

## INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN’S STUDIES

### DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

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This report is a part of the Documentation Project 2022 conducted by the Indian Association for Women’s Studies. Through the course of this report, I have documented and contextualised the life struggle of Ms. Shakuntala through fieldwork in Haryana. Ms. Shakuntala is a senior Aangandwadi workers’ leader from the state of Haryana. She currently serves as the State Secretary of the All India Federation of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers (AIFAWH) in Haryana. She is also the state secretary of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).



*Image: Ms. Shakuntala during an interview for the LAWS Documentation Project in Haryana.*

## **All India Federation of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers**

The All India Federation of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers (abbreviated AIFAWH) was formed by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in its national convention held in Delhi in 1989. AIFAWH is a trade union of more than 5,00,000 Anganwadi workers and helpers in India. Its first conference was held in Udaipur in Rajasthan in 1991 with Vimal Ranadive as President, Bhabatosh Roy as Working President and Neelima Maitra as the General Secretary. Throughout the course of its formation and development, AIFAWH opposed several government measures which have been against the welfare of the Anganwadi workers. They have unionised strongly against the privatization schemes for the Integrated Child Development Services. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme is a central government scheme under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, which aims at the overall development of the children under six years, through anganwadi centres. It was launched on 2nd October, 1975, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) attends to the health, nutrition and the development needs of young children, pregnant and nursing mothers. All children below 6 years of age, pregnant women and lactating mothers are eligible for availing of services under the ICDS Scheme. The Scheme is universal in coverage for all categories of beneficiaries. The programme provides a package of services, comprising supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-up, referral services to children below six years of age and expectant and nursing mothers. Non-formal pre-school education is imparted to children of the age group 3-6 years and health and nutrition education to women in the age group 15-45 years.



*Image: A board of the Anganwadi Worker's Union kept at Jasbir Smarak, Rohtak, Haryana.*

ICDS is implemented by the Anganwadi Workers, Anganwadi Helpers, Supervisors, Child Development Project Officers (CDPOs) and District Programme Officers (DPOs). Anganwadi Worker is a community-based frontline honorary worker of the ICDS Programme who drives the program at the grassroots. The Anganwadi workers and helpers are grass root level workers who impart these services to the poor and downtrodden. But the government does not acknowledge their work and recognise them as workers but calls them "voluntary social workers" and provides them with extremely low and sub-standard maintenance in the name of 'honorarium.'

### **Struggles of Aanganwadi Workers**

The ICDS has been battling for the universalisation of ICDS its righteous implementation. They have also expanded their efforts to help the recipients of the programme by increasing stakeholder engagement with people from the labourer background and other indigenous communities. It has been putting forth attempts to mobilize the help of the recipients of ICDS - this includes millions of people and families of the helpless laborers', horticultural specialists', and other communities. On two events it has gathered crores of marks from the recipients all around the country on notice to the Prime Minister against privatization of ICDS and improvement in the states of the anganwadi workers. It consistently distributes booklets and pamphlets and conducts crusades on ICDS and anganwadi workers. The supported missions and struggles drove by AIFAWH and its associated associations in various states have not just aided

in accomplishing a few advantages for the anganwadi representatives, but have also additionally developed fearlessness among lakhs of ladies laborers, the greater part of them working in the towns, slopes and metropolitan ghettos. They have additionally prompted expanding awareness about the significance of ICDS in guaranteeing the right to food, instruction and strength of children under 6 years. Today, AIFAWH has units in 23 states in the country across Jammu and Kashmir to Kerala and Tripura to Punjab. Individuals from AIFAWH effectively take part in the joint worker's organization for the improvement of the states of the specialists in various areas, of the farming laborers, laborers and women.

The problem with ICDS lies in its implementation which arises out of inadequate funding, lack of convergence, accountability of those managing and implementing the programme. There is a general perception about ICDS being a feeding programme rather than an Early Childhood Development programme. This has generated a lack of community ownership required. The Aanganwadi Workers who are the main drivers of the program are not recognised as full time workers. They are categorised as social workers and paid honorarium rather than salaries. The role of Aanganwadi Workers as early-childhood education institutions is something that has not consolidated much on ground. Supplementary nutrition is an important component of the Aanganwadi Services scheme. The focus under the scheme has been driven by calorie intake rather than on the need for balanced diets to address chronic micronutrient malnutrition. Quality and diversity of diets and behavioural change towards better nutrition have been neglected. A critical challenge faced is poor implementation with the absence of last-mile tracking. This has resulted in less than optimum benefits reaching intended beneficiaries with compromised quality. As a result, the growth of human capital and health and nutrition indicators are not showing improvements nor leading to the envisaged time-bound outcome achievement. This has been officially recorded by the Ministry of Women and Child Development's Demand for Grants Report 2021-22.

### **Recent Developments**

Especially during the pandemic, Aanganwadi workers were not only underpaid but also overworked, despite being at the frontline of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic. More recently, in

a series of protests they have demanded the immediate implementation of Rs 1500 increase in wages of workers and Rs 750 for helpers. This has also been officially mentioned by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi in September 2018. But despite the passing of several years, the implementation still remains at halt. Closure of Aanganwadi Centres has impacted the health of women and children. In this light, the AIDWA demanded “that the government should stop repression and all the termination notices and cases must be withdrawn immediately. All the workers and helpers must be given the status of government employees. Till this is implemented, a minimum wage of Rs 24,000 to the workers and Rs 16,000 to the helpers must be given. All the arrears of increase in payment since 2018, as per the announcement of the PM, of Rs 1500 and 750 to workers and helpers respectively must be immediately disbursed. It also demanded that the Delhi State Government also immediately fulfill the needs of the workers and helpers in Delhi.

Anganwadi workers protested for 39 days outside the Chief Minister’s residence demanding an increase in their honorarium. But the government, rather than listening to them imposed the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA). This was invoked against them by the Lieutenant Governor. Delhi State Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union (DSAWHU) president Shivani in a news report said that “It is worth noting that this law can be imposed only on government employees. But the government does not even give the status of a government employee to Anganwadi workers and helpers. It considers them as voluntary workers who work on honorariums. Then how can the honourable Lieutenant Governor of Delhi enforce ESMA here? Clearly, this step is completely unconstitutional and illegal.”

Currently, women Anganwadi workers are given a monthly honorarium of Rs 9,678 and helpers receive Rs 4,839. Their demand is to increase it to Rs 25,000 a month for workers and Rs 20,000 for helpers. Other issues include the need to own one’s own phone, download Poshan Tracker and use it. Many workers and helpers say that this app doesn’t function properly at all and the server is down all the time, salaries delayed for 2-3 months

## **INTERVIEWS:**

The interview with Ms. Shakuntala was conducted at Jasbir Smarak, Rohtak Haryana where she was present for conducting meetings for the upcoming state-level protests of the Aanganwadi Workers. She invited me very warmly to have tea and talk to other comrades in the meantime. I and my friend Shubham (who participated and helped me throughout this process) were curious to know more about the place which had a long portrait of a person and so many other memorial souvenirs. This intrigued us to know more about the place. Comrade Virendra Singh Malik who was present at that time took us to a small library inside and told us about the historical significance of the Smarak that captured the spirit of a long movement and several student struggles. He is the Secretary of the Memorial Committee and the Secretary of CITU Haryana. He was also the State President and Secretary of the Students Federation of India (SFI).



*Image: Virendra Singh Malik talking about Jasbir Singh during an interview*



*Image: Library at Jasbir Smarak, Rohtak, Haryana*

### **History of Jasbir Smarak, Rohtak, Haryana**

Meetings related to AIFAWH as well as CITU in Haryana are organised at multiple places but foremostly at the Jasbir Memorial, Haryana. According to Virendra Singh Malik the memorial was made in memory of Jasbir Singh who was murdered on 23rd October 1986 in Kurukshetra. During the state-level meeting held on 2nd November 1986, it was decided that a memorial will be established in memory of Jasbir Singh, a revolutionary student leader who was murdered in day-light as he stood for injustice in the college campus. People from the trade union, employee movements, and social organizations were brought together to establish this Memorial Committee. Sitaram Yechurry, the then National President of SFI, was also a member of this committee for a long time. In 1987, the foundation stone was laid down by Pandit Shriram Sharma, a freedom fighter hailing from Rohtak. The inauguration was done by Comrade Harkrishan Singh Surjeet in 1986-1987.



*Image: Foundation stone at the entrance of Jasbir Smarak, Rohtak, Haryana*

Sarv Karmchari Sangh, a new organization representing all Haryana State government employees and board corporations was formed at that time. Hence, leaders from that organization were also in this inauguration along with leaders from Janwadi Mahila Committee and students from Science Movement, Farmers' leaders. A Memorial Committee was formed by bringing together leaders from these groups in 1986. Currently, CPI-ML's state headquarters of Haryana and associated organisations are organised at this place. There was a time when the CITU's office was run from this place till they got a separate state office. Nowadays, the minimum maintenance cost is covered by the Memorial Committee and generally, CPI- M looks after its structure and its maintenance.

The Memorial Committee organises several events every year. One major one is organized on 23rd October every year. It's called the Jasbir Memorial Lecture, in which contemporary topics



of political and social issues are covered. Renowned leaders and activists are invited every year to deliver this lecture. A second annual lecture is conducted every year on 27-28th of September, in remembrance of Shaheed Bhagat Singh's birth anniversary and martyrdom day. Usually, cultural events are organized to commemorate these events. This includes a set of oral cultural folklores from rural Haryana such as Raagini which is then combined with progressive social messages. Except for the pandemic, these events were hosted every year. Over these years, they have also organised some sports competitions like volleyball competitions periodically. Along with this, art exhibitions, art competitions, essay writing competitions were also organized for school students.

Virendra Singh was the Vice President of SFI initially but was later made the State President after Jasbir Singh's murder. He recounts the painful history behind the murder of Jasbir Singh in whose memory the Jasbir Smarak was established. Virendra Malik studied at the Agriculture University, Hisar and completed B.Sc and M.Sc there but couldn't complete his Ph.D. He spent 5-6 years in it, had completed the research, and coursework as well. But he decided that he wanted to devote completely to activism. Hence, he left his Ph.D at the last stage in the year 1993.

Virendra Singh Malik then recounts the story of Jasbir Singh. Jasbir Singh was from Pelpa village, now in Jhajjar district of Haryana. It is almost 4 kilometers away from Badli. He had a younger brother and a younger sister and was the eldest in the family. Jasbir completed his graduation in Science Neki Ram College. He was a student activist during his graduation days. He was denied admission into post-graduation by the college as he was blacklisted because of student activism. Then in 1985, he took admission into Kurukshetra University in MA Economics. He was the second topper in class in his first year. Meanwhile, he was elected as the State President of SFI. During those days, the atmosphere at Kurukshetra University was violent and chaotic, said Virendra Singh. The current Lok Dal had an allegiance with hooligans. In his college, elections used to take place directly. But in most colleges at that time, indirect elections used to take place which meant that Class Representatives were elected directly, and then those Class Representatives used to elect the President. So a prevalent activity came into picture which was against student activism and democracy in the campuses. Whoever would get elected as the

Class Representative used to get kidnapped as soon as results were announced. “And say if the Presidential elections were in five days, the class representative would remain kidnapped till that time and brought directly to the voting booth. This was a major trend those days in universities. SFI protested against this. Not just this, in the class representative’s election as well, students from the opposition were threatened. In that year, Jasbir happened to be there. Under his leadership, SFI protested against these practices, and the university had to rusticate and suspend a few students. Eve-teasing was common there, SFI stood against it. And Jasbir, being one of the prominent leaders, was in the limelight as well. And secondly, the association of the non-teaching staff of Kurukshetra University had the strongest movement there. They used to call strikes and many times those strikes used to last for around two- three months. SHI supported the protesting teacher’s union.”

A budget used to be passed after the elections which used to be collected by every student through common funding where everyone would contribute around five six rupees. “The budget was rejected when the party of the hooligans spent too much on tours and doing mischievous activities. When we were there, we used to keep a portion of the budget for the library, books, and the poor students. But the other party allotted most of the budget for their leisure activities.



*Image: Portrait of Jasbir Singh at Jasbir Smarak.*

This animosity kept brewing, the budget was rejected. This became an immediate issue there. It was afternoon's time, a clash between some students of the two groups took place in the mess, one was the defeated party and the other one who won the elections. The winning ones were over-enthusiastic and the defeated ones were agitated. So Jasbir and other students intervened to stop the fight. I was there that day. I had been there during those election days. And those two sides had called some others as well, who weren't even students. We were all there, we all used to visit each other's campuses during elections. Some of those people started moving out from the mess after the fight that happened while eating, and Jasbir and Samar Sangwan were having tea in the canteen. Samar is a doctor now, he was a student of Shri Krishna Ayurvedic Medical College and a leader of SFI. These two were sitting in the canteen and 10-12 people came and attacked them. We, 4-5 students, were in the room discussing the mess's incident, discussing what could they do next. I felt that they were planning an attack and exactly this happened. Samar was stabbed in the liver, he was operated on in PGI, Chandigarh, he survived the attack. We thought that these people were just fighting and would beat each other once or twice but during that fight, a person went too close to Jasbir. Jasbir was stabbed in the chest and fell to the ground. We immediately took both of them to the university's referral hospital. Jasbir was declared dead. This shook me, unnerved everyone in the campus, especially those who knew about Jasbir. A protest march was called as Jasbir's friends, family and comrades grieved in pain and rage. Several protests happened against this by SFI in Kurukshetra and then in Chandigarh. "Then we appealed in the Supreme Court, and the case went on for years. In 1997-98, five people were convicted. By then, one or two of them had flown out of the country. Again when Lok Dal came to form the government, they released each one of them along with more prisoners. This was a heart wrenching incident that left a deep scar on our memories. It still feels unbelievable to see a friend dying in front of one's own eyes. Jasbir was a true inspiration and we take that inspiration daily as we work towards fighting injustice at his Smarak", said Virendra Malik.



Image 1: AIFAWH and CITU flags kept at Jasbir Memorial, Rohtak, Haryana

Image 2: A souvenir in the memory of Jasbir Singh



*Image: Lecture Hall at Jasbir Smarak, Rohtak, Haryana*

### **BIOGRAPHY OF MS. SHAKUNTALA**

Ms. Shakuntala is a senior Aanganwadi workers leader who has led several protest movements as a member of AIFAWH. She is the State Secretary of State Secretary of the All India Federation of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers (AIFAWH) and the state secretary of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in Haryana.

She is 39 years old and was born on 13th March 1982 in a village called Sotha in Kaithal, Haryana where she settled along with her family after her father's job transfer. Ms. Shakuntala was married at the age of sixteen. Child-marriage had a deeper effect on the course of her life and played a significant role in shaping it. At the age of sixteen, she was a state-level player in the sport of handball. She said, "I hadn't thought about marriage at that time. I had big dreams, dreams about having an identity, zeal to do something in life. My family engaged me without informing me at the age of sixteen. I remember I went for a handball match after which I returned home and I was told that I was engaged."

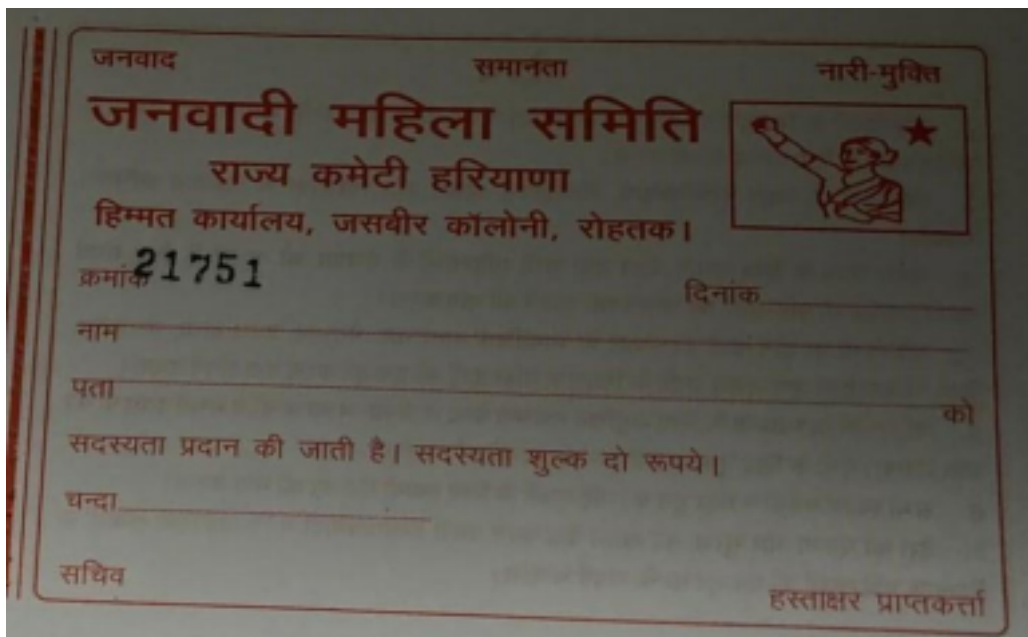


*Image: Ms. Shakuntala during the interview.*

She was not aware of the person she was engaged with. She opposed this but all her efforts went in vain because of the patriarchal mindset in her family which did not give her any freedom to choose her partner. After 1.5 months of the engagement, she was married and she discovered that she was given the wrong information about her husband. She was told that he was educated and was employed. But it was only later when Ms. Shakuntala discovered that her husband was not educated and was rather addicted to alcohol. On the next day of the marriage, her husband told her that he was forced to marry and that he liked someone else. But his family didn't want him to marry a girl from another caste, which means none of them wanted to marry and were forced for it. They kept pulling the burden of the non-consensual relationship for four years and had two children, a girl, and a boy. After a few years, they mutually decided to divorce and end their relationship. After the separation, Ms. Shakuntala started studying again and completed her graduation. In 2007, she joined the Aanganwadi as a worker. She recounted in the interview, "When I started, at that time workers came to give a membership slip like the way I go now."

The membership slip later in her life marks the beginning of an entirely new phase of her life. She said, “The way they were putting the facts, I had no knowledge about the union. I went back to my home and asked my father, as he had a job so might know. He didn’t like the union, he said they are silly people and asked me to stay away from all things related to the union.” Despite this, she took the membership slip. At that point of time, court cases for her routine expenses and custody of her kids were pending. During one such court proceeding, the in-laws and relatives of her husband attacked, and assaulted her brutally both verbally and physically. They registered a false case of stealing rupees 2.5 lakhs against Ms. Shakuntala. They also falsely said that she stabbed her husband’s elder brother 25 times. They forged fake medical reports from a government doctor. Nobody heard her case of domestic violence. She said, “The police’s attitude was really harsh and inhuman, it was worse than the kind of inhumanity we see on T.V. or in films.” At a time when no one including her family didn’t hear her, she rang up the number on the slip of the union and they came for her help. At that time, the membership slip was seen by her as the last resort of help. She remembered that members of the union mentioned that they help all women and workers. A group of teachers and women members, apart from Anganwadi workers assembled immediately and went to the police station with her. Then they protested in Kaithal for six months against the doctor who faked the medical reports.





*Image: Membership slip of Janvadi Mahila Samiti, State Committee, Haryana*

Ms. Shakuntala was extremely grateful to the Aanganwadi workers who came for help even when they did not know her. She said, “I was new as a worker in Aanganwadi. I was shocked that numerous Anganwadi workers came in trollies to support me, workers who I didn’t know, and had no relationship with struggled with me for six long months and we ultimately won. My husband’s brother was charged under Section 182 and the doctor was suspended, his increments were revoked. Actions against those policemen were also taken.”

It was a life-changing moment of realisation for Ms. Shkauntala as she said, “At that time, I realized that the union has strength and they have selflessly helped me, when no relative was standing by me, they stood for me in all ways possible which included protests across the village as well as the police station, legal proceedings and emotional support. After this incident, I was extremely grateful to them and could never forget what they did for me. I decided to become a part of this movement and not leave the people who were there for me in the most difficult times I was in. The Aanganwadi leaders used to ask me to stand up and tell my story. I used to tremble and couldn’t put my story across and used to cry in pain. I couldn’t dare to speak up. Sometimes, I used to think that these people have made a gimmick, they tell me to tell my story every time. I

wondered how many times and how many people I should narrate my story of police, officers, family and the trauma behind all of this. But I later realized that their motive was to make me share my story so that in the future I can speak for others as well. Their motivation has helped me progress. After that, union members also felt that I should be promoted as they believed that I too could be a leader.” Her family was against this and her activism. After being exhausted by such a mentality at home, Ms. Shakuntala decided to distance herself from the family for some time and devoted all her attention to activism as an Aanganwadi worker. She felt that it was her moral responsibility to join them since they helped her in her most difficult circumstances. A widespread movement was led in support of her in 2009 in Kaithal, Haryana. Several women workers from the Janwadi mahila Samiti, Centre of Indian Trade Union, Khet Mazdoor Union and Gyaan-Vigyaan Samiti came forward. Not only masses but the leaders from these organisations also came regularly with roughly around 10-15 members daily. The movement went on for six months and this particular movement wasn’t against the government per se. It was against an individual and with regards to the so-called “private sphere” of the home. Ms. Shakuntala recounts, “when I actually went there to file my complaint the officer was not even in his dress. All that he was wearing were a vest and underwear and he asked me to sit on the ground. I was made to sit on the floor. It still has a shocking impression on my mind and my soul that a woman could be mistreated like this in the police station. And a male police officer can do this to a woman. So this was one of the fronts that we were protesting against the police. Several necessary steps could have been taken by the police. At the Superintendent Police level, the police’s behavior was not appropriate, it was the duty of the SP’s officers to address the issue of the victim who has been tortured and beaten. I got it all tested and medically verified and only after having all kinds of proofs I went ahead to register the complaint formally. The second level of steps was required at the level of the Office of the Chief Minister. The case was registered at the Civil Line police station, Kaithal. This case comes under the CMO level because the doctors who faked the reports were from the Civil Hospital. He was also engaged in illegal work. Assuming that the association hadn’t raised this issue, the doctor would have done numerous wrongdoings and would have been a part of sending innocent people behind the bars”.

After an investigation, the doctor was suspended. His increments and promotion were stopped. Then he gave a written apology to the department and also the Sangathan. All of this was a result

of the relentless protests that happened daily in front of the District Secretariat's Office at Kaithal. This was followed by different plans of action like sometimes. Ms. Shakuntala said, "we used to go to the market to make the public aware of the actions of police and about the protest, about what's happening, how's their behavior, what's their purpose and how they are misusing their authority. These issues were also raised in the media. Regional and local media too played a pivotal role at this point. This included the Dainik Bhaskar, Amar Ujala, Dainik Tribune. Amongst others which covered the entire issue. They would exclusively take statements and interviews from Shakuntala ji and other leaders. "They used to ask my name and what happened to me. But as I told you, when they used to ask me I used to cry and wasn't able to speak anything. That's why those companions used to speak more."

Joining the union and protest was extremely difficult for Shakuntala ji because her family did not allow women at home to participate in the public sphere back then. Shouting slogans, on the streets and being in the news was a daring thing for her. At the time her cousins had clearly said that if she continues to go in strikes and protests, then they will have no relationship with her.

Her younger brother and father were also under societal pressure and were against her. They asked her to either choose the family or the union. At that point in time, Ms. Shakuntala was dependent upon her family along with her two young children and had no shelter to live in. as I had 2 young kids and had no shelter to live in. "I was already divorced, at that time I used to think, where will I go? But when I used to go into the Union's programs and share the issues of my home, members used to support me and encouraged me to keep moving forward. They gradually taught me that a daughter has equal rights, that I should tell them that I will take my part, I will go to the court", said Ms. Shakuntala. Seeing all of this happening, her parents attributed allegations like her being brainwashed by the union. "My mother used to tell me to stop this and focus on my job by saying that I have got this job with great difficulties, and I have to raise my kids, do household works. She would ask me to remain within my limits", remembered Shakuntala ji while being emotional as she expressed this during the interview.

A direct confrontation became useless, time consuming and constraining for her. Hence, she decided to continue activism without discussing much of this at her home. She adopted more

subversive tactics to deal with this situation at home. “Initially, I began to lie about going to meetings, I used to leave for work and then used to take leaves from the job to attend meetings. Then they gave me the responsibility of block secretary of the Anganwadi. They made me the secretary of Anganwadi Worker-Helper Union’s Kaithal city’s block”, recounted Shakuntala ji. This was around 2010-11. She was appreciated for the courage she showed despite all odds and the difficult circumstances at home. Her story was one that clearly represents how her own story was closely shaped by her participation in the public sphere. She was told that she was doing great work. Post this, fellow members also emphasized that she should study about the Union and read some relevant literature, poems and books. She began by reading Bhagat Singh’s *Sampoorn Dastwez* and then she read *Mudde Huye Panne Se Aage*. This deeply impacted her and developed a greater will to continue the struggle not only for herself but also several women like her. This motivated her so strongly that she started feeling that despite all difficulties she keep working with the Union because when the path is one of honesty and for justice then there is nothing to fear about. Following this, she was then selected as the District Secretary of Kaithal.

At this point of time, her daughter was in third class and son was in second class. They were around 5-6 years old then. She said that at this point of divorce even parents were exhausted and they were in favour because the entire marriage was based on several lies told. Her father was also in favor of this because her husband’s behavior wasn’t good towards her parents and also with his own parents. Addiction and constant fights at home were deeply disturbing for all of them. Her father-in-law hence supported her for atleast this decision of separation from her husband. After some time, Shakuntala ji’s father-in-law expired and his father wanted her to get separated but he wasn’t in favor of her taking custody of her kids. Everybody at her home wanted her to give the kids to the husband. “I argued a lot on this with them that these are my kids too and that he didn’t take care of them properly even in my presence, what would he do after me? One of her relatives even physically assaulted her over this issue after a deep altercation. They wanted her to remarry while leaving her kids to in-laws as she was 21 years old back then. They again got her engaged. They did not inform her about this engagement even at this time. The groom’s family came prepared for all the rituals. “I had just come back from work and I asked what’s all this? They just informed me that I was being engaged. They were like he’s a good man, educated, and has accepted your kids too. My family and relatives believed that daughters

should live in their husband's houses only. So I talked to the man and told him that since he is unmarried, he has the option to marry anyone. I asked him why he wanted to marry a woman with two children. He said that he liked me and will consider my children as his own after marriage. His parents also had no issues because in Haryana, especially when a man is not able to get married, then they don't care even if the bride is divorced or having kids already. They are content with the fact that at least their boy is getting married." Due to female foeticide and female infanticide, the number of brides are disproportionate in Haryana. "In such a case, the rationale behind his family must be that they found a girl in the same caste, educated and is an Anganwadi worker who also earns fine", said Shakuntala ji.

Haryana had a dismal sex ratio of 877 females per 1000 males according to the 2011 census. It is a result of decades of sex-selective abortion, rigid marriage laws and a highly patriarchal society. The skewed sex ratio reflects itself in the shortage of brides for men of marriable ages in the state. This gave rise to a practice of 'importing the bride' from other states. <sup>2</sup> Young girls from rural areas of North Indian states were bought as brides by payments to their parents and the broker. Run by mafias, this system is based on human trafficking. Such brides have a tough time adjusting to the Haryanvi lifestyle and are treated as outsiders and unequal. They are denied their basic rights and dignities.

Ms. Shakuntala had a long conversation with her fiance where she asked him questions clearly. She said, "Assume that we have a child again. Will we be able to raise three-four kids? I won't tolerate that you scold my kids, that'd make me feel like you're not their own father and that's why you scolded them. Then there will be arguments and fights. I suggested to him that it would be better if you would reject this proposal and marry someone else. He understood the point and raised this issue among everyone that she already has two kids, and in this time of high inflation, we won't be able to take care of them properly."

After this, things followed as per how Shakuntala ji thought. The man rejected the proposal. But her family was still skeptical and apprehended that this happened because of her conversation with him. She then took a firm stand for herself and said that she is fine without any support and a re-marriage. Her divorce happened in 2011 after this incident. Her relatives for a couple of

years did continue to keep trying by suggesting different proposals to her of people from different professional fields like lawyers, people working in roadways and other singles. They would push for advancing a “perfect match” as Shakuntala ji puts it. It was a long drawn and constant struggle at home at several levels, as she passed all of it gradually– her parents distanced and gave up. This was a victory for her. Now, Ms. Shakuntala focused all her attention towards working for her goals which was to fight against oppression from different spheres including personal lives as well as through the repressive policies of the government.

In 2013, she was the District Secretary of AIFAWH. A major protest was demonstrated by the laid-off employees of Maruti in Gurgaon. Workers of Maruti Suzuki who were sacked in 2012, organized a fifteen-day long march through the surrounding villages and into New Delhi. Half of the permanent staff and all contract workers were arbitrarily fired post an uprising in the factory. This protest dates back to a series of events that began happening in 2012. In 2013, more than 250 sacked Maruti workers sat on a dharna for more than 50 days in the constituency of the Industries Minister Randeep Singh Surjewala who was from Kaithal. They demanded their reinstatement and jammed the Kaithal-Kurukshetra Highway. They also burnt the effigy of Chander Shekhar at Pehowa Chowk who was the Deputy Commissioner of Kaithal. The protesting groups alleged that the DC of Kaithal stopped the night stay camps in the 79 villages of the district.



*Image: Ms. Shakuntala leading a protest at Kaithal, Haryana*

Members from AIFAWH were directed by CITU to support this movement at the district level. They helped those people by providing them food, financial help, going to their protests, addressing the public in whatever manner they could. Ms. Shakuntala ji was not able to recall the date but there was one protest in which the parents of employees and all were about to gather in Kaithal and hold a *Gherao* (siege) in front of the home of the Industrial Minister. It was decided in a meeting that Ms. Shakuntala will join from CITU along with her fellow Comrade Prem, who was the leader of Khet Majdoor Union and was also from Kaithal . Along with this, SFI leader Gaurav also would join to lead the movement from the district.

Ms. Shakuntala had a strong intuition that in the presence of so many police forces called suddenly, something might happen. Hence, she suggested they stay at her place at night and leave only 2-3 fellow comrades at the site. She further said, “In the morning, wherever it is decided to assemble, we will go there directly. But at 1 AM I received a call from a terminated employee, Vikrant from Riwani district. He said, “Didi, we have been detained by the police and

have taken our phone and at that very moment his phone was also snatched. Everyone's phones were switched off. And our phones were being traced, but I had a little understanding of why they would trace our mobiles, we were not even significant leaders. I called comrade Surendra, who told me that the district level leadership have detained those people, and have no knowledge of where they have been taken to. This included the sacked employees as well. We had to gather at Bhagat Singh Memorial, Kaithal at 8 AM in the morning, have a meeting, and make changes in the strategy for the protest that we had. But to my horror, when we went to the Office we saw that the police had surrounded the office and I couldn't understand how police got here but later on when our fellows contacted us on the phone then we got to know about our phones being tapped. That's how they got to know about this location. We, in a way, moved in disguise and in small numbers to gather at Secretariat, but then we changed the venue to a village that was 7-8 kilometers away from Kaithal. We all gathered there and started the protest from there. Shockingly, the police didn't stop us, they had their own strategy to let us in which we got to know of only later. They allowed us into the house of the Industrial minister. They let us march till that place. We kept our sloganeering and speeches in front of his house. There were barricades in front of the villa and we stopped there. But after some time, water cannons were fired, police were pelting stones, firing was done and tear gas was used on us. Since I joined the Union this was the first time I had witnessed this type of protest and this mass brutality at the hands of the police.”

At this point, Ms. Shakuntal and Comrade Prem, and other leaders from different groups were leading the protests. They were brutally beaten but they were determined. But male police held her inappropriately, she felt extremely uncomfortable by the way she was touched by them. They touched her back and breasts and then they lathi-charged. This was done to female protestors by male officers. They were hitting the lathis on their back, policemen were holding them while another one was beating. After that, they arrested and took them to the City Station. This included her, Prem, and some terminated workers of Maruti including Vikrant, a boy named Ramveer, and a woman named Sudesh from Jan Sangharsh Manch. Prem was beaten in front of them and she was beaten up in front of her fellow members by male officers and not by female officers. She was shocked to see the apathetic state of law in the country. All of this happened during the night. A female ASI, Nirmala got her out and stopped the male police officers from



beating her. After this, she was taken to Sadar Station, Kaithal. And Prem was kept in the City Station. That was one of the worst times for Kaithal itself. Nobody in Kaithal imagined the vast brutality against all of them. Police were called from outside and they didn't spare anyone. People walking in lanes, at Railway stations and parks— all were thrashed and violently assaulted. Even the residents weren't exempted. There used to be a Hanuman Vatika right in front of the bus stand at Kaithal, old-aged women used to gather there daily to sing hymns and prayers, police repulsed them as well. Those women were frightened and horrified by the intensity of the events.



*Image: A gherao (siege) staged by CITU in Haryana*

This severely hampered the image of the Industrial Minister and there was a wave against him in the upcoming elections because of what he did to women and residents. Seeing this women from nearby villages also joined the protests. Ms. Shakuntala was arrested and Comrade Prem was kept in jail for 2.5 months. “I was kept behind the bars for 10 days, my bail was granted on medical grounds, I had severe wounds on my back, I was not able to sit or lay down straight. The medical documents were attached to get me the bail. The case went on for 3 years in court, and then we were acquitted of it, all of us. This incident and as I led it, remarkably created an identity for me in Haryana. After this, I was selected as the State Secretary of the Anganwadi, I remained district secretary of CITU of Kaithal. Then proposals from political parties started coming in which asked me to join their party. I had made my mind that I will not join any political party, I was clear about working for the union and the movement that stood for me and helped me regain my selfhood. I continued to fight despite the endless shaming that I face from the family or

society. Neighbours initially used to say looking at me that I am not a nice women. They would taunt and say, *isko dekho, jahan dekho wahan zindabaad-murdabaad*. But after my bravery in this incident, I was welcomed by flowers and colors. They realised that I was working for a cause. After this, the woman who faced issues as I had faced started coming to my home. And I whole-heartedly used to tell them that in all their domestic as well as professional struggles, I will stand with them along with the union. This is how we got out of our homes and built camaraderie. A single incident changed my life and those around me. May this solidarity live long.”



*Image: Ms. Shakuntala interacting with Aanganwadi workers.*

Now Ms. Shakuntala lives all by herself and has got a house. Her son is now in Class 12th and her daughter is married. Her daughter completed her secondary education and then a computer diploma of 2 years. She now plans to go abroad with her partner. Ms. Shakuntala proudly tells that she married her daughter with the partner of her choice. She stood firmly in support of her for the love marriage. Ms. Shakuntala has remarkably shown the passion to work towards changing lives in her community as well as in her own family. She lived the principles that she stood for. Her family didn't participate in the marriage but people from the organization, comrades and friends did. The marriage was done in compassion and the couple has been happily married for more than six months now. They got married on 30th May 2021. "It was the founding day of CITU, so we arranged it that day and also waved the flag of CITU, and I didn't have any brahmanical and patriarchal rituals for my daughter like the "kanya-daan", said Ms. Shakuntala.

She further said, “my son-in-law too, is of a progressive mindset. His thinking is good because he has been participating in several protests against societal injustices. He considers me as the role model and talks highly of me in his family.” Ms. Shakuntala has two younger sisters. She was married alongwith her elder sister. Both of her younger sisters completed their graduation. After this point, relatives started creating pressure of marriage on them. Ms. Shakuntala took a stand for them in her family. She fought all the relatives once again and asked her sisters to study till whatever time they want and marry partners of their choice. One of the younger sisters did a double M.A., joined a company in Gurgaon and then she married. and has a son now. My youngest sister did a double M.A. and after that, she did a course related to the field of Air Hosting and she is currently a ground officer at Delhi Airport. Ms. Shakuntala feels great that her sisters didn’t have to suffer through what she went through. A lot of things changed as she stood strong and denied all restrictions that curbed her participation in movements and restricted her freedom. Her family finally had to acknowledge her strength. Her elder brother once used to say, “Her participation in such a union is pathetic which asks her to go home late.” But when he fell in love with an inter-caste girl, he came to talk to Ms. Shakuntala about it. Then I took a stand for this marriage while also telling the girl to make a well thought decision. I wanted her to be aware of many circumstances. I helped them marry and also got the family to agree to this. They are now happy and have two children.” She also changed other situations at home which included the restrictions regarding clothes that women were allowed at her home. Girls were barred from wearing jeans or leggings, and were asked to wear only a Salwar-suit with a veil. “But we changed those things, all our sisters together like we will wear leggings, we will wear jeans. And now things have changed that my sister-in-law too wears jeans. After all the struggle throughout the years including a lot of conversation as well as assertion we have arrived at this stage that my parents treat my sister-in-law as their own daughter and not just as their daughter-in-law. The marriage was done without asking for dowry and they have never asked her for such things nor did they taunt her about it”, said Ms. Shakuntla. She was extremely grateful to the union which made her strong, leading all these ripple effects from the public to the private sphere at her home.

In the years following 2014, Ms. Shakuntala led and participated in many protests of Anganwadi. She said, “In 2007, when I was the block secretary, I worked for 1500 rupees per month which was given by the government. And today as a result of all these protests we get close to 12,000

rupees now. This was only possible because we agitated and organised. We have been successful in this much increase in the pay scale. Aanganwadi Helpers get rupees 6,000 a month, and this is the 4th highest in the country. This is not a minuscule thing for us. Secondly, we successfully got the implementation of the scheme for helpers' promotion.”

In 2018, when their pay scale was rupees 7,500, they protested and went on a strike for 1.5 months in which more than 52,000 helpers, workers participated, and then the pay scale was increased to rupees 11,811. During this a lot many more promises made by the Chief Minister like acknowledging helper-workers as skilled labor, Dearness Allotments Installments were promised to be given after every 6 months but only one installment was given and it was then stopped. On 7th February 2021, they protested in front of Kamlesh Dhanda, Minister of State for Women and Child Development for worker's promotion. She didn't talk to the protestors. She ordered the police to chase them out at 5 PM and also ordered the SDM to do a lathi-charge. “We were about 200 women left, they directly ordered, “Pick Shakuntala up, and it will all be resolved”, said Ms. Shakuntala. We then formed a chain system, shoulder-to-shoulder and continued this for around two hours. “They were pulling us, we were pushing them back. All in all the Aanganwadi workers were able to overpower those male officers. We snatched their lathis, we gave them a tough one. We didn't leave the gate of the minister, she became the minister because of our votes and now she doesn't want to listen to our problems”, Shakuntala ji proudly said. That movement motivated all the workers of Aanganwadi and instilled the belief that the Ministers are because of them and not vice-versa. A few of them lost their gold earrings, some had to leave their purses. Ms. Shakuntalas' clothes were torn and she was arrested and taken to the police station and was left after a few hours. This happened in Kaithal, on 7th February, 2021. Then on 9th February, they had a discussion in which the minister agreed on some points. They raised the issue of double work which was imposed over the Aanganwadi workers. For example, they are asked to collect surveys and demographical data of normal residents. The field experience of the Aanganwadi worker is exploited without any remuneration for it.

Haryana government is not recruiting for the post of workers, helpers, and supervisors for the last

three years. And out of 26,000 Anganwadi centers, they have selected 4,000 centers for the playschools. This is a part of the National Education Policy launched in 2019. “What will happen to the rest, the 22,000 centers, there's no clarity or information on them. We have asked them questions a lot of times but they haven't answered any of the questions. The seats remain vacant for so many government positions for which they are not recruiting. This includes duties like vaccination, health survey, referral services, Khel-Khel mein shiksha. Now, the vaccination duty is actively being transferred to the Asha workers, since the pandemic. The Haryana government has paused the recruitment of JBT teachers. Now the work of JBT teachers is being transferred to Anganwadi workers. Now, we are saying that if you really want to promote us then, promote us as teachers and the pay should be equal to a teacher. Teachers are paid Rs. 70-80 thousand and Anganwadi workers are paid only 11,811 rupees, they want cheap labor. They want to get more work done for less pay.”, said Ms. Shakuntala.

In this regard, thousands of anganwadi workers observed “All India Demands Day’ demanding safety gear, insurance and risk allowance for Covid- 19 duty. They protested against the harassment of the workers in the name of digitization and ‘Poshan Tracker’ mobile App. They demanded an increased allocation for ICDS along with other basic demands of recognition as workers, minimum wages, pension and social security. AIFAWH observes Demands Day on 12th July this year.

AR Sindhu, the present general secretary of AIFAWH in a letter issued by AIFAWH mentioned, “When there is an increase in malnutrition the government has cut down the ICDS budget by 30% in this year (2021-22). By introducing a mobile app ‘Poshan tracker’ they are threatening to stop the nutrition to the beneficiaries and wages of the workers without even providing mobile phones, data pack or net connectivity. In the name of New Education Policy 2020, the government is opening pre-schools in schools, thereby dismantling the integrated approach of ICDS. These issues have added to the anger of the workers who are already overburdened and poorly paid. This was reflected in the increased mobilization throughout the country, in spite of the restrictions.” The demand charter included other issues like the free treatment for frontline workers and stopping the linking of the wages of anganwadi workers with the ‘Poshan Tracker’ app. In this regard, they protested for a week from 2nd-9th April, 2021. They burnt the copies of

the order on 9th April that asked the anganwadi workers to download a mobile application 'Poshan Tracker' in their mobile phones and upload all the information in it within a few days. They were threatened that their wages will be withheld upon the failure to do so. Those who were not given android phones by the government were asked to buy one on their own immediately. Anganwadi workers throughout the country are agitated against this. <sup>6</sup> AIFAWH demanded the Ministry of WCD withdraw the letter and the decision to link the remuneration ('honorarium') of the anganwadi workers the 'Poshan Tracker' App immediately.

Ms. Shakuntala also led several protests against the New Education Policy (2020) as this clearly impacts the role and work of Anganwadi workers. The NEP 2020 is the successor of the National Education Policy, 1986 and has been in progress since 2016 after the submission of the TSR Subramanian Committee Report to the Union Government. The NEP 2020 was released on July 30, 2020 after the set up of K. Kasturirangan Committee. NEP fundamentally restructures school education, childhood care, higher education, teacher training and the mode of education. Under this scheme, child education is looked at jointly by various ministries like the ministries of Education, Women and Child Development, Health and Family Welfare and Tribal Affairs. The rural areas under this policy will now have a 'school complex' structure which would connect 10-15 schools into one administrative unit.

Critiquing this step, Ms. Shakuntala argues that, "in a way, the government is ruining the schools, it is renaming them to complex schools. They are replacing schools from 10-15 villages and placing one school in its place. Now the kids who could barely afford to go to a school within their village, how will they go to a school in another village traveling all alone. Will parents of young girls allow? This step will deprive the kids of getting an education. And if the students decrease in numbers, then it will impact the teachers as well. It will also impact the mid-day meal scheme workers because their appointment is also based on the number of students. In a similar fashion, if playschools are brought in, this will impact the supervisors of Anganwadi centers too. That's why we, the four unions have decided to come together and protest against this." In addition to this, most of the states had started merging the anganwadi centres and attaching them to the primary schools and school education system, in the name of New Education Policy. This not only severely affects the basic services of the anganwadi centres

but is also being done without any detailed guidelines from the Ministry of WCD. This move is against the basic concept of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) which was claimed to be a focal point of the NEP.<sup>7</sup> Further it opposed the merger of anganwadis with schools, demanded to strengthen ICDS and implement ECCE policy. It also demanded the permanence of ICDS and regularisation of anganwadi workers with minimum wages of Rs 21,000 per month and pension as per the recommendation of 45th ILC. In similar issues related closely to education, AIFAWH staged a major protest on 5th September 2019. This was demonstrated along with AIKS-CITU against the anti-labor policies and privatization as well. The major demands included the institutionalization of ICDS, right to education for children belonging to the age group of 3-6 years, and scientific pre- school education through aanganwadis. This protest was also in coordination with the protests by ASHA and Mid Day Meal workers held on 3rd and 4th September, 2019.<sup>9</sup>

In a rage, Ms. Shakuntala says, “we are considered social workers to date. But all laws for government employees are applicable to us for example, “we can't contest elections of Panchayat like employees/officers.” But they categorise aanganwadi workers in the unorganised sectors when they have to deny their rights of being a worker. She adds, “what happens with social workers is that they are not paid their salaries for long periods like six months. Women form the majority of Aanganwadi workers, especially the divorced or widows. There is no concern and empathy shown by the government as to how they would be managing their families and expenditures.”

While talking about this, Ms. Shakuntala is reminded of another protest in 2017 as one of the greatest learning she had in her experience. She says, “some of us were wounded but from these protests, we had learned a lesson that sometimes we get overpowered by the police and sometimes we overpower them. Earlier it was like you can't do much against the police but now we do everything possible to defend ourselves. So we were arrested in 2017 in the protest and the male fellows who were arrested were taken to Ambala jail and Karnal jail.” Out of the five women, two were from the Forest Department, two others were from Anganwadi, and one from Janwadi Mahila Samiti. The ones from Anganwadi or Janwadi Mahila Samiti didn't fear the jail but the ones from the Forest Department were old aged. They feared that if they were put behind

bars then their families won't allow them to enter the houses, and they will be insulted in their villages. A brutal physical assault took place but the matter was resolved by the night itself. After getting the paperwork complete to be released, all of us stayed at Bhagat Singh Memorial that night, and we took care of those two women, boosting their morale.”

Ms. Shakuntala recollects this protest because it matched the intensity of brutal violence like that of the 2014 Maruti employees protest. This protest was led by the Sarv Karamchari Sangh and CITU, which is the Union of workers and labor. The issue was the amendment in the Labor Code and workers were protesting to get the retirement benefits reinstated, the pension that was scrapped after 2006, and demanded that temporary/contractual workers be made permanent.

Ms. Shakuntala also talked about how she takes forward the ideals of left politics on ground. She says, “the thing is we raise the issues then we relate it to the policies and how the issue is related to politics and how it can be solved. We talk about how political parties decide 5 years of our future, how they implement and run schemes, what should be given, and what should be taken from the employees, all of these are decided by politics. Then after unionising, we delve into literature and more theoretical engagements on left as well.”

Apart from the issues of Aanganwadi workers, Shakuntala ji continued to support women who would come to her regarding household issues including domestic violence. She recounts, “many times, it used to happen that an Anganwadi worker was unmarried and she was forced to get married against her will. We used to convince their parents and resolve such issues and during this, I joined Janwadi Mahila Samiti out of my own will.” Ms. Shakuntala joined it in 2016 and now she is a member of the State committee of Janwadi Mahila Samiti. She is also the case-in-charge for women in her district, Kaithal. And not only advise, but she also helps them get through the police and lawyers who offer free legal support. She says, “I haven't studied law, but now I know so much about it. It took years to reach where I have today. Earlier while being unaware of so many legal rights, I was victimised but now this cannot happen. Even when I go with victims of domestic violence to the police station, they are treated in a better way in my presence. This is so different from the time when I was made to sit on the floor by the police officer. Today, if I call the SP or DSP of Kaithal regarding such cases and request them to taek



action immediately for the women, they agree over calls itself.”

With great contentment, Shakuntala ji says, “I am satisfied that our hard work showed some improvements like someone who came from a different family gets to live in an environment that wasn't there for us, but it's now there. Things changed because we took a step. A lot has changed for the better for which we will fight, in solidarity.”

She looks back at her journey as a series of events that unfolded at each step through courage and the undeterred will to stand not only for one's own self but for others in a similar position as well. She recounts, “I have been terminated once during a movement in 2009, and don't even know about pay cut. These things now do not have any power to stop me. I am fearless in front of such actions by the government to suppress dissent. Infact, now as a senior leader, I motivate other women who newly join the union. I am only passing on what my seniors did for me. We strategize and work together. Now they can give bytes to the media, write press notes, send demand letters, argue with the officials, a lot many "Shakuntalas" have been trained. I feel really happy that many girls have these qualities to excel.”

Apart from being the State's General Secretary, Ms. Shakuntala was intrigued by writing. She started penning down her experiences from movements, which included stories of what she learned from the protests, about her personal life. She also wrote Haryanvi songs on movements like the farmers' protests. She combined the protest demands with the lyrics and the promises the government made. This would be recited as satirical folklore. One of the songs was on the promise of Development or the Vikas model of government. It read as follows;

*Vikaas kad aavega,*

*Modi manne yun toh batade,*

*pehli neeti aayi notebandi,*

*khade line mein sookh gayi pindi,*

*cash kathe te aavega modi,*

*yun toh humne batade,*

*dooji neeti aayi GST,*

*poonjipatio ki bhar gayi peti,*

Ms. Shakuntala's life journey from being a victim of patriarchal violence to standing against this as a strong woman leader is knit by the intermixing of the personal with the political. She personifies the modern day maxim of "The personal is political". Her activism spans across the dichotomies of the private and the public. There are several women whose lives she has touched in both direct and indirect ways. These include women from her own family, across communities, and women workers from the entire country. She stands as an inspiring leader whose story needs to be read and heard widely.

Submitted by

Damni Kain

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