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## Three days national conference of Women from marginalized communities

Written by

Topics: NAWO

**NEW DELHI:** National Alliance of Women (NAWO) organized a three days of National Conference of Women Leaders from marginalized communities-Dalits, tribal people and Muslim women. Two hundred women from twenty seven states came to hold debates, discussions and dialogues for these three days.

NAWO is a national network of women's organizations working for gender and social justice in different parts of the country which came together as a coalition to work on issues specific to Dalits, Muslims and Tribal women who constitute the mass of the poor in India.

### Day-1

Welcoming of the gathering by Dalit Drum Beat was done by Chindu team which is being led by Ms. Sabrina Francis from Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

The programme was commenced by Ms. Sheeba George by giving a brief description about the National Alliance of Women that it is a national network of women's organization working for the last fifteen years, has been making interventions, locally and nationally, as a group to reduce gender and social injustice and to promote rights of women living in these marginalized communities through policy interventions and monitoring programmes. She further added that there was a need to enable a dialogue amongst women leaders from these three communities who are instrumental in charting the future course of debate, dialogue and right for Dalits, Tribal and Muslim communities and enable building intersection for a common cause.

The Conference was inaugurated by Mr. Ramvilas Paswan, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha on 4th of August, 2010 at Constitution Club of India, New Delhi. Mr. Paswan picked up the issue of discrimination and said that it of different types like racial, gender, religion, caste. He thoughtfully commented that no matter from which caste or religion we belong, we are the part of a single family.

He also recalled that time when Muslim religion came in the caste based Indian society and started flourishing then most of the Dalits were converted into Muslims. He further commented that tribal people are the real citizens and problems like Naxalism is because of poverty and unemployment. He spoke about the present situation of the women and that women suffer the most. They are the victims of social system and male-dominated society. He added that problems are multi-dimensional and the only way to come out of them is to pledge to live with self respect; to give proper education to the children and to fight for rights.

The programme was enlightened by the speakers like Dr. Syeeda Hameed, Mr. Ramvilas Paswan, Mr. Salman Khursheed (Minister of States, Minorities Affairs), Mr. Veerappa Moily (Minister for Law and Justice) who talked about the contemporary situation of law and justice in the country, adding that making new laws will not create any difference in the society rather the implementation of existing laws is necessary and other few presentations like dance, drama and the active participation of women from different states of the country.

## Day 2

In the second day of the National Conference of Women Leaders from Marginalized Communities (Dalit, Tribal & Muslim) which is being organized by the National Alliance of Women – NAWO on issues related to minorities, tribals and dalits, at the Constitution Club, New Delhi.

The Morning session chaired by Dr. Kalpana Kannabiran discussed issues relating to Identity, Security and Protection. Ms. Shabnam Hashmi of ANHAD speaking for the Minorities said that the issues are interrelated and that it should not be supposed that only a minority can defend itself, various minority groups should rally together because they have empathy due to shared discrimination by the State. Ms. Narengbam represented the Tribals while the Dalits were represented by Dr. SDJM Prasad of National Dalit Movement for Justice, who used government statistics to prove that the crimes against the Dalits have increased over the time. While Mr. Henry Tiphagne of People's Watch, Tamil Nadu emphasized on the need to protect Human Right defenders. He pointed out various shortcomings in the functioning of NHRC, and said that the NHRC is not taking action against Human Right violations by the State. Among other things he also pointed out that woman human right activists are the most targeted ones, and demanded women representation in the NHRC to restore its dignity.

The second session focused on internal discussion within the three communities, i.e the minority, tribals and the dalit. The Minority group which saw 20 representatives from 9 States, made recommendations for abolition of polygamy in the country, abolishment of the law relating to triple talaq, the need for equal share in inheritance for the male and female. It also demanded that there should be an Atrocities Act for the protection of minorities; unmarried and aged women should be

given financial help by the state, minimum wages for the unorganized laborers, artisans etc., immediate release of the innocent suspected victims of various bomb blasts, as well as the representation of Muslim women in the waqf board. It also wanted to repeal the AFSPA. The Minority group was worried about the stereotyping of Muslims in the media and said that such stereotypes hamper the growth of any community also it noted that Muslims are forced to live in ghettos as they suffer discrimination in other localities and are not sure if the State would be able to protect them in times of Communal riot.

While the Dalit group demanded 50% women reservation, the abolishment of manual scavenging, training of Dalit women in various skills. The Dalit group also protested the diversion of funds meant for the benefit of SC/ST to the Commonwealth Games 2010. The group also pointed out that the Dalits were losing their lands once again due to the unjust land transfer policies of the State.

The Tribal group which had 30 representatives from the North-Eastern part of India as well as West Bengal, Orissa and Jharkhand, noted several specific areas of concern – which are, women empowerment in traditional areas, demand of 50% reservation in panchayat and the judiciary, the displacement due to Mega projects going on in tribal areas, demand for property right for daughters. The group also noted the changing demography of the tribal areas due to mega projects and demanded an amendment to the 5th schedule areas. The forum doubted the veracity of the ongoing census in which tribals are naturally considered as Hindus. It said that the State should give compensation to the war widows, and appoint a special monitoring cell for the North-eastern states. Representatives from Jharkhand questioned State's land acquiring policy being followed in the name of development, as well as witch hunting of women in the state. The forum also demanded that development policy should have participation of tribals along with women, and emphasized the need for a local language, national language and international language.

The last session focussed on gender justice for marginalized women. Dr. Vimal Thorat of All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch chaired the session, while Ms. Jameela Nishat Shaheen from Andhra Pradesh, Ms. Vasavi Kiro from Jharkhand and Ms. Manjula Pradeep from Gujarat shared their views on the exploitation of women from marginalized communities. Talking about the issue of minorities specially of the Muslims Jameela said that the indifference towards the minorities is the main reason of the plight of Muslims. She said that the patriarchy is not played only in the homes of majority communities but it is equally prevalent among the minorities. Questioning various dictates about dress codes on women she wondered why nobody talks about dress code for males. Ms. Manjula Pradeep talked about the honour killings going on in the country, and said that the rights vested in the individual are not being protected by the State.

### **Day 3**

The morning session was chaired by Mr. Narendra Jadhav who is a member of the National Advisory

Council (NAC) as well as the Planning Commission. The session emphasized on socio-economic and political rights of the disadvantaged groups and problems relating to migration, displacement, entitlement, food security, and land issues.

Speaking for the tribals Ms. Bratindi Jena from Orissa noted that the democratic space was decreasing for dissenting communities, she also pointed out that police firings, branding and stereotyping of communities is pushing people to the cliff. She said that socio-economic and cultural rights are not independent of each other and that the concept of development needs to be understood better, the current model of development is not suited for human needs. The government needs to understand and appreciate indigenous knowledge and the way of living. Ms. Jena also demanded the implementation of PESA as well as Forest Rights Act.

Ms. Jyothi Roy of REDS, Karnataka, NFDW; demanded that India should have its own policy of development. She noted that the concepts of rule and governance are completely different. She said that the struggle is not to acquire anything new but to reclaim what has been lost over the time. Ms. Raj pointed out that dalits have contributed free labour to the country for much time, and that now they must take charge of the governance.

While, Ms. Sheba George of NAWO, speaking for the minorities said that there was a conflict between marginalized groups for the limited opportunities. Ms. George also mentioned that muslims want to be known as Indian Muslims and not as minorities. She praised the Sachchar Committee report of the Government of India but noted that the need of the time is to implement this report and in such a manner as to avoid conflict with other groups. She said that there is fear and insecurity among the minorities in the country, also they are poorer than the SCs and STs. Minority workers who work in the unorganized sector are not able to benefit from the government schemes concerning them. She also demanded that people from the majority should speak for the minorities.

The morning session saw its conclusion by the address of Mr. Narendra Jadhav. Mr. jadhav said that the NAC is primarily concerned with social and economic issues. He also said that there are Acts like PESA which was passed in 1996, but has not been implemented till now; same can be said about the Forest Rights Act, 2003. The tribals have to suffer royalty given for their resources. Mr. Jadhav disclosed that the Government is planning an action plan for 35 Districts affected by Maoism along with 25 other Districts, whereby it plans to give minimum and basic facilities like health, education and regular income. On the demand of separate budget for women by the delegates, Mr. Jadhav asserted that it is just not feasible although same cannot be said about separate budget for dalits, minorities and tribals. He said that schemes for benefit are there but they need proper implementation. Speaking on the issue of diversion of funds meant for the benefit of the dalits, Mr. Jadhav noted that this has been the practice for long and that only 40-50% of the funds are utilized, he also said that he was looking for ideas from the Grass root and not revolutionary rhetoric. He promised that the NAC is

working on Food Security Bill and also on Communal Violence Bill which covers not just muslims but all minorities, these Bills will be presented shortly. Communal Violence Bill which was presented in Rajya Sabha in 2003 will see it's passing now. According to this Bill, if a Government Authority takes part in any communal riot he would be held liable.

He said that till now Mid-day meal scheme was not extended to cover Madarsas but now the Government is bringing it into its fold.

In the open floor discussion, many delegates from different States came to the podium and noted their observations. These observations and suggestions were to be forwarded to the Government.

A woman delegate from Arunachal Pradesh said that it is very important for communities to interact and know each other. She pointed out that it is not always that women are discriminated against; but sometime they are part of the process of discrimination.

Ms. Susheela Goyal, an advocate from Madhya Pradesh talked about rampant discrimination against women there. She pointed out that women are bought and sold in M.P in areas such as Sagar, Rewa, Chatarpur, Ujjain and Muraina.

A representative from Meghalaya said that migrant workers don't get the benefit of socio-economic schemes when they migrate to other cities. And when these migrants come back to their respective place they find that what they had is lost, even their identity is not recognized officially.

Mehmooda of Muslim woman welfare organization, Orissa; talked about the discrimination against the muslims in Orissa and that the 2% muslim population is often not cared for. She noted that Mid-day meal schemes are not implemented properly and that Anganwadi workers sell the materials meant for the consumption of children. She asked the State to ponder the way by which Communal violence can be stopped.

While, Ms. Mehfooza from Assam demanded representation of muslim women in the Waqf boards, along with a committee for equal opportunity for women.

The delegates noted and asserted the need for alliance building, understanding problems of each other and working together.

The last session of the conference focused on Communal and Caste Violence, especially looking at the case of Gujarat. The forum received a note from Ms. Teesta Setalvad, secretary of Citizens for Justice and Peace, Mumbai. In her note she said that the State of Gujarat has very low legal representation of Muslims, and that the democratic space for debate and discussion in the State is

shrinking. In Gujarat Muslims are forced to live in ghettos, because they are not sure of protection in case of riots.

The conference ended with certain recommendations. Recommendations focused on setting up of special police stations for SC/ST, female judges and prosecutors for rape victims, amendment in SC/ST Act, shelter homes, land reform expectation from the UPA Govt., complete abolishment of manual scavenging, role change of traditional institutions. Consideration of 18 year old woman as a separate unit, coherent census of Tribals and dalits, compensation for war widows, Sexual assault Bill should have special provision for women in conflict areas, cancellation of all MoU for resources of tribal areas, special monitoring cell for look east policy- woman representative in the cell. Financial assistance of unmarried aged woman, representation in various committees, abolishment of triple talaq, regular schools for minorities along with the modernization of the madarasas etc.

The conference ended with resolution for working further for the cause of marginalized sections of the society.

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