



## Editor's Column

It is indeed heartening to note that a record 59 women MPs have been elected to the 15th Lok Sabha - the highest since Independence. For the first time in the history of independent India, representation of women members in the Parliament has crossed 10% mark - 13 more than in the last house and 9 more than the previous best of 49 in the 13th Lok Sabha.

Though a significant milestone for women in India has been reached, yet the figures are still very low in comparison with parliaments of the industrialized countries. For instance, UK, USA, Italy, Ireland and France have 19.3%, 16.3%, 16.1%, 14.2% and 13.9% women parliamentarians respectively. The Swedish Parliament, with 47% women MPs has the best gender-ratio in the world. Thus, in comparison to these countries, it is disappointing that though India being one of the earliest countries to grant political rights to women, their numbers in the Lok Sabha remained quite low.

However, the 15th Lok Sabha has begun on a positive note and with increased numbers, women would be able to make their

presence felt and bring women's perspective and viewpoint to the fore. So far due to lack of numbers, women members could not make much of a dent with regard to issues concerning women and their voices have been muted because of fewer number of women representatives. Hopefully, with

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increased strength, their voices will be heard. Indeed, this record mandate is a symptom of the changing dynamics of the Indian society and a sign that women may gradually be coming into their own



in the political sphere. Because the women, who won in this election, did so by competing against male candidates. No

concessions were made for them, either during the course of the campaign or in the form of reservations in the Parliament. That more women than ever were elected is due to the changing status of women in the society.

In this context, a mention may be made of the Women's Reservation Bill, which seeks to reserve 33% of the seats in Parliament and legislatures for women. It has been hanging fire for the last 13 years due to lack of an all-party consensus. Now that the present government need not depend upon the regional parties for survival, it should take the initiative to improve the gender-ratio in the parliament and state legislatures. Even socially very conservative Afghanistan has 25% quota in Parliament.

In Rwanda, the quota is higher. Interestingly, in Afghanistan, women have also come through on general quotas. The argument of our OBC champions for a quota within a quota appears self-serving. Admittedly, in a country like ours, it is necessary to send more women to the public arena through general quotas, where they may have a say in decision-making, thereby not only empowering themselves, but the society as a whole.

## Dr. Girija Vyas receiving congratulatory messages

Dr. Girija Vyas, Chairperson of the National Commission for Women has won the Chittorgarh Lok Sabha seat by a margin of more than 70,000 votes.

We convey to her our sincere congratulations.



## Groom and Father Thrashed for Asking Dowry

A bridegroom and his family were beaten up for allegedly raising their dowry demand from the bride's father a day after the wedding. When the time came for 'bidaai', the bride's father went to hand over the key of Maruti Alto to the bridegroom. However, the groom refused to take it and said that he would not accept anything less than a Scorpio and Rs. 15 lakh in cash. As soon as they came to know about the unreasonable demand, residents of Badarpur village, about 20 km away from Nuh in Haryana, forced the groom to divorce his wife before the 'bidaai' as he did not "deserve her".

Ezaz Khan of Akera village, who studies in Jamial Millia Islamia in Delhi.

The bridegroom and his father were not only beaten black and blue by the villagers, but they also took 25 'baraatis' hostage and tonsured heads of the bridegroom and his father. Later in the night, a village panchayat was called and it pronounced the decision that the family would have to pay Rs. 8 lakh - the money spent by the girl's family since engagement - if they wanted to get released. Left with no option, the bridegroom's father agreed to pay the money. Later, they were released.

## FIR Against Woman, Family for Giving Dowry

For the first time, a Delhi court has ordered registration of an FIR against a woman, her parents and her brother for allegedly giving dowry.

It is the first criminal case in the city to be registered under the Dowry Prohibition Act Section 3 in the past 3 years. The Metropolitan Magistrate, after hearing both sides, said: "Police should simultaneously register a case under the Dowry Prohibition Act against the parents of the complainant, who marry their daughter despite demands of dowry".

## NCW will be coordinating agency for NRI marriages

One of the recommendations of the Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women (EWC) (14th Lok Sabha) on the subject "Plight of Indian woman deserted by NRI husbands" was to evolve a well defined/coordinated mechanism to deal with the issue of problematic NRI marriages to enable the aggrieved women to get a respectable solution to the problem. This recommendation was deliberated at an Inter Ministerial meeting comprising representatives from Ministries of Overseas Indian Affairs, External Affairs, Home Affairs, Law and Justice, Women and Child Development, National Commission for Women (NCW) and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). It was decided that the National Commission for Women will be the coordinating agency at the national level to receive and process all the complaints related to Indian women deserted by their overseas Indian husbands.

The State Governments/Union Territories Administration and Indian Missions/Post abroad have been requested to take note of this decision and to take further action accordingly.

## Members' Visits

Member Manju Hembrom attended a seminar on Domestic Violence Bill 2005 organised by the National Commission for Women in Deoghar in Jharkhand.

Speaking on the occasion, Ms. Hembrom said that women must be aware of their rights to combat domestic violence. She said women even now were affraid to lodge complaints in the police stations and their complaints were not taken seriously either.

Inaugurating the seminar, DIG, Mr. Murarilal Meena appealed to the police officers not to scare women but help them to

understand their rights. He said that there was an urgent need to set up Mahila thanas in each

district and for creating awareness about the Domestic Violence Act among women.



*Ms. Hembrom, DIG Mr. Meena and DC at the seminar*

### 45 pc Indian Women Married as Minors

A joint Indo-American study found that nearly half of adult Indian women aged 20 to 24 married before the legal age of 18.

These child marriages were significantly associated with poor fertility outcomes, such as unwanted and terminated pregnancies, repeat childbirths in less than 24 months, and increased sterilisation rates.

The study found that 44.5 percent of women aged 22 to 24 were married before age 18. More than one in five - 22.6 percent - were married before age 16, while 2.6 percent were married before age 13, although India raised the legal age for marriage to 18 in 1978.

### Do You Know?

In 2005, as many as 6,787 dowry death cases were reported. This increased to 7,618 in 2006 and 8,093 in 2007. National Crime records Bureau had reported a whopping 75,930 incidents of torture and cruelty against women in matrimonial homes in 2007.

### President Meets Girls who Stopped Child Marriage

12-year old Rekha Kalindi, who said 'I won't' to child marriage has now become an international poster child, with 11,000 web references.

Recently, the girl, who used to roll *bidis* with her five siblings - in a one-room hutment with no electricity, toilet or running water - in West Bengal's Purulia district met President Pratibha Patil.

Having read the report on how the girl from a village with the lowest female literacy rate (18.4 per cent) in the country had gone against tradition to say no to child marriage and inspired others to do the same, the President invited Rekha and two other girls - Afsana Khatun and Sunita Mahato (both 13) - who chose to study rather than marry - to the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

The president lauded their courage and called them messengers of social change.

## Important Decisions

- **Unreasonable divorce no ground for claiming alimony, says court**

Estranging one's husband without any justified reason would not entitle a woman for claiming maintenance," a city court has held in a recent judgement. The observation of the court came while dismissing a maintenance petition filed by a woman, who had abandoned her husband and had been living with her parents. "A man, whose wife abandons him without any justified reason, is not liable to pay any sum of money as maintenance charges," said the Metropolitan Magistrate of a city court.

- **Police complaint not must to establish dowry death, says HC**

The Delhi High Court has held that a formal police complaint of harassment or cruelty is not necessary to convict a husband or a victim's in-laws in a dowry death case.

"Just because the deceased and her relatives choose not to make any complaint, can it be a ground to discard their testimonies?" the court said. In this case, Surinder Kumar was sentenced to life imprisonment by a trial court for the dowry-related death of his wife who had succumbed to burn injuries within seven months of their marriage.

Upholding the life term for Kumar, the court referred to the testimonies of the victim's relatives regarding persistent harassment meted out to the woman for not having brought enough dowry.

- **Dowry law gets tough**

The Supreme Court has clarified that dowry laws and anti-cruelty laws would apply to any man who lives, co-habits and exercises the authority of a husband over any woman, whether they are legally married or not.

In cases in which dowry harassment has been alleged or a dowry death has occurred, a man cannot get away by claiming that he is not legally married to the woman, an apex court bench said.

- **SC says extra-marital lovers may be jailed if spouse commits suicide**

A woman and her paramour may be jailed if her husband commits suicide because of her extra-marital affair, the Supreme Court has ruled. The lovers may be jailed for abetting suicide.

The apex court upheld the conviction of a man who had an illicit relationship with the wife of another, who committed suicide due to 'shame'. The wife had also been held guilty but she had not filed an appeal as she was satisfied with a high court order that reduced her punishment to a mere one-year imprisonment.

- **No conviction if inordinate delay**

While setting aside the conviction and three-year sentence imposed on a person, the Supreme Court has ruled that a husband or a relative cannot be convicted of harassing the wife, if the complaint is made after passage of a considerable time following the alleged act. In the present case, the complaint was lodged three years after the alleged harassment.

- **At 18, a girl can choose life partner**

The Supreme Court said that a girl over the age of 18 years, has the freedom in choosing her life partner and warned parents not to use force to interfere with her decision.

The court said they cannot confine her, torture her or use any kind of force on her if she was a major.

- **'Can't punish girlfriend on wife's complaint' : SC**

The Supreme Court has said a woman in a live-in relationship, concubine or a girlfriend, cannot be prosecuted for dowry or complaints relating to harassment of a wife by her husband or others. "Living with another woman may be an act of cruelty on the part of the husband ..... but that can't attract the wrath of Section 498A of the IPC," a bench said.

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