



PRAVAHINI

Volume 12 No. 1. January 2004

Our Onward Journey.....

Women's Education and Research Centre, popularly known as WERC, was originally inaugurated as Women's Education Centre (WEC) in 1982. Since then our organisation has come a long way widening its scope, its horizons, its activities along with the clientele it serves, to come of age. WERC is 21 years old!

"Striving for a gender equal society" is the vision that acts as our guiding light and by which we seek to fulfil our mission 'to achieve equality for women in all walks of life'.

Thus through the years, our activities, in spite of various constraints, have progressed slowly at times, but steadily, in the line of research projects, publications, conferences and workshops, and dissemination of bibliographical knowledge. With the peaceful atmosphere prevalent in the present day, our activities have veered towards the topically relevant field of reconciliation and rehabilitation in war affected areas, and amongst war -affected people, mainly women in their thousands.

Year 2003 has seen the continuation of these activities of WERC with renewed vigour, and we refer to three of our ongoing projects.

We have inaugurated a Women's Studies Certificate Course, which will be conducted in Sinhala and Tamil. The four month course which combines theory and activism, is already on schedule in the Sinhala medium and will be followed by the Tamil medium course in March 2004. The lectures are conducted by University academic staff in the relevant fields, and other experienced gender activists. The Executive Director of WERC is the Course Director. Similar courses have been available for sometime elsewhere but only in the English medium. However, we fulfil for the first time a keenly felt need - caused by the absence of such a course in the national languages. Due to the lack of proficiency in English, persons interested in women's studies have been left behind. It has created a dearth of knowledgeable persons who could disseminate relevant knowledge, especially in rural and suburban areas, among that section of the population that is essentially Sinhala or Tamil speaking/educated. While the primary objective of the project is to provide a basic foundation for the discipline of women's studies, it is envisaged that it will lead in due course to discourse on issues of gender, and produce as well, reasonably good

writing in the media and even publication of books. We could also expect the knowledge acquired to be a tool for the purpose of transforming attitudes to a gender sensitive perspective.

The project undertaken in the Eastern Province is entitled 'Skills training and Counselling for Female headed Households'. The whole exercise entails a process of empowering this particular category of women. They are selected from the poorest of the poor of Batticaloa, Akkaraipattu and Ampara. Bereft of economic support or any social welfare these women have become a socially marginalised group, in addition to the economic straits they find themselves in. The project addresses the three main aspects of providing skills training for employment, free legal counselling and free medical counselling, thus seeking to provide the basic needs for placing these women in a better position to face the traumatic life they are compelled to lead.

Another project that has just got under way is an attempt to produce a Gender Reader as a WERC publication. The project is based on the past issues of Pravahini, the WERC Newsletter, which has been regularly published twice a year since 1991. Through out these years it has sought to highlight the activities of women, both local and around the world — their achievements, their trials and tribulations and their struggle for equality. The Pravahini comes out in English, Sinhala and Tamil and comprises articles essays, reports and poems of topical interest — with a bias towards gender.

in this issue.....

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------|---|
| Our Onward Journey | 1 | Much of the current information included in Pravahini is obtained on the internet and from foreign journals and magazines. Hence these newsletters have amassed a wide collection of up to date informative and educative material on gender, from which the Gender Reader will glean the choicest selections. The appeal of the Gender Reader is focused on the general reading public including senior students in schools with the aim of arousing an awareness and understanding of gender. |
| Post Feminism | 2 | |
| Death of a Public Intellectual | 2 | |
| Oppressive Traditions | 3 | |
| Awards for Women..... | 4 | |
| Conferences | 5 | |
| Women News | 6 - 7 | |
| Lakshmi Holstrom..... | 8 | |
| Our Volunteer..... | 8 | |
| A Hand book on CEDAW | 9 | |
| Media Interventions | 9 | |
| A change over for Ramiah.... | 10 | Our twenty one years of consolidated experience and expertise have given us further strength and confidence to enhance our efforts towards our vision. |
| Library | 11 | |
| WERC News | 12 | |

Post Feminism and its conceptual ambivalence

Post feminism like post modernism cannot be oversimplified. The concept has very little consensual comprehension. It was in the late 1980's that the term became fashionable in the media, which used it negatively. It is more connected with a period or an era along with periodic themes and theories like post modern theories. Post feminism is characterised with a few strands of thought. There are a group of young men and women who feel, ably supported by the media in the thought construction that feminism is irrelevant today - is perhaps dead. The struggle of the mother and grandmother, feminists of the 60's, 70's and 80's have borne this fruits. This group, while enjoying the benefits and achievements of the feminists' struggles, do not in anyway feel that they have to take on the struggle forward. Neither do they think that there is need for such struggles. The war is over, the battle is won. For the most part, media is responsible for constructing such visions of post feminism. In effect, it has proposed a view that feminism is after all not beneficial, but has become destructive to women. Feminists have achieved much but are not happy with the result - so why go on struggling? Media has tried to belittle feminist theories posing them against feminist achievements. This can be called the popular, post feminist rhetoric.

However, there is also an academic version of post feminism. All the post theories, post structuralism, post modernism and post colonialism have to do something with feminism too. While not throwing away the totality of all the theoretical premises of the past era, they rebuild on them supposedly improving on them while questioning some or most of those fundamental theories like structuralism and modernism. We have yet to hear of a post marxism. Perhaps unable to coin such a phrase we have opted for neo marxism. Hence post feminism is mainly a theoretical discourse and has very little to do with practice. We can identify two approaches in this academic post feminism. One - it challenges the so called unified dominant theories and debates of the feminist epistemology of the former era. While challenging this approach, it puts forward a multiplicity of debates, theories and arguments converging and collapsing feminist theories with other broad social science theories. Secondly, it questions the category of women as a unitary phenomenon and connects up discourses of power and subordination while retaining the concept of patriarchy. One has no problems with such "grand narratives" as long as they can be realised. However, feminists cannot forget the past. The significance of time should lead us to view and treat both the the past and the present, as equally significant so that the future can be projected meaningfully.

Let me then conclude, by saying that feminism has not become obsolete or outdated or irrelevant. One has to only realise the sufferings, deprivations and exploitations the women all over the world undergo with newly emerging modernisms and their ways, with rise of religious fundamentalism and marginalisation faced by women due to globalisation. Attempts by the media to neutralize and depoliticize feminism should be taken note of. The feminist struggle should now be directed against such media constructions as well, in addition to the multiplicity of powers and the newly emerging facets of patriarchy.

Death of a public intellectual - Edward Said

Edward Said passed away on September 25, 2003. He was the Professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University (USA). He was an American Citizen, a Christian and a Palestinian by birth. His life is celebrated as being rich and productive, as a man who lived his convictions unafraid of conventional wisdom. Belonging to two different cultures his efforts were to bridge the gap between them but one would not recognise the merits of the other. He devoted much of his life to fight for mutual understanding, human rights as against oppression and for all humanity not only the Palestinian cause. 'Humanity as a whole is poorer for his death.

Quoting from his afterword on his famous book "Orientalism is very much a book tied to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history. Its first page opens with a 1975 description of the Lebanese Civil War that ended in 1990, but the violence and the ugly shedding of human blood continues up to this minute. We have had the failure of the Oslo peace process, the outbreak of the second intifada, and the awful suffering of the Palestinians on the re-invaded West Bank and Gaza. The suicide bombing phenomena has appeared with all its hideous damage, none more lurid and apocalyptic of course than the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath in the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. As I write these lines, the illegal imperial occupation of Iraq by Britain and the United States proceeds. Its aftermath is truly awful to contemplate. This is all part of what is supposed to be a clash of civilizations, unending, implacable, irremediable. Nevertheless, I think not.

I wish I could say that general understanding of the Middle East the Arabs and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat but alas, it really hasn't. For all kinds of reasons, the situation in Europe seems to be considerably better. In the US, the hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché, the dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt for dissenters and "others" has found a fitting Correlative in the looting and destruction of Iraq's libraries and museums. What our leaders and their intellectual lackeys seem incapable of understanding is that history cannot be swept clean like a blackboard, clean so that "we" might inscribe our own future there and impose our own forms of life for these lesser people to follow. It is quite common to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar. But this has often happened with the "Orient" that semi mythical construct which since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the late eighteenth century has been made and re-made countless times. In the process the uncountable sediments of history, that include innumerable histories and a dizzying variety of peoples, languages, experiences, and cultures, all these are swept aside or ignored, relegated to the sand heap along with the treasures ground into meaningless fragments that were taken out of Baghdad."

Oppressive Traditions Must Be Challenged in the Home First

Most children simply are not empowered enough to make others around them—especially their parents and other adults—aware of their innermost feelings. This is often due to fear of being hit or shouted at with ugly words that tend to leave lasting negative impressions, such that these children know not to speak of their emotions to these adults (and others) ever again.

Poststructural theorist Michael Foucault claims that we are never without power. We may be able to apply this theory to women who could lobby for their own rights but with children this theory appears steadily unsteady. As a little girl (and even now) for some reason I loved the colour blue and was disgusted at the colour pink. I did not feel comfortable but was afraid to tell my mother. I thus had to endure years of having a room with a pink colour scheme. Did she decide this colour scheme on her own just to annoy me or show me who is boss? Absolutely not; Mum was merely adhering to a “timeless” tradition that pink is for girls and blue is for boys. Thus the first step towards alternative parenting or a feminist way of raising children is to avoid decision-making based on traditionalist thought that denies children the right to object to such decisions and in turn leaves them feeling disempowered.

The above example of colour preference requires further unpacking. Another reason why Mother did not ask me for my colour preference was also probably due to my being female; had I been male she would have to some extent consulted me about the colour scheme of my room. In fact, she admitted that had I been a boy, she would have been so happy (perhaps happy enough to let me choose my own colour scheme?). For his part, my dad reinforced this by welcoming my “boyish” habits and taking great interest in my karate and sporting activities that eventually faded as I grew up and suddenly sought to be more “feminine”. He also once remarked that I would have had a good excuse not to be domestically inclined had I been a boy.

According to Marxist theory, as soon as a thesis is created an antithesis already exists even without it being articulated. True enough, I soon began to feel discomfort over this gender inequity issue at home. My parents may not have realised it at that time but I started to dislike my circumstances, and in my misery I attempted to find an alternative view of the gender issue. This led me to hope and believe that gender equity was obtainable but still I was uncertain about how to make it a reality.

I think that gender equity should begin in the private space of the home. Attempting to initiate gender equity in the public sphere such as the work place is a mission that could encounter many difficulties, as existing mindsets may be unchangeable.

One could argue that gender equity in the home should be the equally shared responsibility of both parents. In a patriarchal society (like most societies) it is often the women who are chiefly responsible for child rearing. While insisting that their husbands play a more active role in child rearing, and even forcing them to do it, women should also consider that being principally responsible for child care could be an opportunity for them to inculcate gender equity right at the start. Maybe the problem is that women often unwittingly succumb to traditional methods of rearing their children, which includes instilling in them gender inequity belief systems. Women thus need to begin such a process of positively transforming their families by questioning their own belief systems and the amount of gender inequity it contains. They should then attempt to rectify any gender inequity at home by a slow and deliberate process making the family understand why there is change as well as the need for it.

As an alternative to what some children would call boring lectures from their parents, the parent or mother could merely make subtle changes in the home as well as in the manner in which the family is governed politically. These might include the recognition that sons and daughters enjoy equal status and rights, bearing in mind however that age groups should be differentiated (for instance, a 13-year-old boy should definitely not have all the same rights as his 5-year-old sister and vice versa).

Another situation that definitely poses a problem is when the mother accords the father a higher status than the children (and herself) and treats him accordingly. This immediately sets the pattern of gender inequity in the family, encouraging the children to believe that the male position in a household is higher and more rewarding than a female position. Sometimes it is the mother who punishes or shouts at her children when they question statements or actions by their father that have to do with gender imbalances (or balances).

Children thus need to be freed from such traditions that promote gender inequity. There is hope, and no doubt an absolute need, not only for feminist parents but all parents world-wide to initiate a process of alternative parenting that will create adults who will in turn practice healthy alternative parenting without much effort.

By: Kumari Kimendhri Pillay was born in 1979 in Durban, South Africa and grew up “in the heat of the oppressive apartheid system.” Of Indian origin, she is a graduate of Indian classical dance, Bharata Natyam, hence the title “Kumari.” She obtained her BA Music degree as well as her Honours in Contemporary Dance and Choreography at the University of Natal-Durban. While working as a researcher, she is currently studying for a masteral degree in Education and Community Development also at the same university.

(From Women In Action - No. 1, 2003)

Awards for Women

We congratulate these women who have won international fame and recognition and hail their achievements gained through dedication to the cause of women and human rights.

The Nobel Peace Prize Winner

The 2003 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to a woman — Iranian Shirin Ebadi, a human rights worker, especially for women and children in her country. On receiving the award she is reported to have said, “this prize belongs not only to me, it belongs to everybody who work for democracy and peace in Iran”.

In her country the award is seen as inspirational to those who for years have been struggling for human rights, all through the Islamic revolution and a despotic regime.

Ebadi is a feminist lawyer, writer and part time lecturer at Teheran University. She is also the first Iranian woman judge but was removed from that position after the Islamic Revolution. She has spent a good part of her life time campaigning for better rights for women and children.

Iran's rulers after the revolution believed in the superiority of men over women, but she is the first Iranian and the eleventh woman to win this award. She was also the first female judge in Iran and practised law until the Islamic revolution, when women judges were banned from working.

The Nobel committee's citation read, “as a lawyer, judge, lecturer, writer and activist she has spoken out clearly and strongly in her country, Iran, and far beyond its borders. She has stood up as a sound professional, a courageous person, and has never heeded the threats to her own safety.” The

Nobel Committee in awarding the prize to Ebadi gave a clear message not only on women's rights but also Islam and democracy. It said “she sees no conflict between Islam and fundamental human rights”

Human Rights activists around the world hailed the Nobel Committee's decision as of critical importance.

The UN High Commission for Refugees Award

Three Sri Lanka women came into the limelight winning the United Nations High Commission for Refugees Award 2003. They were Ms. Aruni Arulsubramaniam, who works with UNHCR in Trincomalee. Her efforts have been directed towards enabling displaced women to take part in representative committees in welfare centres.

Ms. Sitralega Maunaguru an advocate for women's rights. She is a founder member of the Suriya Development Centre based in Batticaloa and Ms. N.G. Kamalawathie who works to empower the disabled. They have each been honoured for the promotion of Gender Equality. Their efforts to support displaced persons in our country as a consequence of the civil war have thus been internationally recognised.

Cannes Film Festival Grand Jury Prize

The Cannes Film Festival's Grand Jury prize was awarded to Iranian Samira Makhmalbai, Director of the film 'At five in the Afternoon'. She portrayed the plight of women in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban regime. She has said she wanted to show the world that life in Afghanistan was not like what was shown on TV, that U.S.A. had rescued the people from Taliban. She had found it very different to the US claims and so in her film she focuses on Nagreh, an Afghanistan woman caught between tradition and the modern world.

Best Film, Best Director, Best Actress

Sulang Kirilli (Wind Bird) the highly acclaimed and controversial film directed by Inoka Sathyanganie has won three outstanding awards at the Montevideo International Film Festival also known as the International Film Festival of Cinematica del Uruguay.

The jury had elected it as the Best film of the year, and Sathyanganie as Best Director, the Major Opera Prima - from among many countries that competed including Russia, France, Italy, China, Japan and England.

Damitha Abayaratne was adjudged the Best Actress at the Dhaka International Film Festival in Bangladesh.

Conferences

The 4th biennial National Conferences Tamil and Sinhala - were held at the WERC auditorium in July and December 2003 respectively.

The National Conference in Tamil organised by WERC was held in July 2003. The theme was 'How can one Resolve the Contradictions between an overall Feminist Ideology and Social, Cultural and Legal Norms?'

The objective of the conference was to encourage researchers, university lecturers, academics and young researchers from all parts of the island to submit their research findings and present them as their papers with the aim of sharing information, followed by group discussions, while also providing material for Gender studies and for resolution of conflicts encountered.

The conference was spread through two days in four sessions. The presentations were made by senior and other academic staff of the Eastern University and the Jaffna University.

The inaugural session was chaired by Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran who explained the objectives of the seminar. After this introduction, Ms. Ammankili Murugadas, Dean, Eastern University read a paper on Women in Society - A Historical Reconstruction. This was followed by papers, which analyzed and discussed various aspects of the theme. The interesting information and points of view expressed in each paper formed the basis of much discussion, which was organised as a group exercise.

At the end of the seminar it was decided to publish a book comprising selected papers, for wider circulation.

The theme of the National Conference in Sinhala was 'Woman and Womanhood in the context of Cultural and Social Space'. It was held in December 2003, covering three sessions through two days.

Senior lecturers from the Departments of Sinhala and Sociology of the University of Colombo and several lecturers from the University of Peradeniya and also two attorneys-at-law presented research papers and delivered lectures.

Information based on 18th and 19th century women and their skilful use of poetry to confront sexist language and abuse was one presentation, while others discussed topically relevant themes such as socio-cultural changes imposed on women by their relocation in Mahaweli villages as well as the migrant women workers in the Middle East. Violence incurred on prostitutes was impressively presented with the help of statistics. Aging women and puberty rituals were also interesting subjects discussed.

The lawyers spoke about, female lawyers and humorous episodes with lawyers and judges. Each session concluded with useful debate.

Finally, the UN document CEDAW was also introduced through the Handbook published by WERC.

Selected papers presented at the conference will be included in the WERC Journal, Nivedini.

The French Ban

Human rights and women's rights activists face a challenge in the proposed law that France hopes to pass in Parliament. It is reported that the French government has proposed a ban on the wearing of religious articles of clothing or accessories by students in schools. As far back as 1989 two students who refused to stop wearing headscarves were suspended from a school in the suburbs of Paris. The ban will be of special concern to students who belong to the Islamic faith and who are obliged to wear the headscarf. Since then more students have been expelled from schools for this same reason.

The ban however applies only to all public school students in the junior and senior high schools but does not apply to private schools or French schools outside France. The law says "signs and dress that conspicuously show religious affiliation of students are forbidden. "This would therefore include all forms of costumes and accessories such as Jewish skullcaps, large Christian crosses and Muslim women's headscarves." The punishment envisaged for violations of the law will commence with warnings leading on to temporary suspension and expulsion from school.

The French government maintains that the law has been initiated for the purpose of protecting the secular traditions of the country. Further more it is apparently an attempt to curb the growing fundamentalist Islamic attitudes pervading the French arena.

The law has already been passed by the Lower House of Parliament. The general opinion is that it will go through the Senate debate successfully in the near future, making its entry into the statute books of the country and will become effective in the school year commencing September 2004.

If and when this happens, will the near fifteen year controversial ban on head carves be settled?

For, this is where the women's rights activists come in. Which way are they going to move? We see social justice movements too being drawn into the fray.

We ourselves hark back to the themes of our National Conferences reported on this page, which have turned out to be so relevant today and of burning topical interest. We envisage stimulating debate to ensue. "How can one Resolve the Contradiction.....?"

Women News

Women against Globalisation

The anti globalisation conference at the World Social Forum (WSF) took place in January 2004 in Mumbai, India. The numbers who gathered at the conference proved the quote from Pablo Neruda made by Kamla Bhasin, a recognised feminist leader:- "They can cut all the flowers, but they cannot stop the coming of spring". Such is the strength of the struggle of women's movements across the globe.

Globalisation they claim has only intensified imperialism and strengthens inequality and exploitation all over the world. The participants agreed that national movements need to coordinate with international efforts such as the WSF, as planned common campaigns at national level are more effective to fight globalisation.

At the conference on Women and Globalisation, over 2000 people participated and it provided the space for sharing international experiences on the effect of globalisation on different aspects of women's lives. Among the many speakers who represented several countries such as India, Uruguay, Malaysia and Indonesia, was Sunila Abeysekera of INFORM, a human rights organisation in Sri Lanka, who discussed sexuality rights.

Indian Economist, Jayati Ghosh commended the women's movement as the "most progressive and dynamic among the social movements". The results of the resistance against the effects of globalisation she sums up thus:- "Another world is not just possible, it is likely, even inevitable".

[The latest information on the issues, campaigns, conferences and other goings-on in the women's movement is provided by "We" the Newsletter from Isis International, Manila; January 2004]

London

The House of Lords, of the British Parliament will be led by Valerie Amos, a Guyanan-born black woman.

This removes the privilege enjoyed by the upper classes where in the past the House of Lords was composed solely of hereditary peers, secured by birthright. Prime Minister Blair's Labour Government has taken steps to reform the House of Lords.

Beijing

China's largest semi official women's group the All China Women's Federation made a 3 year study on domestic violence in Chinese society and found that it was a common occurrence. 38.4% of spouses admitted to resorting to violence when a disagreement occurred which was as often as once every few months. 43.7% blamed wives for unreasonable behaviour while 25.5% agreed that husbands had a right to resort to violence for a wife's misdemeanour. If beaten by their wives 48.2% men said they would resort to violence.

They seldom discussed ways to avoid a recurrence although the majority said they would consult friends and relatives to settle domestic violence. However very few would seek help from police or the legal system.

Sri Lanka

Pleasant news regarding housemaids in the Middle East is a rare occurrence. So a report of an event organised to honour a Sri Lankan housemaid in the host country, Riyadh, was a welcome change from doleful stories that usually reach us.

While being injured in a bomb blast the house maid's immediate reaction was to get the employer's two children to safety, rescuing them from upstairs

and handing them over to security officials. This act of bravery by twenty eight year old Sunila Dissanayake certainly deserved the appreciation and recognition of the Sri Lankan Embassy.

The new Supreme Court Judge, Justice Shirani Thilakawardene, was welcomed at a ceremonial sitting of the Supreme Court in December 2003. In her Address on this occasion she said, "We recognise that in the past women and children have been discriminated against and minority rights abused. Those interests of groups lacking in political power often have their right overlooked and their rights to equal concern and respect violated. But many judgments around the globe seek to set aright these past injustices."

In concluding she had quoted Kofi Annan who, speaking at the 50th Anniversary of the Charter of Human Rights had said, "Human Rights are African Rights; they are also Asian rights. They are European rights they are American rights. They belong to no government. They are limited to no continent, for they are fundamental to human kind itself."

India

When this young Indian woman Archana Ramasundaram joined the Police Service, it was deemed an unusual career for a woman. Today she is the Joint Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation, and perhaps more importantly an activist determined to end discrimination against women. Ms. Ramasundaram recognising that most women suffer discrimination due to poverty, poor health and traditional rites made it her mission to improve the way the police force handles violence against women. She believed that the responsibility of Police officials is most important as they are the first to come into an investigation.

Women only

Sabaya Café is Jordan's 'women only' coffee shop. Here women can eat, drink and listen to music and talk and laugh. In other coffee shops in this conservative society, the women must always be on their guard, restricted in movement and constantly under scrutiny. Sabaya was opened by a woman, Hamin Majah, in a trendy shopping area and displays a sign which clearly says that men are not welcome, while women can come in unaccompanied. Seven young waitresses are employed by her. Non-alcoholic drinks sweets and light meals are served till the early hours of dawn. Hamin claims that it is her dream to see women from all walks of life meet in a relaxed atmosphere, chatting, gossiping joking and even smoking, mostly the hubble-bubble or the water pipe. To complete her dream she searched for a female musician to entertain her clients but failed and instead hired a blind male musician! The women even dance she says and enjoy themselves without men spying around.

Gender Sensitive Parks

Parks in Vienna (Austria) are being re-designed. A project undertaken by women sociologists, city planners and local government offices seeks to make parks safer for girls and women. A competition entitled 'Gender Specific Park Design' provided the input for the planning format. Based on girls' interests in sports and leisure activities and providing a better sense of safety, the parks lighting system has been enhanced for better visibility and the provision of open multi-functional planning access to reduce fear of crime. Planned with insight into behavioural psychology and its relation to environmental designing, the new look parks are intended to reduce the fear and the incidences of crime, thus improving the quality of life for women and girls.



Protesting against the French ban



Bangladeshi Women protest against trafficking in women



Iran's first group of Women Police Officers on parade guns in hand

Women's Education and Research Centre invited Lakshmi Holstrom for a lecture/discussion on 'Women's Writing with Special Reference to Bama'

Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran, Executive Director, WERC, introducing the speaker stated that Lakshmi hails from India, holds a first degree in English Literature, and that her post-graduate work at Oxford University was on R.K. Narayanan. Since then her concerns have been Women's Writing from India and Tamil literature in general.

Lakshmi continued from there to say how she turned to her short story translations. She had done bits and pieces of translation and it had been a natural progression into translation. Her first translation was the 'Yellow Fish' by another popular Indian writer Ambai and then came her anthology 'The Inner Courtyard' a collection of short stories by Indian women. She worked with the authors to find out their intentions in respect of the work as a whole in order to convey the correct individual voice and style of the original, which is the most difficult aspect of translation.

Lakshmi selected the book 'Karukku' by Bama which is a metaphor for pain and anger and analysed it. She spoke of how she became interested in it before she translated Karukku. She had been impressed by what had become known as Dalit writing in Tamil and took to translating 'Karukku' by Bama, herself a Dalit woman.

She said it was both a challenge and privilege to have worked on this novel, and she had the opportunity to meet the author Bama. Bama's writing she said intended to change the hearts and minds of people and to bring about a change in the oppressed class. She does not make any connection between caste and gender. She is single-minded focussed on caste oppression within the church and speaks about experiences of Dalit men and women in church. She said though they are of that class, men and women, have a way of expressing their respect in their speech. Dalit women are always vulnerable and involved in an unending struggle. The translation of 'Karukku' by Lakshmi is on the Crossword Book Award shortlist.

She also spoke about 'Sangati' dealing with the story on gender and the community of Dalit women and also of 'Kisumbukkaaran' stories about the experiences of Dalit men and women. She gave us an idea that though they are Dalit men and women, they too were of a respectable class amongst themselves.

Call to Women

From the National Committee of women(NCW)
(Ministry of Women's Affairs)

READ

The women's Rights Draft Bill and share with us your opinions and suggestions." The Bill seeks to protect and promote Women's rights – to ensure the full development and advancement of women guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men.

Its main objectives are

- ♦ Equal rights
- ♦ Employment and Training
- ♦ Protection of Rights and Protection from sexual harassment
- ♦ Land Ownership rights
- ♦ Women's charter

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly was ratified by Sri Lanka in 1981. Sri Lanka was the 20th country to ratify it and as early as 1981, yet the equality that it promises to women has not been made known to society. One of the reasons for this is that the contents of the material on CEDAW is very academic and not-reader friendly.

The WERC project on CEDAW aimed at disseminating the message of this document, among women and men at various levels of society with a special focus on the younger generation.

A reader friendly handbook therefore has been designed to produce a comprehensive understanding of CEDAW and its relevance to Sri Lanka. The UN document is now in a simplified form with meaningful illustrations. It will be strategically distributed to school students especially in secondary schools, young adults particularly in universities and others in the NGOs and the government sector. This method was adopted as an enlightening men and women on the contents of the Convention would be the first step before one contemplates incorporating it into the domestic legislation in the near future.

The book launch of 'Understanding CEDAW' was held on 13th November 2003 at WERC Auditorium. Ramani Muttetuwegama, an attorney at law reviewed the book. After which there was a discussion regarding the usefulness of the book. The participants included two officials from the Ministry of Education.

This was followed by introducing the handbook to a cross section of society at different venues - the teacher trainees of Pasdunrata College of Higher Education, the participants of Women Studies Certificate Course at WERC, the teachers and prefects of Southlands Balika Vidyala- Galle, the Police Officers of Amparai District. It was also introduced to a cross section of society in Kandy, Udaru Media Group, groups of NGO members, NPC field Officers, teachers and NGO personnel of Batticaloa.

It is our belief that the Convention, which was shelved for many years, would receive wider attention, from a wider group of people, which would hopefully pave the way for a wider usage of the document.

The media, especially the electronic media, is very much into traditional representation of women. While emphasizing the role of mother and wife, women are relegated to very limited areas. This has two effects. They fall into stereotypical moulds and make women accept their roles without challenge through a process of internalization. This leaves out a whole range of women and their roles as plantation workers, migrant workers, women lawyers and women professionals.

While on the one hand gender is receiving much attention as a system of analysis both in the development and social scientific theories, what the electronic media does is to put back the motion of history with disastrous consequences. Women are the losers. There is a need, especially in the Tamil electronic media, to make interventions thereby correcting the status of gender representation. Hence, Women's Education & Research Centre organised a series of discussions, analysis and presentations of alternative ideas, through a panel program with a presenter.

It was proposed to cover various socio- economic and socio- political issues ranging from gender and labour to UN mechanism such as the Beijing Platform of action, CEDAW, to women's political participation. The discussions were aimed not only to raise consciousness of men and women, but also to motivate and activate them into performing more meaningful roles as active citizens of Sri Lanka.

The project expects to have thirteen television programmes to focus public attention on relevant gender issues through the Tamil television channel Shakthi - MTV. This project expects to facilitate an ongoing discussion of critical issues pertaining to women's rights amongst Tamil speaking population.

Video recordings will be made available for use as training tools.

A Change-over for Ramiah

Ramiah our faithful office aide has been with us 10 years. He has of his own accord included for himself the duties of peon, watcher, errand boy and general factotum, and we would add personal welfare officer to the staff and Executive Director. In short he considers himself responsible for all of WERC. His loyalty to the institution and the staff is admirable as is his integrity and obliging manner. He would go out of his way to help and is lavish with his advice for our wellbeing and personal safety.

In spite of advancing years his pace was always brisk and one would never find him seated – he would at least be filling up our glasses of water, putting a chair straight or advising our canine watchers on matters of good behaviour.

Ramiah was amusing and at times officious but we tolerated it all because of his warm and generous nature. Whenever he had to visit a staff member at home on official duty he would always bring a little gift, an apple, a few toffees or a packet of crunchies.

Ramiah has now gone on transfer to Batticaloa, to man our project office there for the duration of the 'Skills Training and Counselling for Women' Programme.

He has settled down happily and as is his wont he makes himself very useful and is popular with the people he now has to work with. His happiest moments still are when WERC staff or the Director herself visits the project office, even though it is not so often. Nevertheless Ramiah keeps in touch with regular calls to inquire after each one's health, and never forgets to send a card of good wishes on festive occasions. The staff misses him and is concerned for his welfare.



Batticaloa Office Staff with Ramiah

Our Volunteer

Kathi pens her thoughts.....

My name is Kathi Radmuller. I am from the South of Germany. I am just 18 years old and still in school. Before I finish my last year for the A- Level I decided to do a voluntary service in Sri Lanka with WERC for six months.

As I arrived everything was totally different for me. The climate, the way of living, the habits. I felt like in a totally different world.

It was difficult to be a foreigner. Sometimes the people treat you like a stranger. That means I got to know how to feel when you are different from the mass. I can understand better now how a foreigner feels in my own country.

As I arrived at WERC, I was warmly welcomed and introduced to everything by our Executive Director, Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran. At WERC I found a new family. I feel quite happy there.

I'm still a student so I had no work experience. I am expecting that my voluntary service here in Sri Lanka will help me to get to know what I want to do in my future. My work at WERC is very varied. That was very useful for my further working-life because I collected a lot of different experiences. I got to know how to be a librarian. I helped to arrange and handle stocktaking and Book Sales. and checking outstanding bills of our customers, I learnt how to organise a book launch. I hope I was useful to WERC too.

I also made a round trip through Sri Lanka. I visited the ancient cities, the hill country and the south inclusive of a national park. It is fascinating, how many things you can find in Sri Lanka and the stories about the old Ceylon are really very interesting. The cool climate in the hill country with its beautiful landscape, the jungle and the wild animals unbelievable that all these things are in one country of this size!

But there is also another thing that impressed me a lot. Whenever you come to a home of a family as a guest, they treat you with such friendliness and make everything so pleasant that you feel very happy there. That is totally different to the usual European way. Everything that I expected has been excelled, so I will definitely come back to this beautiful country and all the nice people whom I will miss so much.

Last but not least, I want to thank WERC for everything. This will be an unforgettable experience for me!



NEW ARRIVALS TO THE LIBRARY

Feminist Under Fire ; exchanges across war zones, edited by Wenona Giles and others. Toronto, Canada, Between the Lines, 2003

Feminist under fire is about women living and working in conflict zones. Focussing on the civil wars in Sri Lanka and the former Yugoslavia, diverse authors face the problems of nationalism, ethnic conflict and militarized violence. They explore commonalities and differences between the two regions and consequences for women, their societies and feminist politics.

Cottons and Casuals; the gendered organization of labour in time and space, by Miriam Glucksmann. Durham, Sociology Press 2000.

Cottons and casuals develops an analytical framework which can also inform sociological understanding of contemporary change in the social organisation of work. .

The author examines changes in the organisation of domestic production and consumption, the use of technology, housing, family structure, gender relations and inter-generational mother-daughter relations. Differing temporalities of work are highlighted as are their far-reaching effects for the organisation of peoples' lives and life courses.

Essays in Indian History : Towards a Marxist Perception, by Irfan Habib . New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2000.

What gives this collection such unity is the author's effort to interpret the main currents of Indian History from a standpoint which belongs to the Marxist tradition of historiography. This volume brings together author's seminal essays published over a span of some thirty years.

Tamil Heroic Poetry by K. Kailasapathy. Colombo, Kumaran Book

House, 2002.

The book attempts both to introduce and to interpret ancient Tamil poems. The author has approached the poems afresh by relating them to an important studies of heroic poetry in other languages especially the Greek, which has enabled him to place them in a proper perspective. This is a study of heroic poetry of South Indian people which has hitherto been neglected.

I want to speak of tenderness -50 writers for Ann Ranasinghe edited by Gerard Robuchon. Colombo, ICES. 2003

Anne a writer in Sri Lanka was particularly concerned by whatever violence against human and living beings. She intensively engaged in writing poetry in English during the 1970s. This book with 50 writers from here and abroad - from over a dozen countries of all continents commemorate Anne's 50 years in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan Ethnic Crisis : towards a Resolution by R. B. Herath. Canada, Trafford Publishing. 2002.

His book is a frank reflection on the history and politics of Sri Lanka that has produced its current tragic ethnic crisis. It is an easy-to-read, concise and up-to-date book that has answers to the burning questions raised by those committed to finding a lasting solution to the crisis.

Selected Essays, by Maureen Seneviratne. Colombo, Wimal Enterprises, 2001.

The 'Selected Essays' are culled mostly from her weekly contributions in the daily newspapers. Many of the essays are topical and relate to the trauma and tragedy of the current times

Thin Veils : in the shadow of the gun and the wicked witch (performing activism) by Sumathy. Colombo, ICES. 2001

Her work is about the power of narrative, politics, woman and land. She is a winner of the Gratiaen Award 2001

Training Materials available at WERC

- ◆ Violence Against Women – English, Tamil and Sinhala
- ◆ Women in Conflict Situation – English and Sinhala
- ◆ Women and Education – English
- ◆ Women and Law – English and Tamil
- ◆ Politics Decision Making and Governance – English, Sinhala and Tamil
- ◆ Cultural Constraint and Media – Sinhala and Tamil
- ◆ Video Cassettes (Tamil) Discussions on Gender related themes

WERC Evaluation 2003

WERC held an internal evaluation at the end of December 2003. It was conducted by the WERC consultants, and a discussion based on the report, took place at a special staff meeting on January 3rd 2004.

The Executive Director presided and explained the purpose of an evaluation. She pointed out that, it was not to find fault with staff nor to be judgemental. It is rather a forward movement in the development of the organisation with meaningful reflection on the past. It gives staff an opportunity to question themselves within their own consciousness rather than question others. The whole exercise is therefore meant to be a corrective and remedial process, she said.

The report was read by the Consultants and the staff was requested to comment on the observations made therein and the suggestions which followed. They voiced their independent views and a useful discussion ensued. Many practical suggestions were made for future improvements in several areas of WERC activities.

LIBRARY

For your next.....

Research, Article, Book,

Speech

Resources

Books and Information on

» Gender » Child & Youth

» Politics » Media

» Religion » Sociology

» Women's Studies

For quick reference:

Dictionaries/Encyclopedias

Research Reports

Theses / Directories

Special collection on Women's
Writing in Sri Lanka

Documentation

News clipping on violence,
suicides human rights FTZ,
Women, Trafficking in women,
migrant workers

Documented Journal Articles

from EPW Feminism and
Psychology, Rethinking History,
Himal/Gender and Society,
Monthly Review etc.

Audio Visuals: documentaries
and Features and Feature films
on women issues, human rights,
ethnicity etc.

- ⊙ We have facilities for
Reading & reference
work for non members
- ⊙ Information through
telephone or fax.
- ⊙ Inter Library Loan facilities
- ⊙ Photocopying at cost
- ⊙ Computer printout of
reading list
- ⊙ Loan membership
- ⊙ Reference/referral services.

Welcome

A warm welcome to Malathy Bhavananthan who joins WERC as
Coordinator for the South Asian Feminist Researcher's Association.

Warm Wishes

Our best wishes and thanks for the services rendered to WERC go out
to Helena Alwis Administrative Officer and Sulakshana de Mel SAFRA
Coordinator.

Readers Comments

We welcome your comments
on Pravahini

Please write/fax/e-mail
to WERC address below

We will publish them
in this column.

WERC AUDITORIUM

- Seminars, • Workshops, • Awareness Programmes,
- Film shows, • Meetings etc.

The WERC Auditorium offers you the following facilities -

- ◇ Fully air conditioned
- ◇ Public Address System complete with Microphones and Ear Phones
- ◇ Overhead Projectors
- ◇ Translating Unit
- ◇ TV and VCR Facilities
- ◇ Magi and Flip Chart Boards
- ◇ Recording facility

A seating capacity of 50 available with conference tables and an airy and spacious dining
area to accommodate the same number.

Meals, Tea could be supplied on request

Women's Education & Research Centre
58, Dharmarama Road,
Colombo 6, Sri Lanka

Tel. 94 01 2595296, 2596826

Fax 94 01 2596313

Email womedre@sltnet.lk,
werc@itmin.com