

# 100 years

## International Women's Day



# AIDWA

(All India Democratic Women's Association)

# 100 Years of International Women's Day

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## **100 Years of March 8: Recalling its Socialist Origins**

-Brinda Karat

One hundred years ago, on August 27 1910, the revolutionary leader Clara Zetkin along with her comrades Alexandra Kollantai and others, moved a resolution at the International Socialist Women's Conference in Copenhagen to observe an "International Women's Day."

### **The Historic Resolution**

The resolution read " In agreement with the class conscious, political and trade union organizations of the proletariat of their respective countries, the Socialist women of all countries will hold each year a Women's Day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage. This demand must be held in conjunction with the entire women's question according to socialist precepts. The Women's Day must have an international character and is to be prepared carefully." The slogan accepted was 'The vote for women will unite our strength in the struggle for Socialism.' At that time no specific date for the observance was decided.

### **The First Observance**

The hundred women delegates from 17 countries representing trade unions, socialist parties, working women's clubs and including the first three women elected to the Finnish Parliament, unanimously adopted the resolution. The following

year, 1911, as a result of the Copenhagen initiative a million men and women marched in Germany, Austria, Denmark, Switzerland and some other European countries. The date chosen was March 19 to commemorate the 1848 revolution when there was an armed uprising against the Prussian king. Describing the demonstrations Alexandra Kollantai later elected the first woman member of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party wrote “. (the demonstrations) exceeded all expectations. Germany and Austria... was one seething trembling sea of women. Meetings were organized everywhere... in the small towns and even in the villages, halls were packed so full that they had to ask male workers to give up their places for women.... During the largest demonstration in which 30,000 were taking part, the police decided to remove the demonstrator's banners: the women workers made a stand. In the scuffle that followed, bloodshed was averted only with the help of Socialist deputies...”

In Russia, women observed the day on the last Sunday of February according to the Russian calendar which according to the English calendar was March 8. In America, Socialist women had already observed a National Women's Day in 1908, the first of its kind when large demonstrations took place calling for the vote and for economic rights of women. Women workers in garment factories were staging militant strikes facing police repression and their cause was taken up as part of Women's day celebrations. The imperialist preparations for war added a new dimension to an international day cutting across national boundaries. Women across countries called for

peace against war. It was in 1913 that International Women's day was transferred to March 8.

But the following year the world war broke out. In 1915 and 1916 although efforts were made to observe the day, the warmongers in all countries hounded those who dared to call for peace and public demonstrations were banned. According to Kollantai, the only demonstration for March 8 that could be held in that period was in Norway when some women delegates could assemble and courageously adopt a resolution for peace.

### **Women's Day, 1917**

Then came the great year of 1917. The storm against the hated Tsarist rule started from the workers' quarters in Petrograd when women workers started mobilizing for March 8. (According to the Russian calendar the date was February 23 and according to the Julian calendar used in other countries it was March 8)). Women workers, wives of soldiers, working class housewives, victims of hunger and the trials of war poured out on to the streets of Petrograd. They denounced the war, they demanded an end to their humiliation they called for peace and bread. Gathering strength and passion they swept through the streets joined by workers and soldiers. It was these women demonstrations on March 8 that triggered the historic peoples upsurge heralding the beginning of the tumultuous and revolutionary events which led to the establishment of the first Socialist State in the world. The women of Petrograd and elsewhere in Tsarist Russia through their actions substantiated the comments made by Karl Marx in a 12 December 1868

letter to Ludwig Kudelmann "Everyone who knows anything of history also knows that great social revolutions are impossible without the feminine ferment."

### **Subsequent developments**

In 1922, the first Workers State declared a holiday on March 8 to mark Women's Day. That was also the year when it was first celebrated in China. The observance of the day gained momentum. In India the first time it was observed was in 1931 on the occasion of the Lahore Conference of Asian Women for Equality. A resolution demanding women's equality and linking women's equality to the freedom of nations was adopted.

Whereas left wing women's organizations along with women in Socialist countries continued the tradition of observing women's day, from the sixties onwards as the "feminist wave" hit the United States and much of Europe, the observance of the day became more widespread and finally led the United Nations to adopt a resolution in 1975 officially declaring March 8 as International Women's day. Today countries across the world observe March 8. While this is welcome, it also provides the ground for a dilution of the socialist origins of March 8, of its history as the symbol of struggles of women particularly working women in challenging exploitative capitalist structures. It is important to recall the socialist origins of March 8 and to prevent its cooption into a market driven celebration of frivolous femininity.

## **Two Aspects**

There are two aspects to the history of March 8. The first and most important is the early understanding of the importance of organizing women workers in particular and women belonging to the working classes in general against capitalist exploitation and to fight for the Socialist alternative. The recognition of the key role that proletarian women must play in the development of women's movements for emancipation was based on the militant actions of working class women across Europe, in Russia and in the United States. Drawn into industry in the worst possible conditions, women and children's labour was used to make super profits. In the first volume of Capital Marx writes, "The labour of women and children was therefore the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and labourers was forthwith changed into a means for increasing the number of wage-labourers by enrolling under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman's family without distinction of age or sex." Socialist women activists were closely linked with efforts to build up organized resistance among working women against their exploitation. The first International under the leadership of Marx and Engels gave specific directions to all its branches to fight for workers rights including women workers and issued a detailed questionnaire to gain proper information to formulate the demands. These included an eight-hour day for reforms in the slave like working conditions of women and children. Marx's daughter Eleanor played an active role in building organizations of working women in the factories of East London. In 1888 London match girls who made up the entire workforce in the industry from young teenagers to

grandmothers struck work. Trade unions supported them and they won major concessions giving a big boost to women workers organizations and movements. In the United States garment and textile workers similarly were organizing themselves with the support of Socialist women winning several struggles. These struggles intensified at the beginning of the century and provided the backdrop to the March 8 observance. The core of the observance was to highlight the fight against capitalism and the crucial role of working women in that fight.

Writings of Socialist women at the time also point to the Herculean efforts that they had to make to convince their male comrades of the importance of a separate observance for women, which was often termed as a move, which would divide the working class. In the event they succeeded. Later in 1920, Lenin in his famous conversations with Zetkin scathingly criticised those within the socialist organizations and trade unions who did not recognize the importance of approaching women as women within the working classes. Those lessons are equally relevant today.

A second equally significant development was taking place. Under the leadership of liberal bourgeois women's organizations and groups a militant women's movement for the political vote for women was sweeping Britain and the United States and some European countries. Known as the suffragette movement, educated women from the elite classes took to the streets in militant actions for the vote. What should be the Socialist women's approach to the movement? A hundred



years later the answer seems obvious. But at that time, Socialist women led by Clara Zetkin had to wage a strong battle within the ranks of the Socialists to have a resolution adopted to support women's right to vote on equal terms as men. Voices at that time within the second International opposed the demand saying it would lead to a strong backlash from the Church and would unnecessarily hinder the movements of the workers who were also fighting for the right to vote, which was granted in most countries only to the propertied classes. Others questioned the timing of the demand saying it would divide the workers who would take time to recognize the legitimacy of the demand. Still others felt it would be diversionary and falling into the trap of the ruling classes who wanted to deflect attention from class struggle. All these differing opinions came out in the open at the time of the first meeting in 1907 of Socialist women in Stuttgart preceding the 1910 meeting in Copenhagen where the March 8 resolution was adopted. The 1907 Stuttgart meeting was attended by 58 women. They were to expect to adopt a resolution and then place it in the wider meeting of the Second International which was being held at the same time attended by over 900 delegates. It was in this respect that the intervention of women leaders like Clara Zetkin who clearly spelt out the links between class struggle and taking that struggle forward through the exercise of the vote and the direct participation of the masses of women in democratic processes was so significant. Just because women of elite classes raise a demand does not mean that the demand has no relevance to the working classes, on the contrary women with socialist consciousness must intervene in the struggle and make the democratic right to vote an instrument to turn against

the ruling classes. This argument won the day and the resolution for socialist support to the universal right to vote without distinction was passed by 47 votes against 11. The main conference also accepted the resolution and henceforth all Socialists were bound to support women's struggles for the vote. It was in this background that we understand the significance of the slogan given at the time of the adoption of the historic resolution for the observance of March 8 in 1910 "the vote for women will unite our strength in the struggle for Socialism.' Just ten years later, one of the first steps taken by the Constituent Assembly which took power after the overthrow of the tsar was to grant women in Russia the unconditional right to vote, becoming the first country to do so.

These two aspects of the March 8 observance, namely the economic and the political intertwined to form a solid platform for action which influenced large masses of women which went beyond the times in which the call was given. The 100 women assembled in Copenhagen could hardly have imagined that their call for an international women's day would resonate through the world even 100 years later. The relevance of the nature of the initiative remains as significant as it was then.

### **Contemporary Significance**

The struggle against capitalism and in particular its relentless drive for super profits in the neo-liberal framework is more urgent than ever. The drive for militarisation, the violence of war and aggression of the imperialist powers recall the need for the kind of heroic mobilizations of women across national boundaries against the First World War. Unfortunately and

deeply regrettably, the de-ideologisation of contemporary women's movements led by feminist groups in different countries have played into capitalist driven cultures which denigrate organized resistance and women's collective action as outdated and unnecessary. An earlier initiative taken by some Canadian women's groups who had organized a platform called the World March of Women focussed against imperialism and the impact of globalisation on the lives of women, weakened with the focus shifting to issues connected with female sexuality mainly on the rights of homosexual and lesbian groups. The right of a woman over her own body and expression of her sexual preferences has become the key issue, interpreted in a narrow way for a substantial section of women activists including in India. They do not see these issues as part of a wider social problem. Conversely, they present all other problems as appendages to the issues concerning women's sexuality, which to them is the main social contradiction through which all others are affected. They refuse to see the class forces which subordinate women in new ways. Under imperialist globalisation we are seeing new forms of women's subordination and sexual oppression and exploitation. The exponential increase in trafficking, in the sale of children for sex, in the increasing number of women being forced into prostitution due to war, displacement, poverty. This requires a concerted and united movement against aggression, against the international powerful drug and mafia lobbies which operate with political patronage. In India the most medieval forms of honour killings flourish within a continuing caste system. Certainly Indian women's movements will have to confront the caste system in any strategy for women's emancipation. In

other words if we have to fight against the most blatant and brutal forms of control over a woman's body as shown in the reactionary fatwas of caste panchayats against women (and men) who dare to challenge caste boundaries in questions of personal relations, we have to take into account the socio-economic conditions, such as the caste system. Unfortunately those who see themselves as champions of women's autonomy are unable to see these crucial links and in their hostility to organized leftwing women's mobilizations prove themselves to be on the side of the establishment.

### **Conclusion**

International Women's day is a symbol of the struggle for women's emancipation against the shackles of capitalism and the patriarchal cultures it strengthens. We know that in India at the stage of democratic demands and struggles we need to mobilize the widest sections of women on a platform for equality. At the same time we also know that such mobilizations can be successful only if they have as their core the voices and demands of the oppressed and exploited working women, the dalits, tribals, the crores of women in the rural and urban unorganised sector who make up the mass of the Indian women and who have the highest stakes in changing the present system of inequalities. On this March 8, celebrating 100 years of its observance this is what we must pledge to take that struggle forward.

***Long Live March 8!***  
***Long Live Clara Zetkin!!***

## **History, Inspiration and Relevance on the Centenary of International Women's Day**

-Shyamali Gupta

-Chandrakala Pandey

This is 2010, we have not only entered 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we have also completed one decade of the same International Women's Day began to be celebrated in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the month of March itself and 8<sup>th</sup> March was declared as International Working Women's Day. If we look at the long duration of these 100 years, we shall see many changes at the global level. During this period of the emergence and fall of Soviet Union, there is socialist women's movement on one side which is engaged in the struggle of liberating the women of the whole world from all kinds of exploitation, oppression and humiliation and on the other side, there are some streams of multifaceted women's movements which are active in misleading the class-consciousness of the women's movement. The social-cultural tide of globalisation is conspiring to decimate the very identity of women. The masses of women have been marginalized due to the savage/severe attacks of capitalism, imperialism, fascism and fundamentalism and if we want their all round progress, the women belonging to the various sections of society will have to come forward and struggle unitedly for their complete liberation. This year when we celebrate International Women's Day, it is imperative for us to know its history. Today if

women have advanced in any field of life, the credit for laying the foundation stone of their progress goes to the martyrdom of our socialist revolutionary women.

### **The Story of March 8**

The story of struggles against the employers and patriarchal values narrates the history of 8<sup>th</sup> March. The industrial revolution which took place in the western countries of the world during the mid-nineteenth century took the women out of their homes and showed them the outside world. They started working in the big factories of the cities on a large scale, economic necessity drew them to social production. Though this gave them the opportunity to know the outside world, but this led to their double exploitation. The endless unrecognised labour in the house on one side and the work in the factories on inhuman terms on the other! They worked from 14 to 16 hours, could not see the sunlight for many days at a stretch and were victim to many kinds of diseases in the damp, dark and unhealthy workshops or factories. Condemned to untimely old age, the average age of working women was reduced to 36 years only. But their labour was not given any importance. Their wage was also half in comparison to the men's wage while they were often responsible for running the household too. Many a time they also had to be victims of physical exploitation. The women had to face innumerable problems in the factories. The only positive aspect was that they realized one another's problems and also the power of unity. Unending working hours, inhuman terms and conditions of work and the pittance they got for their work motivated the women workers

of America to protest and struggle against all this. Spontaneous movements started from about 1820 itself. These were particularly led by the textile workers. The first big strike took place in 1845 on the demand to reduce working hours from 16 to 10 and 5000 women workers participated in it. There was an intense struggle, but this demand was accepted. After this, there were movements in many cities of the world, including England, where participation of the women was notable. Britain was also disturbed by the spate of strikes by industrial workers in 1888 – 89. The women working in the match-box factories of London initiated the movement which spread to the whole unorganised sector, which the employers threw them out of work, there was so much of discontentment that the middle class and intellectuals also came out in their support and donations were collected to help the striking workers. The employers were forced to take them back on work. The spark that was lit by the women workers of match-box industry spread and the fire engulfed the women working in cigar, cotton-textiles, jute, biscuits, jam factories etc. and they all became members of the union.

In 1880 which the “ American trade union, American Federation of Labour”, refused to give membership to women they organized themselves and formed their own separate organization “The Women’s Trade Union League” teachers, etc. This organization demanded eight-hour working day, good school for the children, housing and improvement in the conditions of household work. Also, in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this organization, with the help of nationally famous trade union. ‘Industrial workers of the World’, carried

out two powerful struggles which proved to be pioneers in the international trade union and women's movement. The first of these struggles was 'Uprising of the 20,000' of 1909 and the second was 'Lawrence Strike'.

The special feature of these struggles was that they tried to link the factories to the colonies for the first time and not only women workers, the workers wives also participated in the strike and fought bravely. In this struggle of 20,000 workers, the women working in the textile industry of New York showed such miraculous courage and struggles. From November 22, 1909, these women workers initiated a strong movement for the right to form a union. Dozens of shirt-sewing women workers did not yield in face of hunger, severe cold and oppression by the administration and stood firm on their demands. The employers even gave assurance to accept some demands, but they continued to fight for the right to form a union. Though this demand was not fulfilled, but this strike in which women played a central role, became a milestone in the history of struggles.

The second struggle in this line was by the garment-manufacturing workers of Lawrence in America and the garment industry of the whole region came to a standstill from January to March 1912. For the first time, the workers rose above the confines of country and language and realized that the language of their hunger and unemployment is the same, their misery is the same and the exploiters have imprisoned the labour and food of all of them in their safes. In this strike, workers belonging to 25 different nationalities and speaking



45 different languages, were united and fighting together, demanded increase in their very low wage and a better life in one voice when under the pressure of continuing struggle the local administration reduced the working hours, the employers were further enraged and reduced the wage. The workers were left with no option except to strive. In a demonstration against this insensitivity and inhumanity of the employers, crowds of women came on the roads and the repression of the police became more severe to stop their slogans, rallies and demonstrations. They started caring the helpless women workers as a result of which some died and some were seriously injured. Anna Lapejha who was leading, was martyred there and them, 600 women were stuffed in the jails. Their children had to be kept in the orphanages. But the struggle bore fruit at last. All the demands of the workers were accepted. Women were in the centre of both these struggles. They had faith that after the dark night, a new dawn was about to arrive, since women had woken up, they hoped to wake up the whole race. They would not allow one person to rule over 10 workers. Sustained by the memory of innumerable martyrs, they were determined to fulfil the dream they had seen of a more filled beautiful life. They would fight for their livelihood and also fill their path with flowers.

Till the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were deprived of the right to vote. In Germany they did not have the right to become member of any political party. In England of those times, only educated and property-owning men could vote. Some upper-middle and middle-class women demanded the right to vote for themselves through the suffragist movement, but both men and women

were deprived of this right. But the workingwomen, rejecting this demand, supported the demand, supported the demand for universal suffrage put up by the Marxist revolutionaries. In the conference of socialist women, "First International" organised in Stuttgart, Germany, famous German comrade Clara Zetkin put her view point vociferously that the fight should be for universal voting right for the workers rather than limited voting right for the middle class women. Women's movement will never forget Clara Zetkin's efforts in this direction since she worked as a farsighted leader in organizing the working women and Co-ordinated efficiently the activities of socialist women organizations throughout Europe. Inspired by her, the women connected with the textile industry of New York particularly women tailors collected in large numbers in Rutgers Square on 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1908 and held a strong protest demonstration. Their demands were: reduce the working hours to 10 hours, ensure security at the work-place and universal suffrage should be made into a law without basing it on gender caste, property or educational qualifications.

On the basis of above demands, the working women formed their own separate organisation wage-earner suffrage League (Workers ' voting right organisation). Encouraged by the mass movement of American working women, Clara Zetkin placed a resolution in the second international conference of socialist women being held in Copenhagen (Denmark) in 1910 that 8<sup>th</sup> March should be recognized as International Women's Day. This day was accepted as a symbol of advancing the movement on an international scale and as a commemoration of the struggle for universal

## **Suffrage and other Demands**

The succession of movements did not stop and at last, the exploited and deprived people of England in 1918 and America in 1919 were victorious and the demand for universal suffrage was accepted as law. Before this the socialist revolution in Russia in 1917 left the whole world behind and implemented the law for universal suffrage for its people. This revolution also proved to be a turning point in the women liberation movement because for the first time in the world, a country included economic, political and gender equality of women in its historic agenda. The Bolshevik govt. gave voting right to the women & also passed such civil and divorced law which established marriage as a voluntary relationship and ended the discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate after this, 8<sup>th</sup> March became a symbol of struggles in all the countries of the world. Now many countries celebrate 8<sup>th</sup> March as International Women's Day. When 1975 was declared as International Women's Year, this day was accorded official acceptance by the United Nations Organisations. Many countries have declared this day as a National Holiday prominent among these countries are China, Armenia, Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Vietnam.

But today some organisations have made 8<sup>th</sup> March a more festival and forgotten that history of sacrifices which the women workers wrote with their sweat and blood. The need of the hour is to remember that glorious heritage and to save our

country from the economic- cultural onslaughts unleashed by the rich countries. Multinational companies are engaged in controlling our markets with the help of their costly and showy goods. Our Govt. is also a party to their conspiracy of ending all the welfare schemes .The mass communication media are imposing a despicable anti women market culture on the people. The need of the hour is that one half of the population of the country should build strong unity within itself to face the dark clouds over the country and to take the real message of 8<sup>th</sup> March to the masses.

Even today, women of the world belonging to various sections celebrate this day with great respect, but it is very important to understand its meaning and political importance in the present situation. The rate at which women's problems are increasing today, the women's movement has to advance in the same proportion so that a solution emerges. There may be difference in various women's movements in terms of ideology and thinking, but they are all agreed on the issue of gender equality.

The wind of globalisation has taken women's movement to a new turning point. The gap between a man and woman has increased due to liberalisation and open market economy policies, and a strong women's movement is going on in all the countries to bridge this gap and to establish women's rights at the level of individual, society and nation. A united struggle is essential to remove gender discrimination and achieve social rights. Fourth International Women's Conference was held in Beijing in 1995 in which accepted in its declaration the resolution presented in International Population and

Development Conference concluded in Cairo in 1994. It was in Beijing only that a discussion was held for the first time on the responsibility of men regarding women's rights and their social role with a view to emphasizing the resolution on population, a request letter was sent on behalf of the Beijing Conference to all the member countries. It is mentioned in the action plan of this Conference. Now it is almost 14 years since the Beijing Conference was held. But even today the issue of women's empowerment remain ignored in many countries of the world. There is still a question mark on the entry of women in the corridors of power in many countries. It seems these corridors are encircled by sharp edged fences so that women keep away. That is why in spite of keeping in the issue of gender equality in the list national priorities, there is an indifference towards solving this issue.

In the area of giving rights to women, the biggest hurdle is that age-old rigid patriarchal social system and code of conduct which has deprived women of their freedom from birth itself. We have to stop the continuous attack on women due to the discriminating policies of all kinds as well as class inequality. In order to achieve the objectives of gender equality and respect for women in society, country and even in family, it is imperative to establish a society which is democratic, non-discriminatory, non-communal and secular. We require a system which ensures security for the women at every place, from inside the house to outside. Since a long time, the demand and hope of women movements has been that women should participate equally with men in making policies, taking decisions formulating principles and fulfilling responsibilities

at any level and in every sphere whether family, society or nation.

In today's world, the women as a community of exploited people, considers imperialist wars the greatest enemy of humanity. War –mongering has impoverished society and civilisation a new. In the name of fighting terrorism, the biggest terrorist power of the world, United States of America, is bent upon destroying the whole world. On the women's day, 8<sup>th</sup> March, we also remember all those great revolutionary socialist women leaders as well as innumerable martyrs who played on active part in the movement of peace against imperialist wars.

After the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, women have had massive participation in the outrage of millions of people in many countries against the Anglo- American military alliance. Even in America and Britain, the participation of women in anti war demonstration has been notable. The echo of anti war movement has been reflected again and again in the celebration of March 8. On the centenary of 8<sup>th</sup> March this year, we wish the victory of humanity, defeating all demonic forces.

Women have never been supporters of terrorism. It is the imperialist who have created terrorism in many countries of the world on order to protect their own vested interests. It is only with the help imperialism that terrorist, militant and fundamentalist forces are raising their head in various countries in the form of caste, 'varna' and communalism. These forces are weaving and spreading conspiracies for destroying

democracy. They are also involved in the trade of weapons and narcotic drugs. Moreover, they are ahead of everyone in sexual oppression of women and human trafficking. Imperialist warmongers use all these reactionary forces to fulfil their political ambitions. It is imperative to suppress international terrorism immediately. The way British and American imperialism is trying to undermine the internal strength and unity of several countries, targeting a particular community, in the name of fighting the reactionary tendencies or solving the basic problems of society. They always unleash acute attacks on the rights of women. In this perspective, 8<sup>th</sup> march this year is the day of taking a pledge for starting a campaign against terrorist and fundamentalist forces of all kinds.

Crime against and oppression of women are on the increase, ranging from domestic violence to national terror. The development of their independent identity is a victim of conspiracies at every step. Suffering the blows of globalisation, women today are reduced to being a vehicle of consumerist culture. From individual they have been converted into commodities. Countries of the third world have become hunting grounds of multinational companies and their industrial institutions. Even when people are not able to procure necessities of life, they are being drawn towards lust for cosmetics, men as well as women of the third world are being caught into the web of consumerism. Values are being eroded in a decadent and broken society; degenerate culture is ruling everywhere. To sum it up, a women's healthy social life – consciousness is a victim of all-round onslaught.

That is why a definite demand of the women's movement is political empowerment which has also been approved in the declaration of Beijing Conference. Even today the presence of women in the policy-making institutions of various countries of the world is negligible. In spite of 33% reservation for women in panchayat and local bodies of our country, the bill for reservation of women was only placed in the parliament once or twice and then put into cold storage or was lying dormant in the Rajya Sabha. It is hanging fire due to the duplicity of and strong objections from all political parties except the left. 8<sup>th</sup> March is the day for taking a pledge for initiating a countrywide movement. Erstwhile U.P.A Govt. did include it in the Minimum Common Programme, but did not take any initiative in getting it passed. Political empowerment of women is not a mere platitude / slogan today. Women representatives are carrying on the work of administration very ably and efficiently as decision-making officials in panchayats and local bodies. As far as political work is concerned admired too. But patriarchal mentality does not want women in decision-making or policy-making positions. Of as an exception, women have gone ahead in one or two areas, men keep on citing that example again and again and do not hesitate to say tauntingly –“ After all, how much more empowerment do women need?” Exceptions can never be taken as general rule. The larger the number of women active in politics, the easier it becomes to bring them to the mainstream. Women can also be most successful in the task of keeping politics free of criminalisation and corruption. On the issue of equal participation of women in running the country, various women organisations of our country are waging tireless struggle. Our



basic objectives is that women should be elected directly by citizens votes in all bodies from panchayat and local bodies to assemblies and parliament. No other alternatives are acceptable to us. The laws regarding women which have been prevalent for a long time are also quite discriminatory and we demand amendments in the same. The question of equal laws and equal rights will have to be brought in the campaign on a priority basis. There has to be a single law for all the oppressed, suppressed, exploited and deprived women cutting across caste, class, community and religion. There are many issues like marriage, divorce, right over property, custody, maintenance etc. which are decided according to specific laws in various religions. As a result, women of a particular community are deprived of many facilities available in the normal criminal and civil laws of the country. We believe that many provision and sub- provisions of the Hindu Code Bill need to be changed. Fifty years back, this code was indeed quite progressive, but in view of the present conditions, it needs to be more transparent and foolproof legal safeguard is required. Between 1996 and 2000, there has been 24-27% increase in crimes against and violent attacks on women. It is not possible to reduce oppression of women nor discrimination against them merely through legislation. For this, it is necessary to wage a comprehensive mass awareness campaign and to make women self-dependent.

Therefore this time we are going to celebrate the golden anniversary of 8<sup>th</sup> March, we demand that women should be given more and more employment opportunities with the objective of making them self- dependent. The country should

take the responsibility of their education, health and even family.

In our country, women live largely in villages even now. In the last 2 decades, the way in which the production –system of agriculture has been revised in the villages, the women engaged in agricultural work have been affected very badly. In many states, farmers have committed suicide in large numbers, individually or with family, due to backbreaking debt, non-remunerative prices of crops and many other economic uncertainties. Suffering from chronic hunger, farmers have been forced to sell their kidneys and other organs of the body while the incidents of flesh trade in girls and women, have been also increased. People, particularly women have been terribly affected by food crises on the one hand and insecure life, mechanisation and retrenchment in the name of new technology on the other. Previously women in the villages could often get agricultural work for about 5 months. Today it is reduced to 2 months; what better example can there be of the adverse consequences of the neo-liberal economic policies?

Multi-national companies have monopolised many agricultural goods and this has made the dream of good agriculture in accessible to the ordinary farmers. Having lost livelihood and employment, men and women are migrating in large numbers from the villages to the cities while employment opportunities have also badly contracted in the latter. Women who are victims of migration and displacement are hanging between insecurity and uncertainty. We call upon the U.P.A govt. to take up the responsibility of food security for women, whether

in villages or cities. The govt. should strengthen the PDS and make it available to every woman. The central govt. did not attach any importance to this subject in the last budget; we demand that the subject should get priority in the coming budget.

About 30 crore people live in the urban areas, while the number of urban woman is about 14 crore. There is increasing demand for livelihood amongst poor women, though the number of poor working women is comparatively less (about 10 percent) in cities than in villages. In cities, workingwomen of this class work in the unorganised sector which is outside the purview of labour security laws of any kind. Under globalisation, women buckling under the pressure of employers, give their labour at very low wages. Market economy is pushing the women working in the unorganised sector to the margin. Due to privatisation, permanent work or workers are being replaced by contract or temporary workers who are hired and fired by the employers on their own terms. Women are not able to save themselves from sexual exploitation at their work places. Women's movement has been demanding laws for the security of women in the unorganised sector. This time also on the 8<sup>th</sup> March, the Women's Day, we are giving a call for united struggle for increasing employment opportunities for the women workers for rural and urban areas. For those women who are not able to get employment opportunity in organised or unorganised sector, we have to put emphasis on the formation of self help groups in order to make these women economic independent. Though there is no alternative to permanent employment, but though these groups,

women become self-dependent to some extent and are also able to develop their organisational ability. Therefore, in order to convert this concept into reality, we will have to make women's movement sharper and more focussed.

Education and health –these two services are extremely necessary for the poor. Even today we are way behind in the sphere of women's education. Most of the illiterates of the world inhabit our country and the majority of these illiterates are women. The gap between male and female literacy is 17% according to the latest census. Literacy campaign itself a big movement and we have to bring girls within the sphere of literacy so that they become awakened emphasising importance of education for all, we have to launch a parallel awareness campaign on health since medical facilities are not accessible to majority of the people even today. There is very little provision for the health of rural women and children in the budget. Whichever scheme are there, are not able to reach the poor women due to weak infrastructure.

Every year, while celebrating 8<sup>th</sup> March, we take a pledge for fighting unitedly for protection of women's rights. No doubt our movement is comprehensive and advanced, but it has some limitations and weakness, our socialist women leaders have put this responsibility on our shoulders as part of their legacy that we should be active in making the condition of the working community, which is economically and socially backward, better and we should never lose sight of the basic objective of changing the society. At present our priority is to unite majority of women in society, while facing the terrible crisis in the

current political, social and cultural environment. The ruling and exploiting classes are fully behind the conspiracy of using deceit, force and manipulation to make the women forget the real meaning of International Women's Day, while everyday there are new onslaught on the identity of women. In order to fight this manifold onslaught, we have to launch a manifold movement. It is our moral responsibility towards the new generation to develop this movement from the perspective of class- struggle and build a glorious future for humanity.

That is why our fight is against imperialism, which is humanity's enemy number one, and against capitalist exploitation.

We pledge to remember this militant day with the objective of full-liberation of the whole humanity, without any discrimination on the basis of gender. Our slogan on this centenary should be:

***Down with imperialism and capitalism!***  
***Down with terrorism and fundamentalism!***  
***Let our objective be a world without exploitation!***  
***Let there be a new world built on the basis of social justice and equality, having a socialist system!***

## Resolution: March 8 2010

-AIDWA

A century after that first call for an International Women's Day, on this March 8 we remember the second International Conference of Socialist Women held at Copenhagen in 1910 where Clara Zetkin, great pioneer of the socialist women's movement proposed that women throughout the world should focus on a particular day each year to press for their demands. We remember those 100 women from 17 countries, representing unions, socialist parties, working women's clubs, who supported Zetkin's resolution that read "*the Socialist women of all countries will hold each year a Women's Day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage. This demand must be handled in conjunction with the entire women's question according to Socialist precepts. The Women's Day must have an international character.*" We remember the first celebration of International Women's Day in 1911 in the words of the revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai about its observance in Germany, "*one seething trembling sea of women...Men stayed home with their children for a change and their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings.*"

On this March 8, we remember that many of the issues that dominated the early years of the International Women's Day movement, - the fight for universal suffrage for women, the fight against war, the fight for social security and care for

AIDWA

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mother and child, the fight against price rises are still part of the movement today. From the demand for suffrage we have moved forward to the demand for representation. For the rest, we need to remember that they remain with us because the system that keeps them alive has still to be brought down. It is for this struggle that the great banner of Women's Day continues to call for solidarity, assertion of rights, and that driving force of militant struggle. For we cannot forget the latent power of March 8 etched forever in history on that most famous March 8 of 1917, when women in Petrograd went on strike demanding *Bread and Peace*, a strike that heralded a revolution and an end to the oppressive Tsarist rule in Russia. It is with the memory and striving of that great force that we continue to carry the message of March 8 each year. Not as ritual, not as mere formalistic observance, not as slaves to empty rhetoric, but as a day to press forward for women's rights.

On this March 8, **we reiterate the commitment of the International Women's Day movement to peace and against war.** From India we send our message of international solidarity to women fighting against imperialist aggressions and wars. If the first years of the International Women's Day raised the banner of peace against world war imposed by rivalry within imperialist powers, we today raise the banner of peace against the concert of war by imperialist powers and its renewed attempt at neo-colonial domination.

On this March 8, as women of India, a country that leads the world in hunger, **we demand a universal right to be free of**

**hunger and food deprivation. We demand food security as part of a basic right to life. We demand employment and the right to livelihood. We demand the right to a life free of violence within and outside the home.**

In all corners of the country, women are today concerned, frightened and angry at the tremendous increase in prices of food. Almost two decades of neo-liberal policies - of deliberate wrecking of the public distribution system, of withholding of food stocks while millions remained hungry, of imposing flawed and arbitrary divisions into BPL and APL thus depriving millions of the poor from access to cheap food grain, of cutbacks in state investment in agriculture, of tardy and inadequate price protections to farmer producers and of pushing them into export crops dependent on the vagaries of international markets – have all resulted in increasing levels of hunger and an erosion of the self sufficiency in food production that was one of the primary objectives of decolonisation. Experience has shown that cutbacks in subsidies to Indian farmers have only resulted in the government paying higher prices to multi-national agribusiness companies for imports required to meet the needs of the country, and rising prices for common people. This year we have been promised the enactment of a National Food Security Act, although in the Union budget, food subsidy has been reduced by over Rs. 400 crore, and the fertiliser subsidy cut by Rs. 3000 crore. The bill that has been proposed by the Government seeks to confine the entitlement to families with BPL cards, and to 25 kg of rice or wheat a month at Rs. 3 a kg. Today a family with an Antyodaya card is entitled to 35 kg of wheat at Rs. 2 a kg,



paying Rs. 70 a month. If the Food Security Act is implemented in its present form, this sum will rise to Rs.75 and the family will get 10 kg less of subsidised food grain. **On this March 8, we demand that the allotment of 35 kg should not be cut to 25 kg in the Food Security Act. We demand that the entitlement of Antyodaya families to receive wheat at Rs. 2 a kg be continued. We demand that the benefits of a mandated food security framework be made universal and not confined to those who have a BPL card.** At a time when controlling the rise in prices of food has become the most urgent need of the day, **we demand withdrawal of the proposed increases in the price of petrol and diesel.**

In a context of growing food insecurity, more and more women are in search of employment. If in the 1990s rural women were hardest hit by growing unemployment leading to a drastic fall in their work participation rates, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, increasing unemployment rates can be seen among both rural and urban women. Where open unemployment rates increased in the first half decade of this century from 1.5 per cent to 3.1 in rural areas, among urban women it increased from 7.1 to 9.1 per cent. It needs to be remembered that in our country, these open unemployment rates hide the much larger proportions of workers who might be able to find employment for just a few days in the year or are forced to accept incomes below subsistence, especially among the 96 per cent of women workers who are unorganised workers. Nor does it include the army of unpaid workers who are counted as employed. While NREGA has offered some relief to rural women in search of work, insufficient financial allocations, delayed payments,

unrealistic task targets and financial irregularities have been subverting rural women workers' entitlements. The problem of urban women's unemployment has remained unaddressed and **we demand employment guarantee for women in both rural and urban areas at minimum wages.**

Addressing issues of food security and work and livelihood are critical necessities for providing a safe environment for women to access their rights and entitlements. Even as the movement has pushed for better laws for women, the implementation of existing laws such as against Dowry and the more recent Domestic Violence Act, as well as PCPNDT Act to check sex selective abortions leave a lot of scope for improvement. As of now, existing provisions as per these laws are not being implemented and those guilty of violations continue to go scot-free. More recent incidents of violence have pointed to the critical need to bring in new legislation as well as amendments to address issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. While recent pronouncements by government have accepted the need for speedy trials and fast track courts the urgent issue of definitions of assault continue to be evaded even as government took speedy measures to propose amendments which have effectively diluted provisions with regard to crimes against women over the last one year.

In addition to violence at home, we note that the biggest threat to women's participation in the democratic process comes from the forces perpetuating terror, and inflicting violence on women in multiple ways. This has to be countered. Moreover, growing attacks on women in conflict situations, including by

state agencies continue to be a matter of concern. Be it in Kashmir or the North East, the Armed Forces have shown scant respect for the civil rights of the people of these states, least of all the women. Women continue to be made the target of attack in caste and religion based violence as also in situations of ethnic and political conflict, as well as state violence.

It is imperative that women are not made victims of false notions of 'honour' and that those responsible for implementing and upholding the law not be allowed to walk away free even as they collude in its violation in their respective areas of jurisdiction. Further, self-proclaimed proponents of the moral brigade inflict their views and retrogressive notions on all and sundry enjoying immunity from the law even as the social climate gets vitiated by their acts of violence as per fundamentalist prescripts.

**We demand that existing provisions with regard to violence and crimes against women be implemented. The definition of crimes be expanded to effectively address the lacunae that exist in the law and that state agencies be made more accountable for violations that occur.**

On this the 100th anniversary of March 8, we, the national women's organizations and groups fighting for equal rights and gender justice resolve to continue the fight against imperialism, and terrorist violence. We resolve to strengthen the struggle for food security, right to work, and women's rights to a life without violence. We call on all peace-loving forces to unite against war, and for a just, humane and equal society.

## **One Hundred Years of IWD: Achievements and Challenges**

- A R Sindhu

The CITU has decided to commemorate in 2010 the centenary of the declaration of International Women's Day. It was in 1910 that the Second International Conference of Socialist Women, held in Copenhagen in August that year, decided to celebrate one day every year, all over the world, to focus on problems of women.

The origin of the women's right movement is very closely linked with the working class movement. A democratic and egalitarian consciousness developed along with the advance of capitalism. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the working class in general and working women in particular were becoming more and more aware of the fact that the end of exploitation is linked with the capture of political power. Thus the universal suffragette movement and the working class movement, which are interlinked, gave birth to the women's movement.

It was against the intolerable working conditions and 12-hour workday that women textile workers of New York City organised themselves to fight, as early as in 1857. They were attacked by the police. Within two years the first women's labour union was formed.

On 28 February 1909, at the initiative of Socialist party of the

US, socialist women organized demonstrations all over the country, demanding political rights for working women along with the slogan of better working conditions. Later in the year, the women shirtwaist workers of the International Ladies Garment workers union organized the first strike, 'the uprising of the twenty thousand', which lasted 13 weeks.

“The International Ladies Garment Workers Union had a mere 1000 members before the strike began, but in first five days of the strike, 19,000 workers swamped the union's offices with requests to join. Striking women, many of them in their teens, formed picket lines outside their workplaces, trying to convince the scabs to join them. The strikers were beaten and bruised by police and hired thugs. Public opinion swung strongly in favour of the women strikers”, writes Sarah Stephan.

Thousands of women all over the world supported the strike. The strike was against the miserable working conditions, of course, but also for the recognition of their union. Rallies, demonstration and programmes highlighting the issues of women were held all over the world during that period. Womens' suffrage was in the highlight.

In 1910 the Second Congress of socialist women, taking note of the situation, emphasizing the special problems of women and importance of taking these away from bourgeois intellectual discussion tables to the streets where the workers fight for their rights, resolved to observe a day for women. The observance was started by socialist women and other groups

the world over, on the last Sunday in February and later on 8 March. Observance of 8 March in 1917 in Tsarist Russia, was the beginning of protests which resulted in the 'Great October Revolution, setting up the first socialist society. Later in 1975 the UN also recognized the International Women's Day, 8 March.

Thus International Women's Day has a legacy of women's struggle, for a decent life and decent work and to achieve this, their political rights. International Women's Day had put the special problems of women and their right in development as well as the political process, onto the agenda. One hundred years ago the demands were for an 8-hour working day, equal wages and universal suffrage.

Now a century later, women have advanced in many spheres, but during these years, particularly after the advent of imperialist globalization, there is a concerted effort to strip the IWD of its class and political content. Now it is highly commercialized and marketed to sell products ranging from kitchen utensils to ornaments and beauty products. There is also the propaganda that the class struggle is 'non inclusive' of the problems of women and other marginalised sections, therefore it needs to be separated from the class content.

It is our responsibility to reassert for our rights as a citizen, as a worker and as a woman through struggles, both independently and jointly with others... That is why the CITU has decided to celebrate this occasion by taking up a campaign focusing on the three demands of equal wages, 8 hours

working day and 33% reservation for women in legislatures, which are directly linked to our demands a hundred years ago. Statistics of the UN and other agencies show that 70% of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty the world over are female. According to the UN, women do more than 67% of the hours of work done in the world, earn only 10% of the world's income and own only 1% of the world's property. The value of unremunerated work was estimated at about \$16 billion, from which \$11 billion represents the invisible contribution of women. Women are paid 30-40% less than men for comparable work, on an average.

In the world of work in India, female share of non-agricultural wage employment is only 17%. Participation of women in the workforce is only 13.9% in the urban sector and 29.9% in the rural sector. Women's wage rates are, on an average only 75 % of men's wage rates and constitute only 25% of the family income. Although 60-80% of the food in most developing countries is produced by women, in no Indian State do women and men earn equal wages in agriculture.

The propaganda of women's empowerment, feminisation of labour etc., as a result of 'globalisation' by its advocates, proved to be false and women's work participation rate is stagnant, in recent years. The only increase of women's work is in the service sector, that too in the very low paid, unskilled domestic work. New forms of exploitation such as 'marriage bonds' are also being tried to exploit women.

There are some other shocking statistics regarding the social

status of women in India. The child sex ratio has dropped from 945 females per 1000 males in 1991 to 927 females per 1000 males in 2001. The United Nations Children's Fund, estimated that up to 50 million girls and women are 'missing' from India's population because of killing of the female foetus or high mortality of the girl child due to lack of proper care. Close to 245 million Indian women lack the basic capability to read and write. Adult literacy rates for ages 15 and above for female for the year 2000 were 46.4%. The average nutritional intake of women is 1400 calories daily. The necessary requirement is approximately 2200 calories. 92% of women in India suffer from gynecological problems. 300 women die every day due to childbirth and pregnancy related causes. The maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births in the year 1995 was 440.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) predicted that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010. NCRB 'Crime in India, 2002', states that every 3.5 minutes, 1 crime was committed against women in India. In 2002, 45 women were raped every day, one woman every 32 minutes. 121 women were sexually harassed every day, one woman every 12 minutes. 21 women were murdered every day due to dowry, one woman every 66 minutes. 135 women were tortured by their husbands and in-laws every day, one woman every 11 minutes. Between 1997 and 2002, incidents of rape increased by 6.7%, female foeticide increased by 49.2% and sexual harassment increased by 20.6%.



The universal women's suffrage achieved by the struggles of our ancestors, gave women the right to vote, but an equal share in the decision making process and the bodies remains unfulfilled. Even now in some countries women do not have the right to vote and contest elections. There are other rights - to work, to study, to have equal marriage rights, the right to own and inherit property, right to drive, to have an abortion, so on which are yet to be achieved legally, in many parts of the world. The whole question of housework is addressed nowhere in the world except for socialist countries.

After 60 years of our Republic, women occupy only 9% of parliamentary seats, and less than 4% seats in High Courts and Supreme Court, in our country. This shows that universal voting rights are only a primary step towards women's equality. It is necessary to have a share in decision-making – for this we need other means such as reservation in elected bodies. The 73rd Constitutional amendment, which gave 33% reservation in posts in all elected Panchayati Raj institutions to women has proven to be a powerful instrument for empowerment of women in a socially backward country like India. It has resulted in over one million women participating in decision making at the local level.

The experience shows that although there was very strong opposition by feudal society to the very concept of women having political power, particularly dalit and downtrodden women, the experiment was very successful. In many states, particularly in left ruled states, the number of elected women is now more than 33%, with women winning in general,

unreserved seats. This has been further advanced by the demand for 50% reservation in local bodies, which has already been implemented by some state governments and is being processed by the Central government.

The demand of 33% women's reservation in Parliament and state assemblies is faced with much stronger opposition. Except for the left parties, no other political party is supporting this demand firmly. It is very important to have a strong movement to build enough pressure for this legislation. Unless and until the working class movement takes the lead it will be difficult to achieve this.

The neo liberal economic policies implemented in India have undermined all the existing labour laws. The first and foremost demand achieved by the world working class movement, for an 8-hour working day, is under severe attack in our country, in the name of 'labour market flexibility'. Earlier, it was a problem of implementation of the existing laws. Now the government has declared a policy shift, through the Second National Commission on Labour and other policy recommending forums. The Economic Survey, before the last budget, clearly suggested the increase in working hours upto 12. This has to be fought tooth and nail.

At a time when the capitalist system is in a deep prolonged crisis, it is very clear that it will try to overcome this by intensifying its exploitation. This exposure of the inherent unviability of the capitalist system gives the working class movement an opportunity to go on the offensive ideologically

and politically.

It is very encouraging that women's participation in the working class struggle and trade union activities is increasing continuously, as reported in the All India Convention of Working Women. Even middle class white-collar women are actively leading many struggles and strikes, as seen recently in the banking, insurance and health sectors. They are not only in the forefront of the struggles at the workplace but also vocal in the struggle for their rights within the trade union.

The observance of anniversaries and days should not be ritualistic. Whether it involves holding meetings and rallies, or distributing materials to the needy, it should always be an occasion to reassert the rights won through centuries of struggles and to advance them further. This occasion of the centenary of the declaration of International Women's Day gives us this opportunity. Let us put all our energy to utilize it to further advance the working class movement by advancing the struggle of women workers for equal rights.

# **International Day of Solidarity**

**Right to Food  
Against Price Rise**

**Right to Work  
Against Jobless Growth**

**Right to a Violence Free Life  
Within and Outside the Home**

**Right to Peace and Well Being  
Say No to War**

## **Long Live March 8!!!**

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