

National Seminar on Gender Studies and Women Empowerment

A two-day National Seminar on the theme ‘Women as Critical Partners in an Egalitarian Society: An Evaluation of the Current Status in India’ was organized by the Association of Indian Universities (AIU), New Delhi in association with NorthCap University (NCU), Gurugram, Haryana during March 08-09, 2018. The day one of the seminar coincided with the International Women’s Day and served to rekindle the attention and interest of university students, research scholars, and seminar participants towards the contributions made by Indian women independently and inclusively towards shaping of our society. The seminar served to provide a voice and platform to eminent keynote speakers, corporate professionals, media personnel and social workers to share experiences, their observations and insights on the diversity of challenges Indian women face, how they have positioned themselves in the society that is still very patriarchal and segmented in nature and far from egalitarian in terms to access to economic opportunities, pay parity, sense of freedom, social security and mutual respect.

The Inaugural Session started with the welcome note and background address by Dr Sushmita Biswal Waraich, Head, School of Management, The NorthCap University. This was followed by Introductory Address by the Convener of the Seminar, Dr S Rama Devi Pani, Editor, University News, AIU. In her introductory address, Dr Rama Devi Pani gave a warm welcome to the Chief Guest, dignitaries and all present in the seminar. She in her address highlighted that our education system despite being the second largest in the world has not managed to bring transformative changes in the ethos of the society. Women in our society still experience social brutality, torture, neglect and access to limited opportunities in public sphere. Gender equality and promotion of inclusive environment though have been reflected in policies and curriculum documents, in reality growing incidence of gender based violence depict a gap between policies and practice.

The ceremonial lamp of inauguration was lit by Chief Guest, Prof Kavita Sharma, President, South

Asian University, New Delhi, Prof Prem Vrat, Pro Chancellor, NorthCap University, Dr Amarendra Pani, Head Research Division, Association of Indian Universities, Dr S Rama Devi Pani, Editor, University News, AIU, Dr Veena Bhalla, Consultant, SIS Division, AIU, Ms Ranjana Parihar, Deputy Secretary, Finance, AIU and Dr Sushmita Waraich, Head, School of Management, NorthCap University.

Chief Guest, Prof Kavita Sharma was of the opinion that International Women’s Day is not to be seen as the day where women are made to feel special with gifts but to remember and celebrate her struggles and journey to claim her due fundamental rights. It was reinforced that women all along have been contributing as critical partners in the development of the society in every era before and after India’s independence but have lacked to get the acknowledgement for their role and contributions made.

Dr Sushmita Dutt, Eminent Artist and Social Worker shared statistics on male and female literacy rates and sex ratios in India, variations across states and expressed how India is far behind its neighbors Sri Lanka and Bangladesh on social indices. She pointed out that by nature, women are better equipped to survive and should account for around 51 per cent of the total population. However, reality is quite different as per census and it reflects that human intervention in the form of female infanticide is widely prevalent to curb female population.

Dr Bijaylakhmi Nanda, Vice Principal, Miranda House, New Delhi expressed that universities are places that stand for humanism and all present in the seminar belong to the educated section of India that has been fortunate enough to get access to education. She reaffirmed that in the next census, it will be the current youth that has to decide to break the glass ceilings and discard social evils starting right from their respective homes.

Dr Amarendra Pani, Head, Research Division, AIU gave a brief introduction about AIU, its work and functioning among the Indian universities serving all stakeholders namely Vice Chancellors, academicians and students. He highlighted that women being very dynamic, their diverse strengths should be tapped to enable them to serve as enormous agents of social

change in present times. He also explained how the issue of policy paralysis happens due to the fact that the awareness at the grass root levels does not feed into the policy decisions taken by Government.

Prof Prem Vrat, Pro Chancellor, NCU opined that segregating men and women will not be a healthy trend, commoditization of women is prevalent and it's mutual respect between two that is more necessary. It was pointed out that in many cases it's the women who accentuate problem for themselves. Instead proactively as they both need each other, they should work together in harmonious manner for a better society. The inaugural session ended with the vote of thanks which was delivered by the Convener, Dr S Rama Devi Pani and the Special Issue of University News was released by the Chief Guest.

Technical Session on the theme 'Combating Persistent Gender Gaps to Build an Egalitarian Society' was chaired by Prof Shahida Murtaza, Head, Department of Women Studies, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad. The session brought out success stories of women in the rural areas states wherein they have been pushing forward themselves to assert for their identity to gain economic opportunities, and break the glass ceiling. It was asserted that the mentorship of women is necessary in the form of every possible piecemeal step and action that supports and encourages them to move forward individually and as a group. Prof Murtaza said that universities need to take steps for handholding and mentoring and creating a conducive environment for women and especially those who are less privileged. She reiterated that the youth today should break the shackles and discard social evils at early ages.

This was followed by a Panel Discussion on 'Fighting Back with Dignity: The Need for Women to Exercise their Rights' which was chaired and moderated by Prof. Sanghamitra Acharya, Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The panelists comprised of Dr Hema Raghavan, former Dean, Students Welfare, University of Delhi, Ms Rupali Bhatnagar, Project Manager (EdCIL), Ms Kunjan Arora, Founder Director, Infokart India Pvt. Ltd. It was stressed upon that an egalitarian society is one where all participants both male and female share resources and decisions and move ahead inclusively. The key points that emerged from the discussion were as follows: men need to be more involved in such discussions actively encouraging the humanist attitude

in them. Egalitarian society is one where all participants whether men or women equally share resources, responsibilities, decisions and move forward inclusively. Women themselves should identify their true adversaries and get clarity on it first, i.e. whether it's the people in their family or the traditional mindset of the society. Women need to move ahead of the victim mode mindset and grab opportunities to mentally and financially prosper and take charge of their career and professional pursuits. Women many times themselves suffer from identity crisis and need to discover their true identity beyond the relationships they share in family.

Technical Session on 'Career Advancement Challenges for Women' was chaired by Prof. Sanghamitra Acharya, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi and Dr Usha Rai Negi, Assistant Director, Research, AIU. Dr Negi was involved in the preliminary stages of planning and coordinating for the seminar. It was pointed out that women itself is not a homogeneous group with varied layers. Most of the defense mechanisms and solutions adopted by women five to ten years back are no longer relevant today as the nature of interactions between boys and girls has significantly changed. Social conditioning at home significantly influences professional routes and career choices hence causing high drop-out rates in schools, colleges in engineering and in the field of law education. Women must initiate and self-educate and build their skills and awareness about financial literacy, right to property and related financial decisions in family. Women rather than pulling each other down in workplaces, should acknowledge the social dual roles cohesively and work amicably.

Technical Session on 'Women as Critical Partner: Individual Conduct of Women in Egalitarian Society' was chaired and moderated by Prof. Prem Vrat, Pro Chancellor, NCU. The speakers were Prof. Neelima Srivastava, Professor and Head, Department of Women Studies, *Indira Gandhi National Open University* (IGNOU), Delhi, Sqn. Leader Ms Deepa Nailwal, VP, Hindustan Times (first woman officer of Indian Air Force and Mentor, SHEROES). It was stressed that since the gender bias is so deep rooted in the society, gender sensitivity is the need of the hour. It was observed that at least in the middle class societies; a little change in the belief system has been visible as girls were adding more to family income and voicing their concerns and opinions in purchasing and housing decisions. Men should be more participative in such

discussions and both the genders should collaboratively strive for mutual respect. The speakers emphasized on the role of self-belief, determination and hard work in breaking all barriers for women.

This was followed by a Panel Discussion which was on the theme 'Glass Ceiling–Not a Deterrent' which was chaired and moderated by Dr Prof. Nupur Prakash, Vice Chancellor, Indira Gandhi Delhi Technical University for Women, Delhi. The panelists comprised of Dr Sunita Dubey, Eye Surgeon, Dr. Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital, Daryaganj, Delhi and Prof. Shahida Murtaza, Head, Department of Women Studies, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad. A lot of case studies were discussed wherein the evidence of existence of glass ceiling not just in India but across the advanced nations too was highlighted. Panelists shared their experiences on how tough decisions had to be taken in troubled times to take charge of their lives and professional careers. It was reaffirmed that women with their creativity, intelligence and collaborative attitude have a natural advantage and they should leverage it to the fullest. The associative thinking should become an asset and should be meticulously used for betterment of society.

The Paper Presentation Sessions were presented by a mixed group of academicians and research scholars from various universities of India who used the platform to showcase their research interests pursued on varied themes such as gender budgeting in universities, womenisation of bollywood, missing girls and factors of discriminations at the grass root levels in Karnataka, status and participation of Indian Muslim women, the problem and challenges of single women, gender budgeting in universities, etc.

Traffic Queen, Ms Dorris Francis narrated her story. She, being from an underprivileged family has come a long way. She featured in *Unsung Indians*, BBC series on people working to improve the lives of others. She selflessly manages the traffic, every day, at the spot in Delhi where her daughter was killed in an accident and wished that probably her daughter would have been alive had the traffic been managed better. This speaks volumes not only about a woman's struggles but also her grit. She indeed deserved to be felicitated at such a platform.

A special training session on 'Gender Audit: Measures for Sensitization in Campuses' was chaired by Prof. Sabiha Hussain, Director, Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New

Delhi. The resource persons of the session were Dr Keerti Nakray, Associate Professor, O P Jindal Global University, Sonapat and Convener, Dr S Rama Devi Pani, AIU. It was discussed how education, especially higher learning, plays an important role in promoting egalitarianism. During the Session, measures for ensuring safety of women and programs for gender sensitization (also UGC's initiative) were discussed at length. There was a good amount of deliberation on how authorities need to ensure that a congenial environment is created in order to encourage females in large numbers to be part of higher education.

During Valedictory Session, welcome address was delivered by Dr. Sushmita Biswal Waraich, NCU. The report of the seminar was presented by her. Out of many issues discussed in deliberations over two days, certain issues like fewer women positions in administrative areas and better facilities to attract female candidates especially in professional educational education need urgent attention. She shared a few recommendations that emerged like creating a women's league and urging educational institutions to take proactive measures in order to encourage an egalitarian environment. The feedback from participants was received. Dignitaries on the dais were Dr Renu Batra, Additional Secretary, University Grants Commission (UGC), New Delhi, Prof Furqan Qamar, Secretary General, AIU, Ms Mamata Saikia, CEO, Bharti Foundation and Prof H B Raghavendra, Vice Chancellor, NorthCap University. Prof Furqan Qamar, in his presidential address expressed that overtime, a positive change has been visible in our country about the awareness of crucial role of women and their contribution to the society but significantly more needs to be done by changing mindsets i.e. beliefs and value system. The regressive mindset should be set aside, the glass ceiling broken and preference should be given to merit and accomplishments. Guest of Honour, Ms Mamta Saikia opined that women themselves should become more aware and avoid getting into the trap where they do not mind taking up the backend roles playing second fiddle to men. Though there has been an increasing trend of women getting noticed in unconventional roles and professions, their number was definitely very low. It was reiterated that Women's Day celebration is needed more so for those million unfortunate women who are yet to be aware that they have a voice and control over their lives. The seminar also helped in highlighting the immense, innumerable ways in which the Indian women were channelizing their zeal and

commitment to navigate their way to progress in professional and personal spheres in 21st Century irrespective of the bottlenecks faced.

While coming to the end, it was encouraged that this could be a new beginning for all participants, in the form of being aware of the current and new issues and challenges and taking initiative to address them. The vote of thanks was proposed by the Convener, Dr S Rama Devi Pani. She thanked Secretary General, AIU, Research Division Officers for unconditional support given in successful execution of the seminar and expressed special thanks to Dr Yogita Thakur, Ms Deepa Bhaskaran from AIU, Manu Jain and Mahima Anand from NorthCap University, Gurugram for their backend support, rapporteur assistance and coordination in the seminar. Following are the recommendations that emerged from the two days seminar:

- In reference to the gender audit and sensitisation across university campuses, sexual harassment cells need to function robustly to handle all sensitive issues related to discrimination against women, men and third gender emphasising on right to dignity and send out a strong message of non-tolerance for violations and misbehaviour in university campuses.
- UGC and universities should join hands in creating university women league that works towards creating sustainable work places by helping bright women academicians break the glass ceiling, polish professional skills and capabilities of women, address the bureaucratic bottlenecks that cause stagnation in promotion structure and support to uplift more talented women in senior administrative and leadership positions in academia.
- AIU should take up the cause with UGC and MHRD for the continuation of funding support for Women's Study Centres (WSC) in universities were set up and run with the support/grants from the UGC under Plan Schemes during the 10th and 11th Five-Year Plans.
- Merit and accomplishment of women at all levels in the higher education system should be given more visibility by creation of a mentorship network right especially from the grass root level and institutions should *walk the extra mile* in supporting credible work by their women employees, whether on administrative, academic or leadership role.
- Creation of an egalitarian society requires that both male and females should share resources; cohesively take balanced decisions and move ahead inclusively by sensitising the future generations about the importance of personality rather than gender bias and stereotyping of roles of males and females.
- Women need pro-actively move out of the victim mind-set and grab opportunities to be able to mentally and financially prosper by balancing domestic realities and career dreams.
- Encouragement and creation of a support system for women, who pursue professions which are primarily male dominated and take up unconventional roles for survival is the need of the hour to remove gender disparities that arise due to cultural and altitudinal factors. □