

GROOTS

GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS OPERATING TOGETHER IN SISTERHOOD (SOUTH ASIA)

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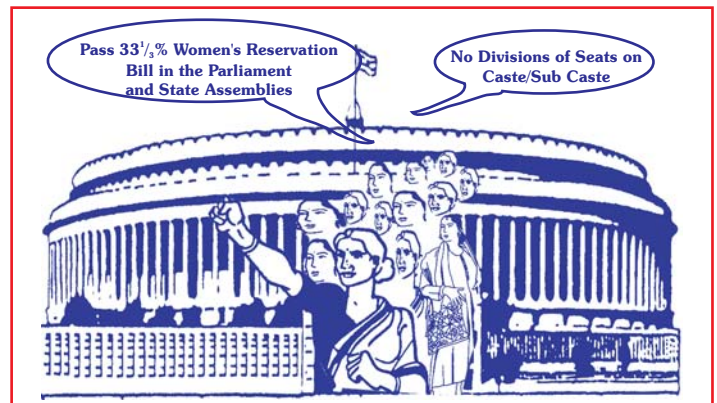
Editorial

What will be the Fate of Women's Reservation Bill?

Discrimination, exploitation and struggles have been part of women's life in all phases of their growth and in India too, it is no exception. As this gender bias goes on unabatedly despite India achieving 60 years of independence, it is time to think of a corrective mechanism i.e. a policy on reservation for women in the highest decision making bodies i.e. Parliament and State Assemblies.

A closer look at the facts reveals that women are impoverished in every sphere of activity not by choice but by **systematic exclusions from policy options** and **protective measures**. This discrimination and **undervaluation** of women's work at the household level **reflects in the workplace too**. The denial of entitlement to family's resources/deprivation of power positions in workplaces (in Government especially) are two glaring examples in the day-to-day lives of women. Neither social legislations nor landmark judgments on these have had any effect to render gender justice on this count.

From 1975 to 1995, the world had witnessed **Four Major UN International Conferences on Women**. Women through their collective vision in all these four conferences have formulated **Forward Looking Strategies** and **Platform of Action** in **all critical areas of concern**. Unmindful of long distances that they have had to travel, transcending barriers of illiteracy, ethnicity, class hierarchies (whether elites or from the grassroots) women



met at these conferences in **Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi** and finally at **Beijing** to voice their concern for equal opportunities and built up several **global networks**. In spite of such cumulative efforts by women over the last two decades, politicians divide women's interest just to scuttle the **passing of the currently proposed women's reservation bill**. Not only have these politicians attempted to divide **women** but have also shown a sheer disrespect to the collective vision/global effort of women. Therefore the current **government in power** should not allow such vested interests to neutralize the efforts of women/their concern but take full responsibility to pass the **women's reservation bill in the Parliament** atleast now without any further delay.

The objection of the political parties to this women's reservation bill is divided on caste/class lines. A question raised to them is what have these political parties done for women who have been victims of caste and class bias at the grassroots for ages? For instance, the women workers engaged in the leather processing work or in the manual scavenging work are confined mostly to the scheduled caste who are stratified as the lowest in the social hierarchy in India today. Have these political parties contributed anything to do away with such class/caste bias that has been a bane on our society for years? Then why should they bring up this issue on women's reservation bill in the Parliament agenda? Why should they demand further



reservation within the quota of 33¹/₃% for women of OBC/SC/ST? Why do they want to weaken women by further fragmenting then?

With absolutely no change in the living/working condition of OBC/SC/ST who still are living in despicable and/vulnerable conditions as ever, this new demand of the politicians towards their welfare does seem to be a ploy to scuttle the presentation of the current bill in the Parliament.

It is an everyday occurrence that more and more new political parties are emerging like mushrooms either on single caste lines or on the basis of sub caste or division. When there is no understanding/unity between them where will they place the women's issue? Therefore, it is time for the political parties to understand clearly that the present bill for women's reservation is a provocation and outcome of the failure of the political parties to nominate women candidates in their own political party. Therefore, now these political parties should ignore all differences and be magnanimous to support the bill in the parliament.

One of the landmark events in history during the women's movement particularly in the late 80s was the vision of former **Prime Minister Shri. Rajiv Gandhi** who incorporated the 73rd and 74th amendment in the constitution providing 33¹/₃rd seats in the **Panchayats** and **Nagarpalikas** for women. Several voluntary initiatives took it up then as a rare opportunity for themselves to reach the grassroot helping and oriented several rural/urban women's group to avail of this political empowerment process. Today such orientation of voluntary initiatives has ensured women at the grassroot a prominent position in the Panchayats and Nagarpalikas to take decisions for their own life and for their rural/urban communities on many issues of their concern be it on poverty or any other women issues. Despite women gaining 12 years of political experience through direct political participation in Panchayats and Nagarpalikas, why not they be given a chance to voice their concern in highest decision making body in Legislature and Parliament?

The tactics of delaying the **women's bill** and controversy surrounding the way it is being dealt have been symptomatic of the **devaluation of democratic values** in the country. If it has to happen that way, it is perfectly logical and democratic even to vote against the bill if it is inadequate in representing the views of the existing parliamentarians and the concerns of the political parties.

But action of stalling a progressive legislation that no other country in the world has so far dared even to think of, is a clear indication of current day politicians' scant respect for women.

There is also another argument that **reservation of seats** for women alone cannot solve the complex problem of gender injustice. But shouldn't this be the **first step in gender equality** that has been denied to them for years? Undoubtedly this proposed legislation on women's reservation in parliament requires political will and commitment on the part of the **government in command** to stand unfettered during rough weathers and pass the bill in the same form as envisaged by the visionaries who formulated the bill without any amendment. Otherwise women have to start their struggle process all over again to achieve this 33¹/₃% reservation and occupy positions/powers.

Recently, the **Social Security Bill** benefiting the working class on **Conditions of Work and Livelihood Promotion Bill** did not pass through the Parliament despite the creation of **National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector** with enormous expenditure from the government's exchequer to prepare for this bill. Unfortunately the bill did not pass through because the bill was expected to benefit mainly the workers in the unorganized sector where 89% of this sector are female entrants who outnumbered the male workers. **This is nothing but politics of gender and denial of gender justice.** The **government in power** should remain as a watchdog of women's interest and see that the bill is passed as a first effective step towards **political participation of women** in the country's affairs. ■

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VISITORS

Mrs. & Mr. Koopman of Netherlands Visit WWF



Mrs. & Mr. Koopman with the members

Mrs. Hanke Koopman, former First Secretary, Women and Development, the Netherlands Embassy, New Delhi and expert on basic education and gender issues and Mr. Joop Koopman, Development Advisor and Economist, visited Working Women's Forum (India) on 16 February 2008. Mrs. Hanke was instrumental in forging a partnership between the Netherlands Embassy and the WWF. They visited the forum after a period of 17 years and it was like going down the memory lane. They were highly impressed with the work, gradual growth and development of the forum. Meeting the staff, they were able to analyse the working of the forum, changes that had taken place and the progress over the years. Queries relating to the issues of the members, problems in the areas and the remedies arrived in handling the issues, details of micro-insurance and the progress of the grassroot women were discussed indepth. The working partnership with the Citibank, the benefits of computerization of banks, the number of persons trained in skill development, retention of old members and the difference made to the members' lives at the grass-roots level considering the structure of the organization were discussed indepth.

Later Mrs. and Mr. Koopman had a direct interaction with the members who are with the Forum for more than 20 years, 10 years and the new members to observe the differences in their lives, be it in education for their children or changes in the attitude of their spouses. The

queries posed to the members were with regard to their employment, expansion of their trade, utilization of loan, benefits availed from the forum, etc. They were impressed with the computerization work and the process of delivering the credit. Later, they visited the area at Pattinapakkam and had a look at the houses constructed by the forum for the tsunami-affected victims. Mrs. and Mr. Koopman's words amply testify the work of the Forum *"WWF's operations are based on the theory that women are capable to take destiny into their own hands provided they are given the correct instruments: credit (for economic progress), training (empowerment, family planning etc.). WWF is providing all these elements in an innovative way and WWF works!! It is spreading its philosophy in quantitative terms and also in depth to the benefit of all who want to listen and to join."* and Mrs. Hanke Koopman *"Knowing the forum for more than 22 years it is heartwarming to see how it has succeeded in empowering so many women. The following features strike the most (i.e.) Clear indication of a higher quality of life and computerization of the bank".* ■

Similarly, Ms. Heide Mitsche and Ms. Gundi Dick from Volkshilfe, Vienna, along with Ms. Jessy Joseph and Mr. Joe Velu from People's Development Group, Velankanni, visited WWF on 12 March 2008, to observe the functioning of WWF and replicate it in their respective areas. Later, a visit to the training section gave an in-depth view of the Forum's activities. Participating in the annual planning meeting of the Forum, they were amazed to find out the meticulous planning behind the activities and operations carried out in an organized manner.



Ms. Heide Mitsche & Ms. Gundi Dick in discussion ■

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

President's Participation in Seminars/Conferences

Dr. Jaya Arunachalam, President, Working Women's Forum (India) participated in the **15th Indian Co-operative Congress of National Co-operative Union of India** on 20-22 January 2008. Her Excellency, the President of India, Smt. Prathibha Devisingh Patil was invited as the chief guest at the inaugural function. Dr. Jaya Arunachalam chaired the session on **Women and Youth Cooperators** and the other dignitaries who made their presence were Shri. Sharad Pawar, Minister for Agriculture, Food and Civil Supplies, Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution, Govt. of India, Shri. Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat and Shri. Balram Jakhar, Governor of Madhya Pradesh. The Congress brought out the achievements and issues relating to co-operative development and also provided direction for its future role in the socio-economic development of the country, including employment generation and women empowerment. ■

Similarly on 22 February 2008, Dr. Jaya Arunachalam chaired the plenary session **MDG's in Asia** in the **11th Asian Congress of Agricultural Medicine and Rural Health** organized by **Pravara Medical Institute, Aurangabad** and delivered the keynote address on **Integrated Approach Towards Achieving Millennium Development Goals**. The conference addressed key issues related to promoting dialogue amongst rural health workers, governments, NGOs, UN agencies, national and international funding agencies, and other stakeholders for finding solutions on health issues. The event highlighted opportunities for innovative, comprehensive and participatory rural health models that can be replicated.



Dr. Jaya Arunachalam Inaugurating the Conference ■



President WWF addressing the students

On 19 March 2008, Dr. Jaya Arunachalam participated in the National Seminar on **Strategizing for the Future Challenges of Women**, jointly organized by the Department of Management Studies and the Department of Social Work of **Shrimathi Indira Gandhi College, Tiruchirappalli**. The president WWF inaugurated the event and delivered the inaugural address on **Women's Economic Role - Experiment of Working Women's Forum at a Glance**. The challenges faced by women and the mode of coping with them in future and the status of women's rights from the ancient period to the present day were analysed and highlighted during the event. The advice given to the students was that they should achieve success in their future endeavours facing all odds and stand on their own feet. ■

To commemorate the **60 Years of Service of the American Library** in Chennai, Dr. Jaya Arunachalam was invited to share her experience and views on 25 April 2008. Dr. Jaya Arunachalam recalled her two decades of association with the library. Moreover, she highlighted the usefulness of library and the information collected that was passed on to the women working in the grassroots. ■

Dr. Jaya Arunachalam's interview was telecast in a private channel Mega T.V. to commemorate Women's Day. The views of the President on the positive and negative aspects of the serial/programmes telecast on the various channels were elicited. The success and achievements of women in various fields were also emphasized. The transition brought about in women's lives was also recounted. ■

WWF STAFF/ COORDINATORS ATTEND SEMINARS/TRAINING WORKSHOP

Ms. S. Nandini, Programme Co-ordinator, WWF attended the **18th National Meet of Forum of Women in Public Sector** at Mumbai on 12 February 2008 and presented a paper on "Social Empowerment of Women - Working Women's Forum (India)". The meet was inaugurated by the Mayor of Mumbai, Dr. Shubha Raul. Women achievers from different walks of life shared their experiences in their quest for excellence. Today women are moving ahead to unknown frontiers breaking old stereotypes. Hence this meet provided an excellent platform to focus on relevant issues affecting working women and to observe and comment on the latest trends in the world of working women. ■

On the eve of Women's Day, i.e. on 8 March 2008, Ms. P. Egammai, Secretary, was invited by the **Integral Coach Factory, Chennai** to enlighten the class IV employees on the various financial loans, the importance of insurance schemes, the empowerment/education of women, a significant aspect in the WWF agenda, and various types of training including skills training. The employees were keen to know about the working/activities of Working Women's Forum (India) and the type of loans availed by the members. ■

The **Chennai Metro Rail Limited** conducted a public consultation/community interaction programme on environmental impact assessment in connection with the implementation of the project to be launched in Chennai. The meeting took place on 28, 29 and 30 April 2008. They sought the support of the public for the implementation of the project, as the process of construction would impede movement on the roads. WWF supervisors/trainers attended the programme.

Queries raised at the interactive sessions pertained to the details of the routes, fares for the services, location of the stations and the buildings/lands to be affected by the project. On implementation, the metro would reduce the strain on the city roads and drastically cut vehicular emissions. ■

Women Power Connect organized a **Southern Regional Conference** in Chennai on Challenges to Women's Empowerment on 12 May 2008. Ms. S. Nandini, Programme Co-ordinator, WWF participated in the session and presented a paper on **Working Towards the Economic Empowerment of Women**. The conference aimed at working towards bridging the gender gap and economic empowerment of women. The meeting was attended by the officials from the government and representatives from civil society organizations from the southern region. ■

Regional Resource and Training Centre, Chennai, sponsored by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, conducted a Workshop for Micro-credit Groups and banks on alcoholism and drug addiction on 15 May 2008. Ms. Nisha Moses, Coordinator and Ms. Parvathy, Supervisor participated in the workshop. The workshop dealt with the drinking scenario among adolescents, the basic facts about alcohol, clarified myths related to alcoholism addressed the symptoms of alcoholic addiction and its impact on the individual family and the community, the need for empowering women towards the prevention of alcohol use and abuse, and the sharing the experience of a the rehabilitated alcoholic. ■

STUDY TEAMS

Student from France Visits WWF

Ms. Auriele, student of political science, France visited Working Women's Forum on 25 February 2008 to observe the programmes and activities initiated for the grassroots women, group formation, type of occupation, average loan size, various forms of training, origin and motive behind the initiation of WWF. Impressed with the activities of the Forum, she quoted that visiting WWF gave her a clear idea of what empowerment concretely means! ■

Students from University of San Francisco Visit WWF

Ms. Michaelina Melton and Ms. Yayoi Watanabe, students of the International and Development Economics University of San Francisco, visited WWF on 5 June 2008 in connection with their focus group surveys. Yayoi's aim was to learn what the members of WWF think about microfinance, whereas Michaelina's survey involved

women's empowerment/health. They were very impressed with the responses provided by the members as they strongly agreed that microfinance can make people better off and they can start their own businesses. Financial independence also gives them many opportunities for decision-making in their households. They felt that the members of WWF are wise and strong enough to be independent. They were impressed to see that women not only gained empowerment on several major dimensions including social, economic, political and educational but that they were also strong and have clear focus in their life choices.



Ms. Michaelina & Ms. Yayoi with the co-ordinators ■

PROGRAMMES/ACTIVITIES IN WWF

Material Development Workshop

Working Women's Forum (India), a pioneer in the upliftment of poor, underprivileged and downtrodden women, periodically organizes such workshops, inviting the affected members to participate, learn/share and also find solutions either from each other or in workshops conducted through external consultants/experts in sensitization programmes.

As a result a material development workshop was organized on 10, 11 and 12 March 2008 for the backward districts of Dharmapuri (Tamil Nadu), Bidar and Bellary (Karnataka). Nearly 45 members participated to express their needs/demands on the prevailing issues/problems in their respective areas. The workshop on awareness and consciousness-raising was facilitated by co-ordinators, consultants and other office bearers of WWF/ICNW and

solutions were collectively found. The various issues/problems faced by the women members were brought out in the form of lectures, pictorial charts, role-play, skit and folk song, mostly visual demonstrations. The resource persons are: **Mr. Namasivayam** a retired faculty member of Gandhigram Rural University and currently an independent IEC consultant for the health and sanitation programme; **Dr. Latha Ravi Kumar**, Consultant, Diabetologist; **Ms. Rukmani**, Retired Social Welfare Officer, Tamil Nadu Women Development Corporation, Chennai currently HRD consultant; **Ms. Pushpalatha**, Child Development officer, ICDS, Dharmapuri District; **Mr. K.V. Rao**, Assistant Director, SISI, MSME; and **Mr. Ramasamy**, from the song and drama division of Gandhigram Rural University gave the necessary inputs and made the events successful.



Members depicting their issues



Members at the workshop

Prior to the workshop, the ground work to identify the problems/issues was taken up in co-ordination with the

co-ordinating staff of the Forum and field workers to identify pressing issues that affect poor women adversely in these three districts.

The three-day workshop aimed at sensitizing the participants and bringing in a new approach in their attitude. An aim of the workshop was to infuse in them income-generating skills to get rid of their dependent situation, to make them economically independent, which was quite essential to eliminate and fight discrimination and all forms of violence against women/girl child. Another aim of the workshop was to create a new environment through positive economic and social awareness to make women a development input rather than welfare targets.

The President, WWF, inaugurated the workshop and stressed on the needs, importance and benefits of the workshop. She further pointed out that problems remain the same everywhere, the lacuna being the lack of awareness of the people in those backward districts on various issues and social needs.

On the final day of the workshop, the invitees Mr. Alok Prasad, Head Strategy and Business Development, Global Consumer Group India and Ms. Uma Gopal Deb, Citigroup, attended the workshop as part of the

valedictory function. It was also a special occasion where WWF's five-year impact study (2002 to 2007) was released by Mr. Alok Prasad. Later, while addressing the gathering, he stated "it is a wonderful moment to be present among the poor groups/leaders and meeting the participants in this workshop. It is also an honour and privilege to be here in WWF and see the work done by WWF that is just completing its 30th year. Besides, women are a total force and a resource to the nation's progress as mothers, sisters and daughters. Their development is essential for social change and economic development". He highlighted the transformational impact achieved under the able leadership of Dr. Jaya Arunachalam. Later Ms. Uma who addressed the gathering stated that she was very happy to be part of an organization that has completed 30 years of service. She not only congratulated but also appreciated the organization, stating that it is also an organization where women have expanded their entrepreneurship and made an impact. She further stated that programmes of Citibank have been devised in accordance with WWF strategies. She felt happy that WWF's continued support and the partnership have been getting stronger and stronger over these years. This is through the contribution of the women who made an impact in the programme and the staff too have contributed to the overall development that is phenomenal. ■

ANNUAL PLANNING MEETING - WWF (I)

Annual Planning Meeting the most important event in the Working Women's Forum's agenda took place on 8 and 9 March 2008. On the first and second day of the meeting, an in-depth review of the branches was conducted. The review revealed the progress of the branches and the



Mr. Alok Prasad presenting the shield to the best branch

needs/demands of the members/staff. It was also observed that the progress and development are quite gradual and where any major improvement was needed, guidance and suggestions were provided by the President and senior staff of WWF. Later, the President met the staff member and field workers of various branches and discussed in detail the various programmes for the forthcoming year and also invited suggestions from the branches. Mr. Alok Prasad, Head Strategy and Business Development, Global Consumer Group India, the chief guest of the meeting and Ms. Uma Gopal Deb of Citigroup graced the occasion. The Annual Planning Meeting was wound up successfully on the final day with the presentation of shields to the best branches. In this context, Kancheepuram in rural Tamil Nadu, Chennapatna in Karnataka and Narsapur in Andhra Pradesh were selected as the best branches. The Vellore branch was adjudged the best branch overall in terms of improvement, membership, repayment and collection. ■



Dr. Jaya Arunachalam received Second Bharat Gaurav Award from the Citizen's Forum of Human rights, Ahmedabad on 28 February 2008.

WE NEED YOUR INPUTS !!!

Letters, Ideas, Comments, Articles or Contributions for our Newsletter

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What people say about GROOTS...

I am impressed by the articles as well as the features with special focus on the plight of the farmers. In the growing Indian economy while the growth rate achieved has been appreciated by all, a key issue that needs to be addressed is to ensure that the economic growth is an inclusive and does not ignore the agriculture sector which is very vital for our national income and prosperity. I wish the very best for your publication in the days to come

Shri. K. Sankaranarayanan
His Excellency the Governor of Nagaland

... as always, it is a pleasure reading the issue and please accept my compliments for bringing out a very informative news volume

Ms. Madhulika Gupta
Director, Head of Corporate Affairs, Citigroup

GROOTS provides an excellent documentation of several things happening at the grassroot level.

Mr. P.M. Mathew
Director,
Institute of Small Enterprises and Development, Cochin