



PRAVAHINI

WERC News Letter

FEBRUARY 1996

"Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels, of women's labour, fertility and sexuality-in the family, at the place of work, and in society in general-and includes action by, women and men to transform society".

Kumari Jayewardena

From the Editor...

This issue of PravaHini comes from our new address at Wellawatte. On August 11th '95 we moved office to the spacious and airy three storeyed building on Dharmarama Road.

We have accommodated our Library, now well furnished and equipped on the ground floor. We stock resource material including books, journals, documented newspaper clippings on current topics. Book and video cassette loans are available on a refundable deposit. Reading room facilities are also provided and computerised reference lists may be obtained on request. The office proper occupies the first floor, while the second floor is being equipped for an Auditorium which can accommodate 40 persons - a

long-felt need for our activities.

It was also about this time that final preparations were going ahead for participation at the Fourth UN World Conference of Women in Beijing. WERC was also represented in the NGO forum from Sri Lanka. The conclusion of the Beijing Conference saw the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, thus presenting to the world a widely discussed, argued and clarified blue-print to be put into action for the empowerment of women. The details spelled out the aim of enhancing, advancing and improving their social, economic and political status, their marital and sexual rights, and their fight against gender violence, giving every

country around the world, the direction to move forward into action - to realise the vision of a future seen through women's eyes - the implementation of which is the challenge placed before governments of the world for 1996. As the United Nations Department of Public Information says "Never before had the world so clearly admitted that without sharing power with women at all levels of decision-making, no real equality between women and men would ever be achieved."

Cont..... page 2

Contents ...

- * *A Platform for Action*
- * *"All women of the World ..."*
- * *At Beijing the Women said..."*
- * *A Training Course - Empowerment of Women in Asia*
- * *Publications & Projects*
- * *Library News*
- * *A very short story*

The UN which sponsored the Women's Conference at Beijing, celebrated 50 years since the creation of the United Nations - "united for a better World." That this world organisation has survived fifty years is in itself no mean achievement, weathering many storms, in its effort to fulfil the mandates of the UN Charter. Peaceful solutions, concern for human rights, and social and economic development have been advanced and upheld through the cooperation of the nations within the UN.

NGOs, their missions and misconceptions

In recent months, NGO's were astir with controversial reports on these organisations, and their activities.

The general feeling among people that the NGOs go their own way unrestricted has been the main point of criticism, especially as their name denotes that they are not part of the government machinery, and therefore not accountable to any one in the country. Much of this criticism has obviously arisen due to a few NGOs whose integrity has been questioned. Letters and articles appearing in the press have argued on both sides and have been useful especially to educate the people on the commendable work, mostly humanitarian, which the great majority of the NGOs are engaged in. The freedom NGOs enjoy makes them more flexible than state machinery and is, in fact, the basic reason for the success of their ventures. It has been

evident that the state has been appreciative and supportive of their activities which are more easily accessible and more acceptable at the grass roots level. For most part they fulfil a need which the state is unable to provide for different reasons.

Nevertheless, increasingly evident in the developing countries is the trend for the state to exercise some kind of control over NGOs. Cooperation with the state will not be distasteful in itself if it does not jeopardise the original identity and autonomy as a NGO. It is absolutely necessary for each NGO to be judged on its own merit, concerning its aims and objectives, its activities and also most importantly its achievements.

A Platform For Action.....

The Beijing Conference on Women is the most recent historical landmark to go into the annals of women's activities. Outstanding as it was as a unique event, if only on account of the number of women (and men) who attended it, and that these women came from all corners of the earth, it was also unique in that this conglomeration included women from grass roots level to official government delegations and world leaders. It is difficult to imagine what must have been an everchanging kaleidoscope of hundreds upon hundreds of different costumes, languages ideas, opinions, strategies and activities. However, overwhelming the variety and multiplicity a superficial look may

have indicated, this flood of women came to Beijing with a commitment to a cause - the empowerment of women. They came with a purpose and tried every method imaginable to achieve it.

The UN 4th World Conference was attended only by the national delegations representing 181 States and the representatives of the NGOs. Its agenda was the Draft platform for Action a 362 paragraph document consisting of a collective presentation of national reports prepared by each country.

Cont... Page 3

These reports gave a review of the progress made by women in reference to each country, with an analysis of what remains to be done and the obstacles in the way of certain areas where women had not reached equality. The final document was drafted as an appraisal of women's progress since the forward looking strategies for the Advancement of Women was adopted at the 3rd UN World Conference in Nairobi in 1985.

The Platform for Action sought to speed up the removal of obstacles to women's full participation in all spheres of life and recognition of the crucial role of women. It listed 12 critical areas of concern identified as poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic structures, power sharing, and decision making mechanisms to promote the advancement of women, human rights, the media, the environment and the girl child.

The sections of the draft enclosed within brackets accounted for 60% of the document and these were the areas of dissension which resulted in much discussion and debating to formulate the document for adoption. Among these topics were Women's rights as human rights, rape is a war crime and Women's unremunerated work. What seemed to be the main problem was the "progressive advancement of the rights of women and the conservative currents which are increasingly gaining in strength throughout the world". Eventually the Platform for Action was adopted. The challenge now lies with the women to see the implementation through demanding their governments to take the responsibility for action against inequalities and discrimination with regard to women.

A poem by Filipino Susan Magno was put to music and sung at Beijing, with women in the audience putting in the final line in their own languages.

*All women of the world
Let's gather all our strength
Let's break the chains that bind us
And struggle to be free.
Let's keep our voice loud and clear
For gender unity
Together, we will build a world of dignity
Let no one in their world
Deprive us of our rights
No race or class or culture
Shall ever stop our fight
Our hopes and our dreams for lasting
Peace will always linger on
While we have a life
Where we will be free"*

At Beijing

The Women said.....

Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the 4th World Conference on Women.

"Action speaks louder than words"

AUNG SAN SUU KYI, (Nobel Peace Prize Winner and a key figure in Burma's pro-democracy movement.)

Tolerance

"It is a wonderful but daunting task that has fallen on me to say a few words by way of opening this forum, the greatest concourse of women (joined by a few brave men!) that has ever gathered on our planet. I want to try and voice some of the common hopes which firmly unite us in all our splendid diversity.

It is not enough simply to live and let live; genuine tolerance requires an active effort to try to understand the point of view of others; it implies broad mindedness and vision, as well as confidence in ones own ability to meet new challenges without resorting to intransigence or violence. In societies where men are truly confident of their own worth women are not merely tolerated, they are valued. Their opinions are listened to with respect, they are given their rightful place in shaping the society in which they live."

Mainstream Voices on Alternative Praxis

Hilary Clinton, First Lady, United States of America

"I believe that on the eve of a new millennium it is time to break our silence. It is time to say here in Beijing, and the world to hear, that it is no longer acceptable to discuss women's rights as separate from human rights. These abuses have continued because, for too long, the history of women has been a history of silence. Even today, there are those who are trying to silence our words. It is a violation of human rights when women are denied the right to plan their own families, and that includes being forced to have abortions or being sterilised against their will."

Nafis Sadik Executive Director of the UN Population Fund denounced involuntary family planning practices.

"We must not bend under the weight of spurious arguments invoking culture or traditional values. No value worth the name supports the oppression and enslavement of women. The function of culture and tradition is to provide a frame work for human well-being."

From the Diversity Tent of the Latin American and Caribbean Women Beijing.

"Wake up, planet Earth and listen to the voice of your women"

Cont... Page 5

Maureen Reagan, daughter of Ronald Reagan (former President U.S.)

"We women have spent the 20th century finding our voice. We must spend the 21st century using it to speak for women who have no voice, who are still voiceless."

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF which was involved in more than 25 workshops at the NGO Forum says.

"Girls are beginning women. The key to UNICEF policy, key to our work at the Forum and key to all the other work we do is education of girls."

NGO Forum ends with accolades of success

"Women came here with their own power and go back home with the power of women from all over the world."

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, UN Secretary General in his message to the world conference on women said.....

"Women are the key to development in every dimension. Equality, peace and development must reach every woman on earth. When the rights and hopes of women in all these fields are advanced, so will all human society come to benefit."

The Cats Eye Column

We are very happy to see feminist discourse in the mainstream media, in Sri Lanka. It was an obsession for so long in the mainstream media, that they ridicule, belittle and indulge in non-academic critique of the feminist praxis.

Perhaps Cats eye in the **Island** is a healthy signal that the alternative is moving into the mainstream. This column covers a range of subjects with a breadth of vision and the in-depth though, short and precise analyses are an indication of the interest and concern for women's issues on the part of the contributors. We hope that this column lasts.

Freedom of Association

We understand that the Government has proposed certain amendments to the Voluntary Social Service Organizations Act.

The original law 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, as we see it, poses a serious threat to freedom of association and to the autonomy of NGOs.

NGOs should be responsible and accountable to their members, funders and other appropriate persons and institution since under the existing law there are means to deal with instances of fraud and corruption.

The recent 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 spokespersons.

A Training Course

The inter cultural course on women and society was conducted by the Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholasticas College, Manila, Philippines, from September to December 1995. Eighteen participants came from fourteen countries of the Asia Pacific Region, and others from Sweden, Africa and Germany. The three months study programme was based on the women's situation, Analysis of women's issues and women's movements, visions and strategies for change, including skills training and action planning. There were module facilitators (Filipino) for each module and the course was conducted in English. The atmosphere was quite informal at the sessions where the participants sat on mats on the floor, and the participatory methods were used. The modules were Women and Religion, Women and Mass Media, Women and Health, Women and Education, creative facilitation and Module making, and Feminist theories. This was followed by an exposure programme where it was possible to meet women in different situations in different parts of the country. Finally the participants submitted an action plan to show how they would disseminate the knowledge gained to empower women in their own countries.

Kumari Wickramasinghe

WERC Publications and Projects

Sthreevaadhi Dharshana - a Sinhala Translation of Dilemma of Theories by Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran

English Nivedini - December 1995 Vol.3 No. 2

Contents include :-

- **Dilemmas of A Transformative Research Ideal Refugees and Resettlemen in Sri Lanka - Joke Shrijvers**
- **Women in Contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil Fiction: A Study of Three Novels - Sitra Maunaguru/ The Business of Child**
- **Prostitution - Maureen F. Seneviratne,**
- **Nationalism Refigured: Gender and Contemporary Popular Cinema - Tejaswini Niranjana**

Nivedini (Sinhala) Vol. 2 No. 2

- **What is Gender**
- **Women and Law**
- **Feminism**
- **Women's rights in the family**
- **What is Women's Liberation ?**
- **Women who gathered in Beijing**

Nivedini (Tamil) Vol. 2. No. 2.

Violence against women is the main theme of the Tamil issue of Nivedini, and we are submitting this issue for the special attention of the UN Rapporteur for Violence Against Women. The testimony of a woman is included in this issue.

Two articles, which look at the cultural construction of the Hindu women which betray both the hegemonic and the alternative image appear in this issue. The first was on the Tamil Hindu Saints by Rajam Krishnan and the other is on how the Royal noble patriarch of the Mahabaratha, Bhishma devalues womanhood. This article is by Iravati Karve (Translation).

The special feature of this issue is the various protest statements issued by women on contemporary gender issues.

Cont....Page 7

PROJECTS

Research

- Female Headed Households in Sri Lanka
- Emerging Ethnic Conscience of the Up-Country Tamils and its implications

Child care

Christmas Bazaar, a Christian organisation of foreign funders has continued support to enable us to complete the multi-purpose building in Obeysekerapura, which will serve as a pre-school cum day-care centre and community centre.

Workshops

In August a one-day Workshop for Training of Trainers was conducted by Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran. In December a one-day Workshop was conducted on Feminism and its Social Implications followed by a Film Show 'Leaves and Thorns' - an award-winning film on violence against women in South India.

Library

New Arrivals

Fighting Forces, Writing Women : Identity and Ideology in the First World War

Author : Sharon Ouditt

Routledge, London (1994)

The author examines the traumatic nature of women's experience during the great war and complex ideological structures they confronted and engaged with, in order to legitimate their positions in the public world. This book will be of interest for women's studies, literature and also study of history.

Social Psychology: Shaping identity, thought and conduct

Authors : Micheal Kail and Chad Gardon

Allyn and Bacon, Boston (1992)

An introductory text book with a variety of sub-sections such as the social pattern of experience and thought, the self, negotiating reality with others and socially structured psychologies. A useful reference source for graduate and post graduate levels.

Historiography in a time of ethnic conflict :Construction of the past in contemporary Sri Lanka Author : R A L H Gunawardena Social Scientists Association, Colombo (1995)

Essays based on ethno nationalism and historiography of Sri Lanka, dealing with two distinct phases of our history.

Television : The critical view

Editor : Horace Newcomb (5th ed)

Oxford University Press, New York (1994)

A collection of papers on contemporary academic television criticism. The essays are on specific programme types, what television means to people, and how it differs from other media. A useful resource book for media studies/television programming.

Library Service - Weekdays & Saturdays 8.30 to 4.30 pm.

Books, periodicals, video-cassettes and documented newspaper clippings are available in English, Sinhala & Tamil.

Special areas : Social sciences including women's studies, History and Mass media.

ATON 2 NOLA

88.11.1994

Brooms & Promotions

It is a cool day. The family is at rest and in a happy mood too. The daughter has just got a promotion at work.

Within a few months they can start the renovation of the house with the additional money that the daughter will bring into the family purse.

The parents started to discuss the details of the renovation plan. The daughter looked on delighted with her achievements and usefulness.

At this moment the son aged fifteen walked into the compound, and started to clean it. He started sweeping the compound with an ekel broom.

The mother is painfully shocked at this sight. She yells out-

" You stupid idiot boy, what are you doing there? Have you ever seen your father, sweeping or handling a broom?"

Momentarily, the boy seemed convinced of the rationale. He nodded his head as if accepting the logic and throwing away the broom he stepped in.

Instantly his face expressed a dubious thoughtfulness . He turned to his sister and asked
" Sister, have you even seen your mother going out to office and getting promotions?"

Perhaps the parents are convinced of the new logic now.



Staff News

- * Mrs. Rose Sinnethamby left WERC in August. We thank her for her loyal service.
- * Kumari wickramasinghe attended the Intercultural course on women and society at St. Scholastica's College, Manila, Philippines September to December 1995.
- * Congratulations to Thilaka and Mr. Wasantha Herath who were married in August.
- * An evaluation of WERC activities was carried out by the staff of WERC and submitted to the Directors
- * We welcome
- Mr. Primal Mallawarachchi - Accounts Assistant
- Ms. Deepthi Wickramasinghe - Administrative Assistant
- Mr. Paul Senadipathy - Administrative Assistant
- Ms. Carmen Niranjala Peiris - Computer Assistant

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