

# Working for Women and Children and their Human Rights

WOMAN & CHILD WELFARE SOCIETY

**T**he Woman & Child Welfare Society (WCWS) is a non-profit and voluntary organization established in August 2006 to promote social and economic development among the most marginalized and most disadvantaged sections of the Indian society.

WCWS tries to foster self-confidence, cooperation and self-reliance through value-based education among women. It seeks to promote economic, social and psychological empowerment of women and children. It seeks to provide relief and assistance to women and children in order to alleviate distress and suffering, provide auxiliary aid to workers; and to sponsor, support or assist in family planning and welfare programs and projects dealing with industry, trade, social organizations and charitable causes. It also organizes legal literacy workshops in the rural areas.

WCWS is a group of experienced, well-qualified and highly motivated members who are committed to promoting women's and children's rights. Most of the team members have been engaged in voluntary social work for the past several years and have come together to form an active team in order to work towards the betterment of needy women and children.

WCWS believes that women and children are left extremely vulnerable. Most of the women do not have access to basic education. The literacy rate of women is very low, particularly in the rural areas. Most families in these areas are dependent on the agrarian economy with agriculture being the main source of income, occupation and means of livelihood.

## **Rights of Women and Children**

Women and children are faced with political, economic and educational problems. They face severe social, economic and political discrimination. Children do not enjoy their childhood and their little shoulders carry the burden of adulthood in their tender years. Their little hands work in the field in scorching heat to earn for their families or look after their siblings when other children of their age play.

Children are innocent, trusting and full of hope. Their childhood should be happy and loving. Their lives should mature gradually, as they gain new experiences. But for many children, the reality of childhood is altogether different. In India, two million Indian babies die before they celebrate their first birthday. More than one million girl children are killed before their birth. About thirty-five million children aged 6-14 years do not go to school and approximately seventeen million children in India work.

The main reason for widespread female foeticide and the continued prevalence of female infanticide in parts of India was the dowry system, which although prohibited by law, continues unabated in Indian society. Dowries and wedding expenses regularly run to more than 3,000 US dollars in a country where the

average civil servant earns about 2,000 US dollars a year. Added to this is the low status of women in rural India, where they perform the menial tasks within the family such as fetching water, gathering firewood, and feeding the animals, and it is clear where the roots of the discrimination spring from.

Throughout history, children have been abused and exploited. They work in harmful conditions; suffer from hunger and homelessness, high infant mortality, poor health care and limited opportunities for basic education. Children have the right to survive, develop, be protected and participate in decisions that impact their lives. Children are citizens in their own right, entitled to the full spectrum of human rights. They will only attain these rights guaranteed to them if each person believes in making this dream come true as parents, neighbors, consumers, employees, businesspeople, teachers, politicians, journalists, professionals, bureaucrats, activists and most importantly as citizens.

The Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986 prohibits the engagement of children below the age of fourteen years in certain employments and regulates the conditions of work of children in shops, commercial establishments, workshops, farms, residential hotels, restaurants, eating-houses, theatres or other places of public amusement or entertainment. The said Act does not provide anything for those children whose parents are engaged in low paid, unskilled jobs and are unable to send them to school. The vulnerability of such children to be exposed to child labor is also very high.

Apart from this, we see everyday children aged 3-4 years trained for begging, not only in big cities but also in small towns. Parents are paid for the exploitation of their children for begging purposes. Begging is an offence under Indian law. There are lots of children under fourteen years of age who do not work in any industry or engage in any economic activity

but because of their parents' work they are also forced to undergo all the hardships that children working anywhere face.

Women also face a similar situation. Despite concerted efforts by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society, the overall status of women and their lack of legal entitlements still call for a struggle. Even today, women occupy a devalued position in society. This is manifested in different forms of grave human rights violations such as domestic/sexual violence, sexual harassment at the workplace, identity-based gender violence and sex selective abortions, to name a few. These forms of violence result in the negation of equality rights of women and their exclusion from all public spaces and spheres of activities such as meaningful employment. In the absence of a state-sponsored social security network and unemployment guarantees, they become dependent on their male relatives for protection and support.

Laws guarantee the human rights of women and children, but without proper implementation they would not solve the problem. WCWS was established to become a single platform to address the root causes of violation of women's and children's rights and work towards their social and economic development.

WCWS seeks help and co-operation from all government and non-governmental organizations with similar aims and objectives and assure them of its wholehearted determination to work for the cause of women, children, the poor, the illiterate and the underprivileged.

### **WCWS Activities**

Since its incorporation, WCWS has been quite active in protecting women's and children's rights. WCWS conducted a survey on male/female sex ratios and checked the records of the anganwadi<sup>1</sup> workers. Under the Integrated Child Development Scheme, one

anganwadi worker is allotted to a population of 1000. An anganwadi worker is trained in various aspects of health, nutrition and child development. The duties of the anganwadi worker are 1) regular health check-up, 2) immunization, 3) health education, and 4) non-formal pre-school education. Apart from this, they also keep the record of births and deaths in the rural areas. The results of the WCWS survey were shocking as the male-female sex ratio in many villages was less than 1000:560. This affirmed the continued heinous practice of female foeticide with the complicity of greedy medical doctors.

Lack of awareness among the people in the villages on the serious consequences of foeticide helps perpetuate this problem. And government support for raising people's awareness on this issues as well as women's and children's rights has been weak to say the least. WCWS has been seeking government help in undertaking rights awareness activities at the village level but has largely failed to receive the support it needed. One case illustrates this problem.

In October 2006, WCWS contacted the District Ayurvedic Officer, the Deputy Commissioner and many other officials in District Sonapat of Haryana state to obtain support for an Ayurvedic camp and a seminar on women's and children's rights. The planned Ayurvedic camp was meant to provide health checkups to as many people as possible, who in turn could be made aware of women's and children's rights. Bearing in mind that the government has been encouraging such activities, officials of WCWS met Mrs. Neerja Raj Shekhar, then Deputy Commissioner of District Sonapat. She extended her full help and cooperation by requesting the Red Cross Society to provide free medicines and also by asking the doctors at District Ayurvedic Office to be available for the said seminar. But such support from the Deputy Commissioner did not translate to action on the part of the officials at the District Ayurvedic Office, who instead said that the Red Cross

Society provided free medicine only upon their recommendation. They also promised to visit the WCWS on the matter, but actually failed to do so despite repeated follow-ups. Thereafter, WCWS requested many high government officials, including Mr. Bhupender Singh Hudda, Honorable Chief Minister of Haryana, and Mrs. Kartari Devi, Honorable Health Minister of Haryana, to help organize such seminars in each and every village. But the many letters of request failed to get a response from any of them. Thus, the sincere efforts of the WCWS volunteers were in vain.

WCWS has also been involved in encouraging women and poor families to form Self-Help Groups (SHG) for their upliftment and have been able to form some SHGs that are doing very well since their formation. Involvement in these SHGs gives women the chance to spare some time from their daily routine work to know about their rights and their strength. Many of them are now able to face the public and deliver speeches on women's and children's rights. On many occasions, WCWS volunteers attended the monthly meetings of these SHGs that helped the women become aware of their rights.

The Women and Child Development Department (WCD) of the Government of Haryana has been running Anganwadi Kendras (nursery schools) for children of 0-6 years. Children are given readymade meals in such Kendras. In early 2007, WCD decided to have the meals cooked in the Kendras and to appoint poor and needy women especially those from the women's SHGs to do the task. But the work was awarded to women from influential and rich families. At the request of the women from SHGs, WCWS complained to the WCD about this. After so much effort, WCWS was able to procure work for the deserving candidates from the women's self-help groups. Now the women earn some money that support their families and help to pay for their monthly loan payment to the SHGs.

The government has many programs and schemes for the upliftment of women and children but little action is taken to implement them. In September 2008, two women SHGs wrote a request to Mr. Murali S. Deora, Honorable Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister, Government of India to help them in starting up a candle-manufacturing unit. A copy of the same was also sent to other ministers including Dr. Manmohan Singh, Honorable Prime Minister, and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, Honorable Chairperson of United Progressive Alliance, but received no response to their request. WCWS took their case and wrote to Honorable Minister Deora to look in the matter and provide the necessary help. The response from Ministry is still being awaited.

### **Activities with Teachers and Students**

As already mentioned, WCWS has been quite active in the rural areas where literacy rate is very low. It is a known fact that 75% of the children in the rural areas do not get the chance to attain proper education either because their parents cannot afford the same or because of their family responsibilities such as taking care of their siblings, etc. A WCWS research involving interview with several teachers, parents and students shows additional factors to the low literacy rate among children in the rural areas: the parents' lack of education, and their engagement with work the whole day that prevent them from taking care of the education of their children. These children lag far behind in education, and their parents are unable to guide their children to do the homework given by teachers. The parents are also financially helpless to send their children for a private tuition. Only the government schools provide education in rural areas, but they are affected by corruption and lack of good teachers. In many villages, only one or two teachers take care of

whole school, while schools in the urban areas have surplus teaching staff.

Students in rural areas also suffer from corporal punishment for not completing their homework and for violating school disciplinary rules, which affects them mentally as well as their education.

These problems encouraged WCWS to build a platform through various conferences in and outside the schools for teachers, parents and students to identify the reasons behind illiteracy, poor examinations results, and increasing drop-out rates. As a result, WCWS decided to concentrate and be more active on school-related activities.

WCWS organizes women and child rights awareness programs with the help of women and child rights activists, teachers and local women. Through seminars, WCWS try to understand the problems of students, teachers and parents. WCWS invites resource persons who explain how and why women's and children's rights should be protected. Speech, essay writing, painting and other competitions are employed to facilitate an understanding of women's and children's rights by students, teachers and other participants. These activities, suggested by teachers and human rights activists, are also meant to create a friendly atmosphere inside the school between teachers and students. Students who excel in their study receive notebooks, pen/pencils and other stationeries to encourage them to continue their efforts. All these activities help students to enhance their learning skills. WCWS also supports the teaching about discipline and moral education so that students give due respect to their parents, teachers and their seniors.

WCWS holds small plays in the villages regarding different social evils like female foeticide, dowry system, child marriage, discrimination against girl education, etc. It organizes rallies to make the public become aware of the problems faced by women and children, and of their rights.

In the 20 December 2008 rally in Village Nahara, District Sonapat, teachers and students from Government Girls Senior Secondary School, Kendriya Vidyalaya (Central School) and Government Boys Secondary School along with the local women participated in the program. Mr. Jai Bhagwan, Sarpanch (Head) of Village Nahara flagged off the rally, which commenced in the streets of the village and culminated at Government Girls Senior Secondary School.

The teachers, students and local women marched through the streets of the village shouting slogans against female foeticide, displaying placards urging the public not to get involved in this severe crime. The villagers warmly welcomed them. Many teachers, social workers, *panchayat* members and officers of WCWS spoke during the rally.<sup>2</sup> Speakers at the rally requested them to struggle for their rights. Students displayed placards urging the public to make the 'Save the girl child' campaign a mass movement so as to rid the society of the evil of female foeticide. One speaker, Mr. Jagbir Singh, Principal of Government Girls Senior Secondary School said, "The female foeticide is not only a crime, but also a stigma in the society."

An interactive discussion on women empowerment, female foeticide, dowry system, girl education, child marriage, etc. was also held. One speaker, Dr. Satyawan Baroda, Yoga Teacher, Patanjali Yog Peeth who also teaches at MD University Rohtak, welcomed the teachers, students, local women and other eminent people of the area. Addressing the participants, he said, "We even cannot dream of a developed and disciplined country until we do not change our thinking against girl child. We should celebrate the birth of a girl child just like [the birth of] a boy. Female foeticide is a black spot on the shining head of India."

## Future Aims and Plans

Based on its experiences, WCWS has defined the following future aims:

- a) To work for the communities suffering from great distress, discrimination and marginalization.
- b) To make an attempt to provide basic human rights to poor and marginalized communities.
- c) To provide children not only with schooling but other basic rights as children have seen adulthood in their early childhood.
- d) To prioritize education among girl children and women in the rural areas.
- e) To promote livelihood among weaker sections of society by working on education, health, rights and advocacy.
- f) To enhance outreach programs on a variety of issues at the grassroots level.

WCWS plans to realize these aims through the following activities:

1. Provision of free crèches for children of migrant workers in places near the workplaces (usually construction sites) that would allow them (children) to receive food and education. The educational component will have to be coordinated with nearby schools. WCWS will also arrange for these children to attend classes in the nearby schools despite lack of formal enrollment.
2. Provision of vocational education to children of poor families to provide them an opportunity to have different work or livelihood from those of their parents.
3. Lobby for the provision of free education in government schools/institutions (with provision for accommodation, food, uniform, etc.) for the children

whose parents do not have permanent residence and have no capacity to afford such expensive education.

4. Lobby for and monitor (using different teams of volunteers) the proper implementation of government welfare schemes like pension for the elderly, widows and the handicapped, low-priced food grains for people living below the poverty line, midday meal at government schools, attractive schemes to save girl children and stop female foeticide, etc.
5. Raise before proper government offices the lack of facilities in many schools in the rural areas (including proper classrooms, benches, safe drinking water, toilets and playgrounds), while also working with school officials on how to address this issue.
6. Campaign for the continuation of education of girls beyond primary and junior secondary levels through values education for parents.
7. Expand the program for the formation of self-help groups of women to boost their morale and economic status, and the health and food awareness program for women.
8. Hold seminars on legal aid, and women and child rights with the help human rights activists, human rights lawyers, and many other eminent personalities to help people understand their rights as well as their duties towards country and other members of society.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Anganwadi” literally means courtyard.

<sup>2</sup> Other participants and speakers were:

- Mrs. Sulekha Rana, Teacher, Kendriya Vidyalaya, Nahara
- Mrs. Darshana Devi, Teacher, Kendriya Vidyalaya, Nahara
- Mrs. Prakash, PTI, Government Girls Senior Secondary School, Nahara
- Mrs. Savita, Teacher, Government Girls Senior Secondary School, Nahara
- Mrs. Prakash Devi, Teacher, Government Secondary School, Nahara
- Mrs. Sunita, Teacher, Government Secondary School, Nahara
- Mrs. Meenakshi, President, WCWS
- Mrs. Sumitra Devi, President, Mahila Mandal, Nahara
- Mrs. Sushila Devi, Asha Worker
- Mr. Prem Das, Secretary WCWS
- Capt. Dharam Singh Chauhan, Treasurer, WCWS
- Mr. Vijay Sihag, Founder Trustee, Deepak Shiksha Darpan
- Mr. Anoop Verma, Social Worker
- Mr. Bhale Ram, Panchayat Member
- Mr. Anoop Singh, Panchayat Member
- Mr. Jile Singh, Social Worker
- Mr. Jaipal Singh, Social Worker