

II. WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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The Panelists were **Ms. Merlyn Martis** (Director of DEEDS), **Sr. Theresa Meera** (an activist working in slums and rural areas in Karnataka), **Ms. Sheeba George** (an activist from SAHR-WARU working for minority women's rights in Gujarat) and **Ms. Christina Samy** (Founder-Director of SWATE). Ms. Christina moderated the Panel and Plenary, and consolidated the Report. Much of the first section is based on Ms. Merlyn's talk.

1. The Plight of Women¹

Women constitute nearly 50% of the human race and thus ought to be about 50% in all areas of social and political life and at all levels of decision-making. But the reality is very different: women belong to the most marginalised in every sector of life. *Their exploitation is a global phenomenon cutting across nations, races, religions, castes, classes and other social categories.*

A) Patriarchy, the Family and Domestic Violence

Patriarchy means the rule and control of men over women's life (e.g., their work, decision-making, freedom, leisure and time), **resources and even bodies**. *Every society manifests and perpetuates patriarchy* through its socio-economic, political and ideological systems. Its institutions display and sanction gender discrimination and the oppression of women, though in varying degrees. As a handmaid of the system, **education** usually stereotypes the role and characteristics of men and women and thereby reinforces patriarchy. **The mass media** basically fulfill the same functions and, in addition, frequently portray women as sex goddesses and commodities. *Both women and men internalise patriarchy and are ultimately its victims. All of us must therefore realise that patriarchy impoverishes humanity in all dimensions of life.*

The family is the basic unit of our society. **In spite of its many positive features, it is also built on the patriarchal ideology of**

male superiority. Though most people do not realise this, *the family is indeed the milieu where the oppression of women takes root and is internalised. It is often there that human rights violations against women are the greatest* – male preference leading to foeticides and infanticides (The sex ratio was as low as 933 women per 1000 men in India in 2001. The world average was then 986.); discrimination in the allotment of food, health care and education; inegalitarian distribution of work; sexual abuses; restriction of freedom of movement and activities outside the house; double standards used for girls and boys in several fields; 'forced' marriages, often of minors; and so on. *The worst is probably that it is in the family that oppressive patriarchal ideas, values, attitudes, roles and customs are usually deeply internalised.* As a result, many women do not realise their full potential. They develop a 'poor' self-image, feel 'inferior', accept their subordination, and become submissive and passive.

The limited freedom of women in their choice of life-partners, their displacement from their natal family and surroundings at their marriage, their economic dependence and lack of education, skills and outside contacts, the dowry system and the prevailing mentality – *all these factors make women very vulnerable to domestic violence.* As shown by common experience and various surveys, *domestic violence is also often related to the dowry system and alcoholism, and it is very widespread.* The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that the number of women dying because of domestic violence is greater than the deaths due to malaria, cancer, traffic accidents and wars put together. *Attempts at raising one's voice are silenced in the name of family honour and of culture and religion.*

B) Patriarchy, Religions and Communitarism

All religions are patriarchal, though in various degrees. (Their revival thus sometimes reinforces patriarchy.) Almost all their scriptures, institutions and legislations are created by men. *Their teachings* (on morality, salvation and even God!) *and practices generally uphold male superiority.* Women's oppression is legitimised – as in the cases of the *devadasi* system, *sati*, child marriage, forced widowhood and dowry. Women are only followers

and practitioners, not leaders. They are considered impure or at least inferior, and kept away from places and functions considered holy and sacred. For instance, women cannot enter certain temples, perform some rites or sacrifices and become priests.

Caste divisions were created by religious people and institutions. Hierarchical relationships were thus established and discriminatory practices like untouchability became entrenched. Caste subjugation is often perpetuated through violence. *Here also, women are the greatest victims, especially since rioters target them to take revenge on and humiliate their caste communities. The same psychology is at play in religious and ethnic conflicts.* Rape is used as a weapon to demoralise one's adversaries.

Religious fundamentalism further victimises women in its organised crimes against the minorities, for example the Muslims in India. Muslim women are the greatest sufferers in communal clashes. This was very much the case in the Gujarat riots in 2002. Hatred and intolerance between religious groups is spreading like a wild fire or an epidemic throughout the country. And this strengthens the patriarchal forces. Domestic and societal violence against women is perhaps a more widespread, dangerous and inhumane form of terrorism than societal and political terrorism. It is perhaps even worse than religious persecutions, racial abuses, caste atrocities, and militant extremism.

C) Impact of Economic Globalisation

Globalisation increasingly affects people's livelihoods and displaces human communities. The Central and State Government favours the corporations and robs people's lands, for instance through Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and their policies also lead thousands of farmers to commit suicide. The poor are thrown out from their habitats and are forced to take shelter in the slums of towns and cities in search of livelihood. Migration has thus become a tremendous problem.

On account of patriarchy, women are particularly vulnerable. They are denied their right to answer their needs of food, shelter, health, sanitation, and education. They are deprived of resources like land, water and forest produce, and experience more and more unemployment and underemployment. In the job market, women are

hired last, paid least and fired first. Casual labour is spreading among them, even more than among men. *Poverty is increasingly feminised.* Women and even girls thus become destitute and are drawn into trafficking in large numbers – some estimates speak of about 500,000 girl victims in India.² **It is not only their right to development that is violated, but even their right to live and survive!**

D) Absence of Political Participation

Women's representation in parliament has never crossed 10%. Compared to the 1960s and 1970s, it also tends to decrease in the state assemblies. Almost all regional and national parties have a women's wing that mobilises women for political events and as vote-banks. *Yet, the women's share in political power remains very meager.* Out of the 542 members of the Lok Sabha, only 45 are women. Even in the Rajya Sabha, where members are appointed and can therefore be more easily chosen to represent a wide spectrum, women hold only 28 of the 242 seats. Almost all these elected and selected women are moreover from the middle class – professional women with little or no link to the women's movement.

The Women Reservation Bill has been shelved by several governments because of their lack of political will to allow women their rightful share in the parliament and legislatures. The criminalisation of politics also prevents women from playing their rightful role in politics. Thanks to the reservation policy in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, women are however visible at the panchayat level and meaningful efforts are multiplying.

In spite of the 1979 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), India's Constitution upholding the equal status of women, the National Commission to safeguard the rights of women, and our Ministry of Women and Children Development, *there is still no genuine political will in our country to reach out to the neediest women* such as the Dalits, Tribals, minorities, unorganised labourers, migrants, economically poor, differently abled and elderly.

There are positive legislations like the 2005 Prevention of Domestic Violence Act and the amendment of the inheritance laws giving equal rights to women over land, but the family laws of some communities remain unjust towards women. *The people's legal ignorance and*

the male-dominated mindset and structure of the judiciary, bureaucracy and police are great obstacles to the building of a gender-empowered society. The criminal justice system is still insensitive to crimes against women, and Family Courts and Women Police Stations still fail to uphold women's rights.

2. Women as the World's and India's Hope

Looking at women's interventions throughout history provides much hope for the furthering of development with a human face. *The entry and interplay of different actors in politics has radically changed in the last 100 years.* These shifts have transformed the involvements of middle-class and grassroots women over time, *changing the mass-based composition of the women's movement and the political environment.* Women participated with men in the struggles and revolts conducted in various rural and Tribal areas of India during the pre-independence period. The orientation, ideology and strategies of these struggles were radical.

Women's liberation movements on the other hand are broadly guided by the ideology of fighting the different forms of patriarchy with the aim of building an egalitarian and gender-just society. In the mid- and late-1970s, several 'autonomous women's organisations' emerged that adopted issue-based 'protest politics' for mobilising women. The 1980s were a time of great energy and ferment in the women's movements, and brought into the public domain many issues that had not hitherto been seen as political. If the slogan of the 80s was 'the personal is political', in the 90s it was 'all issues are women's issues'. *The women's movements in India today are linked together through networks on different issues and campaigns.* While the older methods of protest and advocacy are still used, new methods of resistance and mobilisation for change are being evolved, *with new movements on ecologically-sensitive and sustainable development.*

The women's movements are undergoing a process of renewal regarding their understanding and practice of power and politics. They sharpen their tools, show the power of their collective action, and move from the margins to the center, where a great void is visible. Their experiences of poverty, discrimination and struggles make them frontliners. *They not only rise to oppose violence against women,*

but also to ensure their rights over life and livelihood resources. **Women must organise themselves across social divisions and political formations and become involved in gender-sensitive development.**

The past and present contributions of women to society and history still remain largely unrecognised. But, in fact, these are irreplaceable and as (if not more!) significant as those of men! *We must become more conscious of these contributions and highlight them.* The 'special' qualities and 'unique' potential of women and their increasing participation in the economic, social, political and intellectual life of humanity also fill us with hope. As social activists, we particularly rejoice at their growing involvement in social transformation. *Yes, a better world is possible! And it is already in the making, often mainly through the significant contribution of women.*

3. Development Issues and Challenges

1. Though constituting almost 50% of the population, *women are divided on the basis of religion, language, culture, caste and class. Many or most have moreover internalised patriarchy. Regressive forces promote and utilise these divisions.*

2. NGOs often mobilise women on a sectoral basis (e.g., as Dalits, Tribals, minorities, and persons in need of health care or education). They are influenced by donor agencies and are project-oriented. They also possess different ideologies and strategies.

3. *Women's initiatives fail to address the core issues of exploitation and, for example under the impact of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), focus instead on income-generating programmes and economic transactions.* **The women's movement is still far too weak and scattered, and women's issues are not properly articulated in society.**

4. The continuous struggles of women to earn their livelihood and cope with violence often hinder their involvement in social change.

5. *The fact that some women are trapped in the clutches of caste and communal forces makes change interventions difficult.* Such women sometimes become the supporters or even perpetrators of crimes. *Patriarchy, caste and fundamentalism are strong enough to make women oppress one another.*

6. Gender activists quite often experience varying degrees of opposition and rejection. Since women are assigned the identity of their group, their attempts to change the situation are taken as attacks on their community.

7. The caste discriminations, fundamentalist approaches and gender biases (also towards women religious!) existing in the Church and her institutions pose a big challenge to those who work for development.

8. *Lack of women's representation and participation in governance and administration at the state and national level, and in the Church too.*

9. The State and Central Government should recognise women's organisations as key stakeholders and involve them in planning, executing, monitoring, and evaluating various policies and projects. *The whole issue of the relationship between the government and the NGOs is crucial.*

10. Need for promoting a gender perspective and component in the planning and budgeting of all government and NGO projects.

11. It is imperative to empower women to pressure the government to effectively implement its development schemes, especially in the fields of health care, education, and the provision of basic amenities. Corruption, inefficiency and indifference must be fought against, for they are among the greatest enemies of development. Women have to use the right to information and take part in the social audit process.

12. Unfortunately, many NGOs are also affected by patriarchy. They themselves fail to practice gender equity and partnership in their relationship with and treatment of women (including their own personnel), financial arrangements, distribution of responsibilities, and internal structures.

4. The Needed Responses

To respond to today's situation, issues and challenges, the Colloquium participants highlighted the following measures.

1. All emphasised the paramount need for activists, NGOs and other groups/organisations like CBOs (community-based organisations), SHGs and people's movements **to conduct various educational programmes and conscientising campaigns to**

John Paul II on the Women's Movement

*Human "conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves, and **it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity.**"* Yet, "women have contributed to history as much as men and, more often than not, they did so in much more difficult conditions." In our own days, women "make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a (meaningful) culture" and "model of life", and "to the establishment of economic and political structures ever more worthy of humanity". They also "help to make human relations more honest and authentic". Moreover, **women "will increasingly play a part in the solution of the serious problems of the future"** (*Letter to Women*, 1995, # 3, 2 & 4).

"I cannot fail to express my admiration for those women of good will who have devoted their lives to *defending the dignity of womanhood by fighting for their basic social, economic and political rights*, demonstrating courageous initiative at a time when this was considered extremely inappropriate... **The great process of women's liberation... 'has been substantially a positive one'**... This journey must go on! But I am convinced that the secret of making speedy progress in achieving full respect for women and their identity involves more than simply the condemnation of discrimination and injustices, necessary though this may be. Such respect must first and foremost be won through **an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women**, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women." *The dignity of women is "a part of God's plan for humanity"* (ibid., #6).

promote gender sensitisation and transform the people's mindset. These should reach both women and men, as individuals and groups, in urban and rural areas, through all possible means (informal meetings, educational and religious institutions, mass media, etc.). *Relevant forms of gender socialisation must be developed at all levels.*

Several aims can thus be pursued and achieved: create widespread awareness of women's issues and human rights violations; combat patriarchy and foster gender equality and justice, complementarity, mutuality and partnership; redefine the power relationships between women and men along democratic lines; bring about attitudinal and behavioural changes; spread legal education at the grassroots level; promote various skills and capacity-building; develop a strong/positive identity, self-image and self-confidence; and so on. *This is an uphill but indispensable and possible task. Such a conscientising campaign is absolutely essential for the genuine empowerment of women.*

2. *NGOs and activists must give priority to the most needy women in their campaigns and programmes.* They should also tackle the root causes of the problems, become involved in and take a stand on core issues.

3. *Combat divisive forces like caste and communalism and promote unity within the women's movement.* On account of our multi-cultural and multi-religious society, it is particularly important and urgent to foster *a culture of pluralism, mutual respect, harmony, collaboration and peace.*

4. Adopting proactive and constructive measures at all levels to stop **domestic (and societal) violence** is the need of the hour. Reacting to problems after they occur is not enough. Gender sensitisation has to begin in the family itself. To combat domestic violence, campaigns should also be conducted against the dowry system, alcoholism and liquor shops. A workshop report even recommended prohibition in the whole country, and a complete abolition of dowry in the Church.

5. High priority must be given to ensure **the right of girls and women to literacy and proper education.** But the usual formal education is not sufficient to truly empower women; *gender sensitisation is also required.*

6. **The economic independence and security of women** is essential to empower them in all fields and enable them to resist violence. This involves granting inheritance and land rights to women, registration of property and bank accounts in their name or jointly, secure employment, proper wages, skill training, education and equal opportunities, etc.

7. **Legal education and services** should be provided to women.

8. *Promote the systematic organisation of women at all levels:* women's sanghas, SHGs, CBOs, political fronts and parties, movements, alliances and networking, etc. *Adopt the rights approach and use means such as campaigns, advocacy, pressure groups, etc.*

9. Ensure the proper participation of women activists and organisations *in the formulation and implementation of development projects* (cf. Section 3, nos. 9, 10 & 11). *The role of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) is very crucial in this field.*

10. **All efforts should be made to enable women to take part in the decision-making processes concerning women's issues and other important societal matters.** • Promote political consciousness among women and *their collective grassroots political action* through pressure groups and protest politics, and even through women's political fronts. • Foster women's representation, participation and leadership in all decision-making processes, including in the Church. • Support the Bill for 33% reservation for women in the Parliament and State Assemblies. • Encourage women's participation in party politics.

11. Women should moreover contribute to transform the existing approach to power and politics at all levels, by pulling down the hierarchical and pyramidal structures of governance and administration and developing instead 'circular' structures where people work in collaboration without 'competing' and feeling threatened. This is a more 'feminine' approach: power and politics to be understood not as dominance, but as participation and capacity to influence and make decisions.

12. Ultimately, **both women and men must start responding to gender discrimination at the personal level.** They must question and change their attitudes and behaviour patterns (e.g., sharing the housework, bringing up children without discrimination from childhood, and truly listening to each other and asserting oneself), take a concrete stand on women's issues, and become involved in women's struggles. *In a similar way, the NGOs and activists are also in great need of rethinking and renewing their attitudes towards gender* (cf. Section 3, no. 12).

Appendix Swate and Its Women's Front³

SWATE (**Society of Women in Action for Total Empowerment**) is a grassroots women's organisation based in Karur district. The outcome of ten years of work by the NGO AREDS, this movement began in January 1991. *SWATE concentrated on organising women into sanghas (sangams in TN) and helped them to articulate their felt needs.* Through regular programmes in the villages for conscientisation and capacity building, and trainings for members and leaders, *the organisation enabled rural women to address their issues through sustained collective actions.* Illiterate and poor women, who have been historically neglected and socially excluded, were filled with confidence and strength! **This rights approach is based on the conviction that relevant changes can only be achieved through the involvement of the marginalised, who need to be empowered to move forward.**

We understand **empowerment** as a process by which women become conscious of the causes of their poverty, oppression and denial of their rights. This consciousness leads them to organise themselves to use their collective energies, skills and resources to change their life situations and address the root causes. With their awareness, the sanghas tackle their immediate problems with a long-term perspective of sustainable development. In this process, *women experience power as an encompassing control over themselves and their surroundings, through their participation in decision-making.* **The process has therefore a strong political perspective.**

SWATE's involvement led the movement to participate in the **World March of Women 2000** – WMW 2000, a global campaign that challenged the forces increasing the feminisation of poverty and violence. As an outcome, SWATE initiated a state-level movement, the **Women's Movement Against Poverty and Violence – Tamil Nadu.** *The objective is to consolidate the micro-level women's organisations into a state-level movement that addresses women's poverty and violence and impacts (and challenges, whenever needed) the government programmes and policies through women's participation.*

The women fought, among other things, against the indiscriminate sand-mining in the Cauvery and Amaravathi rivers, which destroys the water resources for drinking and irrigation. They challenged the private contractors through legal and democratic means. After a geological study, the government decided to mine the sand directly, but the results were even worse. When the women and farmers tried to stop the sand-mining, 332 persons were arrested and imprisoned for 8 days, and 16 frontline leaders for 20 days. This made SWATE to present independent candidates in two Karur constituencies for the 2006 Assembly elections. SWATE lost the elections but succeeded in conscientising many people about their political role. The then ruling party was also overthrown, mainly on account of the sand-mining issue.

In 2005, SWATE played a key role in initiating a state-level political movement, the **Women's Front.** *This initiative is a joint effort of several women's movements in Tamil Nadu who try to voice their social, economic, political and cultural rights and demand gender equity against the patriarchal and male-dominated structures and systems.* **The Women's Front works around five demands:** 1) women ownership of land; 2) housing deeds in women's name and provision of basic facilities in rural and slum areas; 3) equal education for all and grant of employment to one educated woman in each family; 4) equal opportunity for women in all fields, government departments and decision-making bodies; and 5) access to health care and quality medical facilities for poor women.

The women want to recapture and control their own resources. We want to be masters of our own destiny and promote development with a human face, thus creating a world of peace, justice and equality for all.