

**GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT
LOK SABHA**

UNSTARRED QUESTION NO:7708
ANSWERED ON:16.05.2000
WOMEN`S AFFAIRS
VENKATA KRISHNAM RAJU UPPALAPATI

Will the Minister of HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT be pleased to state:

- (a) whether the Sixth Conference of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs was held in New Delhi;
- (b) if so, the highlights thereof;
- (c) the recommendations made in the area of education, health, rural and urban development and community development; and
- (d) the steps proposed to be taken by the Government to tackle the problems of women?

Answer

MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT (SHRIMATI SUMITRA MAHAJAN)

(a) Yes, Sir.

(b) The conference/meeting, which is a triennial event, was held from 17-19 April, 2000 and India hosted it for the first time. 46 of the 54 member countries of the Commonwealth including India attended the meeting. Participants also included observers representing international and regional agencies and organizations as well as non-governmental organizations. The meeting was inaugurated by the Hon'ble Prime Minister. The theme of the meeting was 'Advancing the Commonwealth Agenda into the New Millennium'. The Ministers discussed a range of issues focusing on gender mainstreaming, macro-economic policies and globalisation, women's human rights, conflict and peace, political participation and HIV/AIDS. The record of the meeting will be issued by the Commonwealth Secretariat from London.

(c) The recommendations made do not specifically or directly relate to these areas.

(d) A note on the framework in place is attached

(Annexure).

ANNEXURE

TOWARDS EQUALITY

A concern with the status of women and recognition that the progress of the nation is integrally linked with the advancement of women, have under-pinned Indian planning and policy since independence.

Since Independence, women have travelled a long way: the thrust towards poverty eradication, investment in social and economic infrastructure, spread of extension services, information dissemination has brought about significant improvements-

Significant gains have been recorded in the field of health and demography. Expectation of life at birth for females has risen steadily to 63 and has overtaken male life expectancy. The crude birth rate has declined to 27.3 per thousand population and Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) to 72 per thousand live births with sex differentials narrowing.

The gains in women's education is reflected in the female literacy rate from 39.3% in 1991 to 50.3% in 1997 which is more than the gains made by men. Enrolment of girls in schools, women/girls in higher and technical education has also shown significant upward trends.

Female Work Participation Rate (WPR) registered an increase from 14.2% in 1971 to 22.3% in 1991. Women's share in the organized sector has steadily risen from 11.0% in 1971 to 15.9% in 1997.

The landmark achievements of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993 brought about a definite impact on the participation of women in the grass-root democracy through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and local bodies. Women have achieved participation even beyond the mandatory requirement of one-third of total seats in States like West Bengal (35.1%), Kerala (36.4%) and Karnataka (43.4%).

Gender equality has received much greater attention from the Government, the voluntary sector, academic institutions and the civil society since 1995. Partnerships have been developed with media and academic institutions, the NGO sector to support gender mainstreaming.

THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women, including universal adult franchise but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The Fundamental Rights, among others, ensure equality before the law, equal protection of law, prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and guarantees equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters relating to employment. Article 14 confers on men and women equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic and social spheres. While Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc., Article 15(3) makes a special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women. Similarly, Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity in matters of public employment without discrimination on the basis, among others, of gender. Article 39(a) further mentions that the State shall direct its policy towards securing all citizens men and women, equally, the right to means of livelihood, while Article 39(c) ensures equal pay for equal work. Article 42 directs the State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Above all, the Constitution imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen through Article 15 (A) (e) to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

LEGISLATIVE MEASURES

Special legislations have been enacted to make this de jure equality into a de facto one. The State has enacted several women-specific and women-related legislations to protect women against social discrimination, violence and atrocities and also to prevent social evils like child marriage, dowry, rape, practice of Sati etc. The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 provides for equal pay to men and women for equal work. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 amended in 1976 provides the right for a girl to repudiate a child marriage before attaining maturity whether the marriage has been consummated or not. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of 1956 as amended and renamed in 1986 makes the sexual exploitation of male or female, a cognizable offence. An amendment brought in 1984 to the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 made women's subjection to cruelty a cognizable offence. The second amendment brought in 1986 makes the husband or in-laws punishable, if a woman commits suicide within 7 years of her marriage and it has been proved that she has been subjected to cruelty. Also a new criminal offence of 'Dowry Death' has been incorporated in the Indian Penal Code. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1976 raises the age for marriage of a girl to 18 years from 15 years and that of a boy to 21 years and makes offences under this Act cognizable. The Factories Act of 1948 (amended up to 1976) provides for establishment of a creche where 30 women are employed (including casual and contract labourers). The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971 legalizes abortion by qualified professional on humanitarian or medical grounds. Amendments to Criminal Law 1983 provide for a punishment of 7 years in ordinary cases of rape and 10 years for custodial rape cases. The maximum punishment may go up to life imprisonment. A new enactment of Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986 and the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 have also been passed to protect the dignity of women and prevent violence against them as well as their exploitation.

INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

Department of Women and Child Development

The Department of Women and Child Development was set up in the year 1985 as a part of the Ministry of Human Resource Development to give the required impetus to the development of women and children. In its capacity as the nodal agency looking after the advancement of women and children, the Department formulates plans, policies, and programmes, enacts/amends legislations affecting women and children and guides and coordinates the efforts of both governmental and non-governmental organizations working in the field of women and child development. Apart from this, the Department of Women and Child Development also implements certain innovative programmes for women and children. These programmes are in the area of employment and income generation, welfare and support services, gender sensitization, training for employment and income generation and awareness generation.

National Commission for Women

A national apex level statutory body called the National Commission for Women was constituted on 31.1.92 through the National Commission for Women Act, 1990. The functions of the Commission include investigating the Constitutional and legal safeguards provided to women and to recommend to the Government measures for their effective implementation. The Chairperson of the National Commission for Women is an ex-officio Member of the National Human Rights Commission. In accordance with the mandate, the Commission is in the process reviewing 39 laws concerning women. As many as 17 State Governments have also set up state level women commissions.

Parliament Committee on Empowerment of Women

A Parliament Committee on Empowerment of Women has been constituted in 1997 for considering the reports of the National Commission for Women, to examine the measures taken by the Government to secure women's equality and to report on the working of welfare programmes for women etc. The Committee presented its first report on 'Developmental Schemes for Rural Women' to the Lok Sabha on 21.4.1999. Committee on Gender Mainstreaming.

The Department of Women and Child Development, in its nodal capacity, undertakes Inter-Ministerial Review of the progress of 27 Beneficiary Oriented Schemes for Women. Recently, the existing Review Committee has been renamed as 'Committee for Gender Mainstreaming in Government' with the mandate of reviewing the impact of welfare schemes for women on their lives.

A Task Force to review all existing legislations and Government schemes with a view to enhance women's access to national resources and to ensure their rightful place in the mainstream of economic development is being constituted. The Task Force will also chalk out specific programmes for observing the year 2001 as 'Women's Empowerment Year'.

INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

India ratified the Convention on 25.6.93 with one reservation and two declaratory statements. The First Country Report submitted to the CEDAW Committee was considered in January, 2000. In the course of the hearing, the CEDAW Committee members, inter-alia, recommended that the Convention be widely disseminated and translated into the regional languages in the country.

Beijing Platform for Action (1995)

The fourth UN World Conference on Women focussed on negotiating a global policy document 'Platform for Action'. It calls upon governments to take action on 12 critical areas of concern. The Conference clearly accelerated the process of economical, social and political changes that were sparked by the first International Women's Conference in 1975. The Beijing Conference was a milestone; the Declaration and Platform for Action were a call to commitment and action, representing the culmination of a chain of global conferences on women Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). The Department has initiated the process of review of the progress made in the country regarding implementation of the PFA. Besides collecting information from various other Ministries/Departments of the Government and the State Governments/Union Territory Administrations, a feedback questionnaire was sent to NGOs active in the field of gender justice and women's empowerment to obtain information on their work in the field. Beijing Plus Five India Country Report is presently under preparation.

SCHEMES FOR WOMEN

For achieving the goal of self-sustenance and economic empowerment of women, the Government has launched many schemes such as Support to Training cum Employment Programme, Setting up of Employment cum Production Units for Women, Socio-Economic Programme, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Indira Mahila Yojana, Condensed Courses for Education and Vocation Training etc. For creating awareness about the rights of women, schemes such as Awareness Generation Programme, Education Work for Prevention of Atrocities Against women have been launched. The Government has revamped the Scheme of Balika Samriddhi Yojana in 1999 under which a woman in a family living below the poverty line to whom a female child was born was given an incentive of Rs.500/-. This Scheme now provides for the incentive and, in addition, annual scholarships for schooling, to be deposited in the name of the girl child.

The Rural Women's Development and Empowerment Project (RWDEP) (Swa- Shakti Project) was sanctioned as a Centrally Sponsored Project during October '98 to strengthen the process of and to create an environment for empowerment of women in 35 Districts of 6 States. Under this Project, 12000 Self Help Groups of Women will be organized in a span of five years.

With a view to enhance the capacity of field level functionaries and other development related practitioners, the Department has initiated a collaborative project with IGNOU and ISRO for starting a certificate course in the Distance Education mode on Women's Group Mobilization and Empowerment. The first programme is scheduled to start in July, 2000.