

**Indian Association for Women's Studies**  
**XIV National Conference on Women's Studies**

**Equality, Pluralism and the State:  
Perspectives from the Women's Movement**  
4th to 7th February 2014

**Report on  
PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS**



Organised by: **IAWS**  
at **Gauhati University, Guwahati**

# **Indian Association for Women's Studies**

XIV National Conference on Women's Studies

**Equality, Pluralism and the State:  
Perspectives from the Women's Movement**

4th to 7th February, 2014

## **Report on Pre-Conference Workshop**



**IAWS Secretariat**

C/o Centre for Women's Development Studies  
25, Bhai Vir Singh Marg (Gole Market), New Delhi-110001  
Tel.:91-11-23345530, 23365541 / Fax:91-11-23346044  
<http://www.iaws.org/>

# Foreword

The XIV National Conference of the IAWS was preceded by two pre-conference events which focussed on issues of Women With Disabilities (WWD), as well as the concerns of Young Women. Whereas it is today widely accepted that these concerns should be part of mainstream agendas, there is also a need for a more specific focus to facilitate the process of taking these issues forward in general discussions. While the IAWS had initiated a dialogue on disability as far back as its XI National Conference in Goa, when a specific sub theme discussion was on issues of disability, it was felt that the discourse on disability had evolved sufficiently to address it in more specific ways, involving wider participation of women with disabilities to make the process more inclusive. The location of the North East offered a more specific location to hold these discussions in the context of issues arising from women's, and men's experiences in this region.

Similarly, the last few years have seen an unprecedented display of both energy and agency by the youth, more so with a focus on women's rights. This has initiated an entirely new line of thinking and debate in society with regard to aspects of violence, including sexual violence as well as the ways in which the women's movement should and can engage with the youth to incorporate newer perspectives. It was felt that in the backdrop of events as they unfolded in and since December 2012, this was an appropriate moment to highlight aspects related to the problems facing the youth, even as young women's concerns needed to be brought into existing debates in more specific and visible ways. This workshop also aimed at introducing issues emerging from the region to a younger set of women, so as to allow for more inclusive and participatory processes to develop. This was seen as a specific input into the overall theme for the Conference which was on Equality, Pluralism and the State: Perspectives from the Women's Movement.

These events fulfilled one of the objectives with which these events were first proposed. The XIV National Conference of the IAWS registered a significant increase in the participation of women with disabilities, and more specially so from the North East. The organising of this event was timely and appropriate and will hopefully create more space for discussion on the rights of the disabled within the 'mainstream' discourse. Secondly, the hosting of the young women's pre-

conference event ensured greater participation of young women scholars in the main conference and contributed to bringing in a range of perspectives from their specific location. This was all the more necessary given the debates on women's rights over the last few years, the tremendous energy displayed by younger sections of the society in engaging with social and policy level issues as well as the need on the part of the women's movement to dialogue with the younger generation in more specific ways.

The IAWS was happy to be able to garner financial support for these pre conference events from the Institute of International Education, facilitated by the Ford Foundation in India. This both allowed as well as encouraged us to reach out to newer sections. We would like to specifically acknowledge our special thanks to Dr. Vanita Nayak Mukherjee and her team for making these workshops possible through their active support. IAWS also specifically acknowledges its thanks to Dr. Anita Ghai, former President and currently EC member, for shouldering the main responsibility of organising the workshop on Engaging with the Voices of Women with Disabilities. In this she was assisted by Ms. Gayatri Buragohain of the Foundation for Social Transformation and Dr. Armaan Ali of Shishu Sarothi. I also take this opportunity to specially thank the Director, Bosco Reachout, Guwahati for extending full support to enable us to organise the event focusing on disability. I may also mention that the Institute was one of the few places we found suitable with regard to issues of accessibility for the disabled.

We would also like to put on record our acknowledgement of the part played by Ms. Geeta Thatra, Ph. D scholar, CSSS, Kolkata and EC member, IAWS and Ms Akhila Singh, of the Indian School for Women's Studies and Development , New Delhi, for facilitating the dialogue on young women's issues. Prof. Dhruva Saikia, the Vice Chancellor of Cotton College State University needs a special mention for taking time out of his busy schedule for this workshop. Prof. Mahfuza Rahman, of Cotton College, who was also a member of the Local Conference Secretariat for the XIV National Conference of the IAWS proved to be a pillar of support and helped organise the young women's event in what turned out to be an appropriate location to reach out to women and youth in the North East.

Both these pre conference events addressed issues which need more attention from academic as well as activist locations and perspectives and the workshop initiated this dialogue in fair measure. IAWS hopes to develop work in these theme areas in the years to come, so as to allow for further discussion on these issues. We hope to also take forward discussion on these emerging agendas with regard to

women's rights as part of both the women's movement and larger social movements.

New Delhi  
May 2014.

Indu Agnihotri  
General Secretary

## **Report on Pre- Conference Workshop**

### **ENGAGING WITH THE VOICES OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES**

Co Ordinator: Dr. Anita Ghai, Associate Professor, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, IAWS President (2008-2011) and EC member.

Organized in collaboration with Foundation for Social Transformation (FST) and Shishu Sarothi, Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014

Venue: Bosco Reach Out, Guwahati, Assam

Northeast India comprising of the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura has an unhappy and traumatic history of neglect, apathy and insurgency and, despite popular positive perceptions of the status of women, actually has a rather poor track record of gender based violence, specifically, sexual violence in its various locations. Given this context, concern for people and women with disability and their issues is sadly missing.

The 2001 census identified that 2.2% of the Indian population were living with a disability. However, organisations working in the field of disability claim that the strong stigmatisation of disability in Indian society results in an underestimation of its prevalence. Disability rights activists, NGOs and even many government agencies estimate the real prevalence to be 5-6% of the total population. In the light of the above scenario, the rights of people with disabilities get low priority in India and more so in conflict zones like Jammu & Kashmir and the Northeast.

Women everywhere, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, wealth or age, have faced various forms of violence. Women with disabilities are no exception. There are both pragmatic and socio-cultural issues related to identifying, locating and reaching women with disabilities, which result from the context and life circumstances of this population. It is clear that many disabled women are confined



to their homes and are thus less likely to access the state's mainstream programs or services. Many factors compound their situation, such as terrain, weather, lack of mobility aids; being single and female in a traditional setting; and, fearfulness, prompted by experiences of stigma or harassment.

Lack of comprehensive data on women with disabilities both adds to their 'invisibility' and marginalisation and keeps them out of the ambit of engagement and interaction with women's groups and movements. Within the women's movement, women with disabilities have not been included systematically and specifically in the conflict zones of Jammu and Kashmir and the North East.

The IAWS sought to focus on some of these issues by hosting a pre-conference event along with its XIV National Conference. The effort was to bring into the discussion the issue of recurrent violence which is common to all women, and more so among Northeast Indian disabled women, where this fear is heightened by the situation in which they live. It stems not merely from the horror of physical assault and vulnerabilities, especially those unleashed by state forces that are permitted to do so without impunity, but also from the subsequent traumas, social stigmatization and many other inexpressible feelings. This preconference therefore, sought to address the concerns of women with disabilities especially in the additional context of conflict-induced trauma.

The objective was to highlight the issues of women with disabilities as well as to initiate a dialogue within and between women with disabilities and members of IAWS. The goal is to identify the gaps in both, acquiring knowledge and information regarding statutory provisions of the State and the existing scenario such as issues of support services, resources and advocacy which are critical. It is very rare to have a discussion about the problems of livelihood faced by women with disabilities. This is all the more significant since women with disabilities are generally single and also located in female headed households. The aim was also to understand the challenges faced by women with disabilities with regard to sexual and reproductive health. Notwithstanding the issues and concerns emanating from the Northeast, another goal was to extend discussion on the issues of disabled women to other states that ignore the reality of disability in the context of gender. Since many conflict ridden regions such as Northeast and Kashmir have experienced trauma that results in disability these women too remain excluded from earning a livelihood and even accessing a sustainable economic activity. Further, complicating these issues is the widespread lack of inclusion in mainstream policies and programmes.



The workshop aimed to draw up an action plan to educate mainstream organizations on disability issues, so as to encourage inclusion of women with disabilities in their future policies and programs. Finally the objective was to underscore the lack of inclusion of women with disabilities in mainstream policies, programmes and schemes. This was attempted with an underlying hope that the participating women and all stakeholders would initiate sustained work through and with IAWS, with financial support from organisations like the Ford Foundation to conduct orientation programs on sexuality, reproductive health care, sexually transmitted diseases and enable access to available support services for women (with disabilities) in different parts of the Northeast and hopefully other parts of the country to make them more 'visible' and empower them with better control over both their bodily and livelihood integrity. The overall objective was to focus on the need for more inclusive perspectives with regard to social structures, policies and perspectives, including within the women's movement.

Organised a day prior to the inauguration of the XIV National Conference of the IAWS, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, the workshop began with Dr. Anita Ghai, Conference Coordinator, IAWS, welcoming the participants as well as the guests. She explained the purpose of the conference and also expressed her elation at being able to conduct such a workshop in the Northeast. Dr. Ghai stated that the aim of the conference was to focus on the concerns of women with disabilities within the larger conference on Women's Studies. This was critical as such an attempt was long overdue within the women's movement. The fact that there were 19 participants hailing from six different states of the North East (excluding Sikkim) was highly appreciated by her.

Armaan Ali, Director of Shishu Sarothi, expressed joy that finally such a platform for women with disabilities was put up so that they themselves could raise their concerns which otherwise had been read about only in newspapers. Gayatri Buragohain, Executive Director of FST, highlighted the fact that such women are hardly seen in the public sphere. Public spaces have not been built in a disabled-friendly manner relegating disabled women into the private sphere. Hence this workshop was one of its kind in its attempt to bring together people from the North East.

Prof. Iлина Sen, President, IAWS addressed the gathering. Welcoming the participants, she drew upon her personal experience, to enunciate the fact that disability is not only a problem with reference to an individual. There is a need to contextualize disability in the larger structures and the environment, including

family, friends, and teachers. In 'a society that specializes in exclusion', she talked about the need to redefine the definition of 'normal'.

### **Session 1:**

Four papers were presented in the first session which was Chaired by Dr. Sumi Krishna, Former President, IAWS.

The first paper was on 'Livelihood' by Ms. Suchismita Majumdar, Director, Swalambi, Assam. Suchismita Majumdar started by describing the work her organization had done in the field of disability. She said that the organization did community based work including promoting health, education and livelihood for the development of disabled women. She presented various facts and figures to support her stand that the condition of women with disabilities in Assam was better than in any other state. However she said, there still was a lot more to be done to improve facilities for the disabled. Majumdar also added that there was a sharp contrast between the scenario in rural and urban areas. In relation to livelihood, she brought to light the fact that women with disabilities in Assam are neither encouraged to study nor to go for jobs. Hence, self-employment in small enterprises is the only option left. Her organization has tried to empower these women by forming Self Help Groups who take up various income-generating activities.

The next paper was on 'Discrimination against women with disabilities' by Sangita Adhikari, Assistant teacher, Ashadeep (Assam). She began by sharing that she was not born with any disability. Her mental health started deteriorating only a few years back when she was diagnosed with Bipolar disorder. Because of the lack of awareness about the condition, she faced a lot of discrimination and even ended up in the streets from where she was rescued by Ashadeep. She said that it is due to and with their support that she stands today as a qualified teacher. In spite of this traumatic experience she very poignantly raised questions on the mindset of the society towards disabled women. She asked as to why without any fault of hers she was discriminated against? Why all doors leading to success were closed for her. Through her paper, she therefore exposed the stigma that mental health patients face on a day-to-day basis.

In the course of the discussion, a student from amidst the audience asked the presenters about their experiences related to marriage. To this Suchismita replied that the question for marriage doesn't even arise as it is generally understood that nobody will marry such women and therefore no efforts are made to find partners

for them. Not only this, they are even advised to get their uterus removed in total disregard of their sexual needs. Another point raised was that of bottlenecks in the infrastructure that lead to inaccessibility for the disabled.

The third paper, focussing on 'Education' was by Smriti Rani Biswas, student, Tripura. Smriti Biswas related her story of how she lost her eyesight at the age of one and how she never found support from the federal state. Being a hilly area, there was always a problem in making frequent and repeated trips to Agartala, the capital city where at least some infrastructure could be found. The local schools were not equipped with disabled-friendly means. Additionally, purchasing Braille paper was a difficult task as its availability was restricted only to the Government schools, that too in the capital region.

Another presentation in this session was on the 'Scenario of education for women with disabilities in Mizoram: issues and challenges,' by Lalchhuansangi, Student, Mizoram. She began by giving a statistical description of the number of persons with disabilities in India and then in Mizoram according to Census 2001 data. Then she went on to describe the provisions for the disabled under the Right to Education and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to present the contrast between the provisions mentioned in the official policy and what happens in reality. She highlighted that women with disabilities in Mizoram are not encouraged to study and are most often kept within the house to tend to the household chores. She also suggested that for such women home-based education should be provided and that schools should make every effort to provide barrier-free environment for them.

Summing up the morning discussion, the Chair, Dr. Sumi Krishna remarked that the session was quite stimulating and interesting and that it also marked a new beginning whereby the sub-theme of disability was being acknowledged by the IAWS within the larger theme of 'equality, pluralism and the state'. It marked a significant move forward whereby women with disabilities and those without disabilities had both come together on a common platform to discuss the concerns of the former and what interventions are needed to address the same. She also put forward the urgency of intervening right from early childhood in terms of health care which has been missing. She also stated that documentation of such stories as were shared that day and the sharing of these across states will help in mainstreaming the issue, thus invoking more thought and action on it.

Prof. Ilina Sen added that it was a historic conference as two former presidents of IAWS and herself were present to discuss the concerns of women with disabilities in a special event organised by the IAWS. It should be noted that this was not the first time the IAWS was focusing on the theme of Disability, since a beginning had been made at the time of the XI National Conference held in Goa. She said that there was a great need to take cognizance of the infrastructural challenges in front of women with disabilities. Yet another burning issue was that of how structural violence and armed conflict, especially in the context of the North East, aggravates problems for the disabled and also how we need to address these.

**Session 2, before Lunch** was chaired by Ms. Gayatri Buragohain, Executive Director, FST

The papers in this session brought in experiences from different States in the North eastern region.

The first paper was on 'Challenges faced by disabled women in Manipur' by Ms. Sunita Devi, teacher, Manipur

Sunita Devi, shared that she was a special teacher in an upper primary school in Manipur. She had not been totally visually impaired since birth and for a long time she was not aware of her condition to the point that she lost her vision entirely and it spoiled her career. She argued that a girl child who is also disabled is discriminated against and further, the interventions made in the case of a disabled male child and a disabled girl child differ. Usually the parents do not even wish to disclose the disability of the girl child for fear of not finding a suitable match for her and so, since early childhood there is an additional stigma faced by the girl child.

She narrated her own experience stating that in her case though she got married, her in-laws were not ready to care for her. Her husband too left her after 3 years leaving her with the responsibility of two kids from their marriage. She stated that this was not unusual, in fact it is the rule since successful marriages are rare exceptions in the case of the disabled. Another fact she highlighted was that women with disabilities have no control over their earnings. Given the constraints, instead of rebelling they choose to maintain silence. With this she strongly asserted that women should break out of this culture of silence and take active part in political decision-making.

Another pertinent issue she touched upon was that of conflict and its implications for disability. Since Manipur was a conflict prone zone, this left many women with neurological disorders. The rampant sexual violence also leads to disability of various forms. By presenting the case study of a woman with mental retardation who was raped by three men and became pregnant and whose voice was given no consideration, she hoped to bring to the fore the plight of women with disabilities in terms of the judicial proceedings.

She strongly advocated amendment of the PWD Act, which currently gives only a petty amount as unemployment allowance to the disabled. She also felt that there was an urgent need for providing lifetime shelters for women with disabilities. Sensitizing them about their rights was also required to empower them. Disabled women should also be entitled to reservation, she stated, as it would widen the scope of opportunities for them.

Next, Battihun Mary Khongmawloh, from Meghalaya presented her paper which focused on 'Challenges faced by disabled women at the grassroots level in Meghalaya.' Mary has been a grass root level worker who has worked with the Disability Programme of the state. Her paper focused on the issues of the rural disabled women who being women, illiterate, poor and over and above that being disabled faced a four-fold pressure limiting their participation in different spheres of society. She highlighted the fact that Meghalaya, with a significant population being drawn from the Khasis and Garos, which are matrilineal tribes is popularly thought to be pro-women. However, for disabled women, in Meghalaya too the reality is no different from other societies. Being adult but yet treated as a child, she said "You are willing to do things for us which we can, but what about that which we cannot?" She also talked of discrimination in the sphere of love, emotions and sexual life. On the one hand the disabled women find that their sexual rights are denied, on the other they are easy targets of sexual assault.

The health scenario in rural areas is also averse to their needs. Most of the Primary Healthcare Centres and Community Health Centres do not have doctors. In the rare cases where there are doctors, they are not sensitive enough to the special needs of the disabled. She also said that there was a complete lack of accessibility and educational facilities in the villages for them. So, without qualification they had little scope and very few options to earn their livelihoods. Even if they find jobs under MNREGA, they don't get paid.

She ended up by also questioning the role of NGOs since they hardly make any effort to 'reach the unreached'. She posed questions pertaining to the human rights of the disabled as they find no respect and are only treated as objects of mockery. She hoped that the kind of platform that the IAWS was providing would have an impact on how programmes are implemented in rural areas.

The third paper in the session was on 'Women with disabilities - issues and sensitization of police' by Rajan Singh, Assam Police Service (APS), Assam

The focal point of his paper was about including a gender and disabled sensitive curriculum in police training itself in order to get rid of all the charges levied against them for not being sensitive to women with disabilities and in the larger context, to women as such. He made an honest admission that such sensitivity was lacking and was courageous enough to outright accept that many of the allegations against the police force had a basis. In his paper he suggested various measures to sensitize the policemen. One of the suggestions was that the Bureau of Police Research and Development be approached to modify the current police-training module to include ethical behaviour towards women with disabilities. He also advocated the setting up of crime record database exclusively for women with disabilities in order to document their experiences. Also, he suggested that NGOs could network with the police to create legal cells to extend help for such women. Lastly, he said there should be fast track courts for disabled women.

The papers were followed by a lively discussion. Summing up the session the Chair acknowledged that sensitization is required at multiple levels and that it should begin right from the level of primary education in schools. The process of sensitization should be tailor-made for different target groups. Mary reiterated the point that one way of sensitizing the police force could be by compulsorily including a whole chapter on disability itself in basic level police training. The discussion moved to policy making, with Dr. Anita Ghai pointing out that there was an urgent need that the disabled should be consulted while framing laws concerning them and that there should be "nothing for us without us". Nandini also said that rather than medicalising the issue of disability we should look at it from a rights-based perspective.

**Session 3** in the afternoon further extended the discussion to include specific experiences of interventions as well as to focus on the need for policy interventions at different levels. In the Chair, was Prof. Sandhya Limaye, from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

Initiating the discussion in this session were Harpriti and Nandini Rao who spoke about how 'A little Swabhimaan goes a long way - Empowering deaf women in North India.' Harpriti, who was a deaf woman herself, communicated with the audience with the help of an interpreter, with inputs from Nandini from time to time. Their paper was about the functioning of the Deaf Way Foundation and how it has been empowering deaf women since 1992. Their modus operandi was to 'train the trainers' to conduct workshops with deaf women on topics like sexual abuse, violence, sexuality, their rights and dignity, which eventually turned out to be a platform for them to express themselves. Nandini explained in detail how the workshops were conducted. They maintained that their model was open for review, even as it could be replicated elsewhere. She stressed the point that disability should be looked at to go beyond the framework of charity and that being 'deaf' was not a stigma for them but defined their identity.

The next paper was by Celine Lawai, titled: The need to empower women with disability- a reflection. Lawai was a student and a member of the Association of Challenged People in Meghalaya. Lawai discussed diverse issues related to the lives of women with disabilities and how they are doubly discriminated against in society. Through a power-point presentation filled with powerful pictures showing women being discriminated against in numerous ways, she covered topics such as gender discrimination in general and went on to focus on issues faced by disabled women in the matrilineal societies of Meghalaya, which are presumed to be quite progressive. She concluded by saying that 'everyone should be involved in women's empowerment, not only women'.

The third paper focussed on A shift from Nagaland to Delhi.

Deboshree, the student who presented, was a blind girl who had lost her eyesight only two years back. She related her experience of not finding facilities for the blind in Nagaland and hence being forced to migrate to IVHI, Dehradun to study. She narrated her account of how this experience instilled immense confidence in her. She mentioned that through narration of her struggle she wanted to appeal to others also to follow their dreams, because, according to her, 'disability was just a state of mind'. She herself wanted to be a lawyer. She said that the Government

should take up necessary measures to improve their quality of life and that the blind people themselves should be made aware of the various provisions and opportunities available for them.

The last paper in this session was on Education by Monika Das, a student from Assam. Monika Das, also related her story of how she was treated badly after falling off the stairs which had made her disabled when she was 13 years old. This had hampered her studies and she had to struggle a lot in her village where there was no accessibility for people like her. She focused mainly on the fact that there was a gap between the rural and urban areas in terms of the facilities available and that the villages really lagged behind in this regard. This problem, raised by others as well, needed to be addressed urgently.

Some of the key points that emerged from the discussions were: how to incorporate the psyche of acceptance, lack of a strong support system for the WWDs, to deal with abuse; issues pertaining to sexuality, etc? Shabina Ahmed of Assam Autism Foundation also presented the Chair with some of the first ever produced books on disaster management for the disabled, one in Braille and one that was pictorial. At the end Prof Limaye concluded by pointing out that empowerment should come at three levels- individual, group and community.

**The last session in the workshop had been planned with a focus on the potential ways to move forward to fight for the rights of disabled women.**

All the speakers in this session emphasized the need to create a network of organizations and people who were working in the field of disability across India. It was argued that this was critical to strengthen and streamline and the fight for securing rights for the disabled people. The 2013 bill on disability came up for scrutiny and aspects/ clauses of the Bill were severely criticized. It was pointed out that it was critical to acknowledge diversity in the forms of disability in order to understand the specific needs of women with different disabilities. Women's sexuality needed to be spoken about and respected, rather than being restricted.

One of the speakers critiqued the women's movement and the queer rights movement for not paying adequate attention to the concerns of the disabled people. It was stressed that different movements needed to adequately acknowledge the concerns of the disabled and support them in their collective fight for rights. Another issue that was raised was that of the concerns of care-givers and how this had not been addressed sufficiently. It was argued that a collective platform was required to discuss these concerns frequently.



The highlight of the day was a play organized to demonstrate the experiences of mothers of daughters with disabilities, sexual abuse in family, issues of marriage and its positive and negative representations, domestic violence and hysterectomy sterilization.

**Note:**

Dr. Anita Ghai would like to specially acknowledge the support she received from Farhana and Sonika, students of TISS, Guwahati, and Pooja Bakshi, from the University of Delhi.

## **Young Women: Resisting Violence and Exploring Legacies**

Date: February 3, 2014

Venue: Cotton College State University,  
Guwahati, Assam

Co-ordinators: Akhila Singh, Research Coordinator, Indian School of Women's Studies and Development, New Delhi and Geeta Thatra, M.Phil Student, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata.

### **Introduction**

In the midst of far reaching changes that are ensuing in contemporary times, the challenges faced by marginalised groups and young women are manifold. On the one hand, there are denials, exploitation and marginalisation; on the other, there are assertions for dignity, self-respect and autonomy, which are more often than not met with violence – both in overt and covert forms. The instances of violence are particularly heightened in the cases of inter-caste or inter-religious marriages, which challenge social hierarchies and provoke violent responses in the form of control over women's labour and sexuality, sexual harassment at the workplace, restrictions on mobility, acid attacks, or killings sanctioned by caste panchayat or families, often with the complicity of the state. While violence against women is an endemic issue, there are specific issues arising out of women's location in the North East Region (NER) on account of a prolonged situation of turmoil engulfing the communities, the state and the context of uneven economic development in ecologically fragile regions, resulting in displacement and loss of livelihoods. The scale and gravity of assault on women from these states needs to be located in the framework of collective violence – against entire communities, disappearances, the mass killings of men, and sexual assault on women.

This pre-conference, related to 'young women' explored exciting possibilities for raising some critical questions, such as how does 'age' become an important criterion for 'difference' among women? What does this category tell us about the experiences of 'young' women in contemporary times? What is the nature of its intersection with other stratifying categories, like caste, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.? What questions or challenges do these intersections pose to the processes of gender justice? The attempt here was to raise questions related to



different axes of intersections, exploring their meanings, and the interplay of various categories, in the context of marginality that give rise to complex manifestations of injustice.

The pre-conference workshop was initially planned with two sessions focusing on: (i) Interrogating Violence, and (ii) Exploring Feminist Legacies from the North East.

### **Interrogating Violence**

Recent years have seen an unprecedented increase in cases of violence against women in India. The overall cases of crime against women have increased and a large part of the brunt of this increasing violence is being borne by the young women, whose increased presence in the public realm is being seen as a threat to patriarchal dominance. There is an increase in the number of cases of incest involving young girls and rape cases reported between the age group of 14 to 30 years have escalated. Over the years, the patriarchal structures have tried to prevent young women from living and developing their potential. This critical process in young women's lives has been stunted by the limitations imposed upon them in the form of restricted access to education, early marriage, early child bearing, etc. In addition to this, there are denials, exclusions and discrimination on the basis of gender, which may often overlap with other forms of inequalities, such as social status, caste/ethnic hierarchies, and economic deprivation, which compound the gender injustice. The child sex ratio is symbolic of the status of women in our country, and according to the latest Census, this figure has come down to the lowest since independence. The shocking revelation made by the Census 2011 that the child sex ratio (0-6 years) has further dropped from 927 to 914 girls per thousand boys, has confirmed the worst apprehensions of those working to uphold women's rights in the country. The background note for this session had identified some of the following areas for discussion:

- ❖ **Sexual Violence:** Cases of sexual assault are continuing unabated in all parts of the country. There is also a constant increase in the number of cases of molestation and sexual-harassment over the years and in particular, gang rapes of young girls, including minors, in all parts of the country. Sexual violence on women is being used as an instrument of settling scores between communities and families. Incidents of young women being attacked by

stalkers once again focus on women's freedom of movement, choice of clothing, access to public spaces and so on in the face of continual denial to women of their right to make decisions regarding mobility, love and/or sexuality. The incidence of acid attacks on young girls who have refused the advances of men or decided to exit out of existing relationships is also on the rise. Some of these attacks are also motivated towards settling family feuds where girls are being targeted by disgruntled relatives.

- ❖ **Marital Violence similarly affects** young women who face violence within the first year of their marriages. The average (median) age of marriage in the age group of 20 to 49 is 16.5 years to 18.3 years for women. The increasing cases of "bought wives" and migration for marriage from poorer states into some of the richer states have only made these women more vulnerable to all kinds of violence.
- ❖ **Unequal Opportunities:** While a happy picture is being painted regarding the achievements of some women in sports, science, media, politics etc., in fact there are serious inequalities in the opportunities that are available to young girls. This extends to the spheres of literacy and education, early marriage and child bearing all of which put a double burden on them and keeps them away from becoming a part of formal workforce. Female work participation rate according to the Census 2001 was 25.63 per cent, while it was 51.68 per cent for men. Sexual harassment in schools, universities and at the workplace has only made the situation worse. Mass scale displacement of women and their families caused by mega infrastructure development projects also puts them in situations of vulnerability. As more and more families are suffering from economic hardships, young women are being forced to work in the informal, unorganised sector where the worst kind of repression is taking place.
- ❖ **Caste-based Sexual Violence:** A woman's agency over her sexuality has always been seen as a threat to the existing authority of those who have been controlling the levers of socio-economic resources. The instances of violence against dalit and tribal women do not stop at the act of violence, but extend to the process of seeking justice which is biased and which further makes them more vulnerable. As women are stepping out of their conventional spaces to make their own decisions regarding their sexuality, there has been severe resentment and offensive retaliation from the patriarchal forces. The regressive forces resist change in the name of custom and tradition and legitimise the

oppressive relationships of caste and gender. A woman's right to choose her partner hits right at the roots of caste and the patriarchal system.

It was envisaged that the session on interrogating violence would focus on issues of control and violence faced by 'young women' in the context of geographic and culture specific social histories and institutional arrangements. Young students/researchers were invited to make presentations that explored the contentious intersections of caste, gender, community, sexuality and labour, all of which contribute to violence against young persons in contemporary times.

The second running theme for this pre conference event was aimed at Exploring Feminist Legacies from the North East

The North Eastern Region (NER) consists of eight states, which share several common features, such as the hilly terrain, rich natural resources, bio-diversity, dense forests, highest rainfall, large and small river systems, people's access to their own land or community-owned land and resources, skilled women engaged in a variety of handicraft production, village systems based on familial and kinship ties, etc; Nonetheless the region is not a homogenous unit. In fact, each state has a heterogeneous mosaic of communities, including those recognised as 'Scheduled Tribes.' Over 200 tribal groups with distinct ethnic identities constitute a sizable proportion of the population and most of them live in small or medium rural settlements. Each of the states has its own history and the tribal groups in the states have distinct customary practices and governance systems. Each is keenly aware of its ethnicity and asserts its identity with passion and fervour. There are also vast differences between the people living in urban and rural areas, the hills and the plains in the different states. Besides, the different groups face different development bottlenecks.

In July 2008 the Ministry of Development of the North East Region (MDoNER) and the North Eastern Council (NEC) released the North Eastern Region: Vision 2020. The Vision document emphasises six development components: (i) selfgovernance and participatory development, (ii) creation of development opportunities, (iii) developing sectors with comparative advantage, (iv) capacity building of people and institutions, (iv) creation of hospitable climate for investment, and (vi) building infrastructure through public investments.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis is mainly on increasing connectivity and creation of employment opportunities through state investment in infrastructure, which reiterates that

private investment is to be encouraged in harnessing the natural resource, agriculture and tourism. Poor infrastructure and governance, combine with low productivity and market access. Meanwhile, the quest for ethnic and cultural identities has sown the seeds of dissatisfaction even as backwardness, remoteness and problems of governance have provided fertile ground for breeding armed insurgencies.

While this context determines the lives of the people as a whole, it is important to examine how the state and society have responded to the needs and aspirations of the women from the different communities in this region? This is pertinent since the sense of well-being on the part of communities of North East is exceedingly low. Ecological degradation of the region has had disastrous implications for these communities, which are largely dependent on agriculture, forest and water resources for their sustenance. The resources of the region have been exploited to fulfil the needs of the rest of India, without corresponding human development and opportunities in the region, exacerbating problems of exploitation of natural resources. This along with high rates of unemployment prevailing in the region has directly impacted the lives of women. In the absence of any other industry, tourism is seen as one of the important means of building a market-economy within the region. Due to "troubled history and geo-politics" there are also issues of citizenship removal of AFSPA, of Restricted Area Permits (RAP) and Inner Line Permits (ILP) which complicate matters. There is a deep sense of relative deprivation, among the communities residing here, which has provided the basis for various forms of unrest, conflict and violence for the last three decades or more. The fallout of this protracted conflict is visible at several levels and finds expression in different responses both in terms of form of protest/ resistance and stated political goals. The hopes, aspirations and ethnic loyalties of the people have been little understood by the Indian State or 'mainstream society' and this has only deepened the sense of alienation in the region. It is observed that the 'quest for ethnic and regional identities have fomented a climate of insurgency in several parts of the North Eastern Region, which has led to political fragmentation of the region which has been further fuelled by the slow pace of development.<sup>2</sup>

For a discussion on women's lives in the NER several aspects need to be kept in mind. Firstly, we need to recognize that there is a perception that women in the NER have an edge over women in other parts of 'mainland' India, mainly in terms of autonomy and mobility given that the tribal cultures of the region are more egalitarian, which is evident from the existence of women's collective work patterns, women's markets and village based activity on a co-operative basis, which seem

to sustain and perpetuate an order of social cohesiveness. Nevertheless the following need to be noted:

- ❖ Women have always had some level of economic autonomy because of the income earned through their homesteads – their skills in handloom weaving, basketry, bamboo crafts and other crafts. In addition, women have deep knowledge of their local natural environment and the use of herbs and roots for medicinal use or for supplementing the family diet.
- ❖ Food insecurity in the NER is high. There is a deficit in food production, but the question of food security cannot be addressed without paying significant attention to the larger question of human security.
- ❖ Interestingly, despite their marginalised roles in decision making, the burden women carry as a fall-out of conflict adds to their socio-economic responsibilities and many from different age groups and occupations, including survivors of sexual violence, are forced to single-handedly run households.
- ❖ Even in matrilineal communities, where a woman inherits ancestral landed property, she does not have real control with the maternal uncle or clan playing a decisive role. In many areas traditional customary laws and practices sanction polygamy and child marriages; in others, land, property rights and custody of children are given only to the men. Sometimes pressure is exerted on women from within the community to uphold cultural and ethnic identities, inhibiting the questioning of gender-biased customary laws and practices.
- ❖ In spite of women's supposedly 'empowered' status, the sex ratio in the region is not favourable towards women and they have little choice in the area of reproductive health despite the fact that there is a strong tradition of women's knowledge of indigenous health practices, including contraception.
- ❖ Women's role in decision-making is minimal in communities in the region, including those following matriliney; they are excluded from participation in political decision-making since the traditional institutions of governance do not accept women and even when women have come in, their role is peripheral or figurative. Young women bear an unequal share of this inequality and denial of democratic decision making.
- ❖ The most crucial element of disadvantage or discrimination against women



in armed conflict situations in the NER is the violence itself. It is important to focus on the manifestations of gender discrimination in situations of conflict, The AFSPA, intermittently in operation in different states of North-East India since 1958, is the most critical factor in cases of human rights violations in the region.<sup>3</sup> The large presence of the armed forces in almost all the states in NER, at some point or the other, has been a deciding factor in disadvantaging women in these states and causes women to live in a state of relentless fear and anxiety. While the community may not openly ostracise sexually violated women, they suffer from a deep sense of shame, lowering of self-esteem and lack of self-confidence. Sometimes, even school buildings have been taken over to accommodate the armed forces, leading to girl children mostly not being allowed to attend school.

Given that conflict is intermeshed with questions of identity and ethnicity, there is a greater attempt to control women's mobility and their bodies and in the assertions of ethnicity, women are seen as bearers of community 'honour' and 'tradition'. These various forms of discrimination, violence and disadvantage against women in the NER have been noted by groups working in the different states, including the NEN, which pointed to some of these aspects in a detailed study "Women in Armed Conflict Situations" in 2005.

- ❖ Admittedly, women fall in different socio-economic categories and the disadvantages that they suffer from differ significantly within the Region, but significantly the young are more vulnerable amongst them at all stages. Despite this marginalization, women's groups have persevered and express their desire for peace and condemn violence. Women have also been in the forefront of **Resistance, Struggles and Organising**. Some of the organisations in existence include the Naga Mother's Association of Nagaland (NMA), the Mother's Union of Tura in Meghalaya (MUT), the Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWU), the *Meira Paibis* of Manipur (MPU), the United *Mokokchung* Forum (UMF), All Bodo Women's Association (ABWA), the Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF), Macha Leima in Manipur (MLM), to mention a few. The initiatives of peace and justice are integral to women's organising in the NER and have a long history; and many organisations have emerged in response to atrocities and violence against women in the region. These have both questioned human rights violations and have also worked towards conflict

## resolution

The objective, through the workshop, was also to focus on women's struggles emerging from the situation in the NER and the history of their resistance, to also understand how women are negotiating the various institutions, like the family, community, state and market, in which they are embedded in complex and at times contradictory ways? What is the nature of diversity within the North East region itself, which necessitates moving beyond generalised presumptions? What are the newer possibilities for modes of organising and strategizing to defend the human rights, particularly of young women? The issues of justice in the North Eastern region pose questions arising out of the context of patterns of development even as they demand sensitivity to the diversities and conflicting aspirations of different communities. Presentations were invited with the purpose of eliciting responses reflecting on the negotiations, struggles and resistance of women from different North Eastern states, and the challenges these pose to young women and to the women's movement in this region and beyond.

Whereas initially the plan was to hold the discussions in two segments, this was modified based on the responses received. This helped in integrating the discussion on women's experience in the NER with the issues emerging from other parts. Further, participants were encouraged to engage with the themes through conversations and dialogue including diverse forms of presentations, papers, short films/documentaries, plays and/or performances, etc.

The overarching theme of violence was creatively interpreted by the participants. The presentations covered a range of contemporary concerns faced by the women's movements and were subsequently organised in four sessions. These were:

1. Resisting Violence in Conflict Situations
2. Performance, Representation and Political Action
3. Gendered Violence in Intimate Spaces/Relations
4. Gendered Labour and Concerns of Health and Violence

Abstracts were received from 24 women for the pre-conference workshop. However of the 19 who had agreed to present there were 5 dropouts. Overall, 14 speakers presented their full papers, which gave ample time for discussion.

Clearly the pre-conference workshop on 'Young Women': Resisting Violence and Exploring Legacies,' held at Cotton College State University, Guwahati set the stage for the 14<sup>th</sup> National Conference of the Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS). The day began with a warm welcome by Dr. Mahfuza Rehman (faculty at the Cotton College State University) and encouraging remarks by Dr. Indu Agnihotri (General Secretary, IAWS) for the young participants. She referred to the significance of the participation of the youth in movements for social change and the manner in which events after December 2012 had once again highlighted the tremendous need as well as scope for the women's movements to push for a discussion on the issues coming up. She pointed to the urgent need to understand the different forms of violence faced by young women in their diverse locations, including specifically in the North East. This necessitated that approaches to challenging and countering this violence take into account the multiple factors perpetuating violence especially in the context of globalisation, fundamentalist assertion and a conservative backlash in society.

## **Session 1**

The first session on 'Resisting Violence in Conflict Situations,' chaired by Dr. Rakhee Kalita, explored the diversity of women's experiences within the North East region, with a particular focus on Assam, Meghalaya and Manipur, which necessitated moving beyond generalized presumptions. The moot point of this session was the perceived higher status of women in the North Eastern states, but the papers highlighted the low participation of women in local political institutions and increase in the levels of gender and sexual violence perpetuated in conflict areas. There was also a focus on women's agency and role in resisting state violence. Kalita further suggested that it would be important to examine how women have not only exercised their agency in the recent years of North Eastern history but how they have redefined violence itself.

The first presentation, by Rukshana Rahman, focused on the high intensity conflict areas of Dotma and Titaguri of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in Assam to examine the nature and prevalence of gendered violence in areas of political turmoil. The author argued that in areas where political and social

insecurity prevail, violence against women becomes more severe. The incidence of human trafficking in women and forced prostitution is the highest amongst all forms of gendered violence in these areas. There has also been a sharp rise in domestic violence in the post-conflict situation. The paper reiterated that justice is denied to the victims/survivors of gendered violence in these conflict areas. The paper argued that in conflict or post-conflict situations “sexual assault is intentionally used during armed conflict as a tool of war contributing to the intentional destabilization, humiliation and degradation of a population. Such violence is regarded as an attack on the individual security of a person and such acts can create an atmosphere of fear and submission within population”.

The second paper, by Risha Borooah, analysed data related to representation of women from the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council across the last four tenures, i.e., from 1994-99 to the present tenure of 2009-14, to argue that women have remained largely unrepresented in the *Dorbars* (traditional system of village administration). Explaining the structure and operation of the *Dorbars*, Borooah suggested that the matrilineal society in Meghalaya is steadily disintegrating. She substantiated this with an example of unscrupulous conversion of communitarian land into private land by *Syiems* (men who are heads of the *Dorbars*), with the implementation of the Succession Act in 1980. The male *Syiems* have tended to leave inheritance to their sons, and Khasi women are merely relegated to being custodians of their ancestral property. Finally, the paper challenged the popular perception of a matrilineal society, wherein women are considered to enjoy economic and political power, while in reality they have a highly limited political voice and declining access and control over land and other resources. There were references to recent changes, with some *Dorbars* inviting women to participate. Borooah, drawing on the feminist conception of deliberative democracy, was sceptical of such inroads made by women and emphasised the need to study the terms of women's participation in traditional political institutions.

The third presentation by Kaberi Das focused on the data produced by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and the incidence of violence against women in the NER, and particularly in Assam which records the highest number of cases. The table below, taken from the paper, is illustrative:

S. No.	State	Rape (Sec.376 IPC)	Kidnapping & Abduction (Sec. 363-369, 371-373 IPC)	Dowry Deaths (Sec. 304B IPC)	Cruelty by husband or his relatives (Sec. 498A IPC)
1	Arunachal Pradesh	46	58	1	26
2	Assam	1716	3360	140	6407
3	Manipur	63	133	0	43
4	Meghalaya	164	24	1	16
5	Mizoram	103	3	0	8
6	Nagaland	21	10	0	0
7	Sikkim	34	10	1	4
8	Tripura	229	114	37	858

Source: Table 5.2: Incidences of crime committed against women during 2012, NCRB Report, p.215.

Kaberi also discussed the nature of resistance to violence against women that is perpetrated mainly by the state. She drew upon the metaphorical association of women with the figure of Kali. This sparked off a lengthy debate, on the use of certain iconography for feminist politics, especially in the context of growing majoritarian violence and appropriation of the language of progressive politics by right wing forces.

The objective of drawing upon historical analysis to explore legacies of resisting violence from the NER could not be fully realised since there were inadequate responses and many dropped out, leaving only three speakers. This included Manola Gayatri, who was going to perform a dramatic monologue with external visuals and music with an attempt to find a language to express solidarity, where commonality of experience might seem absent but there could still be the possibility of empathetic understanding. Through her performance Manola suggested that violence against women also needs to be understood as a 'crisis in masculinity', which cannot be solved only through legal and punitive measures. Bhavneet Kaur wished to traverse another region of conflict to reflect on women's narratives of resistance in Kashmir. She raised questions about the contexts and the conditions in which resistance emerges and the actors/agents of this resistance.

Bhavneet pointed to the significance of memory in women's narratives of resistance to also explore how memories are shaped, particularly those of loss and violence.

Dr. Kalita problematized the binary conceptualization of women either as victims of violence or as agents of resistance, to suggest that we need to vision and position women not only in terms of heterogeneity based on social location and recouping the agential aspects of women in resisting violence, but to enter into a fraught space where women are also aggressively legitimizing nationalist, sub-nationalist and ethnic violence as perpetrators of violence, including instances where agency is exercised in or through combat. Hence, the challenge is to understand such a repositioning of women in combat vis-à-vis the conflict. She suggested that there was a need to think about the idea of 'transitional justice,' and that women's role could be envisaged not only in peace building (since peace is a discredited word in the North East, where the absence of war does not necessarily mean peace) but also through participatory politics.

## Session 2

The second session 'Representation, Performance and Political Action' was chaired by Dr. Trina Nileena Banerjee. In this the attempt was to think through each of the terms – performance, representation and political action, and their interplay, particularly in the context of increased violence faced by young women in contemporary times. Banerjee began the session with an anecdote about P.C. Joshi, who is considered to have taken the initiative to set up the cultural front of the Left in the 1940s. This was also the beginning of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The cultural squads of IPTA, she said, performed as 'speaking newspapers' in third class railway compartments, where they narrated stories about the situation in the world, in the here and now. This could be read as the staging of the immediate, as is attempted by street theatre or political theatre till date. Two papers in this session looked at the powerful role of street theatre in staging feminist protests. Another thought through the space provided by digital technology for feminist activism. There was also reflection on the gender asymmetries within media news rooms, given the entry of many young women into the profession of journalism.

Two of the presentations analyzed theatre and performance as resistance, in the context of the December 2012 protests against rape and sexual violence against women. Diksha Lamba analysed four performances, *Walk* by Maya Rao, *Cleansing* by Pandies, *Mudda ye hai ki mudda kya hai* a street play by Hindu College (Delhi

University) and *Sarkari Feminism* by Pandies, which came up as a response to Delhi 2012, to register protest against the violence faced by women. Diksha chose performances that could not be traditionally defined within the paradigm of the political theatre of the Left, and suggested different ways for documenting 'feminist theatres of protest'. She juxtaposed the co-option of street theatre by rival political parties to business organisations promoting their brands, arguing that this has debilitated the political edge and potential of street theatre. She underscored the need to probe the question of how we should understand feminist theatre as resistance and strengthen it in the face of violence unleashed by the state and market forces in contemporary times, just as we must interrogate the acceptance of feminist theatre as protest by the state, even as it perpetuates violence against women through its very conception of women's safety and protection.

Komita Danda explored protest through culture and the multifarious forms it took during December 2012 in the space of the capital city. She wrote as a political theatre activist and illustrated the interactions between performance and protest. Several artists felt the need to respond to the incidence of violence against women as well as the rising tide of protests on the streets of Delhi. Komita suggested that we need to revisit the conception of an artist, since it was not the hitherto cultural, performing or performance artists who conceived of performances as resistance. She briefly discussed the performances *Yeh bhi hinsa hai* by Bharti Mahila College, Delhi University, *Woh bol utthi* by Jana Natya Manch and *Thoda Dhyani Se*, by Mallika Tanija. Komita focused on two performances and cultural interventions that were performed as part of the mass protest on the streets of Delhi. *Nau tees (9:30) ki aakhri bus*, a performance, protest, flash mob or cultural intervention by Jana Natya Manch, Jan Sanskriti, Janwadi Lekhak Sangh and other organizations, mainly to reclaim public transport and the city for women, especially at night. The performance questioned the status of public transport in Delhi and whether public spaces at night were meant only for men. Through these performances, there were attempts to reclaim public spaces for women to assert the need for measures to provide security for women. *Walk*, created, as per Maya Rao's own admission, in course of her own transformation in the face of the energy and resolve shown by young women and men on the streets of Delhi, is a performance which not only questions violence against women but also goes on to ask who we are. Through this analysis, Komita highlighted the transformative role of art to end with the famous quote from Bertolt Brecht, "In the dark times will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing about the dark times."

The second set of papers included in this session reflected on the changing nature of 'younger' women's presence in the mainstream newsroom and their activism on social media. Nithila Kanagasabai, based on in-depth interviews, participant observation and her lived experience as a young woman journalist in the mainstream media, argued that over the past decade, women broadcast journalists have been dubbed as 'Pretty Young Things' (PYTs) by the media, and even senior women journalists in print sometimes employ this term to refer to their younger colleagues in broadcast news. She pointed to a disconnect between older women journalists, many of whom may have identified with the feminist cause and even played a pivotal role in reporting on women's issues in the media in the late '80s and early '90s, and the younger women journalists who seemed reluctant to take on the mantle of feminism and were thus seen as lacking political vision and strength. Through her paper, Nithila explored how young women journalists negotiate with feminism in relation to their profession and deal with sexism, gender discrimination and sexual harassment at their workplace. One of the central questions of her exploration has been the relational difference between 'older' and 'younger' women journalists and their negotiation with feminism. She also reflected on whether the newsroom has become a site of mythical celebration of post-feminist narratives, with the representation of socially, economically and sexually 'empowered' women, who do not need the concessions of feminism.

Sujata Subramanian explored the potential of the social media and other online spaces for feminist politics. She suggested that the latter had 'redefined what it means to be a feminist' and had a unique democratizing potential. Having said this, she presented various conundrums before us: (i) digital technology allows for the construction of a 'feminist public sphere' where the voices of the marginalised could be heard; how the low internet penetration in India constantly raises the question of unequal access (ii) social media and online spaces enable women to form networks of political solidarity along with the option of maintaining anonymity, yet gendered and sexualized violence forms an inescapable reality of such spaces. With the blurring of boundaries between the real and virtual and, with the effects of violence spilling into women's offline lives, Sujata maintained that the existing legal framework was inadequate to cover the wide range of gendered and sexualized forms of violence against women. She argued that there is a need to understand such forms of violence and their implications, if digital technology is to become truly a space for feminist activism.



Sabrina Iqbal Sircar's paper on Islamic feminism did not directly 'fit into' this thematic, yet it was included so as to allow for reflection on the concerns it posits for inclusive feminist politics. Sabrina analysed the work of Islamic feminists, who have been at the forefront of contemporary reformist movements to challenge the monopoly of traditional interpreters of the *Quran* and *Hadith*. Based on the scholarly works of Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Fatima Mernissi, she suggested that Islamic sources need to be examined through an interpretative methodology that enables a (re)interpretation of foundational *Quranic* principles to ensure equal rights for women. Sabrina located her analysis within Islamic feminism and sought to ensure the rights of Muslim women within the framework of religion.

Questions raised at the end of this session included: What is our relationship to modernity? When we discuss about feminist politics, what is the free subject that we envision? If we are thinking about emancipation, then what does it have to do with an individual? If we are to reposition the individual vis-à-vis the community, then how do we envision this 'free subject'? Do we expect the subject to step out of the norm entirely and occupy some space of mythical autonomy or is it a (re)negotiation of norms that hold a community of people together? Critical comments from the audience emphasised the inter-subjectivity and personalization of politics reflected in most of the papers in this session, as also the consequent lack of historicization of contemporary inequalities and marginalization. There was a suggestion to think about collective subjectivities of 'young' women, say from the 1990s, which might be different from the collective subjectivities of 'older' women, who were confronted with a world of sexual difference in the '70s or '80s.

### **Session 3**

The third session on 'Gendered Violence in Intimate Spaces/Relations' was chaired by Dr. Anagha Tambe, who suggested that violence outside intimacies and intimacies without violence have been important areas of engagement for Women's Studies scholars. She also pointed to the shift to a focus on desire in contemporary scholarship, though this shift is not that sharp since there was an emphasis on questions of desire and agency in the earlier feminist engagements with violence in intimacy and sexuality. She contended that this shift of focus has been through a 'revolution for sexual transgression' or 'revolution against heteronormativity, though even now the concerns of violence have not been erased. This is true not only with respect to contemporary incidences of violence against young women

but also in the context of ethnic violence, war crimes or the violence of revanchist cities. She highlighted the change in discourse around violence through two significant examples: first if beauty contest was considered *as* violence, we now think of violence *in* the conception of beauty; second, if prostitution was considered *as* violence, we now think about violence *within* prostitution/sex work.

This session had three presentations, which discussed the contentious binary of choice and force, consent and control that are central to the question of violence faced by women in intimate spaces and relationships. There was an emphasis on widespread prevalence of violence and hostility against inter-caste and inter-religious marriages across the length and breadth of the country, countering the notion of it being a phenomenon restricted to some North Indian states. The voices of young women for autonomy and equal rights to public spaces have led to a conservative and patriarchal backlash which blames women themselves for the violence inflicted on them. The personal choices that they make are conceived of as being the cause of violence and rising sexual crimes. One paper elaborated on violence faced by young couples inflicted by families and the community in the name of 'honour'.

In a paper titled 'Migration, marriage, trafficking: analyzing women's vulnerability to violence in contemporary Northern Haryana,' Garima Srivastava discussed the implications of the adverse sex ratio in Haryana and the various forms of vulnerabilities faced by women as part of their movement across different regions and cultures for marriage. In Haryana men who have reached the age of thirty-five, and remain single are unable to find a local bride. Given these circumstances the society has developed a number of 'coping' mechanisms. One such way devised being that of importing brides from amongst the poor from faraway states in the Eastern and Southern regions of India, namely, Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. In some cases these women are also brought from Bangladesh. While migration as a result of marriage may often be a socially acceptable means for disadvantaged women to achieve a measure of social and economic mobility, the paper looked at the abusive and ambiguous nature of such long distance marriages. Garima sought to analyse the migrant woman's negotiations with various institutions like state, family and community, how they impinge on her everyday life in the 'new' society, and the way these structures reconstruct and define her identity in different ways.

The second paper, "Violence against choice marriages: Locating the patterns and exploring the way ahead" by Rani Rohini Rahman, dealt with the issue of 'honour' crimes, particularly the forms of 'honour' oriented violence which were mostly inflicted against choice asserted in marriages. Rohini argued that while the crimes in the name of 'honour' were associated with only a few states like Haryana, Rajasthan and western U.P., their prevalence is not limited to these areas. The paper cited some of the recent incidents of 'honour' crimes, like the cases of Rizwanur Rehman, Nirupama, Abdul Hakim, I. Ilavarasan, Monika Dagar, Manoj and Babli etc., to establish that the common perception of these crimes occurring only in rural backdrops or where caste panchayats were more active was also, in fact incorrect. Drawing from the work of Prem Chowdhry, Rohini argued that whereas in most cases where family members or relatives of the couple were involved it was the sense of 'honour' that led to the crimes, in instances where the larger community or *khap panchayats* were involved, it was mainly socio-economic reasons such as maintaining caste boundaries and control over land, which were crucial factors. Thus she sought to explore the intersections between different social, economic and political denominators to explore strategies of intervention, which are multifaceted. She suggested that although legal interventions are/were necessary in order to create awareness among the police, judiciary and other administrative machinery involved, progressive interventions made at the primary level were very important to push for social change along with a strong political will.

Vaishali Singh made the third presentation around issues of "Consent and control within intimate relationships". The paper was based on information and the experience of a campaign called 'Must Bol', among young people placed in different institutions and communities. The paper tried to explore the complex relations between gender and sexuality and how it determines aspects of young people's lives in the context of their intimate relationships. Violence emerging from gender goes largely unrecognized, is routinised in many ways and often even celebrated. It was widespread and took myriad forms, especially with increasing use of technology and emerging virtual spaces. The situation is made more complex as most often young people do not have social legitimacy to have romantic or sexual relationships, which often leads to their keeping it hidden, thereby also limiting their ability or right to make choices, both in the personal and public spaces, and to have access to any institutional or societal support to fall back on. Vaishali noted that while women were expected to not talk about their romantic

relationships, men were encouraged to flaunt these in order to maintain their celebrated masculinity. She argued that while these attitudes produced behavioral imbalances among men and women, and vulnerabilities among women, they also at times legitimized control over women's body and sexuality. These observations were reinforced in the interactions during the campaign and discussions with young people. The violence that young women face within romantic relationships remains largely unexplored and unquestioned, she observed.

The last paper, which was circulated but could not be presented, on "Impact of intimate partner violence victimization in the antenatal period (pregnancy)" by Prema Janardan and Buelah Shekhar, was a study of 100 pregnant women, who were in their third trimester, from Purasavakkam area of Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The study of intimate partner violence and obstetrical health showed a positive correlation between the type of abuse and the state of obstetrical risk. The study suggested various steps that could be taken towards institutionalising the routine screening and treatment for violence related injuries and trauma.

In the discussion around these papers participants highlighted the irony of the situation that comes to the fore with the selective appropriation of caste/patriarchal discourses which justify 'honour' crimes on the one hand while accepting the bringing in brides from far away locations and thus selectively permitting inter-caste marriages on the other hand. Several experiences were shared around the last paper of this session, which emphasized engaging with young persons' to build nuanced understandings of intimacies and relationships in contemporary times and the need to engage in conversations with young boys and men.

An important aspect of the role of media in forming notions of love and intimacy among young people or the notion of choice, based on neo-liberal discourses, begged a question, along with many others raised by the chair. First, there was a problematisation of the dichotomous construction of love and honour, where love is conceived as a modern notion based on choice and honour as a primordial notion based on caste control. This leaves out the complex relation between "love marriages" and maintenance of social boundaries or hierarchies, where many "love marriages" are based on new ways of social compatibility, which may not be mediated through caste, but class or cultural capital. Second, a study of marriage migration located in the political economy of Haryana is commendable, which is not looking at it within the discourse of trafficking, yet analysing the violence and vulnerabilities of women due to marriage and migration. In this

context, there is a need to explore what are the new networks of solidarity or 'weapons of the weak' that emerge amongst women who have migrated from a particular region? Thirdly, how do we talk about intimacies within institutions, particularly in the educational institutions, outside and beyond the framework of sexual harassment? Are there new spaces that are created by young people, outside family and schools/colleges, to talk about intimacies and romance in a positive manner? How are we then to think about violence in these new spaces or 'economies of love', including for instance that symbolised by Valentine's Day.

#### **Session 4**

The last session, 'Gendered Labour and Concerns of Health and Violence', was chaired by Aardra Surendran. The attempt in this session was to interrogate issues of violence with and through the question of labour. The chair pointed out that although the session seems to be hastily titled, it avoided clubbing all these issues under the rubric of 'development', as often happens in academic seminars. This also draws on the legacy of the women's movement which has constantly critiqued the notion of development and the politics around the term.

The first presentation on Vulnerabilities in girls: factors that lead to vulnerabilities and interventions to subvert them was made by Nischint Hora, on behalf of Medhavinee Namjoshi. The paper looked at the issues and needs of young girls in the present context of growing violence and constant insecurity. She argued that the discourses around violence against women, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, etc., were taking place without the active participation of adolescent girls who are at the receiving end of this violence. The nature of violence could be physical, psychological or structural. Institutions such as the family and school, as well as state interventions in terms of laws and policies, sometimes reinforce the various forms of violence. It examined the issue through the work of Vacha, an organization that works with adolescent girls. The paper documented violence in the form of constant threats to follow the set norms, remain silent and not to question any atrocity, inequality or discrimination. Nishcint tried to locate and identify such perpetuating conditions that create vulnerabilities towards violence. She also talked about interventions by Vacha to break this circle of systemic creation of vulnerabilities in girls.

The second paper in this session, by Rajeshwari, was a study on the Health and nutritional status of adolescent girls and women in rural Haryana: 2009-10. It looked at the health indicators of girls in the backdrop of the social realities of Haryana. With the help of primary data, collected from 16 villages spread over eight districts in Haryana, the paper examined health and nutritional status of adolescent girls and women vis-à-vis the socio-economic characteristics of the households. Rajeshwari argued that the primary responsibility of the state was to provide health care services to all its citizens which requires a comprehensive health care system to also ensure women's right to health. However, the campaigns for women's health and health rights in India had been primarily geared towards the demand for better health facilities, protest against all those forces that endangered their health. Women's lives are governed by multifaceted and nuanced realities where caste, class and patriarchy intersect with each other in complex ways to intensify women's subordination. Thus, it becomes imperative to tease out the issues involved with access, particularly systematic exclusions and denials that hinder realization of women's health rights. Finally, contesting the celebrated green revolution of Haryana, Rajeshwari argued that there has been a lack of attention paid to diversity of food consumption by women, with excessive investment into production of wheat and rice. In this manner, the nutritional requirements of girls and women have been compromised to a great extent; and if we want to bring about a change in the health status of women, then we need to pay attention not only to the gender blindness of particular policies but also to the economic decisions that have an impact on women's lives.

The last paper of this session, "महिला अपराध - नारीवादी संदर्भ व दुविधाएँ" (roughly translated as Women's Crimes: Feminist Context and Dilemmas) by Mamta Singh, attempted to tease out some of the dilemmas for the women's movement through a study of criminality among women. The paper drew on the life histories of eight women criminals convicted for murder presently in a jail in Patna, with a more detailed focus on two of the cases. A pattern that was evident through all these cases, as suggested by Mamta, was that the women were convicted for crimes committed against some intimate or family members: husband, ex-boy friend, father-in-law or brother-in-law. A similar pattern was observed amongst 10 women criminals convicted for murder in Wardha jail, where women had committed crimes against their family members. An important point raised by one of the convicts was that it would be wrong to assume that the sentence that they were serving is actually for the crime that they had committed. Mamta narrated some anecdotes

from the life histories of two women convicts, to suggest that these women were trying to avenge violence committed against them through crime/violence. She further argued that this was a form of “resistance” by women against the violence that had been perpetuated against them through the institutions of family and marriage. The crucial questions Mamta raised were: how should the women’s movement understand or locate this “resistance”, and what is the significance this scholarship would have in the production of knowledge from a specific location drawing upon the experiences of women convicted for crimes? She juxtaposed the examples of Kiran Aluwalia who burnt her husband to death after facing domestic violence for 10 years in London - on whose life the movie *Provoked* was based - or Roopam Pathak who was involved in the killing of a Minister. She drew upon another case from a village in the interior of Lucknow, where a woman was similarly convicted for burning her husband to death, to question why in the former case human rights groups and women’s rights groups were on the side of Kiran Aluwalia or Roopam Pathak, but no one stood up on behalf of the woman in the Lucknow case? Is it the significant class difference which determines responses in the women’s movement which neglects such instances of resistance by women, Mamta asked? Or is it that the resistance of such women, languishing in jails, is not recognized as such?

Two papers that were selected for this session, but could not be presented were on *Declining Women Workers and Increased Violence against Women in India: Is there a Pattern?* by Sona Mitra and *Women, Labour and Technology: A Case study of South Eastern Coalfields Limited in Korba district*, by Sujata Soy. Both these papers dealt with women’s work in the context of neo-liberal development and issues around labour. Sona Mitra attempted to analyze the declining workforce participation of women using gender as an analytical category. She looked at the intrinsic link between the decline in women’s participation in ‘economic activities/productive work’ in India, as revealed by the National Sample Survey estimates and an ever-increasing spate of violence against women in urban areas. Sujata Soy attempted to analyse the relationship between women, labour and technology in the South Eastern Coalfields Limited in Korba district. The focus of her study was on women’s experiences in an industry characterised by patriarchy, by looking at the dialectical processes linking the mine with the local economy. Sujata argued that women were recruited in the mines on “compensatory” grounds in the formal sector and then “integrated” in a very different manner with their work being undervalued and their labour was appropriated as “unskilled” and

assigned as “ancillary work”, or they are accepted only in low paid jobs as construction workers, vendors or casual labourers. Hence they had to live with exploitation and discrimination, even if protective laws and policies towards women were brought into force.

This session underscored the specificity of the experiences of adolescent girls and the nature of vulnerabilities faced by them in both overt and covert forms, with the natal family playing a restricting role on their mobility and interactions, which significantly impacts their prospects of education. The gender blind policies of the state also play a detrimental role in the access to health and nutritional facilities by adolescent girls and young women. The sharp decline in state expenditure for the public provision of universal, affordable or free services like food security, health, water and sanitation, child care, etc. has had negative effect on women’s lives. The papers on work dealt with the challenges and negotiations of women entering into new and contested work spaces. Clearly their attempts to claim public spaces as their work spaces have had an impact which is also reflected in their being exposed to increasing violence. An important question raised in this session was the link between agrarian relations in Haryana, farmers’ suicides, taboos against women holding the plough and the impact of these on women’s rights, health and nutritional status. The question of land and women’s entitlements came up in a central manner during the discussion.

While summing up, the chair brought together the complexity of the processes involving interactions and negotiations of the women’s movement with the state. The presentations brought to the fore the complicated relationship between the state and women’s groups, while claiming citizenship rights and entitlements for adolescent girls. The presentations highlighted the gender blind nature of policies of the state, which requires active engagement of the women’s movement with the state while remaining critical of the various atrocities and discriminations perpetuated by the state. A further complication arose from the relationship of the women’s movement with the state, and its interventions with regard to the realm of legality and justice, even as these also point to various lacunae in the movement’s understanding of crimes committed by women.

## **Reflections on Organising the Workshop**



In the course of planning and organising this workshop, the process of conceptualising the themes related to 'young women' posed several challenges with regard to the complexities of social reality within which young women's lives are embedded. There were numerous conundrums with respect to the issues to be included, the participants to be invited, the ambiguous divide between 'young' and 'old' women, and the philosophical question of universality versus difference. Some of these tensions were raised by the coordinators in the concept note, which reflected upon the category of 'age' as a criterion for difference and its relation to other categories like, caste, class, ethnicity, gender. At a conceptual level, the creative tension that lies at the heart of universal values and notion of difference had been central to the framing of the pre-conference themes.

In conversation with the 'older' generation of IAWS members and the women's movement, we as coordinators realized that there was a conscious attempt to encourage young women's participation in the conference and as members of IAWS. Accordingly, this pre-conference aimed to emphasize the significance of young women's presence in the women's movements and in women's studies scholarship.

It also posed some ethical dilemmas for us, eg., with regard to our location as 'young' research scholars placed in academic institutions in urban centres like Delhi and Kolkata. Along with this, our class and caste privileges posed crucial questions about representation and inclusion. This is also one of the most contentious debates of contemporary times. Acknowledging our limitations and incapability at resolving this challenge at the level of organizing this pre-conference, we hoped to receive wider representation in terms of participants as well as issues. We also made a provision for presentations in vernacular and encouraged diverse forms of presentations, including paper presentations, short films, documentaries, plays and/or performances. We feel that it is important for us to admit that the diversity among participants and forms of presentations nevertheless remained limited and, that we need to work towards improving the social composition of both the organising committee and participants in the forthcoming conferences as well as other initiatives taken by the IAWS. This in fact poses challenges for the women's movement in present times. The success of the workshop lay in its being able to open up issues and foreground the crucial challenges that lie ahead.

*Report Prepared by: Geeta Thatra and Akhila Singh, April 2014*

**(Footnotes)**

- 1 Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office. "PM Releases North Eastern Region Vision 2020 Document." July 2, 2008. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=39993>. In 1971, the North Eastern Council (NEC) was established as a forum of the states in the region to coordinate economic and social development activities. In 2001, the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) was set up to deal with matters pertaining to the socio-economic development of the eight states. For more see, Gorky Chakraborty. "North East Vision 2020: A Reality Check." <http://www.idsk.edu.in/common/file/oc-33.pdf>
- 2 North East Network. "Women in Armed Conflict Situations (A study by North East Network)." Guwahati: NEN, 2005.
- 3 For a detailed analysis on human rights violation and the role of AFSPA, see Gautam Navlakha. "On Ending the War against our Own People." *Economic & Political Weekly*, XLVI, no.8, (February 2011): 24-28. For dislocation in Mizoram, see Nandini Sundar. "Interning Insurgent Population: The Buried Histories of Indian Democracy." *Economic & Political Weekly*. XLVI, no.6, (February 2011):4757. For an account of deaths and cost of internal security, see [http://mha.nic.in/uniquepage.asp?Id\\_Pk=238](http://mha.nic.in/uniquepage.asp?Id_Pk=238)

