

The Role of Women

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Nineteen Seventy Five is a historic landmark in the calendar of Women's progress as it has been proclaimed the International Women's Year by a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly. India has also joined the comity of nations to celebrate this in a befitting manner. In order to finalise the programme for the year and to review its implementation, a non-governmental body has been constituted known as the 'National Committee on International Women's Year'. With the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, as the President and eminent women

full integration of women in development and the involvement of women in promotion of world peace.

The achievement of these objectives calls for concerted and intensified action :

- (a) To ensure the full integration of women in the total development effort, especially by emphasizing women's responsibility and important role in economic, social and cultural development at the national, regional and international

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members from academic, public, social and cultural fields, the Committee held its first meeting on December 19, 1974. Mrs. Gandhi emphasised the vital role women have to play in shaping the destiny of the nation and indeed of mankind. The Committee should work out pragmatic programmes which will benefit women and elevate them in society and brighten their image within the country and abroad. For the "International Women's Year 1975", three specific objectives have been laid down by the United Nations Organisation. These are the promotion of equality between men and women,

levels, particularly during the second United Nations Development Decade.

- (b) To recognize the importance of women's increasing contribution to the development of friendly relations and cooperation among states and to the strengthening of world peace.

It may be recalled that since its inception the United Nations has been working for the advancement of women and for providing them equal opportunities in all walks of life. Besides, the "Charter of United Nations" and the "Universal

Declaration of Human Rights" for safeguarding the interests of women, as far back as 1946, the United Nations constituted a "Commission on the Status of Women" followed by several conventions and resolutions (e.g. "Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951", Convention on the Political Rights of Women", 1952, "The Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriage", 1962, the "Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of others", International Covenants on "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights" and "Civil and Political Rights" the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 ; the General Assembly Resolution 2263 (XXII) 1967 "Declaration of Elimination of Discrimination Against Women", Resolution 2542 (XXIV) 1969 on "Declaration on Social Progress and Development", the Resolutions 2626 (XXV) and 2716 (XXV) 1970 on the "International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade").

Despite these provisions and notwithstanding the progress made during the past two decades, a wide gap has persisted all over the world in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of women. Out of 28 General Assemblies of the United Nations, only two have so far been presided over by women. Even up to May 1974, there were only 180 women as against 2369 men delegates in the UN General Assembly. There are still a number of countries where women do not have the right to vote.

It has now been increasingly realised that "Discrimination against women is incompatible with human dignity and with the welfare of the family and of society". It is an "obstacle to the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity". The declaration of 1975 as the Women's International Year, to quote Mr. Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General of the United Nations, "coincides with the time of increasing awareness throughout the world of the extreme importance of the achievements of equali-

ty of men and women, not only as a fundamental principle of human rights, but also as a necessary prerequisite for social and economic development and stimulus for world peace".

In ancient India, particularly during the Vedic Age, women enjoyed a high status in the home as well as outside. Many of them became poetesses, mathematicians and theologians. They had certain measures of freedom and an effective say in the selection of their husbands, as is evident from the social custom of holding "Swayamvaras". Life used to be considered incomplete and imperfect without women. The *Ardhanarishwara* i.e. half male and half female form of Shiva, speaks of the unity and oneness of man and women, the importance attached to women and the equality enjoyed by them. In fact, women in olden days played a significant role in all fields, including the cultural, social, religious and political. Unfortunately, in later centuries, for various reasons, women lost their original positions. The *Purda* system, the practice of *Sati*, child marriage, polygamy, enforced widowhood, the dowry system etc. reduced women to a position of a liability. However, some efforts were made at the beginning of the 19th century to improve the disadvantaged position of women and to remove the social customs, traditions, practices which forced them to live a life of unhealthy discrimination.

With the advent of Independence a new impetus was given to the social reforms for women. The constitution granted them equality of status and opportunity. The Directive Principles empowered the State to make special provisions for the progress of women. There are, in fact, a wide range of constitutional and legal provisions for protecting and safeguarding the interests of women from exploitation etc. Legal disabilities with regard to marriage, inheritance, guardianship, adoption etc. have been removed.

During the past two decades, the country has no doubt made

spectacular strides in promoting the interests of women. The speed with which Indian women have come to the fore-front, has been remarkable and this has had its impact on foreigners. The literacy rate among women has gone up from about 7.9 per cent in 1951 to 18.7 per cent in 1971. During 1946-47 to 1973-74, the enrolment of women went up from 36.8 lakhs to 244.01 lakhs in primary schools, 3.2 lakhs to 45.37 lakhs in middle schools and 0.2 lakhs to 9 lakhs in colleges and the university stage of education.

In the age group of 6-11 years, 66.4 per cent of the female population was in primary schools in 1973-74 as against 24.6 per cent in 1950-51. According to the 1971 census, there were about 3 lakh women graduates in the arts and humanities, 82,000 science graduates, 3,500 engineers, 16,000 doctors etc. The expectation of life among women in 1971 was 45.6 years as against 31.7 years during 1941-50. Women in India have increasingly started venturing into new avenues of public and private employment, such as the Indian Administrative Services, the Indian Foreign Services, the Indian Police Services, as mountaineers, pilots etc. Their invigorating participation in local, State and National politics has also been forthcoming and gaining prominence. India is amongst a few exceptional countries which has woman as her Prime Minister.

From the above, one should not infer that we have come to the end of our endeavours for promoting equality between men and women in the country. In fact there is a wide gap in the opportunities and facilities available to women as compared to men. For instance, even in 1973-74, for every 100 boys, there were 62 girls in Primary schools, 43 girls in middle schools, 36 girls in secondary schools and 31 girls in colleges and university stages schooling. The expectation of life of women as per the 1971 figures is lower than that of men. The percentage of women in Parliament even in 1971 is about 5.5% of the total strength of both the

Houses. The implementation of the constitutional and legal provision for women is not yet fully effective in several fields. There are a host of customs, regulations and practices which are discriminatory against women. In fact a vast field lies before us to ensure justice and reduce the disparities in the opportunities and facilities available to women and make them equal partners in social, economic, political and cultural development. This will entail new determinations and a new approach, devising of appropriate measures to educate public opinion and to direct national aspirations towards the eradication of prejudices and abolition of all other practices which are based on the ideas of inferiority of women".

Woman is indeed a pivot around whom the family, society, rather the whole humanity, moves.

Their role in directing and shaping the destiny of the nation is crucial. With the advancement in science and technology, the world has moved fast. Women have to assume a dynamic role in the changing context of time and locale. It will be too much to expect that the goals and objectives set in the theme of the International Women's Year can be realised by Government efforts alone. It is only with the active participation of the masses, both men and women, - full involvement of the people and all voluntary and public institutions, that the much cherished objectives of the International Women's Year can be effectively attained.

(Courtesy : UNICEF)

POST BASIC COURSES

1. Theatre Nursing—12 months in length. Classes will be taken in twice a year in January and July.

2. Reconstructive Surgical Nursing—12 months' course which will start on July 1, 1975.

For further details please write to the :

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