

Challenges for the Women's Movement

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The 6th National Conference of AIPWA is to be held at Vijaywada on 8-9 February. As a curtain-raiser, we have an overview of the major issues and challenges facing the women's movement in India today.

Liberation

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All over the world - be it in the Arab Spring, in the movements against austerity measures all over Europe, in the 'Occupy Wall Street' protests in the US, or in struggles against corruption and corporate land grab in India - women have been at the forefront of a remarkable wave of people's movements for democracy. In India, too, women are coming forward to assert their rights and demand equality. But ruling class policies, and regressive social forces, present a formidable challenge to women's assertion.

The Indian Government, led by the UPA in its second term, makes tall claims that two decades of liberalization have 'empowered' women. The facts on the ground present a very different - and shameful - reality.

Gender Biases and Discrimination

Sex Ratio

For women in India, discrimination begins in the womb and at birth. The latest census figures show that the number of girls in the 0-6 age-group has fallen to the lowest since Independence - a mere 914 girls for every 1000 boys. Governments at the State and Centre have been deliberately lax in implementation of the PC & PNDT Act (Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994) that bans sex-selective abortions.

Health and Survival

The Global Gender Gap Report 2011 shows that when it comes to women's health and survival,

India's performance is at rock-bottom (at 134th place among 135 countries). India has one of the worst maternal mortality rates in the world. 57.9% pregnant women and 56.2% married women suffer from anaemia: clearly pointing to poverty, chronic malnutrition, and gender biases that affect the vast majority of Indian women.

The Government's policies on food security and women's health, far from urgently correcting this appalling situation, are only calculated to make women even more vulnerable. The Prime Minister recently described the findings of hunger and malnutrition report (HUNGaMA) as a "national shame" - but the policy direction of the Government does nothing to correct the shame. The Government's proposed 'food security bill' mocks at the very idea of 'food security.' Under it, BPL numbers will be arbitrarily fixed by the centre. The Government is yet to withdraw its criteria of Rs 26/Rs 32 for poverty line, and has only reluctantly agreed to modify it slightly. The criteria for BPL identification are guaranteed to exclude a huge number of the poor. The Bill reduces the amount of food grain rations; and proposes a shift from food entitlements to cash transfers. The Bill also links the ration system to the highly controversial 'Aadhaar' scheme. The Government is yet to universalise the ICDS programme. In spite of a Supreme Court directive, the Government is yet to ensure sufficient fund coverage for ICDS. As a result, over 1 lakh anganwadis remain unoperational, while those that do operate often lack the most basic facilities. Now, the Government is talking of 'restructuring' the ICDS in keeping with World Bank recommendations, and is proposing to privatise the ICDS on a 'PPP' model. Such measures can only help food marketing companies prey on the malnutrition of women and children for profit. Similarly, the NRHM is also under-funded, with the ASHA workers, who provide crucial services in improving women's health and survival, being paid a pittance of an 'honorarium.'

Daily, lakhs of crores of rupees are being drained away to corporate coffers and Swiss bank accounts in the form of black money, corporate plunder and huge scams in which the Central Government's top leaders are involved. Yet the Government, which is desperate to protect this corrupt system, claims to have inadequate funds to ensure food security and health for India's poor, especially its women and children, who are living in conditions worse than those of the world's poorest nations!

Discrimination in the Political Sphere

We have a woman President and Lok Sabha Speaker. But these symbols of women's political participation appear rather hollow when we remember that women continue to be abysmally underrepresented in the Parliament and Assemblies. With great fanfare, the UPA Government passed the Women's Reservation Bill (providing 33% reservation in Parliament and Assemblies) in the Rajya Sabha. But this was pure political theatre - and the same Government, using the old excuse of 'lack of consensus', has carefully avoided placing the Bill for vote in the Lok Sabha. In Parliament, MPs across political lines openly aired their patriarchal prejudices while opposing the Women's Reservation Bill. There is now talk of truncating the reservation provisions to 20% or less. AIPWA condemned the ploy to scuttle the Women's Reservation Bill by pitting caste and community against gender. AIPWA said that the demand for a quota for OBCs and minorities could be incorporated within the ambit of 33% seats for women, and such a demand must not become a pretext to stall or dilute the Bill.

In panchayats, 50% of the seats are reserved for women, and elected women representatives are challenging patriarchal forces. However, discrimination against elected women representatives, continues - for instance, in the 'panch pati' syndrome where the husband acts on behalf of the elected woman, and in various forms of caste and gender discrimination.

Women in politics and public life at all levels - from panchayats to Parliament to people's movements - face sexist and gendered abuse by opponents.

Discrimination in Access to Jobs, Land and Resources

Women continue to have unequal access to land and other resources. Women farmers rarely have land pattas issued in their name. Compensation policies in case of displacement are inevitably discriminatory towards women. Women also find it more difficult to get loans.

At the workplace, too, gender bias is rampant. Even in MNREGA, for instance, women are often denied work on the grounds of gender. In many colleges and universities, women teachers have been asked to observe 'dress codes.' In one University in Kolkata, a woman was not allowed to take classes because she refused to wear purdah, as demanded by some fundamentalist forces.

In many professions, there is a sexist emphasis on women's appearance and 'attractiveness' rather than on their skills. For instance, norms related to weight and appearance, are applied only to female air cabin crew (airhostesses) and not to male stewards. A Maharashtra Tribal Development Minister recently said that tribal women trained as airhostesses could not get jobs since their looks were not 'physically attractive enough.' Women badminton players are told that they must compulsorily wear short skirts - to look 'attractive', rather than to choose clothes that they, as sportspersons, find comfortable.

The Indian Air Force Vice Chief recently described women fighter pilots as a 'bad investment' because they might take maternity leave. Similarly, an Army Vice Chief said that appointing women as army officers was undesirable because male jawans could not be expected to take orders from a woman!

Demeaned and Denied Dignity

Women's labour inside the home and family continues to be kept 'invisible'. Its character as labour is cloaked in ideological disguises, as the 'natural' or 'primary' role of women. Even the Census survey deems women involved with "cooking, cleaning of utensils, looking after children, fetching water, collecting firewood" to be unproductive "non-workers".

Terming women's labour inside the home to be their 'primary' function in society is often an excuse to pay women less at the workplace, on the pretext that their work is merely 'supplementary' to the income earned by men.

At the workplace too, women's labour is often denied its due recognition, respect and rights. The lakhs of women in the anganwadi and ASHA programmes, for instance, are paid a mere 'honorarium' for the huge range of work performed by them. They are denied recognition as government employees. Similarly, domestic workers are denied recognition - and the rights - that are due to 'workers.' Women farmers too are denied recognition as cultivators.

Women Workers

Has globalization and liberalization ushered in economic and social emancipation for women in India? If we believe the Governments at the Centre and the State, yes. But the actual experience of women tells a very different story.

It is true that women are joining the workforce in increasing numbers. All around us, we can see some of the traditional patriarchal shackles being weakened as women come out of the confines of the four walls and develop a new confidence and sense of collective strength and solidarity. But as of now, most women are very far from finding the secure and dignified jobs, economic independence,

and equality that they seek. Instead, at every step, they have to battle the system which sees them as cheap labour that is 'easy' to exploit.

Unequal Access to Work

The Global Gender Gap 2011 ranks India at 131st place among 134 countries, on the question of women's 'economic participation and opportunity.' Only 35% of women in the country above the age of 15 participate in economic activity (i.e either work or seek work), compared to 85% of men.

Unemployment rates are very high for women - in some cases, even higher than that for men. For instance, according to the NSSO 61st round, the unemployment rate (of those seeking but not getting work) in 2004-05 in the 20-24 age-group was 12% for rural men and 15% for rural women; while it was 16% for urban men and 27% for urban women.

It is clear, from the above, that women face greater social hurdles that limit their economic participation. But even when they overcome these hurdles and seek employment, they find it far more difficult to get jobs than men.

Women's Work: Least Paid, Most Exploited

In certain sectors, however, women's labour is, indeed, preferred - as a cheaper labour substitute for men's labour. Women are also sometimes preferred because they are perceived as less likely to unionise or engage in struggles, and more vulnerable to coercion.

Women are therefore, disproportionately represented in the informal sector, in what are called the '3D' (dirty, dangerous, demeaning) jobs.

- It is significant, for instance, that whereas women aged 15 and above comprise only 27% of all employed persons in the country, girl children constitute 42% of all child labour in the country!
- A very large section of women workers (64% of women workers in rural areas) are 'self-employed.' But 'self-employment' only means more exploitation, not less. Three-fourths of self-employed women in villages and half of self-employed women (mostly from poorer households) in towns/cities are unpaid family workers.
- Other 'self-employed' women work in the most vulnerable and precarious sections of the informal economy - for instance as home-based workers or street vendors - because they fail to find more secure or better-paid work. Increasingly, even international manufacturers are opting to get work done by home-based workers, to avoid labour laws. 60% of female self-employed workers work all seven days of the week.
- 83% of rural women workers are tied down to primary sector activities like agriculture.
- More than 12% of all urban women workers are domestic workers. Among the poorest 20% of urban women workers, 53% are employed with private households as maid servants, cooks, etc, and 91% of jobs are based on verbal contract. Whereas among the richest (top 20%) of urban women workers, 48% have jobs in the government/public sector and 13% in large private companies. Less than 40% of urban female workers have written job contracts. Clearly, the majority of women workers, especially those who are poorer and more vulnerable, have no option but to work in casualised jobs with no job security, out of the purview of labour laws.

Women are paid less than men for the same work - at all levels of employment. A note issued by the Government in 2010 gave the details of NSSO findings for 2007-08. According to these findings, the

average wage rate for regular wage/salaried employees in rural areas was Rs 175.30 for males and Rs. 108.14 for females; and in the urban areas, the wage rate for males was Rs. 276.04 against Rs. 212.86 for females. In the rural sector, on an average, Rs. 66.59 was earned in a day by a male casual labourer, whereas a female casual labourer earned Rs. 48.41 a day. In the urban areas, a male casual labourer earned Rs. 86.58 in a day and a female, Rs. 51.34 in a day.

Even educated women in both rural and urban India continue to be paid far less than men for the same work, and this gender gap between women's and men's wages keeps growing wider.

Agriculture sector and Rural Labour

As we have seen earlier, a very large proportion of women workers are confined to the agriculture sector. But women's work in this sector is often unpaid family labour, where they are not recognized as farmers but only as 'helpers' of (male) farmers. Even when women are the direct cultivators, they rarely have land pattas in their own name, and are deprived of access to credit and subsidies. There has been a growing trend of women farmers committing suicide - but such suicides are rarely counted among the 'farmers' suicides.'

40% of all agricultural workers in India are women. They are paid less than men for the same wages. Most of these women are from oppressed castes, and are also vulnerable to feudal sexual exploitation and violence.

Even in MNREGS, women workers have an uphill struggle to secure job cards, work, and equal pay. Often the MNREGS work norms are designed to discriminate against women: for instance, when wages are calculated based on the amount of soil dug, rather than on the number of hours of work. MNREGS work sites are expected to provide crèche facilities - but these are hardly ever provided.

Rural Health And Education Workers

Increasingly, the government is relying on the underpaid labour of women to provide essential public services and run various prestigious 'flagship' schemes for education and women's and children's health in rural areas, such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), or National Rural Health Mission (NRHM).

A large number of teachers in the World Bank-supported SSA are women: who are paid monthly wages between Rs. 1000- Rs. 3000.

The World-Bank supported ICDS is one of the worst instances of exploitative work. The anganwadi workers and helpers are tremendously overworked, carrying on their shoulders almost the entire burden of nutrition, immunization, health check-ups, hospital referrals and even pre-school education of kids. Yet they are not recognized as government employees; as 'voluntary workers', they are paid a mere 'honorarium'. In the 2011 Budget, the Finance Minister announced that the remuneration for anganwadi workers would be raised to Rs 3000 (from Rs 1500) and of helpers to Rs 1500. It is another matter that even these hiked amounts are less than minimum wages! But a year later, even this paltry hike is yet to be implemented.

The ASHA workers too, similarly, have an endless list of tasks. They are supposed to be available night and day, and they work even in remote and difficult terrain. Yet they are paid an extremely paltry 'honorarium' rather than any salary. In keeping with the stereotypes of women providing 'selfless nurturing and care' for free inside the home, it seems the Government expects ASHAs and anganwadi workers to provide essential health services - for free, unpaid - to the entire country!

The case of murder of the ANM (auxiliary nurse and midwife) Bhanwari Bai in Rajasthan is a reminder of just how vulnerable rural health workers are to exploitation and violence. Bhanwari first

approached a Minister, Malkhan Singh, to avert a transfer to a very remote area, away from her family. This is how women health workers become vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation at the hands of men who wield power.

Domestic workers

There are an estimated 45 lakh domestic workers in India. Their working conditions remain completely unregulated, and they remain deprived of basic rights and social services.

In 2010 the 100th annual Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted a Convention on 'Decent Work for Domestic Labourers.' The Convention, adopted by representatives of governments, employers and trade unions of most countries of the world, recognized that "domestic work continues to be undervalued and invisible and is mainly carried out by women and girls, many of whom are migrants or members of disadvantaged communities and who are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in respect of conditions of employment and work, and to other abuses of human rights." We can easily see how this description holds true for domestic workers in India.

The Convention, to which India is also a signatory, laid down that domestic workers must have the same basic labour rights as those available to other workers: reasonable hours of work, weekly rest of at least 24 consecutive hours, clearly-defined terms and conditions of employment; protection against violence or sexual harassment; and freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

In India, domestic workers from adivasi areas are especially vulnerable to trafficking. Demeaning treatment is rampant, and there have been many instances of brutal violence, especially on child labour.

Domestic workers have, through their struggles, won some legal rights and protections in some states. The struggle continues to force the Central Government to enact and implement laws to guarantee the recognition, rights and dignity of domestic workers.

Women in SHGs

SHGs are peddled as the main vehicles for 'women's empowerment' by the Government. But microfinance institutions too exploit and reinforce patriarchal structures: women are seen as 'better borrowers' because they are less mobile and more vulnerable to social coercion. Exploitative interest rates of MFIs and humiliation at non-payment pushed women to prostitution to repay debts, and forced more than 50 women to suicide, in Andhra Pradesh recently. Women have less access to bank loans and institutional credit than men. Instead of increasing this access, governments focus only on microcredit for women. But microcredit does not free women from exploitative money-lenders etc; in many cases, women are forced to take loans from moneylenders in order to repay the loans provided through MFIs!

Impact of Economic Crisis and Neoliberal Policies

The Global Employment Trends for Women report of 2009 estimated that around 2 crore women would join the ranks of the unemployed thanks to the global economic crisis. Many studies have noted that the economic crisis has had an especially negative impact on women's employment and lives in developing Asian countries like India.

This is because women have a large share of jobs in the sectors that are worst hit by the crisis: textiles, garments, footwear and leather, electronics, hotels and restaurants, and construction. Women in these sectors are often the first to experience job cuts. When the global crisis happened in 2008, 700,000 clothing and textile workers in India lost their jobs, most of them women.

Neoliberal policies and the economic crisis are resulting in greater privatization of healthcare. As a result, women's burden of unpaid work inside the home has increased.

The entry of corporate retail and the new Vendors' Policy has also hit women's employment. Women who fail to find jobs in other sectors have usually found 'refuge' in petty retail trade (i.e small shops or street vending). But women's share of employment in this sector has fallen sharply with the entry of big corporate players, and urban development policies of evicting informal vendors. If the Government succeeds in allowing FDI in multi-brand retail, no doubt women in this sector would be hit even worse.

Sex trafficking and Sex Workers

The global sex industry preys on women in poor and backward countries like India. With globalization, women in India have become even more vulnerable to sex trafficking. Within the country too, sex trafficking is rampant.

A large number of sex workers in India are brought into sex work by force, kidnapping and violence. An even larger number opt for sex work as a means of survival in the absence of secure and properly paid work. Sex workers work in conditions that are extremely hazardous to their health as well as safety. They also bear the brunt of the stigma attached by social hypocrisy.

As long as poor women remain deprived of secure, properly paid employment, they will inevitably seek refuge in demeaning and dangerous sex work. While resisting the social stigma and violence faced by sex workers, we must demand an end to trafficking; protection of sex workers from exploitation and violence; social services for sex workers and their dependants; as well as rehabilitation in alternative and remunerative employment.

Women's Freedom Under Attack

Women are finding their daily freedoms and rights under the worst kind of assault. Young girls and even adult women face violence when they exercise their freedom to choose their friends, wear clothes of their choice or marry a partner of their choice.

Sangh Parivar outfits like Sri Ram Sene and Bajrang Dal have systematically attacked women for wearing jeans, visiting pubs, and even for having Christian or Muslim male friends at school or college. Such attacks are especially rampant in Karnataka, where the BJP is in Government and the Sangh outfits backed by the Government, police and educational institutions, have created an atmosphere of terror against women. In Gujarat, Sangh leaders like Babu Bajrangji boast of having kidnapped and separated thousands of women from partners and husbands of other religions and castes.

The Sangh Parivar, in Karnataka and other states, has raised the bogey of so-called 'love jihad', accusing every Muslim man who marries a non-Muslim woman of being a 'jihadi' (terrorist). Dangerously, even some courts in Kerala and Karnataka and the some governments like the Maharashtra Government have given credence to this communal and anti-woman myth.

In Haryana, Punjab, and Rajasthan, there is a rising trend of community leaders or 'khap panchayats' passing 'death sentences' against couples who marry in defiance of caste norms. Couples in inter-caste marriages, as well as same-gotra marriages and in fact, all self-choice marriages, have faced threats and violence at the hands of these community leaders and khaps. In cases where a woman of a so-called 'higher' caste marries a dalit man, the dalit family and community are also attacked. The Khaps justify such threats and even murder in the name of community and caste 'honour.'

But violence on couples in self-choice marriages (wrongly termed 'honour' crimes) are not confined to khaps or even to rural areas. In major cities - including Delhi, Ranchi, Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata - there have been innumerable instances of families killing their daughter and her partner. In a particularly brutal recent instance, a father in Karnataka, publicly hanged his daughter in view of the whole village - for the 'crime' of loving a dalit man. There are an even larger number of cases where killing may not take place, but the daughter is forcibly imprisoned and coerced into giving up the relationship or marriage of her choice.

In such cases, the role of the police has been shameful. In many cases of khap killings in Haryana, the police cooperated with the killers, even handing over the couple whom they were ordered by the courts to protect! In the case of Rizwanur-rehman's death in Kolkata, the police helped Rizwan's father-in-law, a powerful industrialist, to harass the couple and pressurize Rizwan's wife Priyanka to return to her parents. The chief of police defended such actions openly in the name of the 'status' of the industrialist's family.

In one landmark judgement, the Karnal district court awarded death sentence for the perpetrators of the 'honour' killing of Manoj and Babli in Haryana, and life sentence for the khap leader who ordered the killing. But the Punjab and Haryana HC has overturned that verdict.

It is particularly shameful that a recent Karnataka High Court verdict sounded like a khap panchayat verdict, refusing to recognise a marriage between adults, ordering an adult woman to remain in parental custody, and even saying that a woman below 21 years of age needed parental consent in order to marry, though the official age of marriage is 18!

All hues of state governments have condoned 'honour' crimes - be it the BJP Govt of Karnataka, the Congress Govt of Haryana, or even the erstwhile CPIM-led LF Govt of West Bengal. Congress leaders in Haryana have openly defended khap panchayats. Recently, following an incident where an upper caste mob stripped and beat up a dalit woman whose son married a girl from their community, a Maharashtra Minister from the NCP said, "The outburst of the girl's family was natural." The UPA Government at the Centre has shamefully held back from enacting a law against 'honour' crimes. Other forms of 'moral policing' and attacks on women's freedom are also common. Police forces at many places in UP and Delhi have indulged in public harassment and humiliation of couples.

When people justify rape by blaming women's 'provocative' clothing and behavior for rape, they are actually saying that rape is a punishment for women who exercise their freedom. The Delhi Police Chief recently said that women who chose to go out at 2 am should not complain of rape. The DGP of Andhra Pradesh said women 'provoked' men to rape them by wearing 'fashionable' clothing. Other top cops like KPS Gill have expressed identical remarks in the past. Reddy's remarks were justified by Karnataka's Women and Child Welfare Minister C C Patil, and even by the head of the committee against sexual harassment in Bangalore University, KK Seethamma. Internationally, women have held 'Slutwalk' protests against this tendency of authorities (in police, courts, etc) to blame victims themselves for sexual violence.

Violence on Women

Alarming Rise in Sexual Violence

National Crime Records Bureau data show that among all major crimes including murder, robbery or kidnapping, instances of rape have risen at the steepest rate in the past 40 years. Incidents of rape in the country have increased by 791% since 1971, whereas murder increased by just 240%, and robbery by 178%. Kidnapping increased by 630% - but even this is less than the rate of rise in rape cases.

Why has sexual violence on women increased in such an alarming manner? The NCRB data itself provides one of the answers: conviction rates for rape dipped from 41% in 1971 to 27% in 2010. Conviction rates for other crimes against women - dowry death, cruelty by husband and relatives, trafficking, molestation, sexual harassment, kidnapping - are similarly very low. Bad and biased policing, courts that are unfriendly to women and gender-biased, and the resulting low convictions give rapists a sense of impunity. Given that so many police officers believe that women 'invite' or 'provoke' rape, it is hardly surprising that they are unable to ensure the punishment of the rapists for whom they have so much sympathy!

Most rapes are not committed by strangers and villains: records show that 97% of rapists are known to their victims (family members, neighbours, friends, acquaintances etc). Rape, in other words, is very much part and parcel of the entire web of subjugation and inequality of women in society.

Laws Against Violence on Women

Are the existing laws enough to deal with the reality of violence on women? After sustained campaign by women's groups, the Government has drafted the Criminal Procedure (Amendment) Bill 2011 to expand the scope of sexual assault laws. This Bill widens the definition of rape beyond penis-vagina penetration, covering atrocities like penetration by objects and other forms of sexual violence on women as well as on children of both sexes. However the Bill excludes marital rape from the category of sexual offences, thereby condoning rape within marriage. The Bill also fails to recognise and provide more stringent punishment for organised sexual violence on women, as in communal or caste violence.

In spite of a landmark verdict by the Delhi High Court in 2009 decriminalising homosexuality, the Government has yet to take any steps to do away with Section 377 that discriminates against same-sex relationships.

There is also a proposed and long-pending Bill against Sexual Harassment at the Workplace, which covers women in organised as well as unorganised sector. But this Bill provides for punishment against the complainant in case the complaint is found to be false or malicious in intent - a clause that can only deter and intimidate women, who are in any case reluctant to lodge complaints thanks to social pressures.

Laws against acid attacks and stalking are also urgently needed, given the huge rise in such crimes.

Dowry deaths and dowry-related harassment continue unabated. Yet, it is shocking that the Rajya Sabha Petitions Committee is considering a petition demanding that offences under Section 498-A (severe domestic violence and dowry-related torture) be made non-cognisable, bailable and compoundable. The Law Commission has just recently recommended that Section 498A be made compoundable. If the law is amended in keeping with these demands, henceforth police will not have to accept any case under this section, and all women will have to file all such complaints before magistrates; police cannot arrest anyone under this section without an order from a magistrate; and

there will be greater pressure on women to compromise.

Section 498A is the only legal avenue for justice open to women suffering severe domestic violence and dowry-harassment. If it is weakened, it can only further increase the violence and dowry torture faced by women. The claim that Section 498A is being rampantly 'misused' is a myth. In fact, it is being underused: convictions under this Section have usually taken place only in cases where dowry deaths have occurred, and in cases where dowry deaths have not occurred, very few convictions have taken place.

With every law of the land, there are some cases of misuse, but no one calls to weaken those laws as a result! Any cases of misuse should be dealt with on a case-to-case basis, but in fact, there is a need to strengthen and expand, not weaken, laws against domestic violence and dowry.

Politicians, Police, and Violence on Women

In state after state, there have been instances of violence on women by MLAs or police. In Rajasthan, two Congress MLAs have been arrested for involvement in the disappearance and suspected murder of a nurse/midwife (ANM) Bhanwari Devi.

In UP, no less than seven MLAs are accused in rapes, murders and disappearances of women, mostly from dalit or other oppressed communities. Clearly, even with a dalit woman as CM, feudal power holds sway, with MLAs considering rape to be their birthright. One young girl was gang-raped at an MLA's home, and then thrown in jail on false charges of theft.

In Odisha recently, a Minister has had to resign following protests against his role in protecting the perpetrators of a horrific gang rape of a 19-year-old dalit girl, who is now in a coma. The girl is the key eyewitness in the gang rape of her friend in 2008. Her friend was mysteriously killed and she herself was attacked twice since 2008, in an attempt to silence her. And now, she herself has been gang-raped and left nearly dead, but the BJD Government has been protecting the perpetrators.

In UP, AIPWA was at the forefront of the struggle for justice in a horrific case in Nighasan, Pilibhit, where a young Muslim girl was gang-raped and hanged to death in a police station, into which she had gone to rescue a cow that had strayed. The Government repeatedly tried to cover up the incident by tampering with forensic reports, but the sustained struggle forced the State Government to refer the case to the CBI.

As a result of police bungling, the Arushi murder case is yet to be solved. The Arushi case underlined how gender and class biases of the police hamper serious investigation in cases of violence on women.

In Bihar, when a school teacher Rupam Pathak stabbed to death a BJP MLA, the ruling JD(U)-BJP leaders were quick to tarnish her character, and assault her. The AIPWA's timely intervention turned the tide of public opinion, and brought to light the fact that Rupam had made repeated accusations of rape which had been buried by the police, and had been facing repeated intimidation by the MLA, forcing her to take the extreme step.

State Repression

To crush people's movements - against corporate land grab, against eviction, for self-determination - the state unleashes a virtual war on people. Women are at the forefront of the movements - and also bear the worst brunt of the repression. This has been seen in Kashmir and the North East, as well as in struggles against corporate land grab, and in the anti-nuclear struggles at Jaitapur and Koodankulam. Women have also, as a result, been at the forefront of the struggles challenging state repression.

Demanding repeal of the draconian AFSPA, Irom Sharmila has been on fast for the past 11 years, virtually imprisoned and force fed in a hospital room. Yet the UPA Government has refused to repeal the AFSPA, which has protected army men who have indulged in murder and rape.

In Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, other states of the NE as well as Kashmir, there have been many cases of custodial rape and killing of women. The recent Shopian case was a shameful one in which a whole range of Central agencies helped to cover up the double rape and murder of two young women by armed forces. Women in Kashmir have been struggling against 'disappearances' – and their struggle has recently forced the Kashmir Human Rights Commission to acknowledge the presence of thousands of mass graves, and to investigate the allegation that 'disappeared' people lie buried as nameless 'terrorists' in these graves.

Operation Green Hunt, unleashed by the state on the pretext of countering Maoists, has actually targeted adivasi and peasant struggles against land grab. The recent instance of brutal sexual violence on Soni Sori in the custody of Chhattisgarh police is a reminder of how women are bearing the brunt of Green Hunt.

In W Bengal, women were at the receiving end of rape and repression in Singur, Nandigram, Lalgurh. At that time, Mamata Banerjee spoke the language of human rights and democracy, promising land and dignity to adivasis and peasants. After coming to power, she is singing the same tune as her predecessors in W Bengal, and her allies at the Centre. Just like in Chhattisgarh, a woman in Lalgurh was recently gang-raped by the joint forces, and warned that if she complained, her husband would be killed in a fake encounter as a 'Maoist.' She attempted suicide in desperation. Such assaults underscore the continuity between the previous CPI(M)-led Government and the present TMC Government, when it comes to state repression and assaults on women.

In Odisha, Operation Green Hunt has claimed the lives of many innocent adivasis. At Kalinganagar in early 2011, five tribals were picked up by the police, and killed in a fake encounter. 2 of the 5 were young girls, one of them a mere 12 years old.

Communal and Caste Violence on Women

Women from oppressed castes and minorities are especially vulnerable to targeted casteist and communal violence.

A huge number of cases of naked parading and sexual violence on dalit and adivasi women take place daily, and very few are punished. The SC/ST Act remains extremely under-utilised. Even in the notorious case of gang rape and massacre of dalits at Khairlanji, the Courts refused to convict under the SC/ST Act.

In Karnataka, the dalit women of Budihalli (Chitradurga district) have borne the brunt of casteist attacks, eviction from their homes and sexual violence. The BJP Government of the State has done all it can to protect the perpetrators.

In Vizhupuram (Tamilnadu) recently, tribal women were gang-raped by police. When the victims sought to lodge a complaint, the SP, instead of sending them to hospital for a medical examination, or arresting the culprits, detained them in his office for 18 hours, intimidated them and forced them to sign blank papers. Only after the media highlighted the issue, was an FIR filed, and only when the Court directed, did the police send the victims for a medical examination. Such biased conduct of the police also ought to be prosecuted under the SC/ST Act.

Bihar under Nitish Kumar perhaps makes the tallest claims of women's empowerment. In Nitish's home district, however, a woman from the barber community, asked by some upper caste men to cut

nails, refused, saying that she no longer pursued this traditional occupation. She was then scalded with boiling water and branded with a hot iron rod, even in her private parts, as 'punishment' for 'getting above her station' by feudal forces.

Communal and caste violence overlap in the case of dalit Christian women of Kandhamal - victims of a pogrom conducted by the Sangh Parivar in 2008. A nun who has bravely fought for justice against rape has testified to how the police in Odisha colluded with the communal forces rather than protected the victims.

Muslim women in Gujarat were subjected to horrific rape and massacre during the 2002 pogrom. They continue to face systematic violence today. The killings of Kauser Bi and college girl Ishrat Jehan, claimed to encounters, have been revealed now to be cold-blooded custodial murders by the communal and corrupt Gujarat police, as part of a political conspiracy of the Modi-led BJP Government.

Giving voice to the spirit of women's ongoing struggles on all the above issues, AIPWA 6th National Conference, to be held at Vijaywada on 8-9 February, has given the call -
'We'll Resist Discrimination, Violence, Repression! We'll Fight and Win Jobs, Freedom, Dignity!'

P.S.

* From Liberation February 2012:

http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2012/feb_2012/cover_feature.html