

# *Nivedini*

Vol. 4 No.1 June 1996

- Gender, Nation and State
  - Domestic Power Structure
- Mother of Rahula
  - Employment of Wife and Domestic Power Structure
- Technology and Women
  - Women's Movement

**WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND RESEARCH CENTRE**

## Our Objectives

To study and research the various aspects of women's subordination in Sri Lanka in order to sensitize men and women on gender issues.

To establish a forum for women to express themselves as writers, researchers, poets, and novelists; to publish their works in Sinhala, Tamil and English.

To disseminate information relating to women and create awareness and increase consciousness on feminist issues.

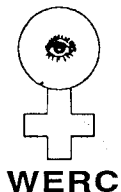
To strengthen the women's network locally and internationally.

To extend co-operation to and solidarity with other oppressed and marginalised groups in Sri Lanka (such as refugees, unemployed and slum dwellers) with projects for rehabilitation and general upgrading of their lives.

To serve as a resource and documentation centre in Sri Lanka that will become part of the network of research and study centres on Women's Studies in the Third World.

### What does 'Nivedini' mean?

Nivedini derives from a Sanskrit verb. It could mean either, that which is placed before you ritually and reverentially, or a carrier of knowledge with a female gender suffix 'ni' (derived from the verb vid, to know.) We use it with the second meaning.



Women's Education and Research Centre

## Nivedini

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**CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES**

“There is no reason, only reasons - Jean Frances Lyotard.

Though this quotation may be true, is it possible to collapse all the reasons into one comprehensive broad reason after identifying classifying and deconstructing all the reasons?. No, say the post-modernists.

There are indeed many reasons for women's subordination which takes the forms of being discriminated, marginalised, dispossessed, exploited and oppressed. The knowledge of such process, be they political social or economic is also socially constructed. What then is the truth. Truth and justice, it is argued by post modernists cannot be grounded in nature reason or god. Are we being led into a blind alley ?.

Feminism is a protest. It is a protest against a series of socially constructed norms which are pervasive in all spheres of activities and ideology? However, from the inception of the feminist movement there are different streams of thought within the movement. The classification are many and they are broad. Liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, Socialist feminism and Cultural feminism, the list is long. The grand narratives became the brand names of these feminisms. Theories such as psychoanalysis, structuralism, post- structuralism and of late post-modernism became the tools of analysis. Old theories were cast away, partially inducted and coopted into the new theories. Arguments and counter-arguments were met and dissected. From “penis envy” to “sati” and veiling were analysed. The issues become endless. New forms of patriarchal controls evolved out of the old ideology of patriarchy. Familial patriarchy entered the public sphere resulting in the emergence of public patriarchy and there was a need to deconstruct the process of public patriarchy. Theorising never ceased.

However, I was fascinated to read of a further, categorisation of feminism. Judith Eyans in her book, *Feminist Theory Today* has classified feminist schools into a further classification as liberal, Early Radical, Strong Cultural (or cultural radical), Weak Cultural, Socialist and Post-modernist. She says 'a mixture of tradition and practical concerns has dictated her choice. My initial fascination moves into a state of uneasiness when I began to make attempts to comprehend the classificatory naming of feminism. For me what is important is that one cannot remove from the scene the history of feminism as a emancipatory social movement, though the word emancipation may smack of old worldism. Here I am not speaking of a linear development of theories, one leading to the other, but the crossing of boundaries in each of these issues though one stream of thought may predominate. When these feminisms are classified, there is an in-built hierarchical ordering which speaks of one as more appropriate, more useful and therefore higher. This is the crux of my concern. It is an irony however, that while waging an endless war with culture that brands of feminism should be called "Cultural and Strong Cultural" feminism.

Societies are divided always, the divisions result in marginalisation, seclusion and separation. The markers of such divisions are premised on hierarchical values as high and low, whether those divisions are based on caste, class, gender ethnicity and religion. Divisions based on ethnicity, religion and caste are subjected to a hegemonic principle, whatever group that is dominant socially, politically or economically tries to subjugate the other. But the gender divisions are determined biologically though the resulting hierarchy and marginalisation are socially constructed.

Within these categories crossing the boundaries is only possible for class groups. Gender groups cannot cross inter-biologically but can cross the boundaries of socially constructed ethics, values and norms and behaviour patterns.

It is a simple truth that the dominant group and its gains are premised on the exclusive possession and privileges, powers and favours. When we talk of equality it does not merely mean a division of the privi-

leges, powers and favours but also connotes the absence of certain powers and a process of deprivation, dispossession and losing benefits that the higher group enjoyed so far. In fact this struggle, its causes, process and consequences are theorised and we have now grand theories and narratives in the alternative stream, while the mainstream has its grand theories and narratives for the maintenance of the privileges. It is a process of painfully losing and gainfully achieving that we are talking within feminism. History has no proof on one group giving up willingly. The struggle has taken different shapes, styles and contexts in the political social and economical. They are philosophised, conceptualised and therefore theorised. Feminists' share in this intellectual exercise is equally enriching and a complicated complex phenomenon has arisen.

Why is that there are no grand theorising for example in the class analysis, caste analysis ethnic and religious analysis, but only on gender. There are no Socialist, Marxist, post-modernist theories on ethnicity class and caste categories. Is it because gender crossing is not possible. Is it because it is biologically determined?. The answer is not so simple.

The gender specific problems of the women among the various groups have necessitated the specific analysis of women. In other words, the construction of gender is not merely related to gender identity. Its intersections with other equally important social categories like class, race, caste, religious belonging and ethnicity have complicated the category of gender. In short, the material conditions of women's lives, when brought into active focus sheds different streams of light and the current critical discourse theories such as post-modernism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and post-structuralism have attempted the deconstruction process. However, the point that I am trying to make is that these streams of thought may by themselves not contribute to a totally unsatisfactory process. But are we fragmenting feminism? Have these theories led us to the state of the proverbial elephant and the six blind men who identified parts of the elephant and mistook them for the total elephant.

It is generally believed that neither liberalism nor Marxism has theorised on gender or that these theories are gender-blind. Hence my argu-

ment is to cross boundaries with clear perception of a totally emancipatory vision. Crossing boundaries is not breaking the rules of the game but rather a radical and-forward step like crossing the boundaries of gender constructions. Women and feminists both should cross the boundaries of theories and selves.

#### About this Issue :

This issue of *Nivedini* covers a wide range of subjects, some are interconnected. Ms Rajasingham and Thiruchandran's papers deal with the same subject of Nationalism and the demands on women at different levels and contexts and regions. There is an underlining unity between them. Ms. Sundararaman's account of the literacy campaign in South India give us various insights. The intergrading of gender into the campaign is an innovation worth imitating. However, the need for literacy campaigns in Sri Lanka may be thwarted in its very inception with nationalistic claims of the high literacy standards in Sri Lanka. The statistical data as it often does belies the reality. There are a lot of men and women (whose number is greater than men's) in the margins who are illiterate and need to be mobilised and campaigned for literacy programmes. In Sri Lanka such literacy skits when planned can integrate principles of ethnic unity in addition to gender equality.

Sidramshettar's paper on power relations within the family in Karnataka (India) speaks of the transformation from "derived" power to intrinsic and primary power when the women's status is transformed from a full-fledged house-wife to an employed house-wife. Can it be then said that the males when they realised that this power base is being eroded with loss of privileges started to complain of increasing juvenile delinquents-as a result of the so called family crisis- mothers being out at work and negligence of children-Will they learn soon to share household and parental responsibilities. Let us hope they will.

Ms. Coomaraswamy is heard again on violence against women, but this time she clearly argues for the linkages of the issue of violence against women to human rights issues both nationally and internationally.

Maureen Seneviratne's imaginative 'Mother of Rahul' is a journey into the wife/mother roles of an illustrious father and son. The brave wife and mother realises eventually that neither a husband, however great he be, nor the son, however loving and kind he be, offers protection to a woman. Neither are kinsmen/kinswomen of any use. What then is her last recourse?

A mind well directed is the sole means of protection for a woman. This realisation is no doubt painful.

United Nations University - Institute of New Technology initiated a project to study the impact of technology on women in the selected countries in the Asian region. The main objective of the project is to enhance the advocacy skills of women workers by increasing and sharing their knowledge on the negative and positive impact of technologies on women's work and employment. Ms. Anberiya Hanifa has identified a number of factors which have a negative impact on Women in Electronic Industry.

We are also recording the women's protests and statements on various issues that are pertinent to women and to the civil society at large.



## Women's Sexuality in States and Nationalist Struggles\*

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Darini Rajasingham \*

In the past two decades optimism about achieving gender equality within the framework of the nation-state has waned in the face of persistent old and new forms of women's cultural subordination. While traditional patterns of patriarchal control over women's sexuality within the structure of the family and the State are being eroded, new patterns have emerged in the world's secular democracies where the struggle for women's rights as such, has a long history. This has been the case despite the availability of advanced birth control devices and new reproductive technologies which have helped women to take unprecedented control over their bodies and sexual lives, and despite women's greater participation in the political and economic life of their nations<sup>1</sup>.

Struggles for gender equality have taken similar and different forms in the less developed world where resurgent post-colonial nationalist movements and state sponsored religious fundamentalisms have undercut gains made by women's greater political activism and participation in national economies. Additionally, many third world women who participated in anti-imperial post-colonial nationalist movements have actively participated in nationalist religious and cultural revivals which circumscribe their sexual autonomy and independence.

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\* A version of this paper was published in "From Basic Needs to Basic Rights" (1995) edited by Margaret Schuler, Institute for Women Law and Development.

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<sup>1</sup> For example the debate over women's right to abortion which took place in the late eighties in the US and Britain reflected the dominant societal belief that women's choices with regard to birth control can and must be overseen by the State. The State though officially secular acted in conformity to dominant Christian religious beliefs regarding the sanctity of life and unborn fetuses.

The reasons for these contradictory trends might be sought in the history of post-colonial nationalisms and uneven economic development, which as several scholars have noted, redefined national culture in terms of archaic religious traditions, ideologies, and customs (Chatterjee, P: 1990, Jayawardene, K: 1986). Nationalism has indeed impinged on women's lives in contradictory ways.

Post-colonial nationalisms have constructed women as the idealized preservers of pre-colonial culture and tradition. They are seen to be

- a: untainted by colonialism;
- b: the bearers and nurturers of custom, tradition and culture within the household (a space untouched by colonial rule in many parts of Asia)
- c: the mothers of the nation who literally reproduce and maintain the purity of the ethnic/racial/national community.

The powerful idealization of the role of mother as reproducer of the ethnic community and national culture, has circumscribed the definition and realization of women's sexual choices and reproductive rights in post-colonial nation-states.

At the same time, many third world women have been active participants in anti-imperialist nationalist movements which legitimate limiting women's sexual freedom by emphasizing their reproductive responsibilities to the nation. The tension between women's activism and the often constricting role of mother and nurturer has often been resolved in time, when as Jayawardena has noted in her study of "Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World" (1986), women political activists have been pushed back into the "private" arena, or household in the post-independence period. This was the case with Iranian women who took an active role in the anti-imperialist struggle against the Shah and made the veil into a symbol of resistance. Later, they found themselves relegated to the roles of wives and mothers alone. Their freedom was severely circumscribed when in the post-Shah period, the 'chador' became a legally binding requirement, the age of marriage was reduced to 13 years, and divorce became nearly impossible.

As participants in anti-imperialist struggles for cultural autonomy, independence and self-determination then, women have also sometimes inadvertently contributed to the mythology that they are the keepers and guardians

of national culture and ethnic/racial purity. It is therefore difficult if not impossible to deny that they have subscribed to strongly patriarchal ideologies in order to fight for community and nation, more often than not in situations of ethnic and/or nationalist competition, tension and conflict, such as, Northern Ireland, Palestine or Sri Lanka. At the same time, many nationalist women have creatively used and manipulated the symbolism of motherhood, to fight State oppression and violence against themselves, their families and ethnic communities. In so doing they have challenged and extended the definition of the culturally sanctioned role of "mother", and have both appropriated and subverted the nationalist ideologies that circumscribe their lives and choices. Taken as a whole, the experiences of nationalist women and their lives complicate any attempt to see women's sexuality and sexual identities as separate from their ethnic and national identities.

This paper highlights the paradoxical position of women who live in post-colonial nationalist contexts where women are seen viewed as the guardians and transmitters of national culture. The paper draws from recent critical rethinking about women's identities and experiences in post-colonial contexts to explore how the State and/or nationalist ideologies both impinged on women's freedoms and are simultaneously manipulated and subverted by women. It argues that women's sexuality has been increasingly domesticated via reproductive technologies and population policies which enlarge their choices while giving impersonal forces like states and medical industries greater access to and control of women's bodies and subjectivities.

The paper grapples with the general problematic of defining and implementing a set of universally applicable rights for women given the complex and contradictory experiences of Asian women living and working in contexts of post-colonial ethnic and nationalist struggle. It briefly touches on women's resistance to patriarchal State regulation and their attempts to subvert communal control of their lives and sexuality and challenges the view that Asian women have been merely victims of patriarchal States and their ethnic communities.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE ROLES IN THE STATE AND NATION**

The persistence of gender inequalities despite women's greater participation in the economic sphere, has problematized the nineteenth-century Euro-American feminist project, which posited that incorporation of women in national politics and economics would lead to liberation<sup>2</sup>. Many early feminists believed that women should and could be recognized as equal partners with men if and when they were able to enter the public sphere and the State in large enough numbers. They therefore focussed on blurring the distinction between the "private" and "public". Yet recent research on the impact of women in the development process has made clear that women's incorporation into national economies, State bureaucracies, as well as advances in reproductive health have brought contradictory benefits to women. Women have had to carry the double burden of wage labor and house work, and in many less developed countries where labor regulations are weak or non-existent, they have often been propelled from restrictive family and kinship structures to equally structured and restrictive factories and work environments controlled by international capital interests and/or the State. This fact has been noted by many socialist feminists as well as by critics of modernization.

Jayawardene (1986) and Chhachhi (1988) for instance, have pointed out that special programs for women's employment and skills training have often been supplemented by the passing of restrictive laws in line with regressive tradition and religious fundamentalist positions in many South and South East Asian countries. The greater control of sexuality appears to go hand in hand with the provision of opportunities for women to work outside the household. Economic and political gains are thus off-set by the imposition of other cultural and religious strictures which are explicitly aimed at the greater control of women's sexuality and reproduction. Chhachhi has pointed out that economic liberalization and fundamentalism constitutes two sides of the same coin "the imperative to control and direct women's labor, fertility and sexuality to suit both capitalist and patriarchal interests" (1988, 3). Here it should be noted that in many post/colonial less developed nations the State has actively furthered the dual process of reinventing cultural traditions and ideologies which em-

<sup>2</sup> Early Euro-American feminists had argued that women's incorporation into the public sphere, coupled with recognition of household labor as paid labor, would release women from bondage to the household, family and kin group, while facilitating their autonomy and independence. For a similar, more recent, approach to the question of gender (in)equality see Hayzer (1986) and Young et al. (1981)

phasis women's role as keepers of national tradition, mothers and wives, even as they follow open economic policies which impel women to reach beyond the household economy, and the culturally prescribed role of "mother" and "wife".

Early feminist struggles for sexual/gender equality were premised on the assumption that the modern nation-State could and would constitute an ally in the struggle for gender equality. While in the Euro-American world the State might have played the role of uneasy ally and forms of gender inequality shifted, women in the post-colonial world have more often than not lacked the support of the State in their fight for equality. This is particularly the case in countries where the State openly plays ethnic politics. In these contexts the proliferation of medical and scientific knowledges and technologies has enabled greater State and/or communal control of women's reproductive and sexual lives in the interests of the nation. Women in nationalist contexts have suffered diminished control over their bodies and lives in real and relative terms.

The uneasy and ambivalent position of women within the modern State and nationalist cultures is not a recent phenomenon. Virginia Wolf for instance, argued very early that women have never been considered full citizens of the patriarchal State which disenfranchised and discriminated against women and their offspring if they married or conceived outside the ethnic community, while accepting men who marry and father children outside the ethnic community. She went as far as suggesting that women could not and should not participate in Britain's imperialist and nationalist projects. While the issues that Wolf among others highlighted earlier this century have been readdressed in England where laws of nationality and citizenship for English women's spouses and children have been altered to compare with those of men, patterns of national/ethnic discrimination based on patriarchal and patrilineal kinship and descent structures remain in many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Often sexist immigration restrictions are also the residues of colonial racism and fear about miscegenation.

The interpellation of racial and gender based discrimination with regard to who is or is not a legitimate citizen provides insight into the deep anxieties of nationalisms. It also points to the manner in which anxieties regarding racial/ethnic purity have been projected onto women who come to bear the responsibility of maintaining nation/ethnic purity as the literal reproducers of the nation. In this context it is hardly surprising that the imagery of ethnic, racial and nationalist conflict has historically been replete with sexual stereotypes, and that the speeches of nationalists are peppered with references to

"violation of our sisters and mothers", and exhortations for the men of the community to prove that they are in fact men.

Arguably, an extreme and obverse aspect of nationalist idealizations of women, is State sponsored religious fundamentalism, nationalist violence, and State policies which are aimed at controlling women's fertility, sexuality and reproduction. The rhetoric of communalism and nationalism has historically been full of the increase of numbers of "other" communities and the excessive breeding of the "lesser races". For instance, recently the Hindu nationalist, Vishva Hindu Parishad, produced a pamphlet which argued that due to polygamy, by the year 2000 Muslims would outnumber Hindus in India - a statistical impossibility. In Sri Lanka there are reports that ethnic minority Muslim women are being pressured to stop the use of contraceptives and to produce more children in the contested East coast provinces. Similarly, in Singapore where the State openly plays race and class politics, wealthy Chinese women from the dominant ethnic community have been reprimanded for betraying the nation since birth rates of ethnic Chinese have declined. The former Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, went as far as levelling an extraordinary charge against the nation's mothers by accusing them of "imperiling the country's future by willfully destroying patterns of biological reproduction" (quoted in Heng, G and Devan, J, 1992, 344). Similar attempts to channel women's fertility are evident in countries such as Sudan, Nigeria, Egypt, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, where fundamentalist forces have state support. Iran offers an extreme example of the implication of this phenomenon for women.

The flip side of State and nationalist attempts to protect and maintain national reproductive success, is State promotion and enforcement of rigid birth control policies in countries like China and to a lesser extent India. In both these Asian nations ruthless population reduction policies have been enforced through forced sterilizations and/or government removal of family subsidies and persecution and harassment of women who have more than one child. These strictures combined with cultural prescriptions that value male children have made for high levels of female infanticide.

In such situations, ironically, the availability of new reproductive technologies and/or technological innovations like amniocentesis and sonograms has proved to be of mixed blessings. While enabling the screening and selection of unborn infants these technologies have raised new social and moral dilemmas for Indian and Chinese women. Women facing societal pressures for a boy child often end up aborting girl children in the hope of producing a male



child sometimes at great emotional, physical and psychological cost to themselves<sup>4</sup>. While these technologies provide greater selectivity for women -- i.e. the ability to select the gender of their children -- they have also brought about extraordinarily levels of female infanticide and unbalanced sex ratios in China and India. The availability of such screening technologies has arguably furthered direct or indirect societal and State pressure on women by enabling communal scrutiny and intervention in hitherto inaccessible aspects and processes of women's reproduction. In a majority of poor post-colonial nations, where population policies rather than women's health and well being are the criteria for what kinds of birth control and or reproductive technologies are available, the more useful and safer contraceptive and reproductive technologies are often inaccessible to the women who need them.

What seems clear in all of this is that in most parts of the world, including economically advanced nations, women's sexuality has become the subject of unprecedented scrutiny, research and control by States, medical institutions and other impersonal powers. This has been partly enabled by developments in reproductive health and science as well as via population policies. Thus even as scientific and medical developments in the field of fertility and reproduction have enabled women to take greater control over their bodies and biological cycles they have also become the subjects of increased scrutiny and attempts to control their fertility by the State. For women living in highly patriarchal societies, advances in birth control methods and new reproductive technologies have indeed provided mixed blessings. While they have been freed from endless pregnancies by the wide availability of the pill and other birth control devices, areas of their bodies and sexualities which were had not hitherto within the purview of state and communal scrutiny have been opened. Following Micheal Foucault (1980) we might then argue that the bounds of sexuality have been expanded.

The result has been that the female body has become increasingly articulated within the public sphere for State regulation. More often than not such regulation takes place on the grounds that their off spring are members of the national community. This has been evident in recent debates regarding women's rights to abortion, the debates as to how abortion might be sanctioned, and the period of time in which abortions might be legally carried out.

In both the first and third world, for different reasons it is then arguable that there has been a shift from a familial and kin based pattern of patriarchal control over women to that of State and/or collective communal regulation of women's sexual lives and choices in the past decades. In many less developed

countries this shift has occurred with the redefinition of female and feminine sexuality in terms of women's biological role as reproducers of a social group, the ethnic community or nation.

### **POST-COLONIALISM, COMMUNITY AND THE "WOMEN QUESTION"**

Given that contraceptive and new reproductive technologies have extended the field of human sexuality (particularly women's reproduction), as well as the means for increased medical-scientific, societal, communal, and State scrutiny of women's bodies and sexualities, it is not surprising that the issue of balancing women's rights against the community and family has reemerged as a central issue in international feminist forums such as CEDAW, over the last two decades. Yet it is arguable, following Foucault, that the idea of sex/sexuality, and its boundedness, is an historically and culturally particular Anglo/European construction of the human body and identity, which treats a person's sex/sexuality as if it were separable from other aspects of that person's cultural/communal identity.

Feminist scholars and academics from the post-colonial world have suggested so much in critiquing universalizing tendencies in the feminist movement and in human rights discourses from a variety of positions. In particular, these critics have highlighted how women's gender/sexual rights and identities have been pitted against their ethnic/ national communities in universalizing terms, even as they acknowledge the complex ways in which women are marginalised by their communities. This post-colonial critique draws from the contradictory experiences of women in the post-colonial nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America, to challenge what they see as a false dichotomy between (women's) individual rights and the community. A corollary nationalist feminist critique of "human rights" discourse is the argument that the idea of "rights" is trapped in Anglo-European constructions of personhood and individual entitlement, which uses a biologized construction of women to posit cross-cultural commonalities as the basis for universal laws.

Other feminist critics have challenged the notion of universal progress, and the idea that rights constitutes protection from previous and colonial forms of inequality. The concept of equality is seen to consist of a reductive denial of difference while being yet another attempt to reassert western hegemony, this time in the form of "human rights". The latter position sometimes dovetails with that of post-colonial nationalism, but is arguably the most serious critique of the universalizing aspects of human rights discourses which flatten or treat cultural differences as epiphenomenal.

One productive strand of the post-colonial feminist critique of "rights" has focussed on reconstituting the struggle for gender equality by framing the issue of "women's rights" as "human rights" in a manner that is sensitive to the dilemmas which women from relatively impoverished and conflict ridden nations face. The difficulties that women who have deep allegiances to their religious and ethnic communities experience when they are forced to choose between their ethno-religious community and their rights as women, as such, they note, necessitates a rethinking of the very idea of "rights" in a constructive, contextually located, and historically situated way (Hensman 1989, Spivac).

The rest of this paper then draws from critiques of universalizing and relativising discourses in the literature on South Asia to explore how and if women's rights discourses might be reconciled with the multiple identities which women straddle and live. For, it is indeed arguable that the universalizing aspects of rights discourses flatten differing cultural conceptions of women's bodies, subjectivities, and possibilities of action. Further, in the context of heightened nationalist conflicts, emphasis on women's rights which pit women against their ethno-religious communities can result in great violence and against women and men. In such contexts negotiating a third space between universalizing (feminist) human rights discourses and relativist post-colonial nationalist discourses is a strategy for survival for most women.

The post-colonial feminist critic begins with analysis of orientalist, constructions of the Asian societies. It challenges the frequently made equation between (eastern) religion, culture, tradition and gender inequality/oppression, against (western) secular modernity, gender equality, and civilization. Such an equation posits that non-Euro-American peoples and cultures are traditional, ahistorical, and bound by hierarchical religious traditions and superstitions which are fundamentally oppressive to women. Rather, it is arguable that secularism is itself not culture blind but merely masks the national hegemony of dominant groups while eliding the issue of cultural difference and other modes of being. This point might be extended to the failures of modern secular western democracies to contend with racial/ ethnic and cultural minorities and their differences.

The post-colonial critique also attempts to get beyond the dichotomy between "nation/community" and "individual" that both the liberal discourse and the post-colonial nationalist discourse are caught in, by foregrounding the ambivalences that women live. The well known Shabanu case in India illustrates the point.

The Shabanu case became the focus of national debate and violence in the eighties when the Indian Supreme Court first ruled that Muslim women could file for divorce and maintenance under Section 125, the secular Criminal Procedure Code, which is far more favorable to women than Muslim law, but subsequently reversed the decision stating that they were subject to Muslim personal law. What was curious was that Shabanu herself subsequently asked that the court overturn the first judgement in her favor, even though she stood to lose by having her case heard under Muslim personal law. Later following protests by Muslims through out the country (the Bombay protests alone numbered over 100,000 people and included many Muslim women) she had said to have said "if there is going to be bloodshed then let the judgement be withdrawn" and signed her name to the petition calling for her defeat (quoted in Henchman, 1990:25).

Shabanu asked for the withdrawal of the judgement because she feared the threat of communal violence between Muslims who claimed that their minority rights were being infringed, and Hindus who claimed that Muslims should conform to secular law which privileges Hindu custom. Circumstances had forced her to make an impossible choice. What emerges from the Shabanu episode is the highly volatile and overdetermined nature of the issue of "women's rights" in multiethnic cultures where the question of the status of women is already prefigured though a history of colonial discourses and ethnics antagonisms. In India the question of the status of women, whether Hindus or Muslims, cannot be treated in isolation from the Indian post-colonial nationalist riposte to how the European colonizing powers constructed "Islam" and the "women question", as well as the history and current conflict between Muslims and Hindus.

The dominant liberal colonial discourse constructed Asian and particularly Muslim women as victims of their culture, while positing that gender equality was a western feminist project and a mark of civilizational superiority. It is as a post-colonial riposte that we must read the response of many Indian nationalists, men and women, who deny that women are oppressed by Hindu and Muslim religious tradition and law. In the post-colonial phase of nation building the question of women's rights is highly problematic because of the difficulties that addressing the issue poses to the nation attempting to construct its genealogy on the basis of a valorized past, glorious culture, history and heritage of which women were viewed as the mothers and keepers. The problem of constructing what Benedict Anderson has termed the "antiquity of the modern nation" is a fundamental aspect of the women question in India and

many South Asian nations. The issue of women's rights is inseparable from ethno-national identity formation.

And it is this light that we might also understand the Indian government's initial refusal to sign CEDAW even as we might critic it. When CEDAW became available for ratification in 1981, the Indian government registered a qualification against the Article of the convention which required State parties to modify social and cultural patterns and the laws of marriage and family relations<sup>4</sup>. The Indian government declared that it would abide by this article only "in conformity with its policy of non-interference in the personal affairs of any community without its initiative and consent"<sup>5</sup>. In other words, Indian constitutional guarantees which authorize ethnic and religious (minority) communities to oversee the exercise of personal/ customary/ family law could not be altered under any circumstances, including CEDAW. What is interesting is that the Indian constitutional guarantee of personal law to its minority communities which goes a great deal further than that of most Anglo-European secular democracies toward a genuine multiculturalism raises the most difficult stumbling block for the enhancement of women's (a different sort of minority) rights. Rather, when the constitutional guarantee of gender equality comes into conflict with other constitutional guarantees to respect the cultural and religious autonomy of minorities, the issue of women's equality was rendered secondary.

Our choice is not however that of dismantling constitutional guarantees to protect ethnic minorities in order to enforce CEDAW, but rather to work with Muslim personal law, to work towards gender equality from within the community in a manner that does not fuel already polarized ethnic tensions. Rather the project should be to reform Muslim personal law in a way that such reforms might be made a reality for Muslim women and result in a positive outcome rather than the backlash against Muslim women that Shabanu feared.

Given the reality of ethnic conflict and violence, and the effects that such conflict has and might have on women it is difficult to dismiss the initial reluctance of governments of countries such as India to sign CEDAW as merely cynical disregard for the status of women<sup>7</sup>. Rather, the failure of nations like

<sup>4</sup> Arts. <sup>5</sup> (a) and 16 (1).

<sup>5</sup> Extract from comment on the Convention, in *Multinational Treaties deposited with the Secretary General of the United Nations*, U.N. New York, (1985). Cf. Goonesekere, 1991 :3.

<sup>7</sup> The Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women had been signed by 130 countries as of 1994.

India which encompass a diversity of ethnic communities, to ratify the treaty on the grounds of respect for the cultural boundaries of ethnic, religious and national minorities pose a challenge to attempts to formulate and implement a set of universal women's (reproductive) rights. Several Governments which also declined to sign CEDAW or signed it with reservations did so on the explicit or implicit grounds that "woman" are subject first to the personal or customary laws of their ethno-religious communities, and that women's status and rights are therefore communally governed and mediated.

The reticence of many third world countries to ratify CEDAW might also be explained in terms of a more general perception that the discourse of "human rights" in practice, whether when applied to women, ethnic, and religious minorities or children, has been used by first world countries as an excuse for justifying unequal trade relations, and the maintenance of the global status quo.

What emerges from the arguments for and against CEDAW is the fact that attempts to formulate a universal set of rights on the basis of women's perceived biological, sexual, or natural commonality breaks down at many different levels and sites because women's nature or sexuality is itself culturally mediated and inseparable from other facets of identity and experience. This is particularly evident with regard to women who have strong allegiances to their ethno-national communities and/or in situations of ethno-national conflict. These women are often asked and forced to make what Spivak has termed in a different but related context - "impossible choices", here, between their ethnic/ religious/ cultural communities and their individual (women's) rights, as such. Like Shabanu, women who have allegiances to their communal, ethnic and religious communities, and feel the onus of maintaining ethnic peace on them often cannot articulate their individual (gendered) needs and desires in terms of human rights, when human rights entails identification with the enemy community. Both, nationalist claims that women in exercising their rights as women betray rights their nation, and human rights discourses which dichotomize between the claims of ethno-religious communities and women's have created a dilemma.

## **WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS VS THE NATIONAL COMMUNITY**

Feminine sexuality is a field where science, culture and myth have been and continue to be confusingly and seamlessly merged. Historically the focus of magico-religious belief about impurity and danger, as well as various forms of cultural and moral denigration and regulation, women's sexuality has been increasingly redefined through scientific research, political debates over women's reproductive roles and "rights", and the invented traditions of modern national cultures. Women have been both the agents and victims in the proliferation of scientific and pseudo-scientific discourses on their sex, sexuality, its ideological elaboration and practice.

What is distinctive about the present is the elaboration and proliferation of discourses, knowledge and policies vis-a-vis women's sexuality and reproductive roles and the opportunities that science and new reproductive technologies have opened to the State, and other impersonal powers as well as extended families to monitor, scrutinise and control domains of women's sexual lives and bodies that once seemed outside their purview. Thus, this paper has traced how medical innovations and policy discourses have reconstituted the field of women's sexualities and enabled the development of new forms of patriarchal control. At the same time I have argued that women's sexual identities take different contours in different parts of the world because they are constituted through multiple intersecting discourse of identity, such as ethnicity, religion, language. Broad similarities in women's biological and reproductive roles are in this scenario undercut by cultural particularities and peculiarities.

In particular, I have focussed on how women's perceptions and experiences of their sexual identities are cross-cut by ethnic, communal, national and cultural difference. Human Rights discourses, as well as, feminist discourses have often ignored this fact and pitted women against their ethnic, religious and cultural communities with scant attention to the violence that such dichotomization does to women who have strong allegiances to their national identities and religious communities.

At the same time, I have tried to explore the current conflict between universalizing formulations of the woman question and one strand of third world feminist critique of this formulation on the basis of cultural difference. Thus the issue of gender equality has been framed within the broader problematic of post-colonial nationalism, east and west, because understanding the problematic that patriarchal nationalisms pose to a general formulation of women's rights entails also recognizing other existing economic and political hierarchies, differences and difficulties that colonialism and post-colonial nationalisms pose to women. This difference intersects with and problematizes universalizing formulations of women's rights, responsibilities and needs, particularly given the present history of Euro-American cultural hegemony and dominance.

Abstract legal strictures and State level interventions such as CEDAW need to be supplemented by community level mobilization for women's equality in local situations. Often, where other issues intersect with the "women question", feminist community and grass roots activism is the only way to proceed as the Shabanu case in India showed. The formulation of women's rights must be sensitive to the multiplicity of discourses which intersect and over determine the outcome of such controversies and more importantly the contradictory realities of women's lives.



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## LESSONS FOR THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT FROM THE LITERACY CAMPAIGNS

<sup>1</sup> Ms.Sudha Sundararaman

The Total Literacy Campaigns are a uniquely Indian creation. Unlike most of our development schemes, both its inspiration and its funding are national. Unlike the other successful literacy campaigns in the world, there was no revolutionary change or political triggering process preceding these mass campaigns. Rather, these campaigns were initiated in 1988-1989 by a combination of relatively chance developments in the administration and the people's science movements. It is rather surprising therefore to find that this movement has grown in the space of five years into an unprecedented national mobilization of women and rural youth. This has had an impact not only on literacy and on primary education, but in a number of other development areas.

Today, as the literacy campaigns appear to be largely losing their transformatory potential and are increasingly degenerating into routine governmentalized schemes, we find this an opportune movement to sum up the experience of these five years and draw upon the lessons we can gain from it. We will restrict this paper to five themes which we think are relevant for further study and for activists in the women's movement. There are of course many other areas of concern and interest. But we choose these five so that there is a definite focus in the paper.

- a) Why was there such a large impressive mobilization of women for the Total Literacy Campaigns? In what way was literacy and the campaign for literacy

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Inaugural session of the Indian Association of Women's studies, Jaipur, December 27, 1995

perceived as empowering women? Most figures now establish that between 60 to 75% of learners and volunteers were women. A conservative estimate of women who must have been learners is at least 40 million! That means over 4 million women volunteers. (If we take a sum of 123m target illiterate in the districts covered so far, and assume that only half of them actually participated, and that 65% of them were women).

- b) What was the nature of opposition encountered by the literacy activists, and why did these sections oppose the campaigns? How is this opposition relevant to understanding the nature of these campaigns.
- c) What was the fall out for women's movements from the literacy campaigns. That is, in what non-alphabetical areas of concern to the women's movements did the literacy campaigns have an impact. These were not necessarily intended benefits of literacy but occur they did and often like in Andhra these results were more evident and gratifying than the effect of literacy per se.
- d) Why are the literacy movements collapsing today? Why has the TLC been a nine day, or to be precise, a five year wonder only? Why could these campaigns not be sustained?
- e) And finally, what general lessons on the strategies and tactics of a women's movement can be gained from the literacy campaigns.

### *Empowerment and the Literacy Campaign.*

Why did women participate in the campaigns? There are a number of reasons. One undeniable reason is that women wanted to become literate. Why, is a complex question to answer, and indeed few have been able to adequately answer it. Asking the women themselves, one gets stereotyped answers - to see where the bus is going (how often, after all, are the respondents going to board the bus?) or to write a letter (to whom?) or even replies that unconsciously pick up idioms and phrases from the literacy promotional songs and skits. Or at best, one gets a defiant - "because we wanted to". To us it appears that in some way being literate had become a sought after value or status in itself, quite apart from the practical utility that such learning had in their lives. It gave one a sense of identity, and an identification with a certain quality of what they wanted to be - the self image they hoped for.

It is likely that the content of the primers and the unconscious attempts to build in messages relating to their daily lives helped. But it is unlikely, given the

awareness levels of the volunteers themselves that per se the alphabet learning experience would have served as conscientization.

What did help and perhaps made the critical difference, was the accessibility of the classes. The fact that in groups of 5 to 10, they could sit down near their own doorsteps at a time of their choosing, with a familiar person as instructor, in an informal setting where they could come and leave as and when they wanted to, may have played a greater role in facilitating participation than any other single factor.

The other major feature that facilitated the participation of women was the strong mobilizational aspect. One key to mobilization was the *kalajatha* - a powerful medium that packed its messages in the popular cultural idiom and forms. But even more than the forms, the messages in themselves served to link literacy with a number of basic livelihood problems and even with questions of exploitation as well as to address discrimination against women. Again and again the songs and skits reiterated - to escape from poverty, to resist oppression, to question discrimination, one must become literate. It is not in one sense important whether literacy, especially the low levels of literacy these campaigns in practice provided, could actually address such issues or whether indeed illiteracy per se was the stumbling block to resisting oppression. Quite likely it did not. But such messages did strike a chord of sympathy amongst women of the weaker sections, and above all, it inspired lakhs of teenage educated girls and rural youth to volunteer to serve as instructors and organizers.

Simultaneously, the call for becoming literate was not perceived as threatening by local vested interests. The view that such sections could hope that literacy would make the poor more amenable, less hostile, and more susceptible to the propaganda of the dominant may or may not be valid. But what matters in our view is that it lowered their threat perception in mobilization for literacy. Thus if at one level political leaders of most hues maintained silence, local vested interests would seek to maintain a formal identification with the programme.

At another level, the massive environment building lent social sanction for thousands of women in each block to congregate daily for evening classes and even make the occasional trips to the enjoyable training camps and other programmes. Here, often for the first time, they could participate in discussion on social issues, mingle with men, sing songs collectively, and so on. The normal resistance that men, especially in certain more conservative sections have to letting women go out for meetings was time and again overcome by determined

activist attempts. If the visible presence of the collector and the government machinery gave the campaign some legitimacy and comfort in the eyes of conservative sections and a large section of people, the participation of a number of progressive elements, especially under the leadership of the BGVS, and the way in which they articulated literacy as empowerment gave the programme credibility amongst the people, especially amongst those village level "intellectuals" who had to be motivated to provide the village level people's leadership that was so essential to make this a people's campaign.

It is our proposition therefore that the major empowerment of women that occurred flowed out of the organizational strategy. This occurred at various levels. For example in Pondicherry, while studying women's responses to what gains had been made, we were surprised to find repeated references to wife beating becoming less. Similar anecdotal reports have since been received from a wide number of districts. Probing further it became apparent that the slight worry of the husband in facing a more confident woman, combined with her current association with a women's group helped. Often if she was beaten (and failed to attend class) a volunteer or others would turn up to enquire. Why, even to admonish the surprised husband! Literacy groups thus acted as women's first experience of organisation in a myriad number of other ways. Unfortunately, few evaluation studies have documented these aspects and in most campaigns today, these are no longer available for documentation. But one question remains - if literacy per se was not the main vehicle of empowerment, but rather a strategy of mobilization, why did not such a strategy meet opposition from the entrenched vested interests? Surely such opposition, though not desirable, would be one test of the potency of such an empowerment strategy.

### *Opposition to the Literacy Campaigns*

References to conflicts within literacy campaigns are poorly reported, and outside limited activists circles, few are aware of it. Yet such opposition was widespread, almost universal and took many forms.

One of the most notorious of this is our own experience in Pondicherry. The Pondicherry campaign, the second TLC in the country to take off, just after Ernakulam and even before total Kerala, always had good support from the Lt. Governors and a few key officials in education and other departments, but a very lukewarm reception from the state's politicians and much of the government.

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machinery. Though careful to keep a supportive profile in public, in private officials and activists were under constant criticism and harassment. However when the campaign culminated in an unprecedented rally of over fifty thousand people largely the neoliterate and volunteers and village level organisers and more important, when they witnessed the first four months of post - literacy, this coldness turned into vicious attack. Picking up an internal PSF circular that had some adverse comments on the New Economic Policy, and some relatively innocuous lines in the primers (whose transaction had anyway been completed) the honourable Assembly members launched a broadside attack on the entire movement. Headed by the speaker, they attacked the movement as being infiltrated by terrorists, demanded its closure and the seizure of the literacy books. For 4 days, member after member rose in a rare unity cutting across party lines to condemn the movement. No one alleged inflated achievement figures, or even alleged corruption. The single point focus was on penetration by extremists. That there was not an iota of truth in the accusations and in fact no action was taken (as indeed it could not be) did not deter the local newspapers from blazing this story across headlines without ever bothering to publish any counter.

This McCarthyist attack received a set - back when the Pondicherry campaign won the UNESCO award. Deeply embarrassed, the ministry changed tracks and decided to own the programme and brought in maximal political pressure to achieve this. The Education Minister camped in Delhi to ensure that he and not any official or activist associated with the work was sent to receive the award. Once back from Barcelona he proceeded to remove the PSF and other NGO sections associated with the campaigns, replacing them with ruling party stooges who then promptly scuttled the post-literacy effort completely. Even today the PSF is not allowed any co-operation from the state government.

The Kerala case is well-known - The newly elected government associated this programme with the earlier Left Front Government, and proceeded to scuttle it. One common form of opposition to the campaign is the transfer of effective, sympathetic district collectors heading the campaign often leading to public outbursts of protest. Raigarh and Chittoor to name a few had such experiences.

A much more universal form of opposition was for the district administration to seek removal of NGO participants, especially to undermine the BGVS role, under which banner a number of middle class employees and activists from diverse backgrounds, usually progressive in outlook, came together to initiate and intervene in these campaigns. In Andhra, after the anti-arrack agitation and in Tamil Nadu more recently state departments have often issued circulars to

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collectors to such effect. In some places like Bhiwani, pushing out legal office bearers has meant direct administrative action. In this case, the government resorted to police action to evict the activists and seal the office. In Chamoli, the literacy activists drew the administrative ire and faced police firing when they threw in their lot behind the Uttarkhand agitation. In many places NGOs, even those seeking to help were ignored.

A third ubiquitous form of opposition was cynicism and other forms of grass roots level opposition. One cannot say that these were organised, but nevertheless they were everywhere. For example active discouragement of learners by the spread of a rumour that volunteers are receiving payment. Or just a "it can't happen" attitude. Or "it is not 100%" attitude and so on. In contrast to the organized clearly political objectives of the first two forms of opposition, this third form represented cultural attitudes - apathy, glorified self interest, and individualism that finds successful collective activity distasteful and so on. But such attitudes generated by the social structure we live under are as palpable and definite an obstacle to efforts at change as any conscious action of vested interest.

There are some common features about all these forms of opposition. All of them attacked voluntarism, all of them attack a strategy where mobilization is the key, all of them question the linkage of empowerment issues with literacy (and where they succeed they proceed to delink it at once) and all of them seek to marginalise or remove NGO participation in the leadership of such campaigns. That the focus of attack is the nature of mobilisation and the object of attack in the progressive content of the campaign was most evident in places like Pondicherry, Kerala and Andhra where the politicians clearly articulated this, at least in private.

In Pondicherry, the publicly stated reason for the attack made on the floor of the assembly and broadcast by the media was infiltration by extremist agents. That there was not a shred of evidence to support this canard, was made evident by the complete lack of any action even the most minimal of enquiries outside the House. Indeed, the Hon'ble Members clearly stated so in private. In private, their stated reason was the fact that some of the literacy activists were associated with electoral campaigning against a ruling party member in the preceding elections and therefore by implication the association of some elements in the literacy campaign with an opposition party. Despite the wide acceptance of this position the fact that such a party was nowhere in the electoral reckoning of the state, having never opened its account, and the unprecedented unity with which opposition members themselves joined in this attack, makes nonsense of such a claim. Besides



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the fact that no party had even conceived using this campaign for mobilizing votes or supporters was clearly evident in so small a state, for the views within all parties also tend to be quite widely known.

We hold that the real reasons were different. In a place like Pondicherry, the taking on of issues like provision of local facilities and house patts by post literacy activists undermined the power base and threatened the already worried political parties. Political rule & power in Pondicherry depends a lot on patronage of this sort and the campaign by covering the entire small state with an alternative to patronage immediately threatened the basis of such rule. The fact that volunteers would do mobilizational work which till then needed money or influence of the patrons and the people could get services on their own which was their right but so far had needed mediation by political brokers, was a threat that could not be tolerated. It was NOT a political party that was threatened or was threatening. It was a way of doing politics that was threatened and that was threatening.

In larger states the threat perception of such voluntarism and mobilisation was less acute but to the extent local vested interests felt its pinch and to the extent such local vested interests could influence power centres at the district and state levels they acted upon it. Every campaign is full of accounts of such conflicts, with local interests bringing pressure to bear on state governments to change suspect officials or to exclude genuinely effective mobilisers. The larger and more effective the campaign the more were such complaints and the more the conflicts. In Kerala where it was a state wide campaign the end result was again the dissolution of the entire existing literacy force and its substitution by a docile ineffective alternative.

The study of such conflicts is important to understand the dynamics of the literacy campaigns. Missing such aspects altogether some academicians have highlighted the fact that rising as they were in the wake of the new economic policy the aim of literacy could not be empowerment but rather it was either domestication of the illiterate or making them more susceptible to market forces. We do not know whether there is enough evidence to sustain such a theory. But even if it is true, quite independent of the intentions of state policy, the context in which the TLCs arose and the processes it adapted set in motion a dynamic that was to generate an opposite effect-the effect of empowerment. To quote Denzil Saldhana in perhaps the most penetrating and comprehensive work on the literacy campaigns "the intentions of the dominant do not necessarily work out as the discourse of the subaltern. Heightened aspirations generated on a mass scale and enabled through literacy have unpredictable consequences".

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(1) Whereas the question as discussed by some academicians remain confined to the role of literacy and education in state policy and political consciousness, the actual terrain of conflict was within the campaigns - between using a mobilizational empowering process in association with progressive forces or a bureaucratic, acculturating process where the administration seeks to impose literacy or as is often the case only pretends to be doing literacy.

Today no doubt the latter trend has won the day-a point to which we shall return. But this is only to be expected given the nature of governance. However, it is indeed sad that by focussing attention on the wrong space a number of progressive forces and NGOs that could have otherwise strengthened the positive aspects of the TLCs, missed the bus altogether - once again!

The case for the empowering nature of the literacy campaigns cannot be made from the opposition it generated alone. (Of course one is reminded of Mao Tse Tung's statement - it is not bad that the enemy attacks us but good) One needs to see whether the anticipated positive outcomes of an empowerment process were there. And as 75% of the participants were women, it is to the evidences of women's empowerment that we turn.

## *Impact on Women's empowerment*

The anti-arrack agitation of Andhra Pradesh is by far the most visible and celebrated outcome of this empowerment process. The lesson against alcoholism in a primer was picked up as an excuse to launch a blockade against arrack in one village. After six months of incubation in one village it spread to another 7 to 8 villages where it again incubated for 4 to 6 months. There catalysed by repeated discussions organized in literacy circles, promoted by their neo-literate newspaper and emboldened by the first few villages having managed to sustain their action despite confident prediction to the contrary, the movement spread and soon it snowballed into a historic women's movement. While one must recognize the spontaneity of this uprising, it is time also to acknowledge that the Nellore literacy campaign leaderships being in the hands of a small but dedicated core of progressive NGO activists (the local APJVV) played no small role in nurturing it and guiding it onwards.

In the absence of such a conscious intervention, it is unlikely that the Nellore anti-arrack movement would have survived the first few villages. Of course in Dubigunta and later to some extent in its state level spread spontaneous elements

predominated. But the spread from Dubigunta to Saipeta and even from Saipeta to an all Nellore powerful women's mass action was the outcome of an effectively, though unobtrusively planned and organized action by a progressive organisation.

That such conscious organisation, often with a co-operative (even conniving) administration played a major role in channelizing the literacy movement into other women's empowerment areas was much more evident in the next phase at Nellore - the Podhupu Lakshmi phase. Over 7000 women's credit cooperatives of 20 to 30 women each, have saved over 4 crore rupees, releasing thousands of women from indebtedness and giving a firm organisational structure to the movement. Today a wide variety of women centred activities are carried out by these committees. The credit cooperatives have now spilled across district borders and are slowly spreading across the country. In Kanyakumari, Ramanathapuram and Madurai over 500 credit cooperatives are functional and indeed in most of the initial eight districts of Tamil Nadu credit cooperatives are being initiated. In Madhya Pradesh and Bihar too slowly but surely this is being replicated and everywhere activists were pleasantly surprised at the response. Indeed we make bold to speculate that a conscious planned thrust in this area is likely to yield a major response within the next two years. Once again studying the pattern of districts where such programmes take off we find the critical need of the presence of a conscious committed group at the district level, having its own identity distinct from the district administration, but willing to work with the administration and indeed using the broader legitimacy that such association provides to force through new programmes for women's empowerment.

An even more difficult and hence rarer outcome has been the conversion of the literacy movement into a women's employment generation programme. One of the best examples of this is the Madurai production network. Initially they began as attempts at credit cooperatives but soon Gyaneswari a perceptive noon meal worker suggested that they use the accumulated capital for production of samber powder. All the 40 women of the thrift group had a share and got returns on it, but in addition 20 women in the group by turn get daily wages for their production work. This idea rapidly picked up and spread to over 150 groups all of whom started collecting various items from wholesale market and after appropriate mixing, packed it and started selling it locally.

Initially they had depended on the government for their market but as the programme picked up the usual petty corruption and vested interests created many obstacles. To reduce this, the now more extensive production cooperative network diversified into local markets and an even larger variety of products.

Similar production networks and transformation of thrift group capital into productive capital is ongoing in a number of districts. Sometimes like with the quarry workers of Pudukottai or the milk cooperatives of Ramanathapuram the thrift societies flowed out of the creation of production cooperatives and not vice versa. Once again we see that the development is not spontaneous - rather it is catalyzed by NGO forces acting in tandem with or on occasion even independently of the local administration. Precisely because these efforts are not part of the government schemes or targets, such initiatives seldom get reported and successful activists are usually far too busy with surviving to even document such work.

Another major spin off to the literacy campaigns have been on the fledgling panchayati system. Few have studied this aspect and unfortunately in all our areas of regular field contact - Tamilnadu and Pondicherry and Bihar - the elections are yet to take place. But reports especially from Madhya Pradesh indicate that a number of women who were elected especially as ward members or gram panchayat sarpanches were activists of the literacy campaigns. How widespread was this effect? Did the literacy campaigns give them the confidence to stand? Did it alter their perceptions of what role an elected leader can play? We have too little data to comment. However, in meetings of literacy activists especially under the Samata banner repeatedly interaction in panchayats is repeatedly identified as the priority. As the organisation and enthusiasm of the campaigns are carried forward it is likely that interventions to enhance women's participation in panchayats and the use of panchayati raj structures to effect changes to further benefit women are likely to become the major area of activity. We have argued in another paper earlier that even such intervention if left to itself will tend to be populist in nature and will be unable to develop beyond a point. Only where the most conscious and capable elements of the women's movements intervene can the elected women be helped to go beyond voicing accepted concern to fighting for demands that the dominant patriarchal culture may not today welcome.

But perhaps the most widespread manifestation of the TLC as a women's movement was the conscious attempts to fight gender stereotypes and construct a positive image of women. Examples of this are many and widespread and it is difficult to do justice to all. The mass training of women in cycling in Pudukottai is well known. Less known is that other districts like Mandya in Karnataka and quite surprisingly by Madhepura in Bihar were to consciously attempt to emulate the Pudukottai experience and to meet considerable success in this. Madhepura and Madhubani saw a number of such initiatives. In many villages women removed the purdah en masse with the stated reason "that it interfered in reading"! Touring

troops of all women cultural activists were also a repeated sensational phenomena in many districts all over. Add to this the songs, the plays, the conscious introduction of gender content in literacy books and so on the net impact on cultural attitudes must have been considerable. Again though the response was spontaneous, many of these initiatives were conscious interactions by women and men, who had been sensitized to gender issues in the earlier two decades of women's movement work especially the issue of the way the women's image is constructed. To them the TLCs provided an opportunity for taking their concerns across and they used it to the full. Indeed the entire Samata experience marked the coming together of all women's movements at the initiative of the BGVS to consciously develop and enhance these dimensions of transforming the literacy campaign into a cultural movement for women.

### *The Decline of the Total Literacy Campaign*

Today the total literacy campaigns cover 336 out of 468 districts in 20 states and 4 union territories. Of these 336 more than 112 are in the post-literacy phase. Of these over 100 even by the ministry's own figures have been unable to get off the ground or report extremely low achievement. The remaining about 85 projects however achieved about 40 to 50% - an excellent result under given conditions. Most of these 85 districts were in the initial phases. But what is worrying is not the figures. Some of those districts which have reported low figures had seen excellent mobilisational work and the low figure reported is more a representation of their honesty than anything else. What is worrying is the reports that increasingly the campaigns have lost their potential for women's empowerment. Why is this so?

One apparently obvious reason is that most of the districts and states which had a good potential for success for such campaign approach have already been covered in the first couple of years. As the campaign proceeds into the Hindi speaking and high illiteracy areas the chances of success become less. It is easy to theorize that this is so because it is a high illiteracy area and therefore the "status connotation" that makes illiterate women aspire for literacy is less. But one only has to witness the tremendous enthusiasm and participation of women in districts like Madhepura or Monghyr to know that this is far from the truth. Availability of well dispersed literate volunteers is of course a problem. But even more of a problem is the availability of committed and capable district level NGO leadership to give it the peoples movement aspect. There may not be an

absolute lack of NGOs, but often it is a lack of NGOs willing for and oriented to such mobilisational work.

An even more distressing reason for the absence of such participation is the almost complete bureaucratization of the programme. Now that the TLCs are official government policy (unlike in its earlier phase) collectors and state governments vie with each other to get money, spend it and declare the programme completed. The dominant feeling is that the administration can do it alone. In some places like in Tamilnadu and Andhra the conscious interest to keep out forces who will make it a genuine mobilisational event, especially after the successful anti-arrack uprising, has been clearly stated in government circulars. But more often the exclusion of NGOs, is just a testimony to the fact that the TLCs embodied a space for mass action created by the conscious action of a few, a space that inherently does not exist in our socio-economic structure but nevertheless can be created if committed administrations and activists come together.

One must not, one reminds oneself be surprised that a bureaucracy acts bureaucratically. Rather one must be surprised that for such a considerable period and in so many places it acted differently. Political will has of course with the notable exception of West Bengal almost never been there to back these campaigns except at the most for short periods of time. But because such a space, has been forced once, we know it can be done again if more people and organisation consciously plan to create and use such spaces. Even now there are literacy campaigns and more so post-literacy campaigns that retain their mobilisation and empowerment potential. Even now if NGOs and other partnership with NGOs, insisting on a more creative locally adapted strategy and longer and deeper mobilisational process one can hope for better results, at least in some of the remaining district.

One caution is needed. It is easy to interpret the contradiction as bureaucrat as NGO conflict. This would be far from true. There have been and there continues to be bureaucrats who understand the spirit of the campaign and a bureaucratic understanding of the campaign is often a problem in the NGOs also. It is only a conscious desire to use the literacy process as a mobilisational and empowerment process that can preserve the difference. This, a well intentioned bureaucracy cannot do by itself, but even for an NGO this may be difficult to ensure unless it constantly renews itself and keeps the objective clear.

### *Lessons for the future*

What are the lessons for the future? One needs to reflect on the rise of the total literacy campaigns and its unexpected transformation into a women's movement even as the campaign themselves flounder. What can one generalize about the strategy and tactics of women's movements from this. As activists who spend more time responding to immediate exigencies, we are aware of our limitations in making broad theoretical statements.

The success of mobilisation of women for literacy shows the necessity of women's movement to recognize the much broader aspirations of women and their willingness or indeed eagerness to acquire education and improve their own condition given an opportunity to do so.

One basic lesson is the way a broad democratic movement, where even the state participates, can reach out to millions of women, and overcome traditional hurdles to their participation in a process of social mobilisation. Opportunities for such mobilisation are not limited to literacy. Health can be another area that is equally non-threatening and where a broad social consensus is possible. Perhaps one can forge such a programme around a village library movement for workers or around thrift societies, or a cultural movement to portray different images of women. The possibilities are limitless. The objectives of the programme are important but relatively independent of the limitless. The objective, the process used for mobilisation and implementing a programme are relevant to its eventual impetus for women's empowerment. Thus even an occasion like a pulse polio campaign, if properly intervened in by women's groups can be utilized locally as a vehicle to organise women and bring them out. Obviously different mobilisational potential. But given a objective that broadly is acceptable to women's movements the process by which such an objective is achieved becomes crucial.

Another important lesson is that spaces created by such movements tend to be transient. They cannot be sustained indefinitely. Unless the intervening women's movement maintains its distinct identity and agenda and intervenes conscious of the necessity of channelizing this energy and in organizing the participating women, the benefits of such movements cannot be realized. Too often the choice for a women's organisation is seen as putting aside one's agenda

or priorities for participating in a broader social cause or sticking to one's priorities and letting the opportunity go by. It is our submission that both would be wrong. It is a conscious meaningful intergration of one's priorities with the opportunity that such large scale mobilizations represent that can best channelize the mobilisation into a sustained women's movement. The participation of women's movements in such activities is necessary to shape the process itself. Only where progressive elements were available to provide leadership and where they understood their role to include shaping the nature of the movement did it benefit women's movements. Where such elements were not available or not willing to intervene, or only willing to lend a few activists or where such intervention was excluded by the state the campaigns did not realize their emancipatory potential. Today when we see similar movements developing around credit cooperatives or health or watershed management or rural entrepreneurship development, women's movement must learn from the total literacy campaigns. Neither an uncritical participation or a safe distance would benefit the cause of women. What we need is planned intervention to shape these movements.

Amongst all these areas of development and possibilities for intervention, literacy, still occupies a unique place. Literacy is not an end-value in itself, though as we have argued, such perception had helped women's mobilisation considerably. Literacy is a learning skill, a tool to unlock many wide areas of knowledge and capabilities that are essential for survival as well as for building a society without discrimination. If literacy efforts stop with the mere provision of alphabetical knowledge, then the learning it will lead to is learning loaded with the values of dominant sections. Even so the neo-literate can make their own meanings of the written material. However if the process of provision of literacy skills is built up on consciously by women's movements, its true emancipatory potential will only then be realized. Even as we distance ourselves from the current phase of the literacy campaigns we must look beyond to building up another phase in the not too distant future - a phase where unlike in this first phase, the women's mobilisational and empowerment role was not accidentally discovered by activists where we include ourselves, but where it would be the campaign's chief purpose.



## The Mother of Rahula

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By. Maureen Seneviratne

I remember how yesterday, before he came, you asked me again, What is he like, Mother? And as always you followed it up with the question, Will he know me when he comes, Mother? It was easy to give you the answer to your second question, Rahula my son, but how often I have tried - and failed - to tell you what he is like. How could I describe or try to explain, in mere words from my fallible lips?

I could tell you with assurance he would know you. That he would know you at once, for his son. Even though they say he shaded his eyes with his fingers against the faint streak of pale yellow light from the oil lamp on the table and turned abruptly away at the foot of my bed, that night of the moon's eclipse, when you were born. Turned resolutely away from the sight of you there, nestling like a small, helpless bird at my breast, as I lay exhausted after the excruciating birth pangs had passed.

Your father did not stay to look upon his first born. I called to him but he did not heed. But I was never in doubt that he would know you whenever he chose to return. Not only because you resemble the youth he was, in almost every particular. Or because the women folk used to comfort me with kindly talk that blood will warm to blood, instinctively. The ancients were wiser, I think, in their supposition that the natural tie is not bind-fasting; that the eyes of any father and any son can meet in blank unrecognition, unless knowledge of each other and mutual affection for each other has manifested itself or been nurtured in the years of a child's swift growing. That except for this the eyes of father and son can meet and turn away in hatred and recoil.

No, Rahula my son, I did not fear that your father would not know you. For I had learned at last to comprehend the quality of the love he bore for me. It is a love that has its roots deep in knowledge; in his clear perception of the nature of Rahula's mother. It must follow then he would know his son. And so, I rejoice to think, he did.

But I remember when you came to me yesterday before his arrival in our home, with excitement glowing like a leaping orange flame in your eyes and said a little impatiently, Mother, tell me again about my father! My words were once more weak and inadequate but I was tingling with excitement too! Yet how could I explain the sheer translucence of a mountain pool or the stark immensity of that amethyst Himalayan peak snow-capped, thrusting boldly against the vast-white expanse of sky? Are there words to tell of the great crimson fires that surge and rear inside the dark belly of the earth? Of foaming ocean-waves that lash their fury against stubborn, resisting rocks? Can I explain the ecstasy of caked, cracked fields when the glistening rain-showers soak into their arid crevices to quench their long and mighty thirst? Of the joy of wilting leaves in a morning dewfall?

I could tell if I wanted to that once his hand on my cheek was like a glowing coal. That his breast was adamant against the softness of my own. That from the first moment of our knowledge of each other he was gentle, so that my maiden-fears were transported into an indescribable rapture. And how, afterwards, a long light peace washed like a wave over my girlish body.

I think in my secret heart you would be like him, Rahula my son, if the time came for you to know a woman...But that is not to be your transient destiny. Because he discovered the way for you too when he chose to explore his own. And tomorrow you will be gone. Gone away with him to claim your inheritance.

Many times when you were little I have tried to tell you what he looked like. But as you grew I found I had need only to show you your own reflection in the crystal mountain-pool where we went to gather sweet olu buds and blue manel blossoms for my garlands. But beautiful as you are, Rahula my son, he was your peer in beauty. The snows that curdle on Himalaya's heights were not so pure as the whiteness of his brow. The flower-be-decked mountain meadows not so fair as his noble countenance. The clustered purple grapes in their rich twining vines were not as luxurious as his hair. The diamond crown his father wears could not match the brilliance of his eyes. But this is woman's talk; a lover's prattle! If he heard he would smile and call me foolish.

It is when I try to tell you what he is, the essence and the substance of him, that words fail me. What words can tell how compassionate is his heart? How

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can I tell you of his heart? Once I thought I filled it entirely. That we were all-sufficient to each other. Vanity and selfishness, my son? But a woman, before she is established in the state of Entering-the-Stream, does not always perceive how her love can be coldly, arrogantly centered in herself. One can be so weak before one becomes strong. And suffer the pangs of ignorance before Right Understanding is laboriously attained. It was only after I had endured much pain and bitterness I learned his heart was great enough and large enough to encompass the whole world. All the grief and all the suffering and the immeasurable sorrow men endure. But in this knowledge of him was also my own peace. And a purging of the love I bore him to a passionless passion.

Under the pipul tree he sat at last and reached All-Understanding. Under the pipul tree he found the Illumination and Enlightenment he so long and perseveringly sought. But I stayed here in this house I once shared with him and yearned for him with a remorseless yearning. How can you understand what a woman feels when her man leaves her? He sought to be free of the fetters of a householder to fulfil an ampler destiny - but a woman's world is such a small and narrow and intensely personal world. The household the orbit of her activities. Her man its pivot and main-spring. And I was left as I then thought—bereft. The strange thing is I had known for a long time he would go. He stole quietly out of my darkened room that night my son was born-but he did not go stealthily.

Yes he had often told me he would have to go. Tenderly he had prepared me for the parting; patiently explaining that every binding material tie had to be severed before he attained his lofty goal. But while he was with me and his touch was tangible against my side in the opaque dark and I knew I would wake to the welling light of his presence every pale-amber dawn, I could cheerfully promise him this release. He was not deceived. He understood well how it would be with me for a long time after he left me. But it did not stay him from his purpose.

They tried to be kind, I remember, the ones around me. They gave me a surfeit of their love and their care. Pampered and indulged me. But I know that some of them pitied me. And some looked upon me with cruel scorn. What is a woman, after all, when her husband leaves her? When he leaves her in the full rich pulse of his manhood, even if it might be to dwell alone. There must be some flaw in a woman a man cannot live with, or else would he escape to the forest in his prime, before his years as a householder are completed? Leaving his new-born son on the very night of the infant's birth?

If I would I could tell now how I used to lie tortured and sleepless in my

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room. In my room that was filled with those myriad eyes of evil and malice, till the sweat poured down my body in streams and it seemed as if my heart would burst with the sheer weight of the anguish it bore. And there was also the seething, scorching body's need to bear, for I was young then and robust, but I can now recall it all without passion or pain. It was only the pride I somehow summoned from the depths of my being that sustained me. And the pride in you, Rahula my son. I stepped high and tall with you in my arms, burying my anguish in the sweet effervescence of your baby-being!

But the time came, the time came, my son, when your mother was ready to lie contentedly on a narrow couch. When the victory over self was complete. When the pain was assuaged and others no longer had the power to hurt. And I had you, my son. The quiet joy of you. The bubbling, gurgling joy of you. Yet not a day would go by that I did not wistfully think of him. And not a day but you would lisp your baby lips to ask about him.

We would pause sometimes in our frolics in the lotus-pool and lie quiescent on the water and I would try to tell you of him. We would cease for a while from picking wild flowers or berries up the rugged mountainside, rest beneath the shadow of a smooth ledge of rock and talk of him. And suddenly it was as if the breath of the wind against my cheek, the tendrils of hair rustling against my neck, the shadow of the branches falling on my brow were the touch of his hand to still my fears when we first met. I did not know then, he would drive through the city-streets one morning, and become acquainted with the wretchedness of old age, disease and death. And that would mark the beginning of his transcendent search.

Curiously, my son, the days I spent alone, the days swiftly passing into years began to hold for me, as well, a quiet happiness. A happiness laved and scoured of every speck of material grit and grime. I would look up to the blue snow peaks towering in a limitless, majestic sweep and see how they bore a curious resemblance to him. I would see the frozen lakes like clear-glass-panes set into the hazy mountain meadows and they would bring him over-poweringly to my mind. Strength and clarity: He had attained them both. Suddenly I longed to achieve this too above all others. And had he not told me once that in this yearning to achieve is the first step towards attaining them? My heart rose and sang like a rilling mountain brook.

It no longer mattered that miles divided us. I too had begun my journey along the long road to reach that glimmering of understanding which alone affords release. I had Entered-the Stream! Dimly I began to perceive what he had

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tried to tell me of the becoming-free-of-self. Free from the past, from the future, from the present. I floated for a few ecstatic moments in the supreme bliss of Non-Being-and then I saw your childish eyes upon me, Rahula my son, and my heart lifted high like a brave-tossing breeze and I clasped you close in my arms and the scent of you was inexpressibly sweet; your arms round my neck such ineffable delight. You were mine and we needed each other as mothers and their babes do - but my love for you was no longer a bond confining me. It was not even the stronghold I had erected to hide my hurt when he went away. I had no need any more of an anchor. My love for you was free. And because of this you are ready to leave me and claim your inheritance from him when he goes away tomorrow.

Because of it, also, the eyes of father and son did not meet as strangers when he came. There was love and pride in his glance upon you and love and veneration in yours. Then you left my chamber, Rahula my son, and your father and I were together for a brief moment. How can I tell you of that moment? He came to me and sat on my couch, wordlessly, and I rose and prostrated myself at his feet. His worn, calloused, sunburned feet. Vividly they told me the whole, poignant story of his years of wandering and search; of the unparalleled mission he had undertaken. There was no need for any words.

He placed his two hands on my head, as of yore, to bless me, and his touch was gentle on my shorn scalp. For already I wore the ascetic's yellow robe and I had cut off my long dark hair. And I saw in his eyes that it pleased him. That it pleased him far more than the feel of it in times past, besprinkled with sparkling jewels and shining in a golden snood. My patched robe of yellow home-spun was more beautiful in his eyes than the silken garments I used to wear in the years before you were born, Rahula my son, and I know it pleased him most of all that I had taken to wearing them of my own accord.

Then he went from my chamber -but there was no darkness there anymore. Or doubt or pain. The radiance illumines it still. And when you go from me tomorrow at the first hour of daybreak the light will not fade. I think it will shine even more brightly because you have gone to follow him. Because you would have claimed your inheritance. Taken the first step on the road to Non-Returning. And I : what have I gathered? What have I learned? What will keep me poised and tranquil in the days to come without him and without you too, Rahula my son? Nothing but the all-sufficing truth that there are no sons for protection, neither father nor kinsmen, but only a mind well-directed.

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## Employment of Wife and Domestic Power Structure

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*S.C.Sidramshettar<sup>1</sup>*

In most of the industrialised western nations two thirds of married women are employed outside home. As a result the dual earner family has replaced the single earner family as model family. No wonder, therefore that the attention of family sociologists and other scholars has been drawn to the study of the impact of wife's employment on the structure and functions of family and domestic relations. They are mainly interested in knowing whether the employment of wives has helped or hindered the normative pattern of family life that western societies had adopted.

One of the important areas that has come under closer scrutiny is the impact of wife's employment on the balance of power. There are some who opine that the wife's employment has not drastically altered the gender-based distribution of power. There are others who maintain that wife's employment has brought about only marginal changes in the balance of power. The dual earner families are more egalitarian both in sharing of power and domestic work than the single earner families.

Number of studies on marital power showed that the relative power of husbands and wives in making family decision depends upon the relative resources (such as education, employment, occupational status) which spouse brings into the marriage (Blood and Wolf, 1960; Heen, 1963, Safilios Rothschild, 1970, McDonald, 1980). Husbands usually have higher power because they control a greater number of these resources. The wife's power in decision making is assumed to increase as her resources increase. With the background of this

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theory many hold that working women usually have higher power as compared to non-working women.

Indian studies on marital power which focus on decision making by spouses found contradictory patterns. Khanna and Varghese (1970) found that wife's decision making was almost the same in single and in dual earner families. By contrast, Devi (1987) found that the husband's power in decision making in dual earner families was significantly lower than that of his counterpart in single earner households. Ram's (1988) study suggested that wives are increasingly but informally appropriating authority from their husbands to make decisions. Sinha and Prabha (1988) in their study of working women in Bihar found that the vast majority of couples were egalitarian in making decisions on critical issues.

### ***Objective of the Study :***

In the present study an attempt is made to assess the power exercised by the wife and husband in the dual earner families as seen in the decision making process. The main focus of investigation in this area was to assess how the newly acquired rational legal status of woman as an employee in a bureaucratic set up outside the family has influenced the domestic power equations.

In the absence of base line studies in this regard, it was difficult to assess the impact of employment of wives on the domestic power structure. Also there was no way of assessing the impact in those cases where the wives were employed before they were married. For, in such families trends of egalitarian sharing of domestic power are seen right from the time the couple set up their house and started living together as man and wife. But cases where the wives took up jobs after a lapse of some time after marriage need special attention. An indepth study of such women provided an ideal situation to assess the impact of employment on the power enjoyed by married women vis-a-vis their husbands in the family. The present study therefore is an effort to assess and compare the power of husbands and wives in making family decision in the dual earner families.

### ***Methodology***

The study was conducted in a district head quarter namely Dharwad, (Dharwad district, Karnataka) Dharwad being an important educational, cultural and administrative centre of North Karnataka provided an opportunity to undertake such a project fruitfully. The sample consisted of 100 couples where both husband

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and wife were employed in white-collar jobs. They belonged to different occupational groups such as teachers, doctors, and office workers. A working woman in order to be eligible for inclusion in the sample was required to satisfy the following requirements:

- (1) Her husband should also be a white collar employee.
- (2) Should have been married for not less than two years.
- (3) Should not be a widow or divorcee.
- (4) Should be belonging to any of the three following categories:
  - (i) Teacher belonging to secondary schools, graduate colleges and post-graduate department.
  - (ii) Office workers like Officers, Clerks, Typists and Stenographers.
  - (iii) Doctors, Government employees.
- (5) Should have been in service for not less than two years.
- (6) Should have at least one child.

Proportional stratified sampling method was adopted to select the final sample of 100 couples. Structured interview schedule method was used for data collection. Couples were interviewed separately at their residence and sometimes at the offices. Along with statistical analysis case studies were also used for analysis and interpretation of data. Hence, with the help of this quantitative and qualitative data an effort was made to assess the impact of employment of wife on the domestic power structure.

### ***Socio-economic Background :***

The mean age for husbands was 40.9 years and of wives was 35.9 years which shows that the respondents were comparatively of mature age. Most of the respondents were well educated in the sense that not only 40 per cent were graduates but also a sizeable number of them held post-graduate and professional degrees.

Occupational composition of the respondents shows that a majority of husbands (51%) are drawn from the category of office workers, and a majority of wives (47%) from the category of teachers, 11 per cent of husbands and 12 per cent of wives were doctors, rest of wives were office workers and husbands teachers.

A majority of respondents were Hindus (88%). From among the various castes



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the Brahmin constitute (45%) upper middle class, Nuclear families accounted for a majority of the cases constituting as many as 85 per cent.

### *The Traditional Set-up*

In the context of family milieu the amount of power exercised by its members can be gauged by the role that they play in decision making on various family matters. Power is defined as the ability to carry out one's will in the face of opposition (M.Weber, 1964, p.152). The description of decision-making process and power relations between husband and wife in the traditional Indian family portrays a situation where the husband enjoys power superior to that of the wife. He is the 'Master', 'lord', and 'God', and it is the duty of the wife to 'obey', 'serve', and 'worship', him. Thus one gets the impression that the domination of the husband over the wife is absolute and total. But George Simmel, the German sociologist (1950), has cautioned us to be wary of such sweeping generalizations. Enunciating his famous thesis that all the leaders are led and the master is a slave of his slaves, he has put forth his views that domination, in the ultimate analysis, is a form of interaction where there is mutual influencing between the superordinate and subordinate. Eliminations of all independent significance of one of the two interacting parties cuts at the very roots of sociation. He rightly observes that 'Societas Lioninn' that is, sociation with a lion where all the power is loaded on one side leaving the other with nothing, cannot be conceived as a form of interaction. Even in the most oppressive and cruel cases of subordination, there is still a considerable measure of personal freedom and hence scope for the exercise of power. We cannot, therefore, accept the widely popular notions of absolute domination of the husband and the abject servility of the wife in the traditional Indian family. A more realistic picture of the traditional Indian family would be that of the husband and wife as two interacting individuals influencing each other. However, the age-old norms, values had drawn clear cut lines of demarcation in the spheres of activity of the husband and wife. Therefore, there was hardly any question of one interfering with the affairs of the other. Hence, there was no question of husband or wife imposing his or her views on the other and carrying out his/her will in the face of opposition.

For instance, a woman had her own well defined spheres of activity as a wife, mother and housekeeper in which she had her own role to play, responsibility to shoulder and power to exercise. As the one who spent more time with the children and looked after their up-bringing, her influence over them was more than that of her husband's at least in the early years of childhood. Similarly as the one who managed every day routines of running the household, she had a greater say

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in taking decisions in these matters than her husband.

This was the situation in the 'ideal type' of traditional families. But in actual life there were innumerable occasions when the wives by sheer force of their personality (charisma?) wielded power disproportionate to their traditional position in the power structure of the family. With the help of this personal charisma, they have managed to occupy extra-institutional seats of authority and wielded enormous power, albeit discreetly, at the times of taking crucial decisions on vital domestic matters. The folk-histories are replete with anecdotes where women-be they mothers, wives or even sisters- have been the power behind the throne. It is, therefore, not without reason that such stereotypes as "urigella sardara handati munde pinjara" ("A warrior for the town but weaver before the wife") "Ammavar Genda" (her excellency's husband) etc. are some of the hardest currencies in the rumour world.

Thus the wife in the traditional Indian family has exercised power in one form or the other. Therefore, it would be wrong to state that the power and authority that the working wives now have in the dual-earner families is solely the outcome of their newly acquired role as co-earners.

### *Findings and Discussions:*

We found that only certain occasions in the family life call for conscious and deliberate strategies for asserting one's authority and power. Otherwise most of the functions of the family are the outcome of routine decisions made by the husband or wife with least regard to the notion of power and authority. Major issues that sometimes do not find total concurrence between the views of the husband and wife, thereby necessitating exercise of power by one or the other, include purchase or sale of land or house, vehicles, major (costly) gadgets, settlement of marital alliances of their children or of very close relatives like younger brothers or sisters of either of the spouses, allowing a close relative either of the husband or wife to stay with the family, spending money on the close relatives of either the husband or the wife etc. Even in such cases, we were not in a position to weigh as to who exercised more power and authority-husband or wife. The opinion of the talent, skill or experience suited to the situation. Decisions on such matters are taken after a series of discussions and debates by the couple. There are occasions when the wife has asserted herself, but this was seldom admitted. Conditioned as they were to the cultural norm that the husband was the head of the family and the decision maker, the wives were unwilling to project themselves as the decision makers. Therefore their stock answer to the question "who made the decision" was invariably, "husband" or, at the most "we decided

it together”.

The dual-earning families are egalitarian in the sense that the incidence of reluctant acquiescence of the husband is more in such families than perhaps in the single-earner families. The following case illustrates this fact. Mr.R is the college teacher. He narrated:

Even before we were married, we had decided to setup an independent house apart and away from the relatives on either side. Accordingly we set up our own establishment soon after our marriage. But after a couple of years of our marriage, my parents-in-law approached us with a proposal to keep their son (my wife's younger brother) with us so that he could continue his college studies in Dharwad. My wife, who all through had opposed the idea of keeping any relatives with us, changed her stand and pleaded with me for days to permit her brother to stay with us. She mustered all kinds of excuses in support of her pleas. She said that the presence of her brother in the house would be a great help in attending to small chores around the house and that his presence at home, when I was away on duty tour, would be great help from the security point of view etc. This sudden volte face by my wife took me by surprise. However, I put up a strong opposition. I even mounted a counter argument stating that if attending to the domestic chores and providing security were the considerations, I could as well bring my younger brother to stay with us. Thus the arguments and counter arguments continued for a long time. Tempers got frayed, harsh words were exchanged. So much so that we were not even on talking terms for a number of days. But this could not go on for ever. The tension at home was too much for me to bear. Therefore I had to yield and reluctantly agree to allow my wife's brother to stay with us. I am not happy with the decision. But you know marriage means compromise.

### ***Decision Making Among Couples Where Wives were Employed After Marriage :***

All the 22 housewives who were employed after marriage were interviewed in depth on this issue and all of them agreed that their employment had a significant impact on the power equation in the family.

The following case histories seem to support this contention. Mr.R is a bank employee. This is how she recounted the change.

Two things have brought about significant changes in my married life. The first is the birth of our son Avinash and the second is my employment. Even to this day I shudder to recall those five miserable years I spent with my husband and his parents before I got the job. At the time of the negotiations of our marriage I had attended an interview for a clerk's post in a bank and had been selected. I was awaiting my appointment order. This fact weighed a good deal in clinching the issue of marriage negotiations and the higgly-haggle of dowry. You know how it is. In our society a prospective husband looks at an employed girl as a "milch cow" who assures him long and regular source of income. Since I was "a milch cow" my parents-in-law stepped down in their dowry demand, and the marriage was performed. But fate had something cruel in store for me. One fateful day instead of getting the much eagerly awaited appointment order, I received a letter stating that someone had gone to court challenging our appointment and that our appointment was stayed by the Court of law. When my husband and parents-in-law came to know of this, my days of agony started. Not a single day passed without a sly comment either by my husband or parents-in-law. Their favorite barb was that "a milch cow had turned out to be a dry cow". I was reduced to a non-entity in the family. They made my life miserable and heaped abuses on my parents. To add to my agony, I did not conceive for nearly 4 years after our marriage. Our son Avinash was born only during the 5th year of our marriage. The arrival of my son into this world was a harbinger of good luck for me. It not only wiped out the stigma of barrenness but, more important, even when I was in my parent's house undergoing post-natal recovery, I received the happy news that the stay against our appointment had been vacated and that I was posted in a local branch of a nationalised bank.

One should personally undergo the experience to gauge the phenomenal change that my employment brought about in our family. Gone were the days when I was treated as a maid servant. There was a total metamorphosis in the relations between me and my husband and his parents. My in-laws, who had almost driven me to suicide, all of a sudden became solicitous and tender. Gone was their taunt of calling me "a dry cow" instead, they started praising me before all the sundry by calling me "Mane Tumbida Bhagya Laxmi" (A harbinger of prosperity).

But years of ill-treatment and the insults showered on my hapless parents had left great bitterness in me. I lost no time in retaliating. I launched a campaign for an independent household away from my money-minded parents-in-law. This was opposed by them and my husband. But I would not withdraw. Instead, I stepped up the struggle. As a result, our house turned into a battle-ground of intense struggle for power. At the behest of his parents my husband even threat-

ened me with separation. But I would not budge. I knew him well. His was not an intrinsic power but a reflected one. I queered the pitch by saying that I would not care and that I would rather live separately than in the house with his parents. My husband got the message and agreed to set up an independent household. What is more, I even managed to get my mother who was by then widowed, to come and stay with us. This is what my job has done for me.

In the course of our investigation, we came across three interesting cases where the husbands have on their own volition, and much against the wish and desire of their wives, subordinated themselves to their wives. The following are the details of the cases.

***Mrs. L, a college teacher had this to say***

I am astounded by the total transformation that has taken place in the attitudes of my husband after the death of his mother. It did not take me long after our marriage to realize that I had married a "Mummy's boy". My husband's attachment to his mother bewildered me in the beginning. For everything he would run to his mother. His mother had to select him his dresses, she had to grant permission for us to go to a movie or party, she had to be consulted and her approval taken before we left for my mother's place during holidays etc. etc. This was exasperating. But soon I learnt from his brothers and sisters that he was greatly attached to their mother from his childhood. This information helped me to control my temper. Another reason why I took things in my stride was that neither my husband nor my mother-in-law bore any ill-will or animosity towards me.

When my mother-in-law passed away peacefully two years back, I thought my husband would now come into his own and that we would live like man and wife. Honestly I never wanted him to be a hen-pecked husband any more than I had wanted him to be Mummy's boy. Infact, in my heart of hearts I secretly wished that he would exhibit such traits, as "toughness", "aggressiveness" and even "high-handed bossism" that go with manliness. But to my great surprise my husband, after the death of his mother, shifted his "loyalty" from his mother to me. He seemed to place me on his mental pedestal and started treating me with the same deference and subservience as he had done to his mother. This sudden transformation had an unsettling impact on me. I had a different image of what my husband should be. Therefore, I tried my best to dissuade him from this. But to no avail. Our life goes on — my husband relying on me for every thing. I am not at all happy about this but that is how it is.

***Mrs. S. has this to narrate***

My relations with my mother-in-law were not so cordial. She was an officious and haughty lady who believed that she was the centre of the universe and that everything should be done according to her dictates. Born and brought up in a family of loving parents and affectionate brothers and sisters, I could not stand the over-bearing attitude of my mother-in-law. All my determination and resolve to make my mother-in-law give up her high handedness and adopt more democratic ways came to naught when I realized that my husband was of a piece with his mother. He seemed to have no independent existence apart from her. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he was a puppet in the hands of his mother. All this happened when we were at Gulbarga- my husband's native place. Four years back we were transferred from Gulbarga to Dharwad. Having lived at Gulbarga all her life, my mother-in-law preferred to spend the rest of her life there and refused to come with us.

So for the first time in our married life of eight years we set up a home at Dharwad without our mother-in-law. I thought indeed earnestly prayed, that my husband would now be a changed man and that he would don the mantle of the head of the family and take the reins of managing the house firmly in his hands. Alas, that was not to be. I was in for greater shocks. Instead of taking up the initiative of managing the house, my husband started seeking orders from me for everything in exactly the same way he had done from his mother. I tried all ways and methods of weaning him away from me but without any success. Taken aback by this unfortunate turn of events I turned to my close friends and colleagues for advice. But they seemed to make light of the whole issue. In fact, they thought that this was some thing to rejoice on and be happy about. "What is there to be peeved about ? on the contrary you should thank your stars. You are the 'boss' of your house and not a slave like me with a drunkard of a dictator as my husband", said a close friend of mine. But believe me, I never wanted this to happen. I never wanted my husband to shift his subservience from the mother to me.

The third case of Mrs. P was more or less of the same nature. The only difference was that unlike Mrs. L and Mrs. S of the previous two cases, Mrs. P seemed to welcome and relish the shift of subservience of her husband from his mother to her.

***She said,***

Ours was a joint family in the sense that after our marriage we stayed with our

parents-in-law. My father-in-law was a dempocrat to the core but my mother-in-law was made of sterner stuff. She was the defacto boss of the family. Her words were the law. You can imagine my life with such a mother-in-law. However, my life was bearable so long as my father-in-law was alive. With his inimitable affectionate manner, he diffused the tension caused by the dictatorial ways of my mother-in-law. But with his passing away three years ago and my husband turning into a full-fledged 'Mummy's boy' things came to a head and my life become really intolerable. My mother-in-law had her own perverse logic. She seemed to hold me mainly responsible for every mishap in the family. When I dropped my first child she heaped curses on me saying that I had nipped the family creeper (Manetanada Bally) in the bud. When my husband met with a minor scooter accident on his way to fetch me from the office, she put the blame squarely on me saying that I had brought Shani kata (bad luck) to the family. But since last year things have changed dramatically in our family. They are improving. My mother-in-law is sick and ailing. She has completely lost her hold on my husband. He is no more a 'Mummy's boy'. He is totally changed. Now it is me who calls the tune and not his mother. Every one has his day and it is my day now.

It would be unscientific if not hazardous, to generalize on the basis of just three cases. But this phenomenon of 'transmigration of matronly image' from mother to wife seems to be quite frequent. Therefore, we can only say that this area calls for a deeper psychological probe.

We noticed yet another important trait among the working wives of our sample. They were unwilling to take up the leadership role of the family even when it was offered to them. They were inclined to exercise power and authority from behind the scene, and not overtly. As a result, though they did exercise considerable power in a number of matters related to family and outside it, they were reluctant to admit it.

### **Conclusion :**

The findings of the above study clearly show that the wives did exercise power commensurate with the duties they performed as wife, mother and care-taker. It would be totally wrong to say that full-fledged housewives had no power at all. But the power that they exercised was more in the form of derived powers and not intrinsic, secondary not primary. Employment of wives seems to have the definite impact of transforming the power from derived to intrinsic and from secondary to primary.

There could be two reasons for this. First, in a male-dominated society like the Indian society and the concept that a woman in an 'Abale' (weak and gentle sex) is deeply entrenched in the psyche of the people. Therefore, every woman craves to live up to this role-model. And one of the ways of conforming to this image is to keep a low profile in all the matters including the domestic ones.

Another reason could be the deep-lying psychological factor pointed out by George Simmel (1950). He stated (p.193) "The majority of men not only cannot exist without leadership; they feel that they cannot; they seek the higher power which relieves them of responsibility, they seek a restrictive regulatory vigor which protects them not only against the outside world but also against themselves". This seems to be all the more true with regard to women.

A sizeable majority of working wives in our sample overtly expressed that they are happiest and pleased with themselves and with the world when they were under the protection of their husbands. They felt insecure and unsettled under two circumstances. Firstly, when they did not get the total attention and protection of their husbands, and secondly when their husbands seemed to be concerned more about subserving the interests of others such as their mothers and other parental relatives. None of our female respondents however verbose and loud mouthed was desirous or confident of facing life all alone without the support of her husband. In fact, after my interview session with some of the overbold and outspoken female respondents I came away with the feeling that all their verbosity was a smoke-screen to hide their innate dependency on their husbands.



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## The Narrow Bridge of Respectability

Attiya Dawood <sup>1</sup>

All my life I kept walking on  
 The narrow bridge of respectability built by others.  
 For the sake of Father's 'pag', Brother's 'topi',  
 Every breath I took was as they wished.  
 When my reins were handed over to my husband,  
 Then like a clockwork toy  
 I laughed and cried as he pleased.  
 Just as I was afraid of ghosts as a child,  
 Today I tremble at the word "divorce".  
 Father gave "The Heavenly Jewel" in my dowry,  
 Every word in that book  
 Hangs heavy on me like a guilty conscience,  
 Beats my chest like the Second Wife.  
 Throttling my mind, dipped in my blood  
     that is how beliefs have been written  
 Laws have been framed  
 Assuming my status as a sub-human,  
 And society built  
 From the skulls of  
 What were once my ambitions.

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<sup>1</sup> ATTIIYA DAWOOD was born in Moledino Larik, a small village in district Naushero Feroz in Pakistan. She has been writing poetry since 1980. Her first collection of poems in Sindhi is due to appear soon. She has been hailed as the "most important feminist writer in Sindhi" by Shaikh Ayaz who says that a "each and every poem....is lustrous like a pearl".

## Women of the World Stand up to Violence

*Radhika Coomaraswamy*

The first area that interests me in terms of the implications of violence against women in the international arena is the process that made violence against women such an important part of human rights. There is no secret in the fact that certain international women's groups were responsible for the heavy lobbying of governments to place this issue on the international agenda.

The Global Tribunal on Violence against Women in Vienna which was sponsored by a women's NGO, made a powerful impact on the international community. Women's groups not only lobbied but took part in expert group meetings and helped draft many of the resolutions and draft declarations which began to take shape at international fora. The primacy of the women's lobby in this area of violence against women is undisputed.

It was the women's lobby that put the issue on the agenda, articulated the project in human rights terms and introduced the mechanisms to help in the implementation of this mandate. This same lobby is now requesting that there be an optional protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and that there be an International convention on violence against women which will be more binding than a General assembly resolution.

This primacy of the women's movement is an important factor in international politics today. It points to the rise of what Richard Falk called the international civil society as the initiator of programmes and mechanisms in

<sup>1</sup> Edward A. Smith Lecture delivered at the Harvard Law School by RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY, UN special rapporteur on violence against women, on the subject, 'Reinventing International Law: Women's Rights as Human Rights and the International Community.'

the UN system.

What is the nature of this lobby and why was it so successful? Firstly it is made of an international coalition of women's groups who have focussed their energies and efforts with regard to violence against women. In fact there were distinct lobbies which made up the whole. There was initially the humanitarian women's lobby-those interested in the problems of violence against women in armed conflict.

The events in Bosnia Herzegovina influenced this process and the mass rapes and killings had an important effect on the work of these women's groups. It also included East Asian groups working with comfort women who had been victims of Japanese government's military sexual slavery in the Second World War.

The second lobby that was involved in creating this international consensus on violence against women was the African and Asian women's lobby which was interested in health problems such as female genital mutilation, dowry deaths and customary practices which were violent toward women. These issues had already been brought up before the Human Rights Commission at the sub-commission level in reports and working groups relating to traditional practices. They played an important part in putting forward the platform on violence against women.

The third lobby was the North American, European and Latin American lobby which was interested in the issues of domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment. These groups were the most active and the best co-ordinated and they had a measure of influence over their governments. They were determined to make violence against women a human rights issue. They spearheaded the campaign on violence against two men and were largely successful.

They relied on alliances with Third World coalitions but were the most adept in the process of lobbying and studying the UN system. However, at Beijing, perhaps for the first time, a certain resentment was articulated at the Western dominance of the women's lobby especially in connection with United Nations instruments. There were arguments that UN procedures should be relaxed to allow more NGOs from the Third World to be accredited to the United Nations Human Rights Commission and the Economic and Social Council.

Another lobby which played a major part in these international initiatives was Women Living Under Muslim Laws who made a strong case for violation of women's rights resulting from religious extremism to be included as a major area of concern for women's rights. Because of their pressure the mandate of the special rapporteur refers to religious extremism as a cause of violence against women which should be the subject of her scrutiny.

Finally, the other lobby which was instrumental in the creation of the post of the special rapporteur and the enactment of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women was the lobby coming from South East and East Asia dealing with the problem of trafficking and forced prostitution. This has been a very active lobby at both the regional and national level with close links to the other women's groups. They were extremely active in Vienna and many of them assisted in getting women victims for the global tribunal which made such an impact in Vienna.

### *The nation-state*

In recent times, the presence of NGO lobbies have truly assisted United Nations value formation in the area of human rights. Many of the concerns and reactions of the United Nation Human Rights Commission and Sub-commission are animated by the international NGO movement. This is an important factor in assessing the impact of women's rights on the international community. This activist role for international civil society actors marks a major step forward in the process of creating normative international standards.

The victories at Vienna and Beijing are greatly attributable to the consistent pressure of these NGOs. The dominance of NGOs in the international process has not been accepted by all parties. Many states have NGO "phobia" and feel that the role of NGOs have to be curtailed. In addition they point out that many of the accredited NGOs are from the developed West and out of proportion with regard to influence and power. Whatever the sensitivities of certain governments, the NGOs have not only consolidated their presence but are in the process of lobbying for greater representation in United Nations functions and conferences. They have become an important part of the international process relating to human rights. But violence against women is their special victory.

Another implication of this violence against women in international law is

that it is part of the new assault on the powers and configuration of the nation-state. According to commentators, the nation-state is no longer the focus of women's agitation.

The women are taking their issues directly to the in international community. Many international activities are transnational and groups take normative initiatives without state authorisation.

International law has always been statist and the nation-state has been central to the development of international law. The state was seen as the fountainhead of all power. In recent times these perceptions have changed. The dynamic growth of human rights law has already challenged the hegemony of the nation-state and the sanctity of sovereign borders. This took place before any initiative on violence against women. There are certain principles that operated below the level of the nation-state and its actions and discretion are subjects of scrutiny. The intrusion of human rights into international law rules and practice has been so profound that in recent times only states that represent people and respect human rights are seen as being entitled to the full benefits of the international community.

Though the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of states reiterates the old formula of a state requiring a permanent population, defined territory, a government and capacity to enter into relations with other states, the European Community guidelines with regard to recognition rules relating to the Soviet and Yugoslav Republics speak of respect for the UN Charter, the rule of law, democracy and human rights. It also makes reference to the guarantees of the rights of ethnic and national groups and minorities.

It does not as yet speak specifically of women's rights. But the important development is that human rights has come a long way from being a soft scrutiny of states. It has now become an integral part of what constitutes a state and its ability to conduct international relations. The nation-state itself has been radically reconstructed to include the value of human rights at least the normative level. The applications of these principles have generated a whole host of criticism and the European Community has been accused of applying these principles in an arbitrary manner. But it is still important to realize that human rights has moved from the periphery to the centre of international law. It is no longer of only marginal interest.

*Nivedini*  
**State responsibility**

While human rights doctrine in itself has resulted in the greater of scrutiny states with regard to international standards, the women's movement for violence against women has taken the further step of taking international scrutiny into the marital home, thus profoundly affecting existing doctrine on state responsibility. The Women's Convention began the process by stating in Article 2 (c) that states should take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organisation or enterprise.

This is further developed by the Latin American cases on disappearances, the most important of which is *Velasquez Rodriquez vs. Honduras*. In that case the Inter-American Court of Justice held that Honduras was responsible for politically motivated disappearances not overtly carried out by government officials. The state has an affirmative duty to protect human rights applying a due diligence standard. It has a duty to "organize the government apparatus to ensure the full and free exercise of all rights....." States are exhorted to make good faith efforts to prevent disappearances.

The cases on disappearances in Latin America make states responsible for violence in the community perpetrated by non-state actors. States being held responsible for their failure to meet international obligations even when violations, originate in the conduct of private individuals was only recently been accepted as valid. But violence against women takes it one step further.

Now states may be held responsible for their failure to meet international obligations even the violence is by private actors operating in the privacy of their home. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in article 4 (c) states clearly that states should "exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and in accordance with national legislation, punish acts of violence against women. "As mentioned earlier violence against women includes violence as it exists in the family, community and by the state.

This expansion of doctrine is revolutionary and though not vindicated in any court of law, international standards setting instruments and mechanisms are very clear about the fact that private violence in the home is not beyond scrutiny and that states may be held responsible for not exercising due diligence in the investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of violence against women.

*Nivedini*  
**Equal protection**

In addition to the due diligence standard, Human Rights Watch and other human rights groups have argued that non-prosecution of individuals who violate the human rights of women also violates equal protection. Research does suggest that the investigation prosecution and sentencing of crimes of domestic violence occur with much less frequency than of other similar crimes. Wife murderers receive greatly reduced sentences, domestic battery is rarely investigated and rape frequently goes unpunished.

This non-prosecution is seen by many to imply the violation of equal protection standards within a society. This approach has not been adopted in international courts of law but there is an attempt to push forward this argument in terms of setting international norms of human rights. It is an interesting doctrine which has been developed by some scholars and activists.

The doctrine of state's responsibility is in the throes of suffering a revolution. With regard to violence, states are not only responsible for their own conduct or the conduct of their agents, but are now responsible for their failure to take necessary steps to prosecute private citizens for their behaviour in the home. Women's rights as human rights in general and violence against women in particular are responsible for the growth of this international doctrine on this case in point.

Though it has not been sanctified by international judicial opinion, it is an important change. It opens human rights to a whole range of issues which earlier were not its domain. As was said earlier, in recent times the family is seen as a political unit which may entertain power hierarchies that use their power arbitrarily and violently. Intimacy and privacy are no longer justifications for the non-intrusion of the state. It is important that the hierarchy within the family be challenged and equalised. That is the special gift of the women's movement to international human rights.

**Scandinavian aura**

The discussion on state responsibility must also give us pause so as to consider the construct of the state envisioned by women's rights activists. On the one hand there is the view of the states as the perpetrator of violence or in complicity with those who perpetrate violence against women. At the same time there is the view of the state with what I have called "a scandinavian aura" an activist interventionist state in paternalistic protection of the battered, violated



woman. These views of the state only prove the ambivalence we have toward the nation-state and how despite our many attempts to bypass its tangled-web, there is no escape, not only from state directed violence but also our reliance on the state apparatus to protect the woman victim. This duality is an aspect which runs through many of the writings of women experts on this subject.

Not only the basic tenets of international law such as state responsibility but also human rights doctrine itself is being transformed by the discourse of women's rights. It is often said that the first generation of human rights was civil and political rights; that the second generation is economic, social and cultural rights; the third generation is considered to be group rights and the right to self determination. It may be argued that women's rights is the fourth generation radically challenging the private public distinction in international human rights law and pushing for the rights of sexual autonomy.

One way in which the human rights doctrine is transformed is through a radical reinterpretation of the earlier generation of rights to meet the concerns of women. For example the right to life and freedom from torture are being invoked as new right which should be re-examined in light of violence against women.

### ***Freedom from torture***

Rhonda Copelone has put forward the interesting idea that torture should include violence against women in the home. In international instruments, torture is said to require severe physical and/or mental harm and suffering that is intentionally afflicted for a specific purpose with some form of official involvement. The official involvement she sees as state inaction and the inability to get redress.

This unique approach to torture has been articulated very recently and although it has not gained any official sanction, it is one of the ways in which feminist writers are thinking innovatively about civil and political rights in the context of gender.

### ***Difference***

Another interesting series of writing has been on the question of equality. Recent arguments about universality and difference has been applied to the equality provision of international human rights. The principle of non-discrimination against women is firmly entrenched in international law and is the anchor of all women's rights and the core subject of Women's Convention. But feminist writings have experimented with the concepts to bring in the issue of difference the special quality of being female as an aspect that should be respected by the provision. Equality in the past has meant women's access to places and positions which were traditionally male. But how then do we treat pregnant women, violence against women and other gender specific issues? It is argued that the difference between men and women should also be recognised and that sex specific violations should gain visibility in the world of international human rights.

It is argued that programmes for affirmative action would thereby be more firmly rooted if difference is also recognised. In addition Third World women argue that the difference in culture and lifestyle should also be accepted albeit within the general framework of equality. Finally there are those like Martha Minow who have argued that masculine and feminine are differences which require analysis and conceptualisation without making them hierarchical. Women's experiences are different and women's rights should learn to respect these differences without resorting to male privilege.

In this context it must be recognised that while some feminists are attempting to go "beyond equality" to a deeper analysis, a few state actors in the international arena such as Sudan, have argued that the word equality be completely removed and replaced with the word equity when it comes to gender-based issues. Equality is seen as not desirable but equity and fairness, as more abstract legal provisions, should guide state action toward women. At Beijing this lobby put up a strong fight. It is because of this that I am wary about interfering too strongly with the right to equality.

It is an entrenched provision where women are to be treated equally to men. Though this does not cover issues such as violence against women it does cover a whole host of other issues which are important for women working in the public sphere. It is better to let the settled doctrine alone and bring in women's concerns through the articulation of another provision of human rights.

## *Liberal Reforms, Feminist Consciousness and National Models, Ambivalent Constructions, Within Nationalism \**

Selvy Thiruchandran

The latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in India can be called the beginnings of the modern era. The socio-political developments came in quick succession. The convergence of these developments had implications for gender relations. The convergence also led to a series of contradictions with an ambivalence which was to continue later in the twentieth century. The liberal ideology of the British led to many reforms in socio-religious practices. This was welcomed by the local intelligentsia. However the casting of an imperialistic vision of backwardness and primitiveness on Indian culture was resented by the natives. They also resented the role the British took upon themselves to civilize the natives. Despite these conflicts certain reforms were carried through. *Sati* was abolished in 1829, female infanticide was prohibited in 1870. Lifting the prohibition on widow remarriage in 1856, and the abolition of child marriage in 1929 were also significant pieces of legislation. Some of the most overtly oppressive socio-religious customs from the point of female oppression were at least annulled legally.

The second factor which was equally important was the missionary activities. The conversion to liberalism at the political level was followed by the conversion to Christianity at the religious level. The third important factor was the awakening of the local intelligentsia to a radical consciousness via the English language which opened internationalist vistas. The English language brought

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\* This paper was read at the South Asian Conference on Women: The State, Fundamentalism and Cultural Identity held on Colombo, 13-16 March 1992.

with it ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, in short the ideology of the French revolution and the Russian revolution. The Tamil revolutionary poet Subramaniya Bharatiyar welcoming the Russian revolution through his poem 'The new Russia' and 'The fall of the Czar' and writing on women's liberation in South Africa (Bharatiar 1981:311-312, Bharatiar 1986:88) are typical of these trends. Linkages to the ideology of women's liberation had to be sought within these general trends.

While extending their support to the constitutional and legal amendments in the arena of women's rights, some of the Tamil intellectuals wrote on the women's question. This section will deal with their contributions and the resultant consciousness that emerged during this period. This discussion will at the same time pinpoint the ambivalence which has finally led to contradictory visions and conflicting ideologies on women's issues. These contradictions and conflicts have contributed substantially to the construction of the image of women both in the literary and the filmic productions. The social reality of the women should also merit attention from this perspective. Strangely, in the Tamil regions in India it was the men who pioneered feminist writings. Starting chronologically from Subramaniya Bharatiyar, attention will be focused on their writings. Most of what they said were in the form of pamphlets articles and speeches, considered seditious at that time. They were not available in the form of published literature for the public in their complete forms for a long time. They were collected and published later. I have collected my data from the most recent publications which contain more or less the complete writings.

### *Feminist Demands and their Ambivalence*

Subramaniya Bharatiar (1882-1921) extended his support to women's groups. In his extensive writing both in prose and verse he emphasised the need for women to have equal socio-economic rights and the personal freedom to divorce and to choose their husbands (Bharatiar 1981:241). While criticising pre-puberty marriages he advocated remarriage and the granting of property rights for women. He compares Indian women with South African black people, who are isolated, secluded and treated like slaves. But the difference he says is that in South Africa the enemy is a foreigner; here the enemies are our brothers, fathers, uncles and grandfathers, husbands and lovers, and hence the dilemma. He urges women to start the struggle within their homes.

**"Refuse to be slaves, say to men we refuse to live with you, start it today and now. Say it loud, I am equal to you in everything, if you recognise my equality I will live with you. If not I will not cook. This house belongs to me and hence I will not go out."**

(Bharatiar 1981: 251-259)

The virtue of chastity which has a long history is another topic he deals extensively with 'questioning the standards of double morality embedded in the concept. He compares the arrogance of men to British imperialism. Just as the British are forcing the Indians to be loyal to them, so are the men imprisoning women and expecting them to be faithful. He questions the ignorance of men in forcing faithfulness on women by oppressing them (Bharatiar 1981:243-244). The language he uses is convincing and betrays his sense of commitment to the cause. The use of logic to put across the message is a regular feature of his style. Apart from the chastity concept the Tamil tradition celebrated a four-fold quality of femininity, fear, grace, shame and ignorance, as befitting a woman of virtue. He puts asunder that claim and equals the state of such a woman to that of a dog. He emphasises that what is virtue for a woman is to have knowledge and freedom.

Subramaniya Bharatiyar's nationalist vision, for which he was celebrated and arrested and accused by the British of writing seditious literature did not make him an apologist defending Indian customs or the Indian heritage. The ambivalence that characterised many Indian nationalists on the women's question did not surface in his ideology.

### *Feminism of the Dravidian Movement*

E.V. Ramaswamy's (1879-1972) liberation was also part of a general liberation ideology. The feminist ideology as projected by E.V. Ramaswamy, popularly known as "Periyar" (the great, with an honorific suffix "ar") was broader and deeper. The Dravidian movement which was to a great extent given its content and form by Periyar was in many respects a response to the compromising policy of the bourgeois leadership of the freedom movement on social and class issues. The social issues mentioned here include women's liberation as well. The social historians have seen Periyar as a rationalist, as a nationalist, an anti-Brahmin activist, an atheist, but the feminist Periyar was always glossed over. Periyar's views are radical in its content. His feminist vision was part of his rationality

and atheism, an attack on social customs and religious demands, which are archaic and superstitious. This was also a part of the attack on the so called "Aryanisation" of the Tamil culture. In this process he identified the particular oppressive institutions to which Tamil women were subject, namely: female infanticide, prohibition of widow remarriage, widow seclusion, and child marriage. He connected these customs with high caste Brahmins and with the notion of caste purity, which these customs were supposed to uphold for the Brahmins.

Periyar's virulent anti-Brahmin stand has to be understood in the light of the major role of domination that the Brahmin played in the socio-economic and socio-religious life of the people. From their traditional religious roles they had moved to monopolise the secular areas of the professions and state machinery, as professors of universities and colleges and as administrators. Any movement for social equality and against caste domination had to have an anti-Brahmin orientation (Ram 1979:379). As much as Periyar held the Brahmins responsible for the infiltration by an Aryan culture, he also held them responsible for the irrational and mythical character of Hinduism with its variant scriptures: the *Vedas*, *Manudharma Shastras*, *Puranas* and the two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. (Periyar 1974:6-48, 1987a:4-10, 1959: III-IV). He condemned them as irrational, archaic and superstitious. The fundamental premise of his inquiry was the irrationality and the legitimising process which reduces humanity to follow a particular line of thinking, believing myths to be real and taking their characters as models to be imitated. In this attempt his feminist perspective was not wayward or capricious. Among his various publications he questioned the status of women and the inhuman treatment meted out to them in the name of religion and culture.

Two short separate publications, *On Family Planning* (1980) and *Pen En Adimaianal* (Why did woman become a slave?) (1987) bring out vividly Periyar's rational approach to the women's question. He lays special emphasis on the sufferings of women who are particularly affected by unplanned parenthood and by recurrent births. He explains how they affect the health of the women, and how expectations of motherhood deprive her of other vocations in life. He links the general oppression of a woman to the role she plays as a mother (Periyar 1980:9-19).

On the more general aspects of women's subordination, few have been more categorical and precise. The absence of an ambivalent stand is noteworthy.

thy in his attempts at deciphering the process of women's subordination historically, and in his stand on contemporary issues. He puts across his messages with a strong sense of rationality that they imply the seriousness and the urgency. From the principle of rationality he attacks the concept of Tamil chastity *karpu* and how it has been made into a wifely virtue and how men have been exempted from it. He elaborates on the irrationality of the concept of chastity and criticises those Tamil and Sanskrit authors who dwelt on it extensively (*Manudharma Shastra* and *Tirukural*). He takes as an example the chapter on *Tirukural* (*Valkaitunainalam*) where *Karpu* is defined and the worshiping virtue of a wife is extolled and how she could command rain by being a chaste woman. To this he adds the Sanskrit concept called *paty vrata* (the penance to the lord, the husband) and concludes that the ideal relationship expected between a husband and wife is that of master slave, lord servant. The fact that there are no words in our languages (Indian) to connote male chastity, he says, is due to the patriarchal (*anatikam*) system (Periyar 1987:16-25). This kind of male bias, he insists, encourages women to be treated as sexual objects and enslaves them. Since there is no equality between the genders, even a neutral word such as *karpu* which ordinarily should include both the genders is now made into a gender-specific concept to exclude men. This is done by men to their advantage. He ends this section with a query would a woman author, write such verses and express such sentiments as in the *Manudharma Shastra* and *Tirukural*? Here he echoes the contemporary feminist thinking that men having taken over control of the literary production have written such gender biased sentiments and totally omitted the women's points of view. Men did this because men control the finances and they are gainfully employed (economic power). They do this because they are physically stronger than women. They are in fact the ruffians (*morkar*). Because of physical power and economic power they have exempted themselves from chastity and made laws beneficial to them.

While discussing the *purdah* (covering the head and face) system and the general seclusion of women and issues such as monogamy for women, and polygamy for men and prohibition of divorce and remarriage for women, Periyar is emphatic that law and religion are not the only causes for this state of affairs. The acceptance and justification that women in the Tamil society give to such systems help to strengthen and legitimise them. He compares this to the psychology of the lower castes who accept their subservience and slavery and accept their treatment by the high caste (obedience, seclusion, isolation and service) on an assumption that they are indeed unequal human beings. Women themselves think that they belong to men and should be under the control of men, because they are conditioned to accept social habits blindly. His arguments

are here directed towards the concept of "consciousness raising", the modern feminist strategy. He concludes this section by advising women that they should not tolerate the beastly acts of husbands for the sake of chastity. For the sake of chastity women should not continue to live with husbands who don't love them. This kind of social oppression should be destroyed (Periyar 1987:14-15).

"There is no freedom, no love, no chastity unless those laws which are written by a powerful group against a powerless group are done away with (Periyar 1987:16).

He points out the hypocrisy and the contradiction in the social constructions of conventions and taboos which affect only one gender. He elaborates on the contradiction that while love is hailed as divine in Tamil literature and glorified "as unions of mind", in real life men and women are brought into matrimonial contract on the basis of arranged marriage to beget children, to regulate sexual desires and, in the case of women, to do domestic service.

While arguing for the right to annul an unhappy marriage, Periyar says that the marriage system prevailing in the Tamil region is the most oppressive. In reality the marriage rites performed are meant to make a woman a slave to a man. But it is hailed as a divine arrangement in glorifying terms. In this way a woman is deceived (Periyar 1987:38-41).

Property rights for women, and the right to abortion have also merited his attention (Periyar 1987:62). The act of Sarada which was submitted to the British Government to prohibit child marriage was obstructed by the elitist nationalists. He charged them as opportunists and backward (Periyar 1987:72).

Periyar's feminist vision borders on the vision of contemporary radical feminists (Firestone 1970), when he emphasises that the biological factor, i.e. women's ability to conceive, is the root cause of her subordination. Hence women should be rid of that problem totally. "Others may think it is a foolish proposition but I don't see any other alternative, other than for women to get rid of this nuisance to achieve their liberation" (Periyar 1987:82). To those who raise the counter argument that if women refuse to bear children humanity will perish, he has another question. "If humanity perishes, how does that affect women"?

Periyar is known for his active campaign and programmes of widow remarriages where he dispensed with the enslaving Sanskritic marriage rites. He had a comprehensive theory which accommodated many of the contempo-



rary feminist theories and which challenged many of the core values of the Tamil cultural system. He argued for autonomous women's groups, and he had a radical programme of action which makes his vision a complete one.

### "Femininity is Great and Holy"

A somewhat different approach to the women's question comes from V.Kalyanasundaram. His two main concerns, apart from his active participation in national liberation, were women and workers. Being a politician, he politicised these two issues. However, his ideology is conceptually different from that of Bharatiyar and Periyar. An attempt will be made first to identify the major trends within Kalyanasundaram's writings. They will then be classified and summed up within a conceptual framework comparing them with contemporary feminist ideology.

On the main question of the liberation of women he did agree with them, but his general approach was different and he perceived women differently. He identified certain qualities in women. He considered them to be peculiar to women and indeed he thought they were great and should be celebrated and cultivated, and in fact extended to men. Those qualities such as patience, capacity for sacrifice, peaceful nature, passivity, nurture, motherliness, quiet mannerisms, softness of words, are qualities of a cultured mind. They emanate not from weakness but from greatness and are near to godliness (Kalyanasundaram 1953:4-24). He called them *pennin perumai* (the greatness of women) and authored a book with that title. Women are humble not out of fear or inadequacy but out of maturity and recognition of others' talents and feelings. They practice quiet mannerisms out of respect for others (Kalyanasundaram 1971:121-122). He thought women were close to culture: "many of the poets, musicians and painters have feminine qualities and because of this, they were able to flower into artists. Men have demonic qualities and they should cultivate the divine qualities of women" (Kalyanasundaram 1982:305). He echoes the sentiments of cultural feminism, a trend within radical feminism, which insists on celebrating femininity against aggressiveness, violence and strength, which are tagged as machoism and are regarded as men's qualities.

His stand on the oppressive institutions such as child marriage, *sati* and widow remarriage was the same as that of Periyar and Bharatiyar. He actively campaigned for the abolition of the *devadasi* system and tried hard to bring the

*devadasis* into mainstream life, as wives of men. He blames men entirely for their position in society. He equalled the *devadasi* system to committing murder, condemned the creation of a prostitute caste and charged the Brahmin priests with exploiting them (Kalyanasundaram 1937:45). He was deeply involved in the issue of *devadasis* and differed from Gandhi on his stand. Gandhi was not in favour of getting *devadasis* married. He was organising them to be trained in spinning and urging them to live independently out of the money they earned and renounce married life and sex. Kalyanasundaram was more objective in his approach. He wanted the men to accept them as wives and give them a social status equal to that of the other women. He was appealing to men to have the courage and conviction to come forward and accept them as wives (Kalyanasundaram 1982:600). His views could be considered more practical and even more radical when compared to Gandhi's, who told them to give up their "unworthy" profession and become *sanyasinis* (female ascetics). On the issue of widow remarriage too he differed from Gandhi. Gandhi preferred asceticism and a sexless life for the widows. He requested the widows to follow a path of voluntary enlightened widowhood. Kalyanasundaram however was more progressive. He advocated widow remarriage for all young widows, but he wanted the widows with children to remain so if they wished. However, he affirmed that they should decide for themselves and that they should have the right to decide (Kalyanasundaram 1953:301).

Kalyanasundaram compared the status of women to that of the oppression suffered by the working class under a capitalist system (Kalyanasundaram 1935:60). Men think women are created to do service for men. This is a demonic vision (Kalyanasundaram 1935:61). He also rightly identified the caste based variations in the position of women and he related the oppressive institutions of child marriage and widow seclusion to the caste ideology (Kalyanasundaram 1919:183). He also compared men to the bourgeoisie and women to the poor. The man as the head of the family controls the resources whereas, due to lack of financial control, women have to serve and behave like slaves (Kalyanasundaram 1935:78). The above similes and explanations reveal his socialist vision as well, on the lines of contemporary socialist feminism.

He condemns those saints and seers who saw women as sexual objects and as "feminine evil" and those women-haters who thought women are obstacles to the liberation of the soul (Kalyanasundaram 1971:46). Women's participation in the national liberation struggle in the Tamil regions did not have the

same impact as it did have in North India. He blamed this on the Tamil men and appealed to the men not to subjugate their women but to allow them to do their part of service to the nation (Kalyanasundaram 1919:261).

Having listed some of the inhuman social customs in India such as widow seclusion, the oppression of widows, child widows, female infanticide, forced marriage of women, prostitution and the dowry system, Kalyanasundaram advised women not to depend on the laws which were being initiated in the general reform movement (Kalyanasundaram 1937:42). They would not be totally satisfactory. Women should come forward to eradicate the restrictions on their own. However, he insisted on a condition here. They should agitate, not contravening the "dharma of the country" (Kalyanasundaram 1919:198-199).

While a progressive note runs through Kalyanasundaram's ideology and his action oriented programme, there is no doubt that an ambivalent attitude is struck now and then. Many times he seems to sacrifice women's issues to the cultural heritage of India. In this he differs from Periyar and Bharatiyar but he is close to Gandhi.

Kalyanasundaram was more concerned with the question of "Indian dharma" than with the women's question. In another context he categorises women into three groups. The first are those who want to accept the western women's social customs. They want to give up the traditional fourfold feminine qualities of "fear, shame, ignorance and grace". They see no difference between men and women. They take part in public affairs like men. The second category selects whatever is good from the West, but would not give up their own customs and habits. They would not want to go to the legislative assemblies. They would not involve themselves with affairs in which they are not conversant. They help the men in public activities. The third group of women, follow their traditional life-style totally. These are the women who are treated like servants by men. Of these three groups he rates the second category as the best and as the most suitable for India. They safeguard the honour of the country, they are like gods. He condemns the first group of women and perceives them as a destructive force. They will ruin themselves and others too (Kalyanasundaram 1919:208).

This love and respect for the *desa dharma* or the *dharma* of the country has to be understood as part of the national liberation ideology of the time. This psychology of nationalism was a reactive response to the negative vision of British imperialism which viewed everything Indian as "uncivilized and back-

ward" and needing to be civilized. Women became part of the exercise of the reassertion of culture. *Desa dharma* ideology was indeed a negative reaction which undermined gender equality holding women within the parameters of culture and tradition.

When this kind of liberation ideology for women was presented by men to women of the colonial and post-colonial period, women had to confront various shades of gender ideology. One such is within the confines of nationalism. The Indian counter-ideology attempted to project women and their feminine qualities as collective representations of the superiority and the inviolability of indigenous socio-religious traditions as against western civilization, which was soulless and rational. Gandhi was one such propagator. He extended the ideology of the national liberation, the *ahimsa* doctrine (nonviolence) to women's liberation as well. He became a convert to this philosophy when he was convinced of the effectiveness of the passive non-violent non-cooperation that was thrown at him by his wife and his mother when they disagreed with him. He saw a moral excellence in passivity and humbleness, the feminine qualities, and wanted men to give up their aggressiveness and violence and feminise them. His admiration for women of the epics and *Puranas* - Sita, Draupadi and Damayanthi - who were projected as models for Indian women is for all times. He constantly reiterated that the strength of women lies in the purity of mind and chastity. For him both were inseparable. The highest virtue for a woman is to kill herself if her chastity is violated (Gandhi 1958:338).

Gandhi's model of Sita, held up to Indian womanhood as exemplary and to be followed, further legitimised such a "feminisation ideology" (Srinivasan 1987:2226). Gandhi was also keen to maintain the traditional gender roles and could not envisage any fundamental change, though he drew women into the national liberation struggle (Kishwar 1986:56).

### Cultural/National Models Versus Gender Identity

Religion as centrally determining ethno-linguistic nationalism has played a very regressive role towards women. The cultural identity phenomenon within the nationalist movements had a conservative and backward effect on women. It was indeed a strange phenomenon that nationalist intellectuals had to seek shastric sanction for changing or abolishing the overtly oppressive institutions in India such as sati and for the prohibition of the ban on widow remarriage. Viresalingam in Madras and Vidyasagar in Bengal, who were involved in the

debates, argued that they would not introduce a measure that did not have religious approval (Panikkar 1987:2116). The reaction to the Age of Consent Bill in India in 1891, which raised the age of consent for marriage of girls, was typical of this trend. Even Tilak the foremost nationalist wrote in Mahratta (April 12 1891):

"We are very sensitive and feel nothing so much as attack on our national character. That the Age of Consent Act will write in the statute book the character of the Indian nation in the blackest letters.... is our grievance.... So long as this certificate of bad character remains on the statute book we can enjoy no rest" (quoted in Yogendrasingh 1973:74).

This kind of nationalism and a plea for cultural identity is expressed against the reality of the situation, where in 1881 14% of all Hindu girls within the age of ten in Bengal and 10% in Bombay and 4.5% in Madras were either married or widowed. He opposed the bill because he felt that the British should not be allowed to interfere in Indian culture.

While the national liberation ideology took note of overt discrimination on caste and gender lines, nationalists remained uncompromisingly chauvinistic on the issue of personal or family laws. On the issue of women's suffrage they tendered their co-operation, perhaps with the additional reason (besides its being non-familial, and non-personal), that this would tilt the political power of the Indians to their advantage in terms of their national aspirations. The demand of the All Indian Women's Conference to change the Hindu Code in the areas of marriage, divorce and inheritance was opposed by nationalist men. Wherever the patriarchal control in the family and domestic situation needed to be undermined so that gender equality could be real, those demands met with opposition. But to a kind of liberal ideology of equal rights in employment, education and right to vote, nationalist male support was forthcoming. It was not surprising that they used patriotic and nationalist arguments to support patriarchal control. They argued that the sponsors of the proposals were influenced by western education (by implication imperialist) instead of Hinduism (which was Indian) and thereby had become unpatriotic!

The feminist consciousness that developed during the colonial period however, was the beginnings of a process of gender sensitiveness. This subsequently lead to many legal changes which systematically attempted a

process towards gender equality by law.

To what extent these reforms lead to changes in gender ideology remains an unfinished inquiry up to this date.

One unique feature of this period and which raises other questions is the involvement of men in the project of feminism. The obvious question then would be, why did not the women also contribute towards this feminist awakening at this period of time?.

Time and place had an important role to play in this awakening. India was then considered by British to be primitive, uncivilised and backward with archaic customs such as sati and female infanticide. Such a view of 'Mother India' by the masters has pricked the conscience of the local intellectuals who were suddenly alerted to re-look at the injustice of the system. This lead them to a campaign of cleansing India of its oppressive institutions. Once the initiative came from the local population the British considered lending their support as long as it did not upset the apple cart of their power and authority by facing revolts. At this point they put on the role of "civilizing the colonies". This is how and why the nationalist men got involved in feminist issues. Why did not the women also contribute ? Women even at this stage continue to be recipients of messages. Within the nationalist movement there was also an ambivalent glorification of all that was Indian and of the past. Women still remained within the idiom of national, within the national image of Sita. The women participated in the freedom movement and took part in passive resistance and in the non-violent struggle of non-cooperation against the British with their men. But independant recourse to challenging their subordination had not started then. Gandhi's role in perpetuating the image passivity could not be questioned. The men such as Subramaniya Bharatiar, Kalyanasundaram and Periyar had to overtly and implicitly question Gandhi's stance on many social issues.

## GLOSSARY

Anatikam	Male Dominance
Ahimsa	Non-violence
Bhakti	Devotion
Bharata natyam	Indian classical dance
Cankam	Association or assembly of poets
Desa dharma	Dharma befitting the customs of one's country
Devadasi/Tevaratiyar	Women attached to temple services
Dharma, Dharmic	Righteous action, rules, norms and decorum.
	Atharman is the Tamilicised negative prefixed form of dharma
Karpu	Chastity
Madhuriya bhava	Sweet emotions
Mahabharata	The great epic.
Manusmrti/Manudharma	Manu's treatise on dharma also called Manudharma shastra
Morkars	Ruffians
Paty vrata	The penance of chastity for the lord, the husband
Puranas	Religious texts dealing with the myths of gods and goddesses
Ramayana	A famous Sanskrit epic
Sati	Self immolation by female
Shastras, Shastric	Relating to Manudharma shastra, the legal document and other Sanskrit sacred manuals on law, customs and duties
Tirukural	A text of the post Cankam period
Vedas	The earliest religious text in classical Sanskrit, four in number, called Rgveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda

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## The Impact Of Technological Changes On Women's Employment

### A Case Study of an Electronics Factory

Anberiya Hanifa<sup>1</sup>

The study was conducted primarily by interviewing 25 workers out of 1040 workers. We had originally intended to interview 5% of the workers, but it was difficult to meet them. The General Secretary of the Parent Union contacted the branch union. The researchers explained the purpose of the study and requested the branch union to select 50 workers to be interviewed. Selection of the workers were mostly left to the branch trade union leaders, but researchers advised them to identify workers with long and short years of service, those living in boarding and in their own houses, and involved in different production processes.

We were able to interview only 25 workers and we had a group discussion too. Interviews were held after work at the union office. Workers were very free and relaxed to talk to us. They were not inhibited as they were certain that we did not have links to the management. The interviews were conducted in Sinhalese.

Questionnaires were used to interview workers. Apart from the questionnaires, structured discussion were held. Semi structured discussion/ interviews were conducted with Unions that were involved, government officers, labour department and the BOI, dealing with the workplace. Labour legislations were studied in detail.

Difficulties encountered in the study can be summarised briefly. It was very difficult to identify the articles produced and the process of production,

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because workers were not able to explain the nature of the work clearly. This was more difficult as the researchers were not familiar with the terminology, technicalities of the production process, the raw materials used and the final product. This difficulty would be less in the garment factory than in the electronics industry, as garments are a familiar product. The selection of the workers could have been biased but in the circumstances of the study, this cannot be avoided. The possibility of identifying a rival union which was supportive of the management was looked into, but researchers were cautious as it might hinder the study and the management's relations with the members of the Union.

### Company Profile

The Company chosen to study is Kaksto Pvt. Ltd. (A fictitious name) which has BOI status. In 1988 Kaksto was initially known as KT Ltd. but subsequently changed its name to Kaksto Ltd. The company had changed its location twice. Initially the company was located in the suburbs of Colombo, later at location x and now at location y in the heart of Colombo in a densely populated area. Presently this company manufactures magnetic heads for a variety of Audio, Video and Computer applications. The items include record/playback heads for Audio cassette recording and VTR heads used in floppy/hard disks. Kaksto is affiliated to a Japanese company which manufactures similar products and has two modern manufacturing plants in Japan.

Sales of this Company had grown to US \$1,500,000 (projection) in 1993. Production breakdown per month in 1991 amounted to 25,800,000 units.

In 1988 this company had employed 45 workers and figures for the last quarter of 1994 are given below, which shows a steady growth in the number employed.

### PROFILE OF THE WORKFORCE

Table 1: Total No. Employed Persons by Job Category & Sex at Kaksto Ltd.

Sex	Semi Skilled	Supervisors	Secret. & Clerk	Electricians & Drivers	Total
Female	1013	5	2		1021
Male		12	6	3	49
Total	1013	17	8	3	1070

Source : Management - Kaksto

About 95% of the employees are women employed in the production line and the company refers to them as semi skilled employees. About 65% of the supervisors are males but the Interviewees (Will be referred to as girls in this report for convenience.) told us that there was an increasing tendency to employ women as supervisors. At present most of the supervisors are recruited directly from outside but at the request of the Labour Union, management is in favour of recruiting from the present workforce.

Majority of the workers had joined the company between the ages of 17-18 and 84% of the sample are currently between the ages of 21 to 25. 76% of the girls in the sample had passed the GCE Ordinary Level. 20% has passed the GCE Advanced Level.

In the early years of the company prospective recruits were subjected to an entrance test. They were tested for their knowledge of mathematics and science. However, this practice was done away with in the recent times. But the Company has a preference for those who have passed the GCE Ordinary Level Examination. As the factory is situated in Colombo the workers are mainly recruited from urban areas and educational levels reflect the general situation in the country of the availability of unemployed educated girls. Out of the 25 workers interviewed 11 had followed vocational training but were unable to get a suitable job based on the vocational training and education.

### Some of the reasons given for joining the firm are :

- Tired of applying for jobs such as teaching and nursing which meant they could not get jobs for which they had the necessary

qualifications.

- Did not want to be a burden to the family, had to support the family.
- Under the impression that this job was better than working in the garment industry.
- That the work was prestigious and in keeping with their qualification.
- Hopes of being trained in Japan as some of their colleagues had been trained.

Profile of the workers confirms the general pattern of employment in the electronics industry in the Third World, employing young, educated females. Six women are living in boarding while 19 are with parents or husbands. Two women are married. Others are hoping to get married soon.

72% of the women were disappointed and unhappy with their job. They did not have a choice as jobs were difficult to get. They felt that the present job did not improve their skills to get another job. Most of the girls wished to get married and stay at home if that was possible. Some of girls said that they will leave after five years once they qualify for gratuity<sup>2</sup>. The management preferred senior employees to leave for the following reasons though they did not have a firm policy on this.

- they can recruit young girls who will give higher productivity.
- the girls will be less affected by occupational ailments.
- there will be less frustration among the workforce.

#### WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS

From 1988-1990, the Company assumed that the workers were covered by the Factories Ordinance regarding wages, working hours, leave and overtime. Letters of appointments were issued on that basis. In 1990 a Labour union affiliated to the Communist Party was formed and the union demanded that the Company grants them benefits in accordance with the Wages Board Decisions for the Engineering Trade made under the Wages Boards Ordinance. The latter is more favourable to the workers. The Department of Labour intervened on the request made by the union and instructed the company to grant benefits under the Wages

<sup>2</sup> Half months wages for every year of service is payable to workers on cessation of employment if the said worker completes 5 years of service under the Gratuity Act No. 12 of 1983.

Board Decisions for the Engineering Trade regarding wages, working hours, overtime, weekly, annual and public holidays.

Total remuneration varied from Rs. 2,700/= to 3,750/= per month. This includes wages, payment for overtime, attendance bonus and in some cases incentive payments which depended on the targets met. Monthly deductions are made for Employees Provident Fund and loan instalments. The Company had given a loan of Rs. 2,000/= for each worker in December, which is being deducted in instalments every month. Most of the girls are able to manage their daily expenses with their earned wages. A few of them help their immediate families. In addition to their expenses they have the additional burden of incurring medical expenses caused by the work they do.

Working hours for the majority of the employees are from 7.00 A.M. to 4.00 P.M. Working Hours on Saturday are from 7.00 A.M. to 2.00 P.M. Certain sections of the workers work on shifts. According to the Union these workers work with machines. Shift working hours are from 6-2 P.M., 2-10 P.M and 10-6 A.M. The Company when recruiting new employees, obtains their consent to do night work. According to the Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children's Act-Amendment Act No.32 of 1984, it is necessary to obtain the consent of the workers for working on the night. Hence, employers, including Kasto, obtain consent at the time of recruitment. This procedure could be termed as an unfair labour practice. Due to the prevailing high rate of unemployment, workers will consent to do night work and will not be able to retract when they find it inconvenient to do so.

Regrettably our sample did not include workers on the night shift. The Union was not in favour of researchers interviewing the new girls as the management might penalise them or they might get to know of the research. However, the Union assured us that the management complies with the provisions of the legislations pertaining to night work, regarding payment of extra allowance, meals and rest room. Most of the employees who work in shifts stay around the factory, hence the problem of transport does not arise.

The workers are given two hours' overtime on week days from 4.00 P.M. 6.00 P.M. and on Saturday from 2.00 P.M. Prior to the formation of the Union,

overtime was compulsory. They were compelled to work on Saturday too, without over time. These issues were sorted out by the Union in favour of the workers.

All the girls work at least 10 hours of overtime per week, but are not willing to do more than the ten hours of overtime. The girls said that they need overtime work "as the meagre salary we earn is barely sufficient for us to meet the cost of our basic needs food, clothing, boarding fees and travelling. "How can we save anything or send money by way of support to our families if we do not work overtime?" was their lament. Hence the average working day is around ten hours per day inclusive of over time. If the worker gets late from 5 minutes-15 minutes, a pay cut is imposed. If she gets late from 15-30 minutes, a half an hour pay cut and beyond that one hour pay cut is enforced. Work is not given if a person gets late by more than one hour.

As attendance bonus of Rs. 250/= is paid. This is given if the worker does not absent herself even for a day in the month. If she gets absent on one day Rs.75/= is deducted from the attendance bonus and if she absents herself for 2 days she is not entitled to the attendance bonus. Most of the girls did not get the attendance bonus. The Company paid two months wages as bonus in December, which is very advantageous to the workers as most of the Companies in the Free Trade Zone generally pay one month's bonus. The Union claimed that its presence compelled the management to pay this bonus.

#### PRODUCTION PROCESS

As stated earlier, the researchers had no access to the factory. We had to assess the production process and the tasks performed, from the discussion with the interviewers. Often the process was difficult to comprehend. This was more complicated as the workers were not familiar with English. For example the girls referred to an assembly line as "qua line", but subsequently it turned out to be core line. The work done by the girls and the frequent illnesses they suffer were described to in Sinhalese. They were translated into English by the researchers and Table 2 shows the work done by the girls and the frequent ailments they suffer.

Table 2: Frequent illnesses suffered by the girls

TYPE OF JOB	ILLNESS
1. PC LINE Assembling of parts. Takes parts with a tweezer and puts it into a jig to be charged for a day.	Burning sensation in the stomach, faintish, irregular menses.
Making model 6544 parts of the audio heads.	Continuous headaches.
2. CORE LAMINATION Sprays pieces which are doubled. Some pieces are single. These are taken and added to the doubled pieces as a 3rd piece.	Frequent skin rashes, headaches and eye aches, body itches and lip cracks. She went to the Doctor, who had asked her if she worked with chemicals.
3. ADJUSTMENT LINE Carries 800-1000 parcels each weighing 250 grams. Respondent carries jigs. There were no targets fixed for her as she was ill. Some times she stands the whole day.	Eye strains and fever. Doctor has said she has chemicals in the blood. Irregular periods. She also fell ill in 1993, when over 100 girls were taken ill with symptoms of rash, vomiting and dizziness (93 episode). Even after the '93 episode' she has had similar symptoms twice.
Puts the jigs to cool in the machines. Damages are checked through the microscope and then put back into the jigs.	Headaches.
4. AUDIO Piling up audio heads and fixing a holder to the head.	Arm Aches-head ache-eye strains and chest ailments. She was also in the '93 episode.'

'93 episode' is explained on Pg 88



TYPE OF JOB	ILLNESS
Moulding holders are heated and checked and put into oven.	Persistent headaches. Had to go in for spectacles. She was hospitalised for 3 days and was asked to rest.
5. TDK LINE Quality checks using a microscope. Adjusts by hand and takes jigs out of the oven. Carries jigs weighing 16 Kgs. 20 trays are carried each day.	Throat irritation and short sightedness. Suffered from '93 episode.'
Piles up 5 pieces and charges it. 26 pieces to be piled up per day.	Rashes/itching of face/swelling of face: She suffered in the '93 episode.' She frequently has sicknesses similar to the '93 episode.' Doctor had said her ailments were due to exposure to chemicals.
Assembling parts on a sheet. Parts are called B core.	Backache due to same posture. Rashes.
"9242" pieces are placed on jigs.- #7 blocks are placed on jigs.	Eye and shoulder strain. Headaches, backache and skin irritation.
6. TDK ADJUSTMENTS Pieces taken out from the oven are sorted out in to the jigs. The jigs are heavy and she checks the pieces for per perfection through a microscope.	Suffered from '93 episode.' Similar symptoms had recurred 4 times thereafter. She gets admitted to hospitals 3-4 days each time she gets these ailments. Earlier she was treated by Western Doctors and now by Ayurvedic physicians.
7. MITSUMI LINE Checks completed computer heads with microscope-breaks jigs-takes jigs to the line-Cools the jigs from the belt.	Eye Strain/minor burns. Removes jigs from the oven belt. Skin rashes. Badly affected by '93 episode.'

TYPE OF JOB	ILLNESS
Sprays pieces with chemical ie Methyl, Ethyl, Ketone and MEK	MEK went into both eyes and left eye was badly affected.
ML 4- Takes shining small pieces and puts it on the jig by hand.	Boils in the groin - unusual rashes. Was affected by the '93 episode.'
Injection stage - Removes the jigs from the iron belt. - Blocks in the jigs are removed. - Cleans pieces with chemical.	Gets boils. Doctors had recommended her to take vitamins suffered by 93 episode.
Quality Control - Does final checking. Returns rejects to the line. Packing and sending for export.	Skin rash. Suffered in 93 episode.
8. PILE UP SECTION Worked with microscope for two years.	Eyes became blurred.
Involved in making cassette heads. Puts a holder and fits with a tweezer.	Eye problems - affected by 93 episode and in 91. Doctors cannot diagnose.
9. VTR HEAD LINE/LEAD POT Coil winding	Suffers from throat irritation. Burning of fingers is frequent/Her ailments are persistent cold and headache. Her nasal mucous is blue. She has a peculiar bad odour from the mouth.
Nakano (NY 32) bobbin (NY 53) ie burnt in a lead pot. Burnt wire is cut and given and given to the next person.	Skin rash. Cannot swallow. Phlegm clogged in the throat. Dark yellow. Persistent cold due to AC. Odour from her mouth.
Adjusting the bobbin and soldering in the led pot. Check the insulation and damages of the bobbin.	Eye strain - skin rash, chest pain due to pulling the coil out of the bobbin. Clogging of the throat - throat gets clogged and coughs - AC.

TYPE OF JOB	ILLNESS
Winding thin wire in the VTR head by hand. Wire had to be inserted through a hole which is the size of a needle hole.	Vomiting and fever in 93 episode. Very often she has stomach disorders, puffed stomach, headaches and eye problems.
Attaches coils together with led. Inhales led smoke. Fan does not take away the led.	Chemicals het into the eye. Medicine taken from private doctor and Ayurvedic physician.
Takes sheets from the line up machine and sends it to the spray division.	Headaches - MEK went into eyes. Eyes nearly got blind.

### Technology/skills

The Company was manufacturing items required by technological developments in general. Heads for audio/video computer applications were necessitated by technological advances made in the related fields. The girls revealed that the production process itself is manual. It is dependent on nimble fingers rather than the machines. The girls work with microscopes and tweezers, but the real work is done manually with considerable danger to health.

One of the reasons for promoting foreign direct investment by the BOI is the transfer of technology to Sri Lanka and improving technical skills. This is considered a prerequisite to building a base for industrial development and to reach NIC status. At Kaksto enhancement of skills did not take place. The girls in the sample said that they needed only 15 days of familiarising in the company to perform these jobs. Some needed only 7 days. These "skills" are not replicable too and it will not useful to get another job. The girls were disappointed that their educational standards were not of any use to learn these skills.

### OCCUPATIONAL ILLNESS

Significant revelations were the high prevalence of ailments ranging from burns, to fatigues, catarrh, headaches, eye strain and loss of vision, throat irritation and skin rashes.

### Eye strain and loss of vision

Microscopes are used in this firm for close-up detailed work. This causes eye strain to most workers. 84% of the girls interviewed complained of eye strain.

rapidly and eye strain is a common complaint of the workers. This does not reflect the correct picture as most of the girls are reluctant to use spectacles because of financial reasons. A number of girls who have bad vision would have left the establishment over the years. Even in 1990, two years after the factory commenced production, the Union had requested the Company to subject the girls to an eye examination and provide free spectacles. This problem was acute even after two years of existence of the company.

Even the management admitted that long term use of microscope can effect the eyes and they wished that employees leave the firm after a few years. But they do not provide financial support to have eyes checked or to buy spectacles.

The girls also told us that chemicals get into the eye accidentally which meant expenditure is incurred for taking treatment and loss of working days. The Company does not give paid leave for these accidents. Two girls in the sample working in the led pot suffer from throat irritation and bad odour from the mouth. One of the girls complained that the snot is bluish. The girls said that others who work in the lead pot suffer from similar ailments. There were girls who had left the work place due to these problems. Most of the girls suffer from skin ailments. Doctors have attributed this to chemicals used at the factory. The girls complained that most of the girls suffer from colds and catarrh due to the air conditioning in the factory.

In the process of production, this company is said to be using 45 kinds of chemicals. Some of the names of these chemicals were known to the trade union after the '93 episode' (explained below). They are Acetone, Methyl, Ethyl, Ketone, Trichlorethaine Ethylene and Araldite. However, the workers maintained that there were other chemicals that they did not know. According to studies done of electronics industries in Barbados it was revealed that Trichlorethaine causes eye, skin or respiratory irritation. Acetone causes skin, eye, nose and throat irritation, nervous system depression and reproductive hazards.<sup>4</sup> The ailments mentioned by the small population confirm similar pattern at Kaksto.

### The '93 Episode

The girls told us that the company had closed in 1991 for two days as girls suffered from skin rashes and dizziness. Again in 1993, more than 100 girls were hospitalised for nausea, irritation of the eye, dizziness and skin rashes. In 1993, the Labour Department intervened at the request of the Union. Surprisingly,

<sup>4</sup>Carol Bruce : "Health Safety and the Environment in Free Trade Zones" - ICEF, Brussels, 1990

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the Department did not know the existence of this firm. This Company has shifted its location twice after 1988 and changed its name too.

The investigation by the Department revealed that the main cause for the incident was that the exhaust air from the spraying booths had entered the main factory floor through the air condition fresh air inlet. They had recommended remedial action, to the Company. The girls stated that only some chemicals were shown to the officials of the Department of Labour, and according to them there were 45 chemicals used by these firms<sup>5</sup>. Private Doctors who had treated some of the patients had said that the condition may be due to chemicals.

The Management maintains that this ailment was probably German measles. The girls were convinced that it was not German measles, as they had these symptoms before and they continue to have similar symptoms though comparatively mild. They also told us that none of the members of the household and inmates of the boarding houses contacted this form of "Germab measles".

## **TRADE UNION**

Kaksto has a trade union history from 1990. A union affiliated to the left movement was formed in 1990. Management attempted to destroy the trade union by obtaining individual letters of resignation from the workers and by forming management sponsored consultative committees. They even restored to writing of letters to the parents complaining of uncultured behaviour. In 1993 another union which claims to be independent was formed. 90% of the present work force are members of this union. Initially relations between the management and union were strained, but after a period of struggle, the management has accepted the union.

Throughout the interviews conducted and during the focus group discussion the term "we have got freedom now" was used very often. When asked what they meant by freedom they explained thus.

Before the Union was formed, work on Sundays was compulsory and only the normal rate was paid (as per weekdays). They were not allowed to talk during working hours nor were they allowed to raise their heads or move their eyes whilst doing their work. Uniforms with caps were compulsory. Although this was a plus point, caps were very tight and were uncomfortable when they suffer from continuous headaches, they

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<sup>5</sup> Source "Asian Women Workers News Letter" Volume 12 No. 3 July 1993

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needed to take off the caps, but were not allowed to do that under any circumstance. If they got late to work, they were scolded and made to work standing as a form of punishment! They were also humiliated, they were removed from their friends and made to work in another section.

For a work force of 900 in 1993 there were only 10 toilets. They were not allowed to use the toilets during working hours. This created serious problems as toilets were inadequate for all the girls to use during intervals. Salary increments, bonus etc were not given. These appalling conditions continued until the year 1993.

The girls and the union claim that once the Union was formed, all these were rectified. Work on Sundays became non compulsory and if one worked on a Sunday, double the salary per day was paid. They have the freedom to talk whilst working and move around if necessary. If they get headaches they can remove their caps. Physical punishment is not given if they are late to work. But agreed deductions from their salaries are made. They were given salary increments, annual bonus, attendance bonus plus other incentives. They concluded by saying after the union was formed, they were like "slaves set free". The sanitary conditions too have been improved. Management now consults the union before taking action relating to changes in work related issues.

## **Trade Union and Health**

However, the Union has not intervened in the health area in a continuous and a systematic manner. The union intervened in the '93 episode' but in the years following the Union could have taken up issues relating to impaired vision, inhalation of lead fumes and skin rashes. Interviews showed that the workers were conscious of these issues. It may be that the exposure of health hazards in the company may pose a risk to the existence of the industry itself as these occupational ailments cannot be detached from the electronics industry with its present level of technology.

## **ROLE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR**

Over the years the Department had successfully intervened on behalf of the workers of this Company by

- ensuring the recognition of the trade union
- convening conferences to settle industry disputes.

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- promptly investigating the '93 episode' ensuring that the Company takes remedial action
- carrying out a detailed inspection of the place to ensure that health and safety regulations are adhered to by the management.
- ensuring that the company complies with the Wages Board Decisions for Engineering Trade.

### ***Occupational Safety and Health***

In the occupational safety and health of the workers and a strong enforcement machinery. The department is hampered in general by the lack of supportive legislation.

The Factories Ordinance is the main legislation that deals with occupation and safety. This was enacted in 1942 and major amendments were made in 1961 and 1976. The 1976 Amendment was significant in that it required a valid licence by the Chief Inspector of Factories for the factory to operate. But this section remains ineffective as stipulated regulations have not been made under this Act and a date has been not notified for the Amendment to be operative. The Ministry of Labour is reluctant to operationalise this amendment. Unions too have not demanded the implementation of this amendment.

Often the local authority advises the prospective factory owner to obtain the approval from the Chief Inspector of Factory prior to issuing the certificate of conformity. However, this does not always happen. It was proved by the fact that the Labour Department was unaware of Kaksto before the '93 episode'.

The Factories Ordinance deals with, lighting, ventilation, provision safety equipments, minimum floor space, adequate washing and toilet facilities, first aid cupboards and lunch room. But fines under the Factories Ordinance for non compliance are minimal. It ranges from Rs. 100 - 500/=. This is hardly a deterrent when compared with the penalty for other offences.

### ***Factory Inspectorate***

At present there are only 22 Factory Inspectors covering the entire Island. They are unable to carry out routine inspections of the establishments periodically. Most of the Factory Inspectors are mechanical engineers. They often get specialised training by the International Labour Organisation, but they tend to leave the Department for better pastures after the training.

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At present the Department does not employ chemical engineers to advise on protection from chemicals. Firms like Kaksto need regular inspection by a chemical engineers. The Department employs only one medical doctor for the entire country which is hardly adequate.

The Department's role as a protector of workers rights was assisted by the existence of the Union. It was at the instance of the Union that the Department intervened to obtain legal rights of the workers. Effectiveness of the Labour Department at Kaksto depended heavily on the Union.

### ***Has Employment empowered the girls ?***

The employees at Kaksto were able to find employment They are financially independent. Those girls living with parents are able to save money for jewellery. The girls living in the boarding house are no longer dependent on their families, though they hardly save any money. After the formation of the union, management-labour relations are cordial and in general a relaxed atmosphere prevails in the firm. The girls who were interviewed were able to discuss issues with the management. In that sense they were 'empowered'. The Company adheres to minimum labour standards relating to wages and working conditions as laid down by statute.

### ***Critical Issues that Emerged from the Study are:***

- \* The girls suffer from a variety of occupational illness, which are bound to have long term effects. A study on the impact on health on a long term basis is not feasible as employees who leave the firm cannot be traced easily. But it is evident that impaired vision, illness caused by inhaling of lead fumes and reproductive health hazards, will inevitably have long term consequences for the girls and their immediate families.
- \* Skills acquired in the process of their work will not be of use in finding alternative jobs. This is critical as deterioration of health and the strain of working in an assembly line may create a situation where the girls are compelled to leave the firm and look for alternative employment.
- \* Some of the girls believe that marriage will solve financial problems. This is not necessarily true. In these circumstances girls will be at a



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disadvantaged position without necessary skills to find alternative jobs. They will no longer be young to be absorbed in similar industries.

\* The workers in electronics industries are not aware of the chemicals used and the effects of these chemicals on their health. This is a gross violation of basic human rights of an individual.

\* The workers earn less than Rs. 3,000/= per month for working more than 10 hours per day. Though wages paid are in keeping with the minimum wages prescribed by labour statutes, it is inadequate in the present context of high cost of living.

## Validity of the study

There is a possibility that the girls may have exaggerated the ailments but studies carried out in the electronics industries and in other parts of the world had revealed similar facts regarding the nature of the workforce and occupational hazards<sup>6</sup>. The short discussion, the researchers had with the management, and the '93 episode' confirmed the high prevalence of occupational sickness. Research also shows that chemicals used in the production process at Kaksto, could result in ailments similar to those given in Table 2.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. The BOI and the government must develop a screening procedure to prevent hazardous industries coming to Sri Lanka.

The electronics industry with the present level of technology poses a serious threat to Third World women. Increasingly Third World governments are compelled by the developed countries to entertain these industries. The governments of the Third World are expected to provide infrastructure at national cost, give wide ranging tax benefits and concessions regarding foreign exchange remittances.

These industries are increasingly rejected by employees of the First world Third World governments either are not aware of health hazards of these industries or they are reluctant to take action as it might deter foreign investors. The national

<sup>6</sup>i. Carol Bruce : "Health Safety and the Environemt in Free Trade Zones" ICEF, Brussels, 1990

ii. Mrinal Datta - Chaudhuri "Export Promoting Zones and Industrial Employment in Asia" ILO Asian Employment Programme (ARTEP), Bangkok, 1984. Pg86.

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private sector lobby which is closely associated with these industries is quick to react to policies which promote trade union rights and steps to strengthen labour machinery<sup>7</sup> on the basis that it will be detrimental to industrial development and creating employment. They are supported by the international aid agencies, World Bank and the IMF.

### 2. The Government of Sri Lanka must link up with the other Third World countries to compel the multinational companies to offer better terms and conditions to the employees and to prevent these dangerous industries setting up business in the Third World.

Once these industries are established with its technology it is hard to monitor the Company, to see that the women are not affected by work related health hazards.

Labour machinery and trade unions in the Third World situation are weak. The limited cadre employed in the Labour Department cannot cope with the work, and are not equipped to handle modern enterprises with new problems. The donor countries and World Bank advocate pruning expenditure on welfare which would also reduce the quality of the work done by the Labour Department.

This study and other studies done in other parts of the world have shown that the electronics industry has a negative impact on the health of the workers. The crucial question is whether the country should sacrifice health for short term financial and employment gains, considering that the employees in these industries do not acquire technical knowledge which is useful to obtain other employment.

### 3. The Labour Department should strengthen its enforcement machinery by increasing the cadre of factory inspectors and enacting suitable legislation.

Inspectors should be given specialised training in occupational health and safety related to electronics industry. Labour Officers also should be made aware of the hazards of the electronic industry.

Labour Department should make frequent inspection of the workplaces especially where the trade unions are weak to see that the companies comply with the minimum standards.

### 4. Unionisation of the Workers

It is feared that trade union action for better terms and conditions for

<sup>7</sup> Labour machinery includes protective legislation and the enforcement machinery of the Labour Department.

labour may provoke the existing foreign enterprises to look for congenial countries. Equally threatening is the fear that such flight will deter future investment. In the context of Kaksto, trade unions have been instrumental in making the industry transparent and intervening in issues such as the '93 episode' and guaranteeing minimum compliance of the laws relating to wages and working hours. It was clear at Kaksto, that machinery of the labour department was not able to protect the interest of the workers without the assistance of the union. Trade unions should develop their capabilities and capacity to deal with occupational health and safety of the workers. This requires skill development of the trade union officials and a strong commitment irrespective of self interest and political affiliation of the union.

In Sri Lanka labour unions are more concerned with wages and working conditions than with occupational safety and health area. Unions have to update their knowledge in these areas. Unions must necessarily build strength and capacity to address health and safety measures if they are to protect their interests. Unions must pay more attention to research in these areas.

**5. Trade unions and the labour department should be made gender sensitive so that they address gender issues in employment.**

Women's work in the electronics industry is linked to the patriarchal system which assigns to it a subordinate role in the family and society and prescribes specific tasks on the basis of gender division of labour. These industries cannot survive with low technology and poor working conditions without the support of the patriarchal norms which glorify and romanticise the institution of marriage. Women continue to work hoping that marriage with its mythical husband will be the sole bread winner. This accounts for the availability of girls for the employment of short duration and the willingness to bear with poor working conditions. The existence of the New International Division of Labour requires the support of the patriarchal institution of marriage and gender division of labour. The trade union movement is male dominated and often are not sensitive to gender related issues.

**6. Role of the women's movement:**

The women's movement with its national and international links should support the trade union and the state in its efforts to minimise the harmful effects of these industries by preventing such industries from entering Third World countries. Women's Organisations should lobby for health and women friendly

technological changes in industries. In Sri Lanka there is a need to have women's organisations that are involved in the promotion of working women's rights.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The study clearly shows that the provision of employment alone will not change the situation of women. These women workers are disadvantaged both as women and as workers. The quality of employment and the technology used by the industry will be a determining factor in deciding the position of women. The interests of those employed need not be sacrificed to create new employment. If meaningful steps are to be taken to improve the status of women workers, Government must necessarily pay serious attention to those in employment.

## On Media & Gender

Margaret Gallagher \*

### 1. Media and gender : looking back, looking forward

How has the media and gender debate developed over the past twenty years? Our analysis may have deepened, and our proposed solutions may have become more nuanced; but the objective situation has become infinitely more complex. Many media organisations now claim to pursue 'equal opportunities', but women's presence is still very limited. Media globalisation and commercialisation have introduced new layers of complexity making democratic intervention more problematic, and in some cases forging unlikely partnerships between media barons and repressive political regimes. New technologies may open up access for some, but do they increase women's access? They can be economically and culturally exclusive, and they present new problems in relation to certain kinds of content (for example, on-line pornography). There is an unresolved conflict between women's right to fair representation in and by the media, and the fundamental human right to freedom of expression. The media and gender debate now requires a re-examination of these basic rights and freedom.

\* This is the text of the discussion of the group on Gender issues at conference held in Mexico 7th - 11th October 1995 by the World Association for Christian Communication on Communication for Human Dignity.

### 2. Gender portrayal in the media

Research from all regions reveals a clear pattern of female under-representation and gender stereotyping. But what makes the pattern as it is? Why does it persist two decades after it was highlighted by the initial studies? Why is it resistant to change? Among the reasons to be considered: the subtlety of much gender stereotyping; the tendency of the media to appropriate 'new' images and to deradicalise progressive developments; the difficulty of critiquing what is missing or absent in media content; the rigidity of professional routines and practices; the economics of media production. Specific areas of major concern to women include, for example, pornography and violence in media content. Within the debate around the regulation of these, how to we reconcile issues of freedom and of human dignity?

### 3. Gender and media production

Is there a specific gender perspective on events and issues? In what organisational contexts within the media can a gender-sensitive perspective best flourish? What can we learn from examples of how women have influenced the content and shape of mainstream media output? What role can alternative media play in this process? To what extent is the distinction between mainstream and alternative media still a useful one? To what extent are 'new' media reinventing 'old' patterns of stereotyping, and to what extent do they offer more genuinely democratic access?

### 4. Gender and Media use

Women's access to various types of media, and their media preferences, are different from those of men. Although this is a little-researched area, there is nonetheless evidence that women are not satisfied with much of what the media offer them. Other research shows that women - and men - are relatively uncritical media users. How can we build up the critical capacities of media users, so as to encourage a lobby for change? The increasing importance of women as a media 'target group' - particularly in commercial media systems: how can this be more effectively used as leverage to promote change in media output?

### 5. Media and gender: recommendations for the future

Among the practical approaches which could be discussed: regulation; self-regulation; training in gender stereotyping for media professionals; general media education from a gender perspective; internal and external media monitoring; support for women's associations and lobby groups; support for women's media productions (mainstream and alternative) via co-financing, loans and prizes; establishment of audience hotlines and complaints mechanisms; resource kits on gender portrayal and media banks of good and bad examples; measures to increase women's access to media employment. Among the research approaches which could be considered: basic data gathering on gender patterns in media employment; coordinated quantitative and qualitative monitoring; audience case studies of women's use of and reactions to media; studies of outreach/use of women's alternative media; development of simple research/monitoring tools for use by media professionals.

*Consensus  
arrived at  
Conference on Communication  
for  
Human dignity held  
at Mexico from 7-11th October 1995  
by WACC*

### Gender Issues

Gender issues in communication must be understood as pertaining to both sexes, and thus males must joint with females in the struggle for a more just, equitable and balanced world information order. Women's absence from, and lack of power within existing communication structure cannot be changed by women working alone. Men must be their partners in this process. Women, together with men, should look through the prism of gender perspectives at the economic and political contexts of media control, media production, human rights and freedom of expression, media education and communication technologies.

There is a need to examine and critique prevailing definitions of power, masculinity and male-oriented value systems within communication structures. Training for women in new technologies in the use of media for development, community, media and in media production and management can be the means by which women are empowered. The resolutions of the women's conferences in Bangkok (1994) and Beijing (1995) should be propagated and implemented.



## ***Statement By The Feminist Forum issued on Women's Day (March 8th)***

The Feminist Forum is committed to the defence and promotion of women's rights. It recognizes, among others, the rights of girls and women to education, self-determination, development, bodily integrity and to live free from violence. It aims to contribute to the realisation of these rights through facilitating seminars and discussions; collating and disseminating information; and developing strategies to lobby national and regional policy-makers.

The Forum is deeply concerned with the many problematic changes, enormous danger and hardship that women are experiencing as a consequence of the ethnic conflict. The increasing militarisation of women's roles in the conflict, the magnitude of violence against women in the militarised zones, and the large numbers of female refugees of all communities urgently compel support for the resolution of the conflict through peaceful and just means. The Forum opposes the use of violence by any party as a means to resolve the conflict. It supports the devolution package while recognizing the shortcomings therein, and calls upon all parties to engage in constructive dialogue that will lead to the implementation of the package without unnecessary delay.

The Forum also supports freedom from state interference in the functioning of all nongovernmental organizations, including women's NGOs, and calls upon the government to desist from enacting legislation that counters this freedom. It also calls upon the state to ensure protection to NGOs and NGO workers from politically-motivated violence.

Recognising the numerous challenges women face in their attempts to live with dignity, safety and self-sufficiency for themselves, their families and communities, the Feminist Forum emphasises attention to the following issues:

## **Participation of Women in Political and Public Life**

While the position of both president and prime minister in Sri Lanka are held by women, this does not reflect an overall high representation of women in formal political life or in positions that necessitate activity that has substantive public impact, such as the judiciary. Not only are there extremely few women in parliament, but also female representation in the membership of provincial councils and local committees is minimal. Likewise, there is a marked absence of women in the upper ranks of the judiciary. There are no female judges in the Supreme or Appeal Courts of the country, and a marked scarcity in other courts although there is a large number of highly competent women lawyers. These aberrations must be changed through official policy, encouragement for political participation by a broad spectrum of women, and challenges to cultural values that inhibit the appointment of women as judges in order to realise parity between women and men in all capacities of political activity and public life.

## **A Common Civil Code of Law**

Sri Lankan women are subjected to the laws of their respective ethnic or religious communities, especially in areas such as marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. This results in serious disparities in legal treatment and limits women's choices when they seek justice. The development of common, non-sectarian law code based on minimal standards in accordance with the Sri Lankan constitution, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Conventions on Civil and Political Rights and on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights and other human rights instruments that Sri Lanka has been a signatory to, would expand the choices women have in determining the body of law they wished to be judged under.

## **Nationality**

Current Sri Lankan laws have a harsh, gendered impact on the definition of citizenship itself. Sri Lankan women who have foreign husbands are denied the right to pass on Sri Lankan citizenship to their children and their spouses face major obstacles to local employment, while no such disabilities are imposed on Sri Lankan men who have foreign wives. The Forum calls upon legislators to amend such discriminatory laws that penalise Sri Lankan women and children and that are based in extremely problematic constructions of sexuality and nationalism.

**Implementation of Legislation on Violence Against Women**

The Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women has submitted to two ministries recommendations regarding the need for local legislation against domestic violence and strategies for implementing recommendations in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Neither of these has been acted upon at the government level. Lobbying appropriate representatives at parliamentary levels and public education to mobilize support for implementation are necessary in order to ensure implementation. While the Forum welcomes revision of the laws regarding rape, it is very much concerned that there is no specific legislation on domestic violence and that laws against sexual violence within the family, such as marital rape and incest, are absent or inadequate.

**Abortion Laws**

In Sri Lanka, abortion is still illegal with the consequence that women who are not socially or materially privileged risk resorting to back-alley abortionists and therefore endanger their health and lives. Physicians who perform abortions may also be at as much risk of social censure as women who are able to access them. Given that information regarding sexual health and contraception, availability of contraceptives, and follow-up health care for women using contraceptives is very inadequate, and that women across class and ethnic backgrounds still rely on abortion as a means of birth control, it is important that current abortion laws be reformed.

**Family**

Families in Sri Lanka take many forms. The violence of political conflict in the northern and southern parts of the island, and local and international economic changes have radically altered family structures. There is an increase in female-headed households as political, including ethnic, conflict has resulted in the deaths and disappearances of male family members. Women are also increasingly the primary breadwinners as violence debilitates men who participate in the conflict. In addition, there are familial changes occurring as women seek employment overseas to support their families and themselves. In spite of such changes, however, there is little attempt to acknowledge their consequences on both women and their families at the policy-making level, and on

the representation of "family" in the media. Laws and national policies that are implemented on the assumption that women's familial roles are almost exclusively reproductive, and their economic contributions secondary, need to be changed. Public education on issues such as domestic, including sexual, violence against girls and women and the consequences of imparting restrictive social values to girls and women are also imperative.

**Sexuality**

Issues of sexuality are as volatile and as complex in Sri Lanka as they are in the rest of South Asia. The persistent traditions of female virginity and chastity are closely associated with pressures to marry and bear children, and consequently with the value accorded socially to a woman. Such values and pressures are linked with the denial of sexual rights, which include the rights to exercise an informed, freely made choice of partner, to live with integrity in a social arrangement that stems from this choice, to bodily integrity and to reproductive choice. The denial of rights over one's body, in turn, influences and is influenced by the economic opportunities available to women. It also affects the capacity for female participation in, and contribution to, most activities that occur in the "public" sphere. It is imperative therefore to challenge sexual stereotypes within cultural values, and to contest state policies that, based in these values, compromise the rights of unmarried women and unmarried mothers. It is also critical to educate girls and women about their bodies, sexual health and sexual choices.

**Feminization of Poverty**

The globalization of the economy and national structural adjustment programs have contributed to the feminization of poverty in Sri Lanka, as it has elsewhere in both North and South. As women tend to be disproportionately employed in the informal sector, home-based economic activity and lower echelons of the formal sector, fluctuations in economic forces have a severe impact on women's lives. This is particularly acute when, contrary to continuing social and policy assumptions that a woman's earnings supplement a male breadwinner, women are the primary wage earners of a family. The imperative is to lobby economic policy- and law-makers to be attentive to the gendered division of labour and consequently to the quality of life as it affects entire families where female workers' incomes are primary, not supplementary.

## **Women Workers**

While the female labour force in Sri Lanka has expanded significantly over the last decade, there is inadequate consideration of women as workers in Sri Lankan labour law. As a result, women workers continue to face considerable challenges in the work place precisely because they are **female** workers. Sri Lankan women still earn less than their male counterparts for the same task in certain occupations. Proportionately, women occupy far fewer managerial positions than do men. International and local labour laws need to be revised to reflect the realities and needs of a female labour force.

Given that migrant workers and workers in the Free Trade Zone are overwhelmingly female, special considerations are imperative to protect their interests and guarantee their physical safety. For migrant workers there should be better screening of employment agencies and their principals abroad; counseling and recreational agreements established between the state and labour-receiving countries to enforce standardised contracts with minimum standards for working conditions and repatriation. For FTZ workers there should be enforcement of minimum standards required for industrial labour, including leave, overtime, conditions for physical safety and the right to organise.

## **Women and the Media**

The media is a powerful means of education both to change as well as maintain social values. As such, it can be a key instrument both to challenge stereotypical representations of gender and to perpetuate stereotypes. While the Feminist Forum welcomes the initiatives of some of the English language newspapers to provide room for women's perspectives that positively reformulate gender representation, it also notes that the Sinhala and Tamil language newspapers are less amenable to providing a similar critical forum for women. In addition, journalists, tele-journalists and advertisers need to end their reliance on female sexual stereotypes to make their stories newsworthy and to market their products.

## **Women's Health Care**

The decline in nutritional standards and the deterioration of health services has had a strong impact on girls and women. In keeping with the Women's Charter the Feminist Forum urges communal and state measures to improve the nutritional levels of girls and women; the elimination of occupational health hazards; the recognition of women's right to reproductive choice and informed family planning methods; the strengthening of primary and curative health care services; the strengthening of gender sensitivity in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment and the guarantee of confidentiality in HIV/AIDS testing.

The Feminist Forum is working to make real the recommendations for action presented above. It calls upon all women and men to ensure the defence and promotion of women's rights at the level of the family, community and the state, across the identities and demarcations of ethnicity, religion, class and any other conditions that will make such rights real for every girl and woman.

## From Women Living Under Muslim Laws

### International solidarity network

Boite Postale 23-34790 Grabels  
(Mostpellier) - France

We just received the attached press clipping from Pakistan: women of Pakistan have taken the initiative to apologize to the women of Bangla Desh for the crimes the Pakistani army and government committed against Bangladeshi citizens and especially women, during the 1971 war of independence of BanglaDesh. Amongst other crimes, hundreds of thousands of women were raped and left pregnant in camps in horrendous conditions, rejected by their own families. Numerous illegitimate children born out of these rapes never found a place in the society.

The solidarity statement of Pakistani women has been acknowledged and made public by Bangladeshi women on March 8. We should now build on it and support further action.

As you know, for some years already, we have been encouraging and supporting women who attempt to link up with other women across national/ethnic boundaries in cases of wars and conflicts. We have been forwarding to you information on the Women in Black in Belgrade who, throughout the war in ex Yugoslavia, openly opposed from within the policy of ethnic cleansing of the Serbian regime, maintained links with women from other ethnic or religious background, and have worked together in defense and relief of all women.

During the Beijing Forum, we organised jointly with Asian Women Human Rights Council a workshop on "Legal defence of women in wars and conflict situations"; during this workshop, lawyers of the "comfort women" In World war II, as well as women activists who started action in their defence in Korea and the Phillippines, analysed their strategies and success (Japan has apologized to the

victims and agreed on the principle of reparation, negotiations are still on); they also discussed with women from BanglaDesh, Algeria, Kashmir, whose countries were or are at war, and who intend to start legal action against the crimes committed against women in their countries.

During this workshop the Bangladeshi speakers suggested to Pakistani women that when governments are not prepared to apologize, women themselves should initiate the process, by going public about the crimes committed by their own armed forces against women of other nations/groups. We hope that, building on the courageous stand of Pakistani women, women's organisations in Bangladesh will take legal action, demand official apologies and reparation from the government of Pakistan, on behalf of the victims and their children. We hope this action will be conducted hand in hand with Pakistani women, and will be supported by women the world over.

We also hope that the example of Pakistani women will inspire Indian and Kashmiri women to take common public stands on the violence committed by the Indian state against women in Kashmir and work hand in hand in defence of women's human rights. We look forward to similar common action from Tutsi and Hutu women in Rwanda from Tamil. Sinhalese and Muslim women in Sri Lanka etc...

We salute Pakistani women for their forward looking solidarity and courageous stand for women's human rights.



## *From Women and Media Collective*

In March 1993, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the Women's Charter which was formulated as a result of in-depth consultations with women from both state and NGO sectors. This document articulates State policy on women. The National Committee on Women was established as an autonomous body, charged with the implementation of the Charter.

During the 1994 elections, concerned women's groups lobbied for the inclusion of a women's rights agenda in the manifestos of the respective political parties. The principles enshrined in the Charter formed a part of the PA election Manifesto.

At the UN Fourth World Conference on women, the Government of Sri Lanka reiterated its commitment to women's issues. The follow-up and implementation of these commitments is something that is eagerly awaited by women's groups throughout the country, many of whom participated in the Beijing Conference.

During Women's Day celebrations in March 1996, women's groups in various parts of the country have expressed their commitment to the Charter and have articulated their hopes that the Charter will be implemented in its true spirit. A call for the strengthening of the National Committee on Women has been a part of these Women's Day activities.

A reaffirmation of the autonomous nature of the NCW, along the lines of the Human Rights Commission and the National Education Commission, is seen to be critical to the promotion of women's advancement in Sri Lanka.

The undersigned women's group therefore call upon you to extend your continued support to the cause of women by ensuring that the provisions in the Women's Charter will be implemented and the rights of women be thereby guaranteed.

## *NGOs protest \**

WOMEN'S NGOs over several decades have campaigned for women's rights in Sri Lanka, and have functioned as pressure groups on issues affecting women. We wish to express our serious concern at some recent developments that affect the autonomy of NGOs, including women's NGOs.

The Government has proposed certain amendments to the Voluntary Social Service Organizations Act. The original law, enacted in 1980, empowers the Registrar, an officer appointed under the Act, or any person authorized by him to enter and inspect premises and even to attend any meeting of the committee of the organisation. These provisions are a gross infringement of the rights of association.

The law also empowers the Minister to appoint a Board of Inquiry in case of allegations of fraud or misappropriation and refer such reports to appropriate authorities for action in accordance with the law.

The amendment now before Parliament makes this law even more obnoxious. It would empower the Minister, in case where fraud or misappropriation is reported to him by a Board of Inquiry, to appoint interim Boards of Management.

This amendment has also been made retroactive.

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\* Women's Education and Research Centre, Voice of Women, Muslim Women's Research and Action Front, Gender Unit-Social Scientists Association, Women for Peace, Kantha Shakti, Women and Media Collective, Feminist Forum, Resource Centre for Community Groups.

This proposed measure is a serious threat to freedom of association and to the autonomy of NGOs; it empowers improper state intervention in the functioning of NGOs which should be responsible and accountable to their members, funders and other appropriate person and institutions and not necessarily to the state. In any case, there are already means under existing law to deal with instances of fraud and corruption.

These developments seem to betray a lack of understanding on the part of the Government of the role of NGOs and a hostility towards their autonomous functioning, despite claims to the contrary by government spokesperson. We therefore call upon the Government to recognize the autonomy and independence of NGOs and to desist from all action which is inconsistent with this.

## LIBRARY FACILITIES

at

## Women's Education and Research Centre



Our Library has books on Social Sciences  
(Anthropology, Political Science, Women's Studies) in  
Sinhala, Tamil and English.

We have also subscribed to International and Sri Lankan journals  
such as *Frontline*, *Economic and Political weekly*, *feminist studies*,  
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Contemporary Sri Lankan Literature and  
Novels/Short stories too, are available for readers.

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## Nivedini

Nivedini bi.annual Trilingual Journals (English, Sinhala and Tamil) of Women's Education and Research Centre were first published in 1993.

### *The major objectives of the Journal are:*

1. To create, strengthen and disseminate information and knowledge on gender globally.
2. To establish a network between women, researchers, lobbyists and policy planners.
3. To act as a catalyst in society at large and to bring about the empowerment of women and hence the transformation of society.
4. To critique and reassess the process of gaining and disseminating knowledge.

### *The Journal would publish :*

- Interdisciplinary research in the field of women's studies.
- Conceptual and analytical papers on themes related to women's status and role.
- Reviews of books, films and theatrical performances.
- Reports on national and international Conferences, Symposia and Workshops etc. on Women's Studies.

### *Guidelines for the contributors :*

The Journal welcomes submission in all disciplines and is especially interested in paper/articles written from an interdisciplinary approach on gender issues.

- Research papers should be of 15-20 A4 pages.
- Reviews should be approximately of 500-600 words.
- Non-sexist language be used.
- Papers must be in English.
- All papers/reviews etc. must be sent in typed on A4 papers and be double spaced.
- Title page of the paper should be typed separately and should include the author's name, full address and telephone numbers.
- An abstract may be submitted not exceeding 100 words in length.
- A statement of two or three lines about each author should be typed on a separate sheet.
- The Journal cannot pay contributors. Each author will receive one issue of the Journal.
- Papers should be mailed to the following address:

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