



Rashtra Mahila

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Editor's Column

The National Commission for Women is deeply disturbed by the spate of child marriages taking place in various parts of the country despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act, which has been in existence since 1929. In several states, these marriages are common around Akha Teej, which is falling this time on 11th May, 2005. In spite of the Act banning child marriage, the practice is continuing unabated, particularly in Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand etc.

This is mainly because the Act exists only on paper and has not been able to deter parents from marrying their under-aged sons and daughters. Ironically, the Act renders all under-age marriages illegal but not void, which means that an illegally married couple can stay married. It is, therefore violated with impunity and hardly anyone is ever hauled up. Despite the fact that child marriage is a criminal offence, action is rarely taken by the police. Even civil society remains a passive spectator. There's not enough outrage against the practice even among the educated. The meagre fine and imprisonment up to three months shows that the state does not view the crime seriously.

Though the legal marriageable age for women is 18, for men 21, the Census statistics says that 6.4 million Indians under the age of 18 are already married and as many as 1.3 lakh girls under 18 are widowed and another 56,000 divorced or separated. The incidence is understandably higher in

rural areas, but not as low as expected in the cities.

A new legislation, Prevention of Child Marriages Bill, 2004, to replace the loophole-ridden 1929 Act is awaiting Parliament's approval. But legislation alone is not enough. The Commission, while taking cognizance of the pitiable plight of the girl child,

the Chief Secretaries of Chhattisgarh, MP, UP, Rajasthan, Bihar and Jharkhand recommending steps to prevent child marriage. The Commission will visit the states and meet the state government officials, including the chief secretary, DGP and officials of the department of women and child development and panchayati raj department. The members of NCW will meet Collectors and SPs of the districts where child marriages are rampant.

The Commission has also suggested personal attention to the matters relating to the registration of marriage and ensuring of age verification of couples. The District level Health & Medical Officers, the Education Department as well as the NGO's to educate the masses as well as the students on the adverse effects of child marriage. The grimmest part of the scenario is the physical havoc that early marriage wreaks upon girls, who are too young to bear the burden of maternity. Under-aged girls, who are already disadvantaged by a childhood of deprivation, produce weak offsprings, adding to the rate of maternal and child mortality.

Moreover, many of these child grooms after getting good education migrate to urban areas leaving behind their child brides in the rural areas. Later, they marry other women of urban areas deserting their first wives.

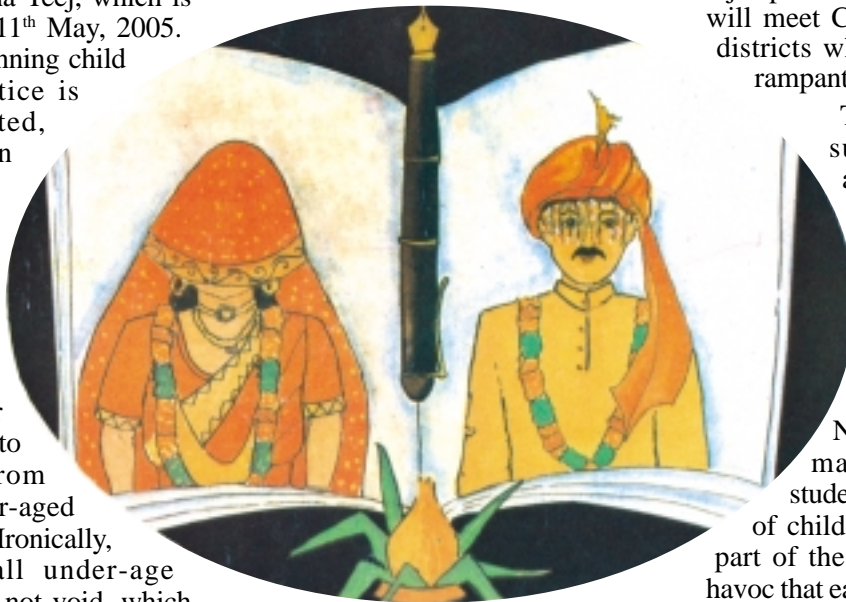
Admittedly, the malaise is so deep-rooted and all-pervasive that courts of law and policing by outside forces can do little to control it. Working towards structural changes in the community and ultimately, building up community pressure on the family alone can provide a deterrence against this social evil.

Focus

CHILD
MARRIAGE

entering into the institution of marriage, realizes that laws alone cannot put an end to the social menace of child marriage unless there is a change in societal mindset and has accordingly suggested certain inputs to the state governments for effective check of the social evil. Some significant recommendations include, constitution of village level committee, appointment of child marriage prevention officers at the village/Panchayat level, proper maintenance of records pertaining to child marriages and action initiated thereof.

The Commission has also written to



Members' Visits

● Member Nirmala Sitharaman attended a public hearing of women lace workers in Narasapur in West Godawari district of Andhra Pradesh. She also inspected the government hospital at Eluru district headquarters in West Godawari district. Ms. Sitharaman conducted an investigation into the allegation of harassment and abuse at the govt. general hospital, Eluru of women nurses. Later, she interacted with cotton and woollen carpet weavers of Pension Lane, Madepalli and Saniverpet areas of Eluru. The member also attended public hearings of women in agriculture and allied activities and women in floriculture at West Sikkim and Gangtok respectively.

● Member Nafisa Hussain attended a seminar at Saharanpur in U.P. on women empowerment on the occasion of Mahila Sashakti Karan Mahotsava organised by Disha.

● Member Anusuiya Uike visited Raipur (Chhattisgarh) on 15th April and attended review meetings arranged by the department of women & child development in connection with the "Bal Vivah Virodhi Abhiyan" launched by the Commission.

On 19th April, an inquiry team consisting of members Anusuiya Uike and Nafisa Hussain and the law officer Shri Yogesh Mehta visited Ranchi and inquired into a case in which a 50 year old woman was paraded naked after the village panchayat elders decided to "punish" her for her son's conduct, who had eloped with a girl. The incident took place at Baski village situated at the outskirts of Ranchi. Later, the members attended review meetings, arranged by department of women & child development, in connection with the "Bal Vivah Virodhi Abhiyan."

SBI to Help Poor Girls in Gujarat

The Gujarat circle of State Bank of India (SBI) the country's largest bank, has evolved a unique scheme to support the girl child. All 444 branches of SBI in Gujarat have been advised to adopt at least one girl child and extend necessary financial assistance required for her education including the cost of school fees, text books, to and fro transportation by bus and small sum of money for personal upkeep.

Chairperson Visits New York

NCW Chairperson Dr. Girija Vyas visited New York to participate in the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations headquarters in New York. The 49th session reviewed implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action 1995, on the 10th anniversary of its adoption.

Contending that empowering women and gender equality are major tools for development and poverty reduction, the delegates urged all nations to take steps to help end discrimination against women in all fields. The UN Commission on Status of Women identified several areas in which gender equality was yet to be achieved and called on all states at the end of its two-week conference to meet these challenges.

The areas needing immediate attention, included continuing high rate of violence against women in all parts of the world, especially in armed conflicts, increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS among women, lack of sexual and reproductive health rights, and lack of equal access under the law to land and property.



Dr. Girija Vyas NCW Chairperson attending the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Next to her are Ms. Rita Bahuguna, Ms. Nafisa Ali, Ms. Jayanti Natarajan.



Dr. Girija Vyas (third from left) Chairing the Asia Pacific Conference.

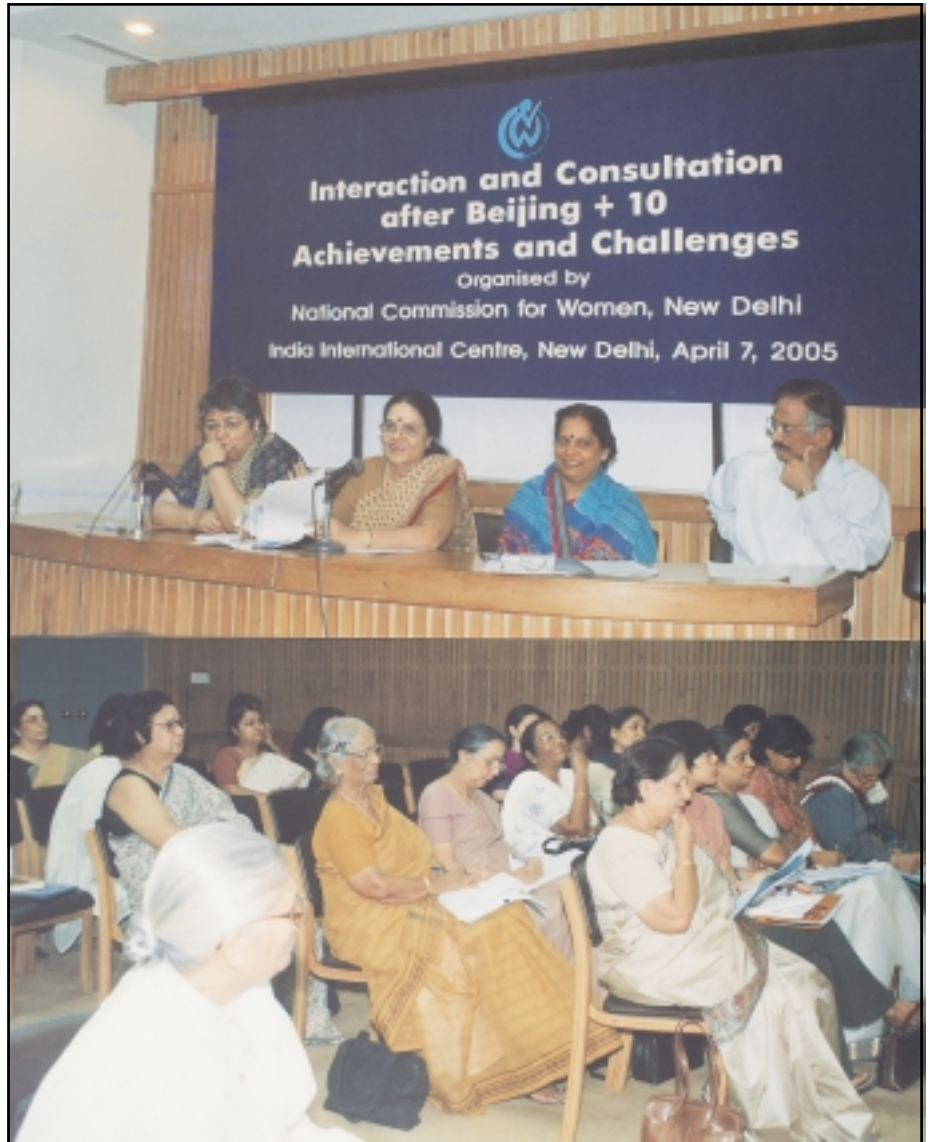
Interaction and Consultation meet

The National Commission for Women organized an Interaction and Consultation Meeting on the “Issues of Achievements and Challenges In Promoting Gender equality and Women’s Empowerment after Beijing + 10” on 7th April, 2005 in New Delhi. The objectives were to initiate a discussion with women activists, NGOs and Government officials to prepare for the ensuing Nam Conference. Representatives of NGOs, such as Joint Women programme, Centre for Social Research, Women Power Connect, YWCA, Mahila Dakshata Samiti, All India Women’s Conference, etc. participated in the meeting.

In her inaugural remarks, Dr. Girija Vyas, Chairperson, National Commission for women said that a close and frequent dialogue between the NGOs and the Commission should be conducted. She emphasized that India should take the lead in all international forums on various issues encompassing women’s equality and empowerment. She stressed upon proper and timely implementation of the existing government policies by the Central and State Governments.

Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman, Member NCW said that a minimum workable agenda should be worked out before going to international meetings so as to thrash out the recommendations which are viable, practicable and situation-specific. During the discussions, the following suggestions emerged:-

★ Most of the participants appreciated the initiatives taken by the National Commission for women and appealed to the Commission to create a taskforce to discuss and cull out issues which may be raised during international Conferences, viz., NAM, Afro-Asian Summit, UN Conference, etc.



At the Consultation Meet (from left) Ms Parul Debi Das, Dr. Girija Vyas, Dr. Sudha Malaiya, Mr. N.P. Gupta, (below) a view of the audience.

- ★ The National Commission for Women should conduct State level studies to review implementation of Government policies.
- ★ The other issues raised were :
 - ❖ 33% reservation for women in legislatures.
 - ❖ Women’s role in public offices and policies.
 - ❖ Violence against women.
 - ❖ Girl Child’s rights and
 - ❖ Economic Empowerment of women including the right to ownership of land.

This is India

Amid drum beats, a tribal girl was married off to a dog on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar. to prevent her from “being devoured by a tiger.”

The girl had developed some “abnormality” in the growth of her teeth and tradition in the tribal dominated slum cluster in Palasuni ordained that she undergo the ritual.

The marriage was “solemnised” with the girl’s parents’ consent.

IMPORTANT DECISION

In response to a petition filed by the father of a rape victim, a minor, who later became pregnant, the Guwahati High Court ruled that termination of pregnancy in such a situation will not constitute any offence.

The judgement said, "Whether the allegations against the accused are true or not is not material in the present writ petition; what is material is the fact that she presently carries pregnancy caused as a result of the alleged rape committed on her. In such a situation, when the victim suffers from anguish, it would constitute a grave injury to her mental health and in such circumstances, termination of her pregnancy by a registered medical practitioner is permitted and will not constitute any offence."

Making a Difference

Thanks to night-patrolling by lathi-wielding women, at least 48 villages in Durg district have become crime-free during the last two months.

There is no gambling, no illicit distillation and not even theft in these villages where policing is being done by the members of mahila mandals.

Displaying photograph-affixed identify cards issued by the respective mahila mandals, the women search vehicles passing through their villages for liquor and anti-social elements. When the drivers resist checking, the women use their lathis. As a result, big liquor contractors have refused transportation of country made liquor to the retail outlets due to fear of being attacked by the women or the consignment being destroyed by them.

Janani Suraksha Scheme gets Cabinet approval

The Cabinet Committee on Economic affairs (CCEA) has approved the Janani Suraskha Yojna, the maternity benefit scheme that will replace the National Maternity Benefits Scheme.

Fully sponsored by the Centre, it is meant for women aged 19 years and above, belonging to below the poverty line families. The women will benefit under the scheme for the first two live births.

However, in the low performing States-Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Assam and Jammu and Kashmir- the scheme will be applicable up to third birth also,

MOTHER-CHILD STATISTICS

Pregnancy-related deaths : Half a million women die every year of complications during pregnancy (one death each minute). In India, the rate is 540 deaths per 1 lakh births.

under-5 deaths: 11 million children under 5 die (nearly 30,000 each day). In India, it is 87 deaths per 1 lakh live births.

Global figures (annual) :

- Four million babies die within a month of their birth.
- Three million stillbirths
- 99 pc of mother-child deaths occur in developing countries

India figures (annual):

- 43 pc skilled attendants at delivery
- 60 pc ante-natal care coverage
- 46 pc child marriage rate

News from Abroad

Norway's parliament told firms in 2002 to ensure at least 40 per cent of each sex in boardrooms by mid-2005 to force corporate leadership to match Nordic traditions of sex equality elsewhere in society. Many companies denounce the scheme as the world's toughest corporate sex equality goal.

"Since 2002 the percentage of women in boards has risen to only 11 percent from 6".

Now Norway has decided to shut companies that refuse to recruit at least 40 per cent women to their boards by 2007 under an unprecedented equality drive.

provided the beneficiary opts for sterilisation immediately after delivery.

The scheme aims at reduction in maternal and infant mortality and seeks to focus on providing benefits to the pregnant women of below the poverty line families and to encourage antenatal care, institutional deliveries and provision for post-partum care which is important not only for the health of the mother but has significant effect on the health and survival of the new born.

The scheme provides for monetary incentives to the mother and the health worker who delivers the baby ranging from Rs. 200 to Rs. 800 as per the set guidelines for rural and urban areas.

For further information visit our website at :

www.ncw.nic.in