



Editor's Column

Kolkata, which at one time, was hailed as a safe city for women, has seen another horrific rape ending in death. A 16-year old girl was gang raped twice, first on October 25 in Madhyamgram and again on the very next day as she was on her way back from the police station. The girl was threatened for weeks to withdraw the police complaint. After the family shifted house to escape the accused, she was murdered recently by the goons, who raided her house and set her on fire.

The National Commission for Women took suo-moto cognizance of the Madhyamgram incident, asking the Chief Minister of West Bengal to explain her government's response in a week's time.

Admittedly, there has been a spurt in crimes against women in West Bengal in recent times with the latest one matching in brutality with one in Delhi and the other at Kamduni at Barasat in West Bengal, a few months ago, which also kicked up immense public outrage.

FOCUS

Kolkata's Shame

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, West Bengal has the dubious distinction of having the highest incidents of crimes against women for two consecutive years. In 2011, the State had recorded 29,133 incidents, which shot up to 30,942 in 2012. It is not that there was no crime against women in the past, but during the last two to three years there has been a spurt in violence,

especially, when it comes to women, compounded by insensitivity and apathy of the police.

To be fair, it wasn't that the previous government of West Bengal was a shining example of women's safety but that does not absolve the present government of its failure in instilling the fear of law among the criminals and ensuring police accountability. The police have become too wary to initiate action against any leaders or supporters aligned to the ruling party, lest they face transfer or suspension.

It is time now for the West Bengal government to take remedial steps to contain alarming rise in crimes against women and girls and for the police to shrug off their complacency about women's safety and freedom.

NCW Chairperson Smt. Mamta Sharma wishes all readers of 'Rashtra Mahila' a very happy new year and reiterates NCW's commitment to safeguard the rights of women alongwith speedy redressal of their grievances.



Suo-moto Cognizance

The National Commission for Women after taking suo-moto cognizance of the media reports on the incidents of trafficking of women in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal for forced labour constituted an enquiry committee to look into the allegations. The Committee has submitted its recommendations vide report titled "Trafficking for Women for Forced Labour: Need for Safe Migration and Regulation of Domestic Work" to the concerned Departments and Ministries.

Seminar on Women's Safety

The National Commission for Women organized a national seminar on "Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls", to pay tribute to the 16th December gang rape victim in New Delhi.

Speaking on the occasion, the Chief Guest, Dr. Girija Vyas, Union Minister for Housing and Urban Development



Dr. Girija Vyas addressing the gathering. (Below) Ms. Mamta Sharma in conversation with Smt. Sheila Dixit

said that though the country has made strict laws to punish the perpetrators, incidents of assault and harassment are still rampant at public places. No woman or girl feels safe. In order to tackle this problem, she said, it was necessary to generate public awareness, ensure proper execution of law,

constructive role of the media, active participation of the civil society and gender budgeting.

Former Chief Minister of Delhi, Smt. Sheila Dixit, the Guest of Honour said that it was the society which should take care of the freedom and dignity of women. She said that women did not need more laws for their safety but a sense of deterrence needed to be instilled in the society.

In her inaugural address, NCW Chairperson Mamta Sharma said that there was a dire need for a change in the mindset of the people towards women and girls. There is lack of implementation of women-related laws and thus, the police personnel and the criminal justice system functionaries should be sensitized to women's issues.

All members of the Commission were present in the function to pay tribute to the brave-heart. The other speakers included representatives from various State Commissions, Women and Child Departments, Universities and NGOs.

A poster for organising a national essay competition on the subjects 'Ensuring Safety and Security to Women in Public Space' or 'Patriarchal Society : Changing the Mindset' was unveiled by Ms. Mamta Sharma.



Chairperson and Smt. Sheila Dixit displaying the poster as Members of NCW look on

Making a Difference

A 27-year old Dalit woman has agreed to return to her husband's home at a village in Dewas District in MP after he promised before a court to get a proper toilet constructed at his place. Savita left her husband's home with her two children, three years ago and went to live with her parents as she felt ashamed at being forced to go out for nature's call in the open. Later, she filed a case in a local court asking for monthly maintenance from her husband. She told the court that she would not go back to her husband's home unless a proper toilet was built there. The husband assured the court that he would ensure a proper toilet at his home before January 10, which is the next date of hearing in the case. The woman has agreed to return home after he builds a proper toilet.

Enquiries undertaken by NCW

Member Hemlata Kheria with social activist Manasi Pradhan conducted an enquiry into a newspaper report titled "Teacher set on fire, blames officials in Odisha", wherein, reportedly an unidentified assailant threw kerosene on a school teacher in Tikiri primary school in Rayagada district, Odisha, while she was taking rest in the school hostel. A detailed report was submitted on 17.12.2013.

Child Marriage

A discussion on "Amendment in Child Marriage Laws in India" was held at the Conference Hall of the NCW, New Delhi. The objective of the consultation was to provide a platform to discuss issues relating to laws dealing with child marriages in India with concerned ministries and stakeholders and come up with recommendations to address issues as to whether child marriages to be declared void ab initio or to remain voidable at the option of the contracting party to such marriages as per the Prohibition of Child Marriages Act of 2006 (PCMA).

In her welcome address, NCW Member Ms. Laldingliani Sailo, referred to the writ petition filed by NCW and DCW in the Supreme Court of India to give directions to the government on uniformity about minimum age of marriage as different laws give contradictory age of marriage and their validity. She said that the discussion was on whether marriages solemnized below the age of 18 years to be declared void or remain voidable at the option of the contracting party as per the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr. Charu WaliKhanna said that child marriage violates a girl's fundamental rights to life, health, non-discrimination, equality, education, work, economic autonomy, etc. and exposes young girls to maternal mortality, morbidity, sexual violence and trafficking. She said that existing provisions under section 3 of the Act making child marriages "voidable" at the option of the contracting party was illusory. She felt such marriages must be recognized as 'void'.

After detailed discussions by the participants, a consensus was reached on the following points: (1) Child marriages to be declared void below the age of 18 years but there is a need to fix a cut off date. (2) A cut off date, preferably 2020, to be fixed to declare child marriages void, (3) Registration of marriage should be compulsory – the certificate needs to have comprehensive details about age. (4) There should be amendment of family laws, especially, Marriage Acts about uniformity of age of a valid marriage.

Members' Visits

◆ Member Nirmala Samant Prabavalkar attended the annual conference of the Indian National Bar Association to celebrate "the National Law Day" on 26th and 27th November, 2013. The Member spoke on "Women Empowerment and Laws" and said that all recently made laws were basically brought to give women equal opportunity and benefits, which they are entitled to. ● The Member visited the Mahila Wards of Indore District Jail, Ujjain Sub-jail, Tirupati District jail and Central Prison for Women at Vellore respectively and met female inmates and assessed their living conditions. ● Ms. Prabhavalkar attended the National Conference of All India Federation of Lawyers at Thane in Mumbai along with Chief Justice of India, Chief Justice of Mumbai High Court and Justice Ranjana Desai, in which she said that justice was beyond the reach of the needy, poor and marginal women. However, through judicial activism and parivarik mahila lok adalats, many women are getting justice today. ● The Member attended a two-day National Consultation on "Women's Participation in the Electoral Process" at Bhubaneswar organized by the Election Commission of India. Later, she visited the female ward at the district jail at Bhubaneswar.

◆ Member Shamina Shafiq was the Chief Guest at a function organized by Shri Chandra Prakashpuri Kalyan Sewa Samiti in Khairabad in Sitapur District, which is engaged in helping economically-backward women by getting them married without paying dowry with simple rituals. ● Ms. Shafiq visited the Maharashtra Institute of Technology, Pune and spoke on



Ms. Prabhavalkar (left) addressing the Bar Association Conference



Ms. Shamina Shafiq giving an endowment Lecture at the World Peace Centre, MIT, Pune, as Dr. S.N. Pathan, Vice President, ICCR and Prof. U.D. Karad, President, UNESCO chairholder look on

“Role of women and youth in the development of society through a culture of peace”, during the 18th annual Saint Dayaneshwara-Tukaram Endowment Lecture Series-2013. ● The Member attended a programme “Ek Shaam Allama Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi ke naam” at Sitapur to promote communal harmony. The Governor, Dr. Aziz Qureshi graced the occasion. ● The Member attended a legal awareness programme entitled “Empowerment of widows and their coalition” organized by the Guild of Services at Lucknow. ● Ms. Shafiq attended a state level learning programme for the elected women representatives and spoke on gender-based violence in Sitapur District. ● She also visited Bhartiya Manav Adhikar Association at Sitapur on the National Human Rights Day as the Chief Guest. ● The Member was part of a delegation that was formed to reinforce links between the Muslims in the U.K. and the Muslims in India, to discuss the experiences of Muslims in the British society and public life. The event took place at the initiative of the British High Commission in New Delhi. The programme included meetings with various organizations, community leaders, students, civil society members, women activists and the media.

◆ Dr. Charu WaliKhanna was the Chief Guest at a Round Table Discussion on “Need for Protective Legislation for Domestic Workers” at Hyderabad. ● Dr. WaliKhanna chaired a session on “Legal perspective - Sexual harassment at Workplace” organized by All India Women Conference. ● The Member as the Chief Guest spoke on “Representation of Women in Indian Cinema and Beyond”, organized by Justice Sunanda Bhandare Foundation in New Delhi. ● Dr. Charu WaliKhanna was Chief Guest on the live telecast on “Sexual Harassment at Workplace”, organized by Doordarshan Kendra, New Delhi. ● Dr. WaliKhanna was the Chief Guest at the Annual Day “UTSAV 2013-theme ‘Let Her Live’”, organized by Indirapuram Public School, Ghaziabad. ● The Member attended a National Consultation on “Women and the Judicial System”, organized by High Level Committee on Status of Women, in New Delhi. Speaking on the occasion, the Member put forth her suggestions to sensitize the judiciary on gender issues so that gender-oriented criminal jurisprudence is developed in India. ● Dr. WaliKhanna was the Special Guest at a function to celebrate “Vijay Diwas” organized by War Widows Association in New Delhi. ● Dr. WaliKhanna was the Chief Guest at a programme on “Women’s Safety : A Challenge, mainly focusing on Domestic Violence against Women”, organised by Heal India at Nalanda. ● Dr. WaliKhanna visited Bodh Gaya to review safety of women in the tourist city. She also visited the Mahila Thana. Later, she had audience with HH the 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje, who said he would seek NCW’s views while holding an International Seminar to discuss gender issues.



Dr. Mohini Giri (2nd from left), Dr. Charu WaliKhanna (2nd from right) at the function to celebrate ‘Vijay Diwas’

◆ Member Hemlata Kheria was the Chief Guest at the “Manavvadi Mela”, a ten-day yatra by a team of young humanists lead by social activist Vidya Bhushan Rawat in Fatehpur District in UP, attended by about 1000 people, comprising mainly women from manual scavenging community. Speaking on the occasion, Ms. Kheria said that though untouchability and discrimination based on caste has been abolished by the Constitution of India, yet in practice, they are still alive. She said it was sad to see that Balmiki women or those engaged in manual scavenging face untouchability not just from upper-castes but from the other dalit communities as well. ● NCW Chairperson Ms. Mamta Sharma and Ms. Hemlata Kheria attended a stage play “Sitayana” organised by Stage Coach Theatre Group directed by Ms. Simi Sahnun. The play depicted Sita’s story and highlighted male mindsets, who still dictate the destiny of women. ● Member Kheria with social activist Mansi Pradhan visited Banpur Block in Khurda District, Tundraput and Gope area, Puri District ‘harijan Sahi’, to meet cyclone-affected women. ● Ms. Kheria also attended a National Seminar and art workshop on “Justice for Women” in New Delhi.



Ms. Hemlata Kheria (centre) at Manavvadi Mela

◆ NCW Member Laldingliani Sailo was the Chief Guest at the regional level Elocution, Singing and Dance competitions organized by ONGC officers’ Mahila Samiti at Noida.

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