



Institute of Social Sciences

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Report on Twelfth Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations

Date: 24th and 25th April

Venue: Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, New Delhi

Theme: Panchayats, Water and Sanitation

Organised by Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi

Sponsored by UNICEF and WaterAid

Participants: 500 delegates from 13 States and Union Territories

The Day was also observed in Hyderabad on 24th April and in Bangalore on 27th April. The other places which will observe the above day are: Bhubaneswar and Chennai.

Highlights of the Celebrations

The Institute organized a two-day convention of elected women panchayat representatives on April 24-25, 2006 at Vishwa Yuvak Kendra. More than 500 delegates including 42 NGOs from 13 States and Union Territories attended the convention. The Hon'ble Union Minister for Water Resources Mr. Saifuddin Soz inaugurated the meeting. In his inaugural address Mr. Soz spoke of the scarcity of water resources all over the world and drew the attention of the delegates about the fact that the Third World War might start on the issue of water!

He also pointed out that along with the reservation for women, there should also be provision of education which would enable them to avail the existing opportunities with ease. He was of the opinion that one of the ways to meet the water shortage is to harvest rain water. Mr. Cecilio Adorna, Country Representative, UNICEF, said that the non-availability of safe drinking water leads to various diseases. For example 4,00,000 children die every year in India alone for lack of sanitation and safe drinking water. He praised the role of women in panchayats and said that they have the power to transform the lives of their own community but also the lives of the future generation. The empowerment of women will lead to peace and security and sustained economic growth. For that elected women representatives have to take charge of ensuring safe drinking water, sustainable water resource management, proper sanitation and hygiene within the reach of the community. He cited the examples of women panchayat members from Tamil Nadu and West Bengal who have made remarkable achievements. Mr. Adorna also spoke of a large majority of gram panchayats headed by women bagging Nirmal Gram Puraskars. And all these gram panchayats are located in Uttar Pradesh.

Mr. Depinder S. Kapur, Country Representative, WaterAid, New Delhi, traced the underlying factors responsible for the abysmal low coverage of latrines both in rural and urban areas. Socio-economic factors account for such a dismal scenario, he observed. He was of the view that women panchayat leaders would be in a better position to understand the ground reality. He referred to some of the critical questions which were raised in a meeting on sanitation organized in memory of late Kamla Chowdhury. The questions relate to the social and economic domains.

For example, if lack of money is a factor, would raising the limit of the subsidy help the sanitation coverage and usage?

Similarly, behavioral change among the children did not improve the use of latrines in Madhya Pradesh. What other factors would be required to improve the practice?

There is a widespread perception that the Self Help Groups (SHGs) are charging high interest rates and that in turn leads to indebtedness in rural India. Given this criticism, can the women groups take charge of prioritizing latrine construction?

He hoped that the delegates present at the convention would take up some of those issues in right earnest. Mr. Rajendra Singh, Secretary, Tarun Bharat Sangh, Rajasthan, 'the water man' and Magsaysay award winner, observed that women in general and panchayats in particular should take charge of the management of ground water so that rational use of the scarce resource can be ensured. He also narrated the experiment which has been carried out in Rajasthan to solve the water problem and how the women have played a pioneering role in the entire experiment.

Ms Poornima Hegde, a gram panchayat member from Karnataka talked about her achievements in providing safe drinking water and universal sanitation through the synergy of civil society and panchayats whereas Mr Sabir Ali from the Council for Social Development, New Delhi, was of the view that lack of sanitation facilities in the mega cities and how the migrant women face the acute problem in Delhi. In the same session, the former president of All India Women's Conference (AIWC) Prof. Aparna Basu and an active member of the same organization Ms. Kalpakam Yechuri shared the activities taken up by AIWC on water and sanitation sector. Prof. Marc Humbert, founder member of Political and Ethical Knowledge on Economic Activities (PEKEA), a worldwide network to provide an alternative framework to globalization, agreed that the functioning of the local government provides one such framework and we should strengthen the same. Mr. Shahir Hassan, President, All India Panchayat Parishad, underlined the importance of integrated approach to solve the problem of water and sanitation at the panchayat level. His extensive visits to panchayats were the basis of his assertion.

In the valedictory, Ms Kiran Walia, the Chairperson, Delhi State Commission for Women raised the general issues like corruption and use of money power and how elected women representatives also fall prey to blandishments they get elected. The question of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through panchayats was highlighted by Ms Rita Sarin, Country Director, Hunger Project. Incidentally the 29 subjects given to panchayats coincide with some of the MDGs. Ms Lizette Burgers, the Chief, Water and Sanitation Section, UNICEF presented vivid visuals of the effects of the water-borne and lack of sanitation related diseases. Ms Mohini Giri, the former Chairperson, National Commission for Women (NCW) and present Chairperson, Guild of Services, New Delhi, remarked that one-third reservation for women in panchayats has brought a social revolution in India.

Women panchayat members were divided into four groups and they discussed the following topics:

- ✚ Government policies and Schemes on Water and Sanitation
- ✚ Poverty, Sanitation and Health
- ✚ Role of School in Ensuring Sanitation
- ✚ Panchayats and Sanitation

In the discussions, the state specific problems and solutions became quite clear. One broad recommendation cutting across the states was formation of national level federation of panchayats to strengthen the local government system. Ms Asha Ramesh, WaterAid who chaired the presentation of group reports, in her concluding remarks, observed that the women and young girls face physical assaults including rape and molestation when they go to the public toilets or to open field.

The following charter of demands were adopted by the delegates:

1. There is need for proper planning at the different levels of the panchayats and at the government level to ensure that the schemes are need-based and implemented in a manner as may be suitable for a specific area.
2. As there are regional variations in the economic and social conditions in different states, a uniform approach to meet the challenge of impure drinking water and sanitation may not work. Appropriate technology should be adopted depending on the availability of local resources. Testing laboratories for drinking water need to be established at suitable centres soon. The convention recommends that the government should take initiative for this and support the programme.
3. Taking note of the depleting water level, the convention strongly recommended that indiscriminate use of ground water must be stopped. Serious threat is posed by the rich in the countryside and the corporate companies including multinational giants like Coca Cola exploiting water to an extent that the local area face acute scarcity of drinking water threatening their health.
4. Water management – including conservation, rain water harvesting and balanced utilization be entrusted to specific groups to be formed as 'pani-panchayat' under the gram panchayat and the gram sabha and be given due authority and fund to discharge their responsibilities.
5. The convention stressed the need for close coordination between panchayats at different levels and concerned authorities including the government for proper water-toilet management in the field. Regular review and monitoring by the state and central government may help. The convention recommended that suitable steps be taken by the state/central government urgently.

Chennai

Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), organized the Women's political empowerment day celebration on 17th June 2006 at ICSA, Chennai in collaboration with EKTA Resource Center for women, Water Aid and UNICEF. The day long celebration was attended by more than 76 women panchayats leaders, activists, academicians, development and legal practitioners.

Ms. Bimla Chandrasekhar, Director of EKTA while welcoming the participants, stressed on the issue of sanitation needs to be addressed from a feminist perspective, as women are the worst sufferers when there is lack of sanitation and water facilities.

In this convention the speakers mainly focused on the societal attitudes that obstruct a pro-active participation of women in governance at the grassroots. In regard to water and sanitation in schools, the delegates were stressing on the role of panchayats on water management in schools and their role in imparting education with regard to water and sanitation in the schools.

Some delegates suggested, women panchayat leaders have to be both private persons fulfilling the domestic duties as well as public persons caring out the governance matters. The discussions also drew attention towards the limitation of the panchayats in terms of powers and allocation of funds for undertaking developmental activities in relation to water and sanitation. Some delegates focused on the role of women leaders from the grass roots to understand the issues relating to water and sanitation and encouraged the women leaders to raise these issues and assured that a number of groups would extend solidarity and support towards this.

Ms. Asha Ramesh (Development consultant, Bangalore) concluded with demand that the management of water and sanitation must be handed over to women's groups at all level, as they would understand the needs in a much deeper manner.

Orissa

The Institute of Social Sciences, Bhubaneswar branch organized one-day state level convention of elected women representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions of Orissa on 01st June 2006. More than 300 elected women representatives of PRI and other delegates participated in this convention. Dr. Damodar Rout, Ex Minister Panchayati Raj, Orissa, inaugurated the convention. In his inaugural speech he emphasized on how water and sanitation are important in day-to-day life. He also discussed about various governmental projects like Swajaldhara, Hariyali, Total Sanitary Campaign, etc. and added that NGOs had a greater involvement to create awareness. Smt. Surama Padhi, the honourable minister co operation, stressed on the awareness building measures in all level of the society in regard to the proper implementation of water and sanitation programme as well as to generate attitudinal change of people and involvement of women in mainstreaming of social life.

Overall, the convention gave emphasis on the people's participation, public awareness on the issues of water and sanitation and the role of PRI in relation to these issues. At the end of the session, Dr. Hrudananda Mohanty, project coordinator, ISS, Bhubaneswar extended vote of thanks.

Hyderabad

One day 12th women's Political Empowerment Day Programme was organized by Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), New Delhi at Urdu Ghar, Moghalpura, Hyderabad on 24th April, in association with, UNICEF and Water Aid and with the support of EKATRA. More than 75 elected Women's representatives from the panchayats took part in the programme. Gazala Khan of EKATRA welcomed the audiences. In this convention, the discussion was mainly on the role of panchayats in water and sanitation. In group discussions, the participants discussed about various issues like scarcity of drinking water, corruption in sanitation work and etc. The representatives of various social organizations shared their experiences as well as gave their suggestions in regard to the issues of water and sanitation. Finally, the programme was ended by the vote of thanks of Ms. Ghazala Khan.

Bangalore

The one-day women's political empowerment day programme was organized by the ISS, Bangalore branch, on 27th April, 2006. More than 150 women delegates from all over the state attended the programme. Mr. C.M. Udasi, the honourable Minister for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Karataka, while inaugurating the convention, focused on the role of women in making panchayats more effective in developmental activities. He also informed the audiences regarding the details of the budget provisions for providing clean drinking water and sanitation in villages particularly for constructing toilets. Dr. U. R. Anayamurti also highlighted the role of women in fighting against dirt and dust though out their life by cleaning their houses every day.

Some of the women representatives shared their problems regarding non-release of funds to panchayats which created hurdles for the proper implementation of water and sanitation programme. The convention mainly stressed on issues of proper use of water and importance of sanitation in villages. The delegates also suggested that village committees needed to provide pure water and better sanitation. They also emphasized on various schemes of government of Karnataka like 'Nirmal Karnataka', 'Swatccha Geaama' and 'Sampoorna Swatcchata Andolana'. They also discussed on how 'Swatchta Doota' i.e., sanitary messengers were being appointed to carry forward the programmes on water and sanitation in the villages in Karataka. Mr. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar on behalf of Institute of Social Sciences ended the convention with a vote of thanks.

Bidyut Mohanty

National Coordinator

Women's Political Empowerment Day Celebrations