Columns
Social Justice



All the young women who participated in our program for International Women's Day declare, “The third millennium is ours!” (Courtesy of Dorothy Fernandes)



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This year, as in every year, the month of March made me pause, ponder, and reflect on how far we as women have moved ahead. It is because of our celebration of International Women's Day — this year on March 8. This year the celebration fell on the festival of "Holi" (the festival of colors), when everyone throws perfumed colored powder on anyone they meet.

The evening before that, we commemorated the "Holika Dahan," when Holika was burned in the bonfire in which she tried to kill her nephew, Prahlad. It signifies the triumph of righteousness over sin. Here in India, it is the festival of spring, the festival of love. It celebrates the eternal and divine love of the gods Radha and Krishna.

This year, International Women's Day coincided with the festival of Holi. It was significant for us women on the periphery who throughout the year have the drudgery of always being at the giving end. It was a time to celebrate our joy at being positive contributors to our society.



At our 2023 celebration of International Women's Day, coinciding with Holi, India's festival of colors, women cover each other in color, to symbolize coloring their lives. (Courtesy of Dorothy Fernandes)

Now and then I wonder why we spend so much time in preparations for that one day. And — ironically — at times we unconsciously have some male figure to be the chief guest for the day!

The journey of working with women has exposed me to the subtle manner in which patriarchy is at play in our lives and how we function. Some of the recent events in our country and around the globe have made me ask this very pertinent question: *When will we women wake up and collectively challenge patriarchy?*

It is so obvious to me that many of us women also operate from a patriarchal mindset, in the way we function and fulfill our responsibilities.

Why is it that we always elect a man for a leadership role in a crowd of women and minority groups? Why is it that we employ the hierarchical "pyramid model" in all forms of governance, and not the feminine "circular model" where we are all equal?

But our contribution — though maybe small in the eyes of the guardians of patriarchy — is that we have made significant moves in shaping our world around us. So we decided to really celebrate this year.



As the women arrive for the celebration of International Women's Day, they each add color to a white cloth, to imprint their contribution to the world. (Courtesy of Dorothy Fernandes)

We at "Aashray Abhiyan" (the name of our organization that campaigns for shelter rights) decided that we will make this occasion a time of joy, happiness and color. As the women entered the hall, we had a white cloth on the stage signifying our world; each of them dipped their hands in color and left the imprint of their hands on the cloth, signifying their contribution to the world.

It was so encouraging to us that every one of them was happy to leave their imprint, consciously becoming aware of what their contribution has been to their families, their society and the world at large.

As the program unfolded, the hidden potentials and talents of the young women were depicted in a realistic manner. The topics they chose to display were "Child marriage," "Dowry deaths," "Mobile as a hindrance to studies" and "Living our dreams." These are common issues that we have been witnessing over the years but

the manner in which they were depicted was very moving.

It also made us aware that the young women of today are not going to tolerate any of these practices. They vehemently cried out that *enough is enough*, that *we need a change*, that *we have dreams that we want to be realized*. No more discrimination! And the most powerful message: *If we do not have daughters, from where will the daughters-in-law come?*



Young women created displays for the celebration of International Women's Day to signify the causes they wanted to underline. This display says, "No to child marriage." (Courtesy of Dorothy Fernandes)

The challenge that these young women have taken on for themselves was moving; we watched as they gave a strong message to the older members in the hall. *We are going to change this; it cannot be so; why is a woman's worth determined by the amount of dowry her parents can offer? Why can't we be married even if we do not*

have the money?

This opened our hearts to the sentiments that lie deep down in the heart of every young woman. It's a challenge to motivate the parents and to listen to the voice of these budding young women, their dreams, their aspirations, their future.

How are we going to resolve these issues? How do we channel these dreams to fulfillment?

One of the most important ways forward is to enforce the law that ancestral property is to be equally shared among all children, both boys or girls. Some parents think that since the girls are given a dowry, they do not need to get a share in the ancestral property.

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This is going to be a long battle, because the patriarchal mindset has been operational for two centuries, and to erase this from the minds of our people is not going to be easy or pleasant. Even today, those of us who work in different spheres are constantly battling such mindsets.

Somehow, men — both outside and within the church — think that it is their monopoly to look down upon the leadership of women, or not to consider women as being on a par with them. Often women have to be doubly empowered and to walk with an extra sense of alertness, to be creating their own spaces and walking that path with a resilience that keeps them strong and undisturbed by their male counterparts.

We are determined to work with the young women gradually yet steadily, helping them to believe in themselves, identify their self worth, dip into their resources, and move ahead without being affected by what happens.

It's a long journey to freedom. Every step matters and we will make this journey undeterred.