

**12th AIDWA NATIONAL CONFERENCE IN MUMBAI CALL
SAFEGAURD THE CONSTITUTION, UPHOLD WOMEN'S RIGHTS,
REACH OUT TO MASS OF WOMEN!**

Archana Prasad

The 12th National Conference of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), held from December 27 to 30, 2019 in Mumbai concluded with the call to safeguard the Constitution and fight the neoliberal policies and Manuwadi ideology of the current BJP-RSS regime. 740 delegates from 24 states attended the conference held in Ahilya Rangnekar Nagar and Mangleshwari Debbarma Hall, Saboo Siddik Polytechnic at Byculla in Mumbai. It was the first AIDWA national conference to be held in Maharashtra.

MASSIVE RALLY AND PUBLIC MEETING

The conference was preceded by a massive rally and public meeting at Azad Maidan on the forenoon of December 27, 2019. The dais was named after Gauri Lankesh. It was attended by over 7,000 women from 15 districts of Maharashtra and 740 delegates from 24 states who expressed their resolve to intensify their struggles against the pro-corporate, communal and authoritarian BJP regime. The rally was indeed a historic event. The AIDWA became the first organisation to get permission to march outside the Azad Maidan in the last several years and it was the first rally in South Bombay after the swearing in of a non-BJP state government.

Naseema Shaikh, President, Maharashtra AIDWA presided over the meeting which was addressed by AIDWA All India President, Malini Bhattacharya, All India Kisan Sabha President, Ashok Dhawale, AIDWA Vice President, Subhashini Ali, AIDWA All India General Secretary, Mariam Dhawale and newly-elected CPI(M) MLA from Dahanu and CITU State Secretary, Vinod Nikole. Maharashtra AIDWA General Secretary, Prachi Hatiwlekar gave the introductory speech. AIDWA Patron, Brinda Karat and Reception Committee Chairperson Dr Tapati Mukhopadhyay were also present on the occasion.

INAUGURAL SESSION

The inaugural session of the Conference took place on the open grounds of the Saboo Siddik Polytechnic, Byculla, with the hoisting of the AIDWA flag by Malini Bhattacharya. After the introduction by Mariam Dhawale and welcoming songs, the Conference began with the condolence resolution which paid homage to the contributions of several leaders and activists of the women's and larger democratic movement. Thereafter Prof Tapati Mukhopadhyay gave the welcome address and hoped that the 12th Conference would develop strategies to deal with the challenges ahead.

The inaugural speech was made by noted actor, Swara Bhaskar who highlighted the current context and lauded the AIDWA for carrying out struggles for women's emancipation on the ground. The importance and the tasks before the women's movement were laid out by Brinda

Karat in her keynote address where she placed the contemporary struggles in the context of the emerging political and economic challenges. Special guests like Swara Bhaskar and Dr Zahir Kazi, President of the Anjuman-I-Islam, Dr Khan, CEO of Haj House, our Patron Brinda Karat and Dr Fauzia Moslem, Vice President, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad were felicitated.

The struggles of women and AIDWA activists were also highlighted in the sub-session 'Symbols of Resistance'. Eight torch bearers were honoured for their contributions to resist the dominant social and political order, social conservatism and honour killings, defend democratic values and resist the Sangh Parivar and fight against neoliberal agrarian policies of the government. Sneha and Mahesh from Andhra Pradesh, Suraj from Haryana, Gomathi from Tamil Nadu, Sanjini from Kerala, Rekha Sutradhar from Tripura, Chhabili Devi from West Bengal, and Maharashtra Kisan Long March icons Sakhubai and Kalabai were honoured.

DISCUSSION ON INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The delegate session of the 12th AIDWA Conference began on December 27 with the election of the presidium, steering, minutes, resolutions and credential committees. The presidium comprised Malinidi, Zainaba, Debolina, Jharna, Sudha, Valentina and Rampari. The 64 page Report on the International and National Developments in the last three years was placed by Mariam Dhawale, and was discussed by 36 delegates. The thrust of the discussion pointed out the rightward political and economic trend in the world, with the imperialist forces having made West Asia and the Middle East a War Zone which has also led to attacks and denial of citizenship to several people. The Conference noted the intense resistance that people have put up against authoritarian regimes in the last three years. It was noted in the report that in the USA thousands of women held a protest saying "Trump is not my President". Similarly Latin American feminism has seen a new turn and the world over women are protesting against fundamentalism of all kinds. The role of Russia and China in pushing back the unilateral domination of the US and the election of a Left secular government in Nepal was also highlighted, thus showing that imperialist dominance was being resisted the world over.

The National Report noted the serious political situation in the country, which is marked by neoliberal policies, recession, 'job-loss' growth and growing poverty on the one hand, and a communal, repressive, authoritarian regime on the other. The following broad trends are noted.

First, women's unemployment is at an all-time high, and the wage gap between men and women is increasing. Women were becoming victims of trafficking because of poverty and indebtedness.

Second, the escalating rate of crimes against women also show that they are becoming targets of socially and politically conservative Hindutva forces. The incidents from Kathua to Unnao to Hyderabad, among others, reflect the political protection that perpetrators of crimes against women have been getting by the BJP and the Sangh Parivar organisations. There have been several attempts to dilute the laws that have provided some protection to women. The

AIDWA has been intervening at both the micro and policy level to mobilise women against these trends.

Third, the attempts to alter the character of the Constitution, abrogation of Article 370 and Amendments to the Citizenship Act; the All India National Register of Citizens and National Population Register (which now requires documentary proof), show the adverse perspective of this government towards minorities, women, Dalits, Adivasis and other sections of the oppressed people.

Fourth, the delegates reported repeated attacks on women and children for retributive justice. Revenge politics by right wing vigilante and communal groups who are politically powerful is reflected in the rising insecurity of women and assaults on their dignity. Delegates, particularly from Uttar Pradesh and BJP ruled states noted the nexus between the Sangh Parivar with the police and administration in the denial of justice. Last, but not the least, the cutbacks in social welfare expenditure, particularly on employment generating activities, public distribution systems etc and the privatisation of health and education services are having a devastating impact. The false propaganda on high profile government campaigns of Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Ujjwala Yojana were exposed through the experiences of different states.

REPORT ON WORK AND ORGANISATION

The General Secretary placed the Report on Work and Organisation for the last three years and it was discussed by 40 delegates. She commended the state units for bringing victims of violence to the national capital on 8th December 2017 for an All India Convention on the violence against women, whether social, economic and political, and drew attention to the fact that the Convention got national attention. She also applauded the inspirational way in which all state units responded to the call for a massive independent AIDWA March to Parliament in Delhi on September 4, 2018 when more than 10,000 women from 23 states braved torrential rains to express their opposition on a variety of issues. She laid out at least three areas where the organisation has to strategise and expand its interventions.

First, the delegates were reminded that AIDWA has been proposing a law against crimes in the name of honour and having a nationwide campaign for enacting this law could become a tool for social transformation. Second, the need to take on the patriarchal Manuwadi forces head-on by deepening our work against caste discrimination. Delegates opined that the challenges ahead are immense and the organisation needs to reach out to new sections of women and combat the daily campaign of the RSS through the Swayam Sevika Sangh, Durga Vahini and other Sangh Parivar affiliates. Discussions also pointed out that the anti-discrimination issue was not only a Dalit issue, but a core issue to be taken up independently by AIDWA. The third sphere is the Right to Work, where the organisation needs to expand and deepen its campaign, especially in the wake of the rising unemployment rate amongst youth and women. Many states reported their struggles being undertaken for farmers and workers in rural India as well as the fight for the rights of other unorganised sector workers

like home-based and domestic workers. They also recounted their experience with implementation of MNREGA and on issues related to price rise and access to food.

FUTURE TASKS

In her reply to the discussion, General Secretary Mariam Dhawale concluded with a call to improve unit level functioning in order to undertake the following future tasks:

1. Build joint and independent struggles to deepen and expand the fight against the anti-women regressive Manuwadi ideology and communal politics of the Hindutva forces.
2. Join the National Strike of January 8, 2020 in large numbers and build independent initiatives to strengthen the fight for protecting the rights of women workers, especially in the unorganised sector.
3. Intensify the struggle for land rights for peasant women, especially after the renewed attacks and dilution of the Forest Rights Act and intensification of land acquisition processes for corporate predators.
4. Build solidarities and independent struggles against CAA/NRC/NPR.
5. Launch activities around social reform and take up issues of socially oppressed sections like Muslim, Adivasi and Dalit women.
6. Strengthen work amongst young women by championing the right to 'choice', so that they can live a safe and dignified life.
7. Streamline and strengthen the AIDWA organisation at all levels with collective and team functioning, concentrating on mass membership, activating unit committees and building of dedicated activists.

The reports and the accounts, which were placed by Treasurer P K Sreemathi, were adopted unanimously by the conference.

COMMISSION PAPERS AND RESOLUTIONS

Eight commission papers were also presented and discussed in the conference. They were on: regressive ideologies and persistent inequalities; women and agrarian crisis; women and urbanisation; women in education; attacks on women's rights in the legal sphere; social media and its impact on women; on problems of disabled women; and on LGBTQIA+ issues. These papers were enriched with experiences from different states. The summaries of the discussions were placed by Subhashini Ali, Archana Prasad, Indrani Majumdar, Ishita Mukherjee, Kirti Singh, Preethy Sekhar, Susan Kody and Manjeet Rathi respectively.

Eleven resolutions were passed in the Conference to take note of the grim political and economic situation. They were: On anti-women labour codes; In defence of the women's right to a violence free world; Against price rise and for universal PDS; Against the Ayodhya verdict; On the non-implementation of the Forest Rights Act; Against the abrogation of Article 370 and on the situation in Kashmir; For the implementation and expansion of MGNREGA; Against imposition of CAA/NRC/NPR; On the rights of LGBTQ; Against the privatisation and commercialisation of education; and In support of the January 8, 2020 All India Strike.

PUBLICATIONS, EXHIBITION, CULTURAL PROGRAMMES

Two publications: 'AIDWA Manual on Patriarchy' was released by Debolina Hembram from West Bengal and P. Sathi Devi from Kerala; and 'Dalit Women: Interventions by AIDWA' was released by Suganthi from Tamil Nadu and Chintha from UP. An exhibition titled 'Many Lives of Mumbai Women' was also put up by progressive artists of Mumbai. It was coordinated by Preethy Sekhar and inaugurated by K.K. Shailaja, AIDWA leader and Health Minister in the LDF Government of Kerala.

Jana Natya Manch put up two excellent plays in the evening of December 28 and renowned Hindustani music singer, Neela Bhagwat performed impressively on December 29. A film on the September 4 AIDWA March in Delhi was shown by NewsClick on December 30.

FRATERNAL GREETINGS

The Conference was greeted by Dr Fauzia Moslem, Vice President of the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad. Dr Moslem shared the experience of her organisation and pointed towards the common problems faced by women in the sub-continent. The Conference was also greeted by AIKS General Secretary Hannan Mollah, CITU General Secretary Tapan Sen, AIAWU Joint Secretary Suneet Chopra, SFI Joint Secretary Dipsita Dhar and DYFI Joint Secretary Preethy Sekhar. All these organisations pledged to build joint struggles with AIDWA.

The credential committee report was presented by Maimoona Mollah. The report showed that the organisation had expanded its base amongst new sections, including the youth.

NEW CEC AND OFFICE BEARERS

The Conference ended with the election of a new Central Executive Committee with 101 members and 2 special invitees. A secretariat of 30 members was elected by the new CEC. Malini Bhattacharya was re-elected as President and Mariam Dhawale was re-elected as General Secretary and S. Punyavathi was elected as Treasurer. 14 Vice Presidents, 8 Secretaries and 5 Assistant Secretaries were also elected. Rekha Goswami was elected as Patron. As many as 26 members elected in this CEC are new entrants.

The Conference ended with the vote of thanks by Tapati Mukhopadhyay. The volunteers and reception committee, who carried out an excellent task of organising this conference in Mumbai, were thanked by AIDWA President Malini Bhattacharya.

The Conference ended with songs and resounding slogans of Long Live AIDWA!