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Jamia Millia Islamia

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SWAN

International Conference

On

**Gender, Community and Violence : Changing Mindsets for Empowering the
Women of South Asia**

Organized by

Dr KR Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies

Jamia Millia Islamia

&

SWAN (South Asia Women's Network)

Date

15-16 April, 2015

Venue

Mir Anees Hall, Jamia Millia Islamia

Concept Note

CONCEPT NOTE

The women of South Asia face common problems including poverty, poor maternal and child health, low educational achievements and illiteracy, violence and social injustice, economic discrimination, lack of ownership or inadequate control over resources, tremendous vulnerability during and after environmental disasters and armed conflicts. It is important to recognize that these issues pertaining to women are common to all communities, religious beliefs and ethnic groups across South Asia, and have defied solution despite decades of effort by the respective governments of each country. The ongoing and overlapping financial, economic, ecological and crises of political instability have seriously weakened the capacity of the government of respective countries to overcome these problems. Despite several outstanding examples of individual and collective achievements by women across South Asia, women still constitute a large body of underprivileged citizens, surviving within the limits of an environment that is increasingly hostile and rapidly degrading.

Essentially, the firmly entrenched patriarchal mind-set and patriarchal system has ensured women's subordinate role within family and society. This has exposed women to violence in its worst forms, has seriously reduced access of the girl child to educational facilities, and of mothers to healthcare including maternal health-care. Patriarchy and violence, including threats of violence, erode the very foundations of democracy and gender justice, thereby preventing the exercise and enjoyment of rights by women and other weaker sections of society. In this way they undermine and negate the objectives of constitutional and legal provisions favouring gender equality, and obstruct the advancement and empowerment of women in social, political and economic spheres of activity.

In recent years violence against women has drawn wide media attention in many countries across South Asia, but the scope and seriousness of this problem continues to be largely denied. Innumerable acts of violence perpetrated against women and children range from domestic violence and battering, sex selective abortions, incest, marital rape and dowry related violence, rape, honour killings, acid attacks, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation including trafficking and forced prostitution. In situations of armed conflict, women and girls become easy targets for attack, mistreatment and even systematic rape. It is important to understand the causes of violence against women and the dynamics of its linkages with other sectors such as health, psycho-social issues, poverty alleviation and economic development. Violence against women reduces women's and girls' opportunities and capacity to work outside their homes, reduces their mobility and so their access to education and information. Hence violence against women, by leaving women out of the development process, is a major constraint in bringing in sustainable development for the countries and region of South Asia.

Threats to peace, whether conventional or non-conventional, internal or external, have a disproportionately adverse impact on all marginalized sections of society, most particularly on women and children. Women face discrimination and repression during war and conflict situations, including violence and forced exclusion from education. Women Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees are exposed to risks of rape, human trafficking, and sexual harassment, they lack access to justice and legal aid is inadequate, especially since women law enforcement personnel are most often not available to make legal aid women- friendly. Access to education, and health services such as maternal and reproductive health care, are limited or absent. In war and conflict zones, women without male earning members are overburdened with providing for the family amidst prevailing stagnated economic activities.

No doubt governments across South Asia are making efforts to achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Even though these efforts have yielded positive results, the inability of the MDGs to take a holistic approach, or to go beyond the growth-oriented model of development to address issues of inequality, has led to the persistence of these crises, and, in particular, has failed to address the serious problems facing the women of South Asia. Hence, the issue of gender equality and gender equity, women's rights and women's empowerment are central and fundamentally important, even a prerequisite for bringing in sustainable development through the post-2015 Development Agenda. Further, gender equality, with justice, respect and dignity for all women, together with democratic and inclusive good governance, are essential and inalienable factors for empowerment of women and thus, bringing in sustainable development. Gender empowerment and gender equality has so far been viewed essentially as a rights issue. Now the time has come that the Governments of South Asia need to recognize and accept the important economic dimension of the societal transformation that can be achieved through gender empowerment.

However, the problems facing the women of South Asia cannot be dealt with in isolation. State laws and international agreements are important and necessary, but these are not enough. The patriarchal mind-set and hierarchy has ensured that most government policies have been gender-blind in their formulation and implementation, failing to recognise, leave alone give due importance to the specific needs of women in order to help them overcome their disadvantaged position in society. This in turn has further strengthened patriarchal norms and has denied to most women any substantial or substantive benefit from the process of economic development across and within the nations of South Asia. What is needed more than anything else is an integrated approach to change mindsets and attitudes, from political leaders to activists, to journalists, to parents and all citizens.

Objectives and Outcomes : The principal objective of this Conference is to focus on the issue of the mindset change needed for bringing in gender equality, gender empowerment and sustainable development in South Asia. It is crucial to usher in this paradigm shift in mindset across the board : through the media, through participation of women in peace-building and conflict resolution, through educational curricula and the process of lifelong education, through inclusive good governance and elimination of violence against women. Mindset change has to be inclusive (all genders, adolescents and children). Mindset change, in order to have a positive impact on reduction and elimination of violence against women, should involve men and youth as part of the solution, so that they are ready and willing to provide every opportunity to women to participate as equal partners in the process of change that they seek.

In pursuit of this objective, the major aim of this Conference is to agree upon and propose innovative initiatives that need to be taken at the grass roots, community and policy-making levels across South Asia, so as to create sustainable models for the future, bringing in the centrality of women's empowerment as an intrinsic part of this process. Through this conference, the organisers seek to build consensus among all stakeholders on adopting non-violence as the methodology of choice for all situations; to support the role of women as peace leaders through appropriate capacity-building; to ensure that women and the girl-child have easy and sufficient access to education and life-long learning; to ensure adequate representation of women in all mechanisms and institutions of governance. Last but not the least, one of the major aims of organizing this conference in the university is to educate the younger generation on the nature of peace and avoidance of conflict, including through the promotion of tolerance and coexistence across different cultures, religions and ethnicities and their role in promoting gender equality and empowerment.

The Conference will focus on policy recommendations, advocacy programmes and networking in order to achieve these objectives. The organisers propose to publish the papers and agreed outcome of the Conference.

This Conference, envisaged in SWAN's Thimphu Declaration adopted at its Sixth Annual Conference on 1-2 September 2014, is being organized in fulfillment of the commitment undertaken by the Convenors, Professor Veena Sikri and Dr Sabiha Hussain, Associate Professor, a founder-member of SWAN who has been looking after the issue of elimination of violence against women in South Asia.

Participants : The participants in this international Conference include high dignitaries, parliamentarians, academicians, policy makers, gender activists and NGO leaders, and representatives from the judiciary from India and partner South Asian countries : Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Conference Sessions :

- Violence Against Women : Impact and Challenges in its elimination, including through seeking justice;
- Governance and Its Structures;
- Education : new approaches for changing mindsets;
- Women as Factors for Tolerance and Peace;
- Media Art and Culture : Important Tools for Changing mindsets;
- Women-centric patterns for socio-economic empowerment and development;
- Bringing Men on Board for Empowering Women.

Convenor : Professor Veena Sikri, Founder and Convenor, South Asia Women's Network (SWAN), New Delhi

Convenor :Dr Sabiha Hussain, Associate Professor, KR Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

KR Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies, conceived and established by Prof. Mushirul Hasan, Vice-Chancellor, Jamia Millia Islamia, became operational in February 2005. It was formally inaugurated by Ms. Kumari Selja, Hon' Minister for State, Ministry of Urban Employment and Poverty Alleviation, Government of India, in the presence of Dr. K. R. Narayanan, former President of India. The Centre aims at generating academic debates and discussions, formulating them in a non-partisan and plural manner within a framework of egalitarian social solidarity as an ideal. The Centre's primary objectives are to generate awareness on the socio-economic, political, and cultural issues pertaining to Dalits, Minorities, and marginalized and socially excluded sections of the population. It aims to achieve this by encouraging inter-disciplinary research and creating various forms of intellectual platform for disseminating views and opinions concerning Dalit and Minority issues.

South Asia Women's Network (SWAN) brings together nine countries of South Asia : Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. SWAN coordinates its work through eight sectoral networks, also called SWANs, covering the sectors of Environment; Arts and Literature; Women in Peacemaking; Health, Nutrition and Food Sovereignty; Education; Crafts and Textiles; Finance, Livelihoods and Entrepreneurship Development; and Women in Media. SWAN was established in March 2009 at the Conference on "Women of South Asia : Partners in Development" convened at Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi. SWAN emphasises the importance of gender empowerment as the key to sustainable

economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability in South Asia. At SWAN's Fifth Annual Conference in Colombo in August 2013, SWAN agreed upon and adopted its "Roadmap for Sustainable Development for the Women of South Asia".