

Note on the Second National Conference on Women's Studies, 1984

The University of Kerala in cooperation with the Institute of Management in Government at Trivandrum offered to host the second conference from April 9-12, 1984. Various agencies and individuals provided financial assistance for the Conference. The University of Kerala received grants from the University Grants Commission (UGC), The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), and the Government of Kerala. Many local citizens and organisations generously donated money to the local Organising Committee. The IAWS received grants from the National Committee for Implementing Legal Aid Schemes, Ministry of Social Welfare, UNICEF, and the All India Association for Christian Higher Education, the Swedish international Development Agency, and the Freedom from Hunger Campaign of Food and Agricultural Organisation.

The number of delegates had increased from 380 in 1981 to 471 in 1984. There were many delegates from most states and Union Territories of India and five from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Observers from USA, The Netherlands and UK too were present. Just as Sri J P Naik, who had contributed immensely to the holding of the first conference in 1981, was absent from that meeting due to serious illness, Dr. Madhuri Shah who was one of the motivating spirits behind the formation of IAWS could not be present at its second conference for a similar reason.

The Executive Council of IAWS believed that while it was imperative for the first Conference to cover a wide range of women's issues, the regular conferences thereafter should focus on a few limited areas linked to one theme. This, it was argued, would enable more in-depth discussion, and more organised set of papers, which in turn would provide some opportunity for consolidation of the knowledge that already existed in the country. Thus the Council selected **Gender and Justice** as the theme of the Conference. Three Working Groups organised three aspects of the problem. These sub-themes were: Law and Legal Studies, Work and Employment, and the Political Process. The three coordinators of the working groups commissioned papers on focusing on major aspects of each sub-theme. They accepted volunteered papers as well. Altogether the Conference discussed 90 papers some of which were later edited by the coordinators. The workshops were held simultaneously in four sub-theme sessions. Each workshop adopted a report at the end of the four sessions.

On the second day of the Conference, Justice V R Krishna Iyer, one of the staunch supporters of gender justice, gave a public lecture on that theme. Citing various examples of violation of gender justice from the fields of law and employment, he appealed to the delegates to join the masses of women in expanding the base of women's movement, using women's studies as an instrument for this purpose. Only a thriving women's movement, he said, could help to remove the deep-rooted biases and unjust laws that continued to affect Indian society, preventing it from moving in the direction set by the Constitution. He warned that this struggle against gender injustice would be a long and arduous one.

The Conference set out a tradition of devoting one panel to the discussion of women's issues in the host state. Thus on 11 April, a panel of local scholars presented papers covering the position of women in Kerala. These papers dealt with the history, literature, media projection, employment, and certain contemporary problems of women in Kerala.

Addressing the valedictory session Dr. Phulrenu Guha, the ex Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women in India and the Chairperson of the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, stressed the inseparability and complementarity of research and action in the struggle for gender justice. She hoped that women's studies, and other voluntary organisations would take up the challenges thrown up by the Conference.

The Conference ended after unanimously adopting 12 resolutions.

These resolution included:

1. Support to the call of the peace movement for total nuclear disarmament.
2. Call for the use of the newly introduced INSAT for the introduction of women's studies into the educational programmes transmitted through telecasting stations.
3. Recommendation to the Government for: a) a uniform enforcement of the already accepted joint ownership of land by husband and wife, and land distribution to single women as a matter of priority; b) stopping categorization of work into such grades as legitimize unequal wages to women workers; c) an effective enforcement of Equal Remuneration Act; d) development of workable measures to assist and rehabilitate women in crisis situation; and e) an earmarking for women a significant share of the Seventh Five Year Plan allocation for programmes for the poor.
4. Recognition and condemnation of the actual destruction of forest by timber contractors, paper mills etc, and not by women as alleged by the government.
5. Suggestion that all property acquired after marriage should be jointly owned by husband and wife.
6. Reduction of female illiteracy to 50% by the end of the Seventh Five Year Plan and by 100% by 2000 through a massive mobilization of resource of educational institutions, voluntary organisations and the government.
7. Resolution to establish an Uniform Civil Code incorporating the values of gender justice and secularism.
8. Condemnation of the delay in bringing forth legislation to control dowry deaths and other atrocities on women on the basis of the recommendations made by the Joint Select Parliamentary Committee as far back as in 1982, and urging government to pass needed amendments to the Dowry Prohibition Act as soon as possible.
9. Request to the government to establish appropriate mechanism to undertake systematic and regular data collection on mortality history and statistical data on mortality.
10. Resolution that IAWS takes up a study of the next General Election with special reference to women, their participation and problems.

11. Recommends that the provisions of the Indian Succession Act governing Christians in the rest of the country be made applicable to all the Christians of Kerala, who so far were regulated by a separate law which was discriminatory to the Kerala Christians.

12. A resolution to awaken national consciousness against the dangerous tendencies of the growing violence, communal disharmony, indiscipline and crime, which while adversely affecting the social structure and economic progress of the nation, are specially detrimental to the interests of women and children.

Some of these resolutions were aimed at the government while others were for the Association to implement.

Working Groups

The three working groups into which the Conference deliberations were divided were: Constitutional Equality and Patriarchy; Women, Work and Employment; and Women in the Political Process. Each group met in four sessions covering four aspects of the subject. Altogether about 80 papers were presented. (The exact number is always difficult to arrive at, as sometimes papers referred to are not available.)

Working Group A discussed about 25 papers under four categories, which were: Constitutional Equality and Patriarchy, Woman and Her Body, Woman and Family Law, and Concept of the Worker.

This group started by analysing the Constitution, the Fundamental Rights and Duties, the Directive Principle and the Preamble to the Constitution, to assess the extent to which the idea of gender justice was imbibed by all these documents. Some disturbing findings were made and discussed. First of all, it was found that only one of the 395 Constitution articles specifically deals with women alone; it relates to maternity relief. Five other women specific directives club women with children or men.

What was more shocking was that while the Constitution appears to be fair to women and men by giving them both equality before law and citizenship, a deep rooted patriarchal principle runs through it. Thus while guaranteeing women and men equality of status - social, economic and political the Constitution gives a place of honour to freedom of religion, particularly to personal law of each religion even though these religious codes of personal law, particularly those in Hinduism and Islam, go against the grain of that equality in entrenching discrimination and subordination of women in society. By de-linking private from public law the State absolves its responsibility for women's rights to their sexuality, to their bodies, and to the inviolability of their identity. Similarly, article 25, prohibiting exploitation, leaves out of its ambit sexual exploitation of women. The basic economic right of equal pay for equal work was only a part of the Directive Principle and not part of the Fundamental Rights right up to the mid 1970s.

It was suggested that a uniform civil code should replace the various personal laws to govern all citizens irrespective of religion, caste or creed. Any reform of the existing personal laws could not be as effective as a uniform civil code. It was considered to be the duty of Women's Studies to expose these internal dichotomies and anomalies of the Constitution, which is said

to have an ideology of secularism, but is actually permeated by patriarchal spirit all through. The State under such a constitution cannot be an impartial dispenser of gender justice, and Women's Studies research should work towards changing this situation and creating an atmosphere wherein social equality of women and men could grow.

Such change should come through legal reform as well as through the rethinking of social norms. Wholesale rejection of personal laws too would be harmful to women's interests, which were protected by some of these laws. The new uniform civil code should not cancel the existing customary laws of the Syrian Christian women, for example, laws which grant them right to land ownership in their own name. The distinction between private and public law was a mechanism to entrench patriarchal ideology. Although the conference could not agree upon a single way to uproot this patriarchal ideology, there was consensus that a way must be found to keep the women-friendly sections of the personal laws and to incorporate them either in the modified personal laws or in the newly devised uniform civil code.

In the same spirit, the institution of family, supposed to be so sacrosanct as to disallow any State intervention in its operation, should be studied minutely. Women's Studies researchers were invoked to remodel rather than discard the institution of family. In the face of growing incidence of sati, dowry deaths, amniocentesis, and nutritional sex discrimination, many delegates wondered if the State should be allowed to remain inactive in the name of family sacrosanctity. Family-based violence against women, though difficult to locate, had to be routed out.

The issue of conflict between difference religious and tribal customary laws also needed to be studied. Such conflicts were highlighted in cases of marriages between persons of different religious or ethnic origins.

The issue of women's work created a good deal of debate. Despite the so-called progressive legislation in the post-1947 period, women still continued to be discriminated against and exploited since much of their domestic and family work was devalued and fell outside the category of work. The greatest injustice was done to women's work by the Censuses. From 1941 to 1981 various categories of work were created and experimented with to identify the work status of people. But nothing has done justice to women's work.

It was not only a concept of time-frame used to label people as workers those who had worked at least for 183 days or as marginal workers -- those who worked for less than that-- which had turned most women into marginal workers. The unorganised, or informally employed and tribal women did not fit into any category. The enumeration methods too tended to make census data unreliable. The enumerators usually collected information on women and the whole household by talking to their male heads. The result was that between 1901 and 1951 there was a steady decline in work participation of women particularly in traditional sector. It was pointed out that to elicit accurate information about women's work participation, it was essential to know what stopped women from speaking out the truth about their work. In a situation where no effective legal change could be made without militant action, it was essential to establish at first that a person was at work before striving for new legislation. The existing Contract Labour, Bonded Labour and migrant Labour Acts had been ineffective in ameliorating the condition of unorganised and tribal women workers.

Moreover, most of the employed women, who constituted a small percentage of women, were to be found in the lowest paid job categories, whether in public or private sector. Similarly, less than 3 percent of the trade apprentices were women and a mere 0.65 percent of those involved in the Craftsmen Training Scheme were women in 1978, and that too in non-engineering trades. An important way to promote female employment in general and in areas away from the traditional female work would be to diversify and expand educational and training schemes for women under various existing schemes such as Apprenticeship Training, Craftsmen Training and Vocational Training Schemes.

The Working Group felt that women's studies and action groups should make meaningful inputs in the census process to elicit more women-specific data and should demonstrate the relationship between policy-making and census data. Like the Government, non-government organisations, including women's groups, should use census data as an instrument of social activism.

Some of the participants felt that in the name of law and order the Government often adopted offensive posture to curb organised and just demands. One presenter said he had seen new Government strategies which encouraged the informal sectors, mostly thronged by women, where labour laws were not applicable. He asked whether it is an astute strategy of the ruling class to throw out certain groups and to back up certain other groups through employment so as to avoid the bindings of the labour laws. (Report of the Second national Conference of Women's Studies, 1984) The categorization of most women workers as marginal workers was one such strategy and this could be the starting point of women's struggle for justice. Women's Studies scholars should pressurize the government to generate more and women-specific census data, which will help women workers struggle.

The chairman of one group pointed out that even in West Bengal, which was run by a Left Front, the trade unions were unwilling to take up the cause of women workers. While the atomised, disorganised and isolated workers section was growing, it remained the most exploited workers section, in the absence of any trade union organisation in their ranks. Since 88% of women were in the unorganised sector, voluntary organisations were called upon to concentrate on rural areas.

Working Group B

The sub-theme of Women, Work and Employment was studied under four heads: Caste, Class and Attitudes to Women's Work; Rural Women, Work and Employment; Women in Industry; and Women's Organisations, Income and Employment Generation.

In fact many of the arguments made in the final session of the first working group were taken up in this second group. This working group, in its first session of Caste, Class and Attitudes to Women's Work, focused on three issues. The first was the perception of women's work by the society and women themselves. A debate on the classification of women's work as supplementary ensued. Many participants thought the dichotomy between primary and supplementary earnings should give way to a focus on **total claims** a woman has through participation in different types of work.

Attitudes to women's work, it was pointed out, were determined by a number of factors. Among these, the locale of work counted most of all. Home-based work and that done

outside were perceived differently even though caste and status considerations, and controls over female sexuality and mobility pushed many women to become invisible workers. The problems of domestic work engaged the participants for a considerable time. It was clear that the value of women's work, whether within or outside the home, was linked to the technology and the social context involved.

One presenter, discussing the caste dimension of work, argued that women find it much more difficult than men to move out of traditional low-prestige caste occupations. Even in poor communities, upward social mobility was associated with withdrawal of women from work outside the home. Sex-biased educational material and the media tend to influence both the society's perception of women's work and women's own internalization of these norms. There was a general agreement that woman's organisations efforts in improving women's self worth had made a dent in the attitudes to women's work, although much remained to be done.

Under the rubric of Rural Women, Work and Employment, the second session of the second working group agreed that, as established by existing research, work participation of rural women differed across class, caste, tribes and regions. But on the whole, women in poor agricultural households contributed half or more than half the total family income; a large number of them were the sole breadwinners of their families. In 1971 nearly 10 percent of rural households were female-headed and much poorer than male-headed ones. An equally alarming fact was a sharp decline in women's work participation and in their income earning since 1961, despite, while some argued because of, government programmes for rural development and schemes for employment/income generation based on new agricultural technology.

Some studies emphasised the need to look at women's employment in general and technological change in particular by class/caste and region; there were said to be significant regional variations in patterns of women's work participation, in the extent of sex discrimination against females in rural households, in patterns of dowry and their inter-connections.

The discussants emphasised the need for further research on the above issues and the following ones:

- a. The effect of technology on women's total work burden, including field work and home-based work, on their access to consumption and control of cash income, particularly in the context of home-based work;
- b. The impact of their nature of their work on women's health;
- c. The impact of male out-migration on women's economic activity and poverty;
- d. The relevance of equating of women with nature and men with culture in the context of the life and work patterns of women and men in particular contexts;
- e. To measure and value housework, despite the difficulties involved, particularly in a subsistence economy, and a study of social structures within which work was valued in society.

The third session concentrated on women in industry. Starting with a discussion of conceptual and methodological issues, the meeting debated the distinction between capitalist and the patriarchal division of labour, and the pattern by which the former supersedes the latter. Both types the traditional and the advanced industry, used the putting-out system. Even within the family labour type industry, the actual reality of the payment and control over the income from women's labour was unclear.

Changes in women's employment areas were noted by three studies. While they were being employed in export oriented industries for the first time, that did not improve women's condition or status due to the exploitative conditions of work. On the other hand women were losing jobs in the jute industry, which was traditionally their forte, because of mechanization. Still in another area, large scale desertion had forced Muslim women to take up handloom weaving, which traditionally was taboo for them. The issue whether women's entry into labour force improved their status was the subject of intensive discussion, following the paper reviewing the impact of development process on women's employment and social status in Bangladesh.

Women's Organisations, Income and Employment Generation was the subject of the final session of the second working group. It generated lively debate on the meaning of socio-economic development, impact of special programmes, the delivery systems, and the role of women's organisations as catalysts of change. In view of the failure of specific programmes to reduce the poverty level of the rural poor, the group felt it would be better to shift the emphasis from improving the delivery system to the receiving mechanism. Women's interest had to be protected through special women-specific programmes, such as Annapurna in Bombay, SEWA in Ahmedabad, Working Women's Forum in Madras and the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi.

Women's organisations, class organisations and organisations with a combined perspective were found to be essential for achieving economic demands, enforcing labour laws, fighting back petty corruption, apathy and inefficiency of the bureaucracy in implementing government programmes. They were also said to be only channels of protection against inhuman work conditions, precarious wages and discriminatory treatment of women a work place and in the family. Women's organisations were equally essential for tackling the so-called private issues, such as wife-battering, alcoholism, dowry, bride price, sexual harassment and superstition. These problems could no longer be neglected in the name of their being labelled as the private domain. Through organisational linkages, interchange and sharing of experiences, women's organisations could promote women's self-reliance, prevent long-term dependency, and strengthen their power, articulation and confidence, concluded the meeting.

It was felt that women's organisations alone would undo the damage done to women's cause by the media which projects them as helpless, and sexually objectified bodies, and thus legitimizes physical and sexual violence against women.

Some discussion took place on the need to redesign programmes by gearing them to the survival imperatives of poor women, rather than confining them to the stereotype of women's traditional activities. Many participants felt that expressed the necessity of revolutionizing

family roles of men and women by involving men in the tender and creative processes of child-rearing and household work.

Working Group C

Women in the Political Process was the theme of the third Workshop of the Conference. Realising the growing invisibility of women from the political process since independence, the Working Group had planned this workshop in such a way as to include a very broad connotation of the term political process. The Group felt the absence of comprehensive studies of the relationship between women's political participation and their own position in society was probably the result of a narrow definition of political process. It emphasised the first need was to define political development and political process from the perspective of women's equality, i.e. a process which provides increasing space and opportunities for women to function politically both as individuals and as a social category. This political process went far beyond the limited electoral politics and included involvement in wider peoples movements such as tribal, socio-cultural, peasants, and workers movements. Despite indications of their participation in these movements, women were absent from the emerging accounts of these movements. Even the growing literature on nationalist movement had failed to highlight women's contribution to it.

The Working Group commissioned case studies on women's role in all these movements and asked the writers to address the following issues:

1. The factors influencing or constraining women's participation
2. The effect of such participation on women
3. The inter-relationship between the political organisations, their leadership and ideology and the extent of women's participation.

The result was 37 papers, and the presence and active participation of many well-known researchers and activists, including some of veteran freedom fighters whose very presence electrified the debates on these issues. Since some of these activists were still involved in various movements, the first hand accounts of their past and current experiences, hopes and despairs made the deliberations stimulating and revealing.

The discussants brought out the essential issues raised in the papers. It emerged that peoples participation in various movements was limited and would remain meaningless as long as the existing system was not changed. This system had kept the life and interests of the masses subservient to those of the ruling class, caste and gender, and thus denied the former any say or choice in determining their own actions. The subordinate rural women did join rural men in protest and resistance movements out of their own experiences and to resist their own exploitation and poverty. Although clearly the relationship between gender relationship of dominance and subordination was the outcome of the material conditions and structures of production, it was also important to understand tradition and culture which legitimised this system. Much more work, based on women's own testimonies, was required to understand the history of resistance and women's ideas of resistance.

The debate stressed that work needed to be informed by class/caste/gender framework of analysis, as the interplay of gender with forces and relationships of production and power

alone would help in creating a new theory essential to understand the system of dominance and subordination in society. The existing theories were incapable of analyzing the contemporary and historical phenomena. Similarly, the existing methodologies had to be modified to analyse women's experiences and participation in different types of movements.

Another set of nine papers revealed women's active and even militant role in peasants, tribal and workers uprisings. In fact, women had initiated some of these movements through their collective protests against oppressive policies. They had effectively linked general exploitation of their class with issues of gender oppression. But since leadership always remained with men, women-specific issues did not acquire prominence.

The papers also emphasised that previous accounts of these movements had completely overlooked women's role therein. This raised many unanswered questions. These questions were linked to the bias of researchers and of the leaders of the movements, as well as to the defective research methodologies used. In the same way the issue of relationship between the leadership of peasants or workers organisations and women's organisations threw up contesting suggestions. These ranged from interdependent complementary relations to complete asymmetrical relations. As elsewhere the discussion produced more questions than answers. Was this imbalance due to biases or resistance from the leadership to women's potential assertiveness? Was this male resistance rooted in hostility to women? Was it a case of relations of dominance/subordination in the private sphere of the family being transferred to male-female relationships in the public sphere? Or was it patriarchal ideology working behind the male-female relationships in these movements? Some participants suggested an intrinsic relationship between patriarchy and hierarchy.

Two more proposals were made regarding the best way to analyse women's participation in popular movements. One group of presenters thought it was essential to contextualise women's role within the history from below paradigm. Another discussant articulated the need to study gender relationships in society at three different levels of discrimination based on caste, religion etc, exploitation emanating from class differences and family-based oppression. The meeting emphasised the important role that women's studies could play in organizing in-depth studies of women's participation in different types of movements.

Examining women's participation in the electoral processes through statistical trends, or socio-psychological studies, the workshop on Participation in Formal Politics pointed out although fewer women contested and won elections, the number of women voters had continued to increase since independence. Low socio-economic position, very low levels of education, traditional social values and the strong patriarchal ideology were cited as general reasons for this low women's participation.

Female representation in the Panchayati Raj system was the subject of some papers which highlighted the experience of women participants, their constraints and the male attitude to the two female members in the Maharashtra Panchayat System. The debate centred round the ways in which such participation could be made more meaningful.

The final session of the third workshop dealt with **Concepts**. Some of the concepts, which the papers tried to define, were patriarchy, its close relation with the class structure in the system, and the issue of development. The main themes of the papers and ensuing discussions were the relationship of women's status and the left movement, the lack of centrality of the

women's question in Marxist analysis, the absence of an analysis of social reproduction relations, and power relations within the sex gender system and their linkages with the mode of production(Report of the Second National Conference on Women's Studies, 1984) It was also felt that concepts such as development, equality and employment must be more closely analysed when applied to women's question. In other words, all concepts should be judged against the value system of justice to women.

The workshop ended by stressing the need for further investigation of the following issues:

Participation

1. Definition of participation- forms and modes of participation, both within and outside established structures;
2. Women's question and the freedom movement attitude and role of leadership;
3. Women's question and the revolutionary movement attitude and role of the leadership, and influence of feudal and patriarchal values;
4. Participation in protest movements Bhakti, anti-price rise, Sarvodya movement of Jaiprakash Narayan and their role in women's question;
5. Relation between spontaneity and consciousness in the various movements of women.

Patriarchy

1. Definition of patriarchy its operation at various historical stages and social formations its changing relation to the different social formation;
2. Patriarchy and various political institutions and organisations state, family, party, caste, trade unions etc;
3. Relations between the women's question and the class struggle the relative autonomy of women's movement vis-à-vis other movements and organisations;
4. Relationship between patriarchy and religion.

Methodological Issues

1. A new perspective for studying past movements and women's participation in them, the question of the historical context of various movements and the role of women in them, the need to integrate the women's question within the political concepts and categories like social structure, class, ideology, state etc;
2. Need for new approach and new data the question of invisibility of data, the problems arising out of the use of existing methodology with all its lacunae, both statistically and analytically;
3. Need to develop a theory for the Indian women's movement and a women's history.

[Note prepared by Kusum Dutta]