

## International Women's Day

# Empowering rural women in India – it's high time!

Publicly elected women representatives in India ought to take advantage of their influence to defend women's rights.

The Constitution of India guarantees all women equality [Article 14], no discrimination by the State [Article 15 (1)], equal opportunities [Article 16] and equal pay for equal work [Article 39(d)]. Furthermore, it stipulates that practices derogatory to the dignity of women be renounced [Article 51 (a) (c)]. The Constitution also allows the State to make special provisions in favour of women and children [Article 15(3)] and secure just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief [Article 42]. The Government of India declared 2001 the "Year of Women's Empowerment", and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women came into force in that year 2001.

### ■ Ambitions and reality

So much for the official side. But in reality, things are very different, as the living conditions of women in rural areas show. For many centuries, rural women have been putting in unfathomable, unbearable and inadequately paid joyless drudgery to earn for their families' livelihood and provide food security to the country's 1.28 billion people. Most rural women face a pathetic plight, having to collect firewood, fetch drinking water, search fodder to feed cattle, work on their meagre land to raise crops or as labourers on other farms, take care of children, etc.

Agriculture and allied sectors in India employ 89.5 per cent of the total female labour. About 84 per cent of all women are engaged in agriculture, either as cultivators or labourers, as against 67 per cent of male workers. Women constitute about 66 per cent of the agricultural workforce. Around 48 per cent

of self-employed farmers are women and 64 per cent of the informal sector workforce depending on agriculture is represented by women.



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### ■ More work, fewer rights

In spite of the fact that more and more women are engaged in farming as men are migrating to urban centres for work, their situation remains unsatisfactory. Not only they are invariably paid lower wages than men for the same agricultural work, they also have to work much more. In the Himalayan region, for example, a woman works 3,485 hours a year on a one-hectare farm as compared with 1,212 hours by a man and 1,064 hours by a pair of bullocks.

Despite nearly 400 million women out of the total 600 million female population depending upon crop, livestock and fish farming, forestry, agro-processing and agri-business for their livelihood, they are unable to access resources such as land, water and capital. Land ownership titles are often in a man's name. Men either take or dictate the decisions concerning farming and women have to carry them out. Men market farm produce, which gives them complete control over household finance. Without legal ownership of the land, women have no access to credit. Only 11 per cent of women in India have access to land holdings, and even they are mostly only small and marginal farmers. About 86 per cent of female agricultural labourers and 74 per cent of female farmers are either illiterate or have education below the primary level. Average education of a female agricultural labourer was less than one year in 2004–05. An Oxfam International study in the state of Uttar Pradesh shows that 6 per cent of women owned land, less than 1 per cent participated in Government training programmes, 4 per cent had access to institutional credit and 8 per cent had control over agricultural income.

### ■ Discrimination starts even before a child is born

The prospects of women achieving equal ownership are already dashed at an early stage. For example, despite being officially banned by the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, child marriage is still a common practice. The worst feature of this practice has been that the child widows are condemned to a life of great agony, with their heads shaved, living in isolation, and shunned by the society. According to UNICEF's

“State of World Children, 2009” report, 47 per cent of India’s women aged 20 to 24 were married before the prescribed legal age of 18 years, with 56 per cent in rural areas. About 40 per cent of the world’s child marriages occur in India. The Immoral Traffic [Prevention] Act was passed in 1956, yet cases of immoral trafficking of young girls and women have been increasing.

Although all medical tests determining the sex of the child have been banned, India has a high masculine sex ratio. Many girls die before being born or reaching adulthood. This is attributed to the female infanticide and sex selective abortions, most of which are owing to the dowry tradition. According to a 1997 report, at least 5,000 women die each year because of dowry demand. In India, parents almost always have to pay money to their daughters’ in-laws either before or at the time of their marriage. But even after marriage, some in-laws or the daughter’s husband may continue to demand dowry. If the dowry is not paid, this can result in the daughter being harassed to the extent that she ultimately commits suicide. While laws do exist to prevent this, the enforcement machinery is weak, and the judicial process is very lengthy. Such cases are well-documented in numerous police records, as is a high incidence of crimes against women. Domestic violence is a daily occurrence. The National Crime Research Bureau reported in 1998 that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than population growth rate by 2010. Not much has changed in this respect since the Protection of Women Domestic Violence Act came into force in 2006. Many cases are not registered with the police due to the social stigma attached to rape and molestation cases or inaction on the part of police.

### ■ Following the example of developed economies

The developed economies of USA and Europe have already demonstrated strict compliance with laws concerning women’s rights and status through most effective Law and Order enforcing machinery and efficient judicial system. Since India is expected to emerge as an economic superpower, the publicly elected women representatives – the existing and the future ones – ought to follow their example and accord priority to the following issues:

**Health and family planning.** Average female life expectancy in India is low compared to many countries. In a large number of families, particularly in rural areas, the girls and women including mothers face nutritional discrimination within the family and are anaemic and malnourished. Maternal mortality in India is second highest in the world. The health professionals supervise only 42 per cent of births in the country. Most women deliver with the help of women in the family who often lack the skills and resources to save a

mother’s life if she is in danger. The average woman in rural areas has little or no control over her potential for reproductive. Women do not have access to safe and self-controlled methods of contraception.

**Education.** Studies confirm that female literacy has a significant influence in improving the social and economic status of women. The female literacy rate is woefully lower than that of males. Compared to boys, far fewer girls are enrolled in schools, and many of them drop out of school education. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, the chief barriers to female education in India are inadequate school and sanitary facilities, a shortage of female teachers and a gender bias in curricula.

**Enabling environment.** An enabling environment should be created in rural areas that can facilitate all rural women easy access to fuel, safe drinking water, sanitation, education, insurance, healthcare and the public distribution system. While women-farmers should be enabled to have hassle-free access to credit, inputs, technology and marketing and their non-institutional debt should be redeemed by institutional credit, rural women need to be relieved from the joyless drudgery of agricultural tasks through adequate and planned mechanisation of agriculture and assisted in taking up non-farm sector income-generating activities.

**Land and property rights.** In most Indian families, women do not own any property in their own names and do not get a share of parental property. Some of the laws discriminate against women, when it comes to land and property rights. Married daughters, when faced with marital harassment, have no residential rights in the ancestral home. Christian women have not yet received equal rights of divorce and succession.

**Decision-making process and position.** As per 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitution Amendment Acts, all local bodies should reserve one-third of their seats for women. Through Panchajati Rai Institutions (PRIs) – Rule of Village Committees – over a million women have enrolled in political life. Nevertheless, women are still under-represented. Elected women representatives in PRIs need to be intensively trained to develop skills. They require capacity building and knowledge management that can help them generate adequate confidence to participate effectively in decision-making processes as well as occupy decision-making positions.

**National Commission for Women.** A nodal office of the National Commission for Women should be established in each block and district to protect the rights of women, girls and children in general, voice their issues and concerns, pay undivided attention to monitoring compliance with the existing Laws and establish effective co-ordination with other related offices.