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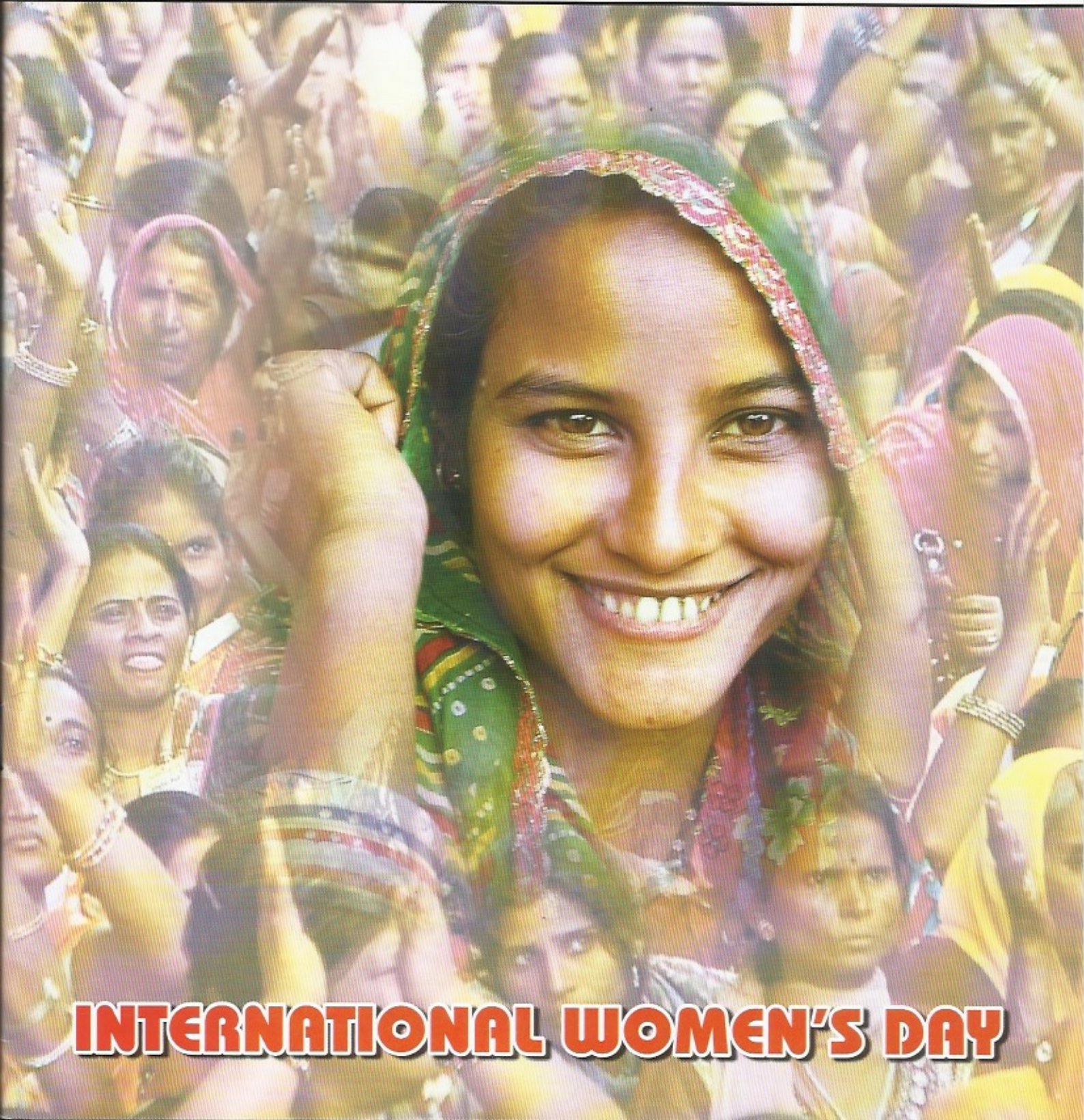


# SOCIAL WELFARE

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## INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY





# SOCIAL WELFARE

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## CONTENTS

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| ◆ Health Camp Organised by Delhi Social Welfare Board   | C-II  |
| ◆ Celebration of National Girl Child Day in Karnataka   | 2     |
| ◆ Chairperson's Visit to Kerala   | 3     |
| ◆ Training of Counsellors/Office Bearers under FCC Programme                                  | 4     |
| ◆ Women's empowerment? At the crossroads?<br><b>Dr V.Janaki</b>                               | 5     |
| ◆ Kultikiri Panchayat's 20 Year Thumbs Up To Woman Power<br><b>Saadia Azim</b>                | 7     |
| ◆ J&K Needs To Empower Panchayat Women: Zaitoon Begum Tells You Why<br><b>Ashutosh Sharma</b> | 9     |
| ◆ Saving The World From Violence, Mothers As Peacemakers<br><b>Surekha Kadapa-Bose</b>        | 11    |
| ◆ Panchayat Strategies: Political Heroines Make Change Happen<br><b>Bula Devi</b>             | 13    |
| ◆ Andhra's Grassroots Women Get A Shot At Power<br><b>Usha Turaga-Revelli</b>                 | 15    |
| ◆ Women In Charge, Karnataka's Quiet Revolution<br><b>Pushpa Achanta</b>                      | 17    |
| ◆ A Natural Feminist, This Santhal Tribal Woman<br><b>Pamela Philipose</b>                    | 19    |
| ◆ Arunachal's First Woman Judge Is In Court<br><b>Abdul Gani</b>                              | 21    |
| ◆ A Tharu Tribal Women Discover Change Through MGNREGA<br><b>Rahul Kumar</b>                  | 23    |
| ◆ Girl Child Day Celebrated in Nagaland   | 24    |
| ◆ India's First All Women SHG Market<br><b>Ratna Bharali Talukdar</b>                         | 25    |
| ◆ In Sunderbans, Colour Coding Kids to Fight Malnutrition<br><b>Ajitha Menon</b>              | 26    |
| ◆ A Rainbow Coalition Sets A Youth Agenda<br><b>Aditi Bishnoi</b>                             | 28    |
| ◆ Osteoarthritis - A upcoming disease<br><b>Renuka Aggarwal and Navjot kaur</b>               | 30    |
| ◆ Sharing a Meal<br><b>Tanvi Nayar</b>  | 32    |
| ◆ Training for Counsellors  | 35    |
| ◆ Free Medical Camp at Uttarakhand  | 36    |
| ◆ Workshop on Rights of Girl Child at Uttarakhand   | 37    |
| ◆ J & K State Social Welfare organized Inter- College Symposium on "Rights of Girl Child"     | 38    |
| ◆ National Girl Child Day Celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh                                     | 40    |
| ◆ Chairperson's Meeting with Commissioner of Police, Bangalore                                | C-III |

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# Women's empowerment? At the crossroads?

● Dr V.Janaki

**D**emocracy has meaning and reality only where people at large are sensitized to their rights, duties and obligations and encouraged to exercise them'

— Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

Women today are at the vanguard of several ground breaking changes across different spectrums of human development and activity. Education, employment, political participation.. the list is endless...but as Justice Krishna Iyer, a much respected votary of equitable justice for women and author of several landmark judgements pointed out...'the little done.. the vast undone...' - sums up the scenario prevailing scenario.

Empowerment of women in an ideal scenario is best understood as a life changing experience of a woman irrespective of her socio-economic-cultural-spatial-health(differently-abled) conditions, wherein she is unhindered in exercising her own choices towards various issues without fear or favour; where she is the mistress of her choices, her freedom of expression, movement, employment, reproduction; freedom over her own body, relationships etc... without endangering or giving cause for finding fault with her on account of this personal choice; with access to all services as a human person, like other citizens, regardless of her abilities- physical or otherwise and not being conditioned by stereotypes reinforced or otherwise and realizing her fullest potentialities as an individual person. However, the reality has all the ingredients of a pot boiler- the good, the bad and the ugly:

#### The good:

- Reams of newsprint, commentaries by the so called experts, academicians, bloggers, the social media network are devoted to eulogizing women's rapid progress in 'breaking the glass ceiling'- women are the decision makers, the game changers, the change makers, the king makers...achievers, cutting across various spheres of human activity and influence.

Whilst it is too simplistic to quote arguments and statistics, government documents, reports- we can know all this thanks to the internet, highlighting the positives: it is true that women have attained phenomenal heights in terms of professional career growth, personal choices, freedom of speech, movement etc., the fact remains that this is a restrictive reality. There is more than meets the eye.

#### The bad and the ugly...

- But.. as the saying goes.. 'the grass is greener on the other side'...this is especially true as the above... what about the other side..? the little known, the neglected and ignored sections amongst women- from impoverished families, broken homes, women with disabilities.. more....
- How does one explain away the spiralling crime graph against women- the perpetrators ranging from a retired judge to a leading media magnate, justifying gang rape of a woman by the local khap panchayat as a measure to preserve the honour of a community to even an obscure student in a remote part of the country? On what basis can we truly say that empowerment of women is *raison-d'etre*? Can we ignore the reality that jettisoning (denial,ignoring)the rights and entitlements of a section within the feminine population- women with disabilities is fair and just?
- Persistence of negative stereotypes that celebrate women's roles and responsibilities towards the family, irrespective of her professional standing, personal choices.. reflected in mass media imagery, cinema, programmes.. in the language used...in interpersonal relationships....

India is a signatory to several international covenants and documents that recognizes the need for the empowerment of women and the roadmap towards achieving them- the Millenium development goals 2015 are just that... a visionary documents that provides a framework, a roadmap for ensuring development of member countries.. Goal 3 states the need to promote gender equality and empower women.. but 2015 is just 10 months away... and we are far.. far.. so very far away from realizing this...

Notwithstanding government initiatives, non government collaboration and partnerships, true empowerment of women seems a very distant reality... there are always 2 sides of the same coin... the pro-empowerment lobby will highlight the positive initiatives by the government.. and continue to sing paens : it is true but .. corruption, mismanagement of funds, inequitable allocation of all resources- human and otherwise, the role of middlepersons, political



expediency, one upmanship by political institutions.. all these have stalled and stymied attempts at the empowerment process of one half of humanity.

### **Women and disability**

#### **Marginalized identities and multiple vulnerabilities:**

This refers to the fact that women per se by themselves continue to be at the fringes of development, despite various interventions. However, the fact remains that amongst women, little understanding exists about the differential issues that face women with disabilities.. they are exposed to and are forced to live with little or no identity and are particularly vulnerable in many ways in terms of barriers and access to resources.

#### **The situation at a glance**

Women with disabilities make up a sizeable proportion of the global population, and a majority of the population of persons with disabilities is in developing countries, and in spite of such declarations as above, it is estimated that:

Women with disabilities make up at least 10% of all women globally (WHO) Women with disabilities comprise three quarters of all disabled people in low and middle-income countries (USAID) 65-70% of women with disabilities in low and middle-income countries live in rural areas (USAID) Women in general are more likely than men to become disabled because of poorer working conditions, poor access to quality healthcare, and gender-based violence (ILO) Only 25% of women with disabilities are in the global workforce (UN) Because of increased risk of gender-based violence and lack of access to reproductive health care services, women with disabilities face unique challenges in preventing HIV infection (WB) Literacy rates for women with disabilities globally may be as low as 1% (UNDP) Mortality rates amongst girls with disabilities are much higher than for boys with disabilities (USAID, UNICEF) (sourced from the internet) In a nut shell...

Empowerment-largely seen only on economic basis

- Does not factor on cultural barriers
- The role of the socialization process in conditioning attitudes towards women, the girl child, their roles and responsibilities needs to be changed in keeping pace with changing times
- Vote bank politics... as the nation gears for the next general elections... lot of hype and hoopla, promises, welfare schemes...race ...
- Within the women's movement itself there is hardly any mention about women with

disabilities... largely ignored, not considered to be important still.... Most reports, documents do not mention issues/problems faced by women with disabilities.... Proves that elitist nature of movements still strong

#### **Caught in a time warp...**

The empowerment of women should mirror the realistic progress of a society. However, globally and in India in particular, women are caught in a time warp: they are caught in the throes of progress in terms of education, employment, cultural freedom to some extent and amongst a minuscule section of the population; whilst still facing a backlash in the form of sustained campaigns at vilification in the form of increasing crimes of all kinds, reinforcement of stereotypes that celebrates women's traditionally accepted roles in the family in terms of decision making, reproduction etc... in varied ways that are detrimental to her realizing her true potential as an individual person...

#### **The need of the hour...**

At this crucial and critical juncture in Indian history, it is fitting to recall the Mahatma's observation that progress of the country is impossible without the empowerment of one half of the population. Sanitisation of all arms of governance, focusing on implementation, better planning and resource allocation, participation of women in the realization of their potentialities, inclusion of all women with and without disabilities, sustainable utilisation of resources, tight budgetary control to ensure transparency and accountability of all stakeholders... these and more are the need of the hour.

#### **Some useful resources worth looking into:**

<https://www.facebook.com/TheEmpowermentOfWomenInIndia>

<http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/pdentry/why-has-it-become-normal-to-dehumanize-women-in-india>

[http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/women\\_insecure\\_world.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/women_insecure_world.pdf)

<http://www.thecho.in/files/The-Unheard-Voices--Empowerment-of-Women.pdf>

<http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/entry/why-has-it-become-normal-to-dehumanize-women-in-india>

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