not only institutions of governance but also the frameworks of power. The meaning and dimensions of democracy has been the subject of continuing discourse among feminists. These dimensions cannot be analysed without reflecting on national and international contexts of perpetuating patterns of patriarchy and gender subordination. Both the national and the global political processes within which discourses of women's advancement appear have sometimes contradictory implications for the lives of women.

There is a continued reliance on legislation to uphold the principles of non-discrimination. There is an increasing conflict between statutory laws and customary laws in relation to women's rights (caste, panchayat and honour killings). In a regional seminar organized by the IAWS in collaboration with the Centre for Women's Studies, Kurukshetra University, a resolution was passed expressing deep concern at the drastic decline in girl child sex ratio in Haryana and Punjab, aided and abetted by social prejudices and medical malpractices. It condemned the growing power of extra constitutional bodies like the caste panchayats violating women's human rights by interfering in their personal lives and the growing incidence of violence in the name of 'family honour' against young couples marrying on their own. Such incidences are a reflection of the reassertion of caste politics and patriarchy. State allows these bodies to perpetuate violence against women. Violence against women remains a critical area of human rights violation.

The continued absence of women's voices in governance and women's continued marginality in shaping political instruments remain matters of concern. While policy documents claim that there is a shift from a framework of reform to a framework of equity and women's empowerment, the rhetoric of a progressive gender perspective is followed by a totally lackdaisical approach. There is a difference between populism, a desire to project a pro-woman stance and a genuine effort to make those crucial changes in institutions and structures that keep marginalizing women.

During the last decade, there has been a preoccupation with representational politics. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have provided political space to women in institutions of local self-governance. However, the policies of economic liberalization have shrunk economic spaces for poor women.

The struggle over rights and entitlements and the need for expanding democratic public spaces also means exploring the role of civil society organizations and their capacity to intervene in state-society relations. Despite controversies surrounding the concept of 'civil society', it is also a site of contestational politics with various constituencies. Much of the contemporary debate on civil society sees them as countervailing power and building alliance politics. Civil society organizations have become key to the developmental agenda today. While an impressive

number of organizations have come up, concerns have been raised about the decline in civil society activism and promises that it held. It is more geared to 'functional developmentalism' rather than to ideological issues.

The dilemmas we face are far too complex to be amenable to any one approach. Women's movement consisting of fluid, diverse and autonomous groups or broad coalitions of women's organizations have to guard against fragmentation, divisiveness, personal agendas and competition among members. We have to reflect on issues of gender mainstreaming as a process, policy discourses, institutional responses and the gap between rhetoric and action.

IAWS has completed twenty-three years and very soon it will be time to celebrate 25 years of the Association. IAWS has provided a link between various sites of knowledge and praxis and has provided space for emerging scholarship and debates in Women's Studies and within women's movement. Organizationally fluid, it has several limitations but its strength lies in its members shouldering responsibilities and ensuring continuity and vibrancy.

I invite all of you to the deliberations in the Conference and am sure that your active participation will enrich its proceedings.

Thank you.