

ONE LAKH AIDWA WOMEN IN INDIA HIT THE STREETS IN PROTESTS ON AUGUST 28

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The year 2020 has been one of serious challenges. Masses of the poor and marginalized sections are still trying to put the pieces of their lives together. Pieces that have been scattered by the policies of the arrogant and insensitive Modi government. Everyone is trying to find ways and means of adjusting their daily lives to overcome the obstacles caused by the unprecedented Covid-19 upheaval. The stories of the disaster caused in women's lives are heart wrenching. There is no thermometer that can measure the despair of women when facing the tormenting faces of hungry, starving children and the pressures to keep the home fires burning, along with coping with illnesses and deaths.

The All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) is trying hard to take up these myriad challenges in multiple ways as mass mobilisations are restricted due to physical distancing. In many places, women are prohibited by their family members from going out of the house for fear of contracting Corona. Yet the situation demands the holding of protests to hold the government accountable. Anger and frustration among women is palpable whenever they participate in the demonstrations. Thousands of AIDWA activists all over the country are doing commendable work in these most difficult of times.

Massive Joint Women's Nationwide Protest

With the aim of strengthening our struggle against the ruling BJP regime, conscious steps have been taken to forge united actions with like-minded women's organisations at the national level as well as in the states.

Six national women's organisations, namely AIDWA, NFIW, AIPWA, AIMSS, PMS and AIAMS held joint nationwide protests on August 28 for Life, Livelihood and Democratic Rights. The thrust was on organising local protests with the participation of maximum number of women. The enthusiastic response to the August 28 protest actions has clearly brought out the need for joint activities. This has been a very encouraging experience.

In a significant nationwide action, which was the largest women's show of strength since the Covid lockdown began, over one lakh women under the AIDWA banner took part in the August 28 protest demonstrations in 23 states all over India. The mobilisation by other organisations was in addition to this.

Kerala led the protests with a massive mobilisation of women at the booth level. A total of 76,534 women in 20,747 centres came out on the roads. West Bengal held protests in nearly 130 centres with a participation of around 5,500 women. Tripura saw hundreds of women participate in 53 places in 8 districts. Undeterred by the police lathi charge in

Belonia, women continued to protest. In Tamilnadu 3,026 women in 324 centres in 24 districts held protests. These are all AIDWA mobilization figures. Similarly, thousands of women in hundreds of places were in struggle in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Delhi, Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Odisha, Punjab, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh and Manipur.

A joint protest which included the central leaders of all the participating women's organisations was held outside Shram Shakti Bhawan in New Delhi. A joint memorandum with a charter of demands was sent to the Prime Minister. Memoranda were submitted to the collectors, tehsildars, BDOs and other concerned officials in various parts of the country. Many of the local issues could be solved due to these interventions.

AIDWA-AIPSN Joint Campaign against Obscurantism

A month long nationwide campaign from July 23, Captain Lakshmi Sahgal Memorial Day to August 20, Dr Narendra Dabholkar martyrdom anniversary day was enthusiastically carried out demanding the strengthening of the public health system and to combat the obscurantist and superstitious beliefs regarding the Corona virus propagated by the RSS-BJP combine. AIDWA activists conducted numerous seminars, meetings and discussions at the local level to encourage scientific and rational thought. It was by no means an easy task, especially as the Manuwadi forces use religion and communal propaganda to mislead women. Yet, AIDWA-AIPSN activists took up this campaign as a challenge and it helped in exposing the falsehoods of the ruling regime.

Memoranda were sent to the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, Health Ministers, Collectors and local authorities by AIDWA state and district committees. Anganwadi and Asha workers participated in this campaign in some states. More than 3,000 women participated in the demonstrations in front of more than 200 government hospitals and primary health centers demanding better health facilities in Telangana. Protests outside government hospitals were also held in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. A free health check-up camp was held in Karnataka.

An AIDWA Maharashtra state delegation met the State Health Minister with a memorandum demanding various health facilities to Corona and other patients, availability of ambulances, safety equipment for Corona warriors, safety of women in quarantine centres, cash benefit and ration to all non-tax-payer families etc. Demonstrations, unit meetings, distribution of masks and sanitizers etc were held in 12 districts in bastis/villages stressing the importance of a strong public health system and opposing its increasing privatisation. An online study class for all main activists was held on 'Corona – Importance of Public Health System and Effects of its Privatisation'.

Relief Work for Amphan Cyclone-Affected

AIDWA units in West Bengal have done tremendous work to reach relief and help people affected by the Amphan cyclone which devastated eight districts. From the very first day AIDWA demanded that the disaster be declared a National Calamity so that funds can be released and responsibility taken up by the BJP Central Government. But till date this has not been done. The relief given by both the central and state governments was totally inadequate to meet the unprecedented devastation. All the official relief funds were channelised through the corrupt state government, resulting in an incredible syphoning off of relief money and materials by TMC goons.

People burst out in spontaneous protests and AIDWA led the protests in many villages. In the areas which were affected with the terror and political victimization of the TMC, AIDWA members steadfastly stood with the women of these regions. AIDWA gave an all India call to raise money for relief work and many states responded. AIDWA immersed itself in relief work with the state and district leadership visiting all the affected districts and distributing relief. Some of the cyclone areas had to be reached by boats. The damage was extensive in the SC and ST populated areas.

In Kolkata women came out in the streets in protest as electricity was not restored for more than 100 days in several areas. AIDWA delegations met state, district and local authorities and demanded justice in the relief delivery system and adequate rations. AIDWA also took up the task of planting saplings in North 24 Parganas and other areas.

Intervention against Microfinance Companies

The Tamilnadu AIDWA began a separate helpline to deal with harassment by debt collectors of microfinance institutions (MFIs) and handled more than 80 incidents of debt recovery issues. Through such interventions, AIDWA developed new contacts in 30 villages and recruited 3600 members in Tirunelveli. In Madurai and Dindigul, new contacts were made through AIDWA work among women harassed by the MFIs.

Petitions were given to collectors in 25 districts asking them to appoint special officers in each district to deal with complaints against MFIs harassing women for compulsory repayment of loans despite a moratorium by the RBI. Due to AIDWA protests, the collectors and SPs in 15 districts have issued a severe warning of strict actions against such MFIs. A PIL has been filed in the Chennai High Court seeking extension of the RBI's moratorium up to February 2021 and for regulation of MFIs.

AIDWA delegations have been trying to meet the RBI ombudsman in the district, zonal or regional offices in the states for registering complaints about harassment by MFI agents. Efforts are on to get an appointment with the RBI Governor. A women's organisations' joint protest letter from the centre has been sent to the Rural Development Minister against its decision of collecting the outstanding loans from the SHGs.

Multifarious Activities of AIDWA Intensified

With the increasing economic onslaught on the lives of women and the communal, obscurantist campaigns by the Manuwadi forces, it is imperative that AIDWA raises its voice against the anti-people Modi government. AIDWA state committees have made serious efforts for activating the local area and village unit committees and are taking up the daily issues confronting women, which include ration, work and health.

Numerous meetings were held by AIDWA in the riot affected areas of Mustafabad, Johripur, Kailashnagar and Khajuri Khas in Delhi. Women and young girls attended enthusiastically. More than 1,000 women from these areas have enrolled as AIDWA members.

AIDWA units in some states have initiated activities among migrant women workers. AIDWA conducted a survey on domestic workers and a report on the basis of this survey has vividly brought out the disastrous impact in the form of loss of work and earnings. A total of 1,726 forms were filled in 55 districts in 11 states. This survey has helped AIDWA in starting work among domestic workers in Tamilnadu and Haryana. A militant protest of 350 domestic workers was organised in Gurgaon, Haryana.

To help women in distress, helplines were started by various AIDWA state and district committees to take up cases of domestic violence. In Tamilnadu eight psychologists gave free online counselling to the victims of domestic violence. Here AIDWA handled 52 domestic violence cases and 40 child sexual abuse cases. 42 cases of domestic violence were handled in Uttar Pradesh. Here AIDWA also intervened in the Savasini Shelter Home case where 57 women were found Covid positive and 5 of them were pregnant. The warden and the probationary officer have been suspended.

A state level survey by 2,042 AIDWA members on the functioning of the public distribution system was conducted in 1300 ration shops in 19 districts in Tamilnadu and memoranda were submitted to the collectors on the demands arising from the survey.

With the help of an NGO, an assistance of Rs 3,000 each was given to 100 self-employed women (flower sellers, poultry, milk distribution, ironing, batter grinding, etc.) to restart their businesses. More than 10,000 women in over 1,000 centres across Tamil Nadu demanded the closure of TASMALC liquor outlets.

Telangana did a survey on issues of women in self-help groups, on problems faced by women in the employment guarantee scheme and on problems in public hospitals. Protests were held on the identified issues. 3,000 messages were sent to the State Rural Development Minister demanding a loan waiver of Rs 1 lakh to each SHG.

The state government in Maharashtra began a subsidy scheme of Rs 4,000 per tribal family in the state, with Rs 2,000 worth of grain and Rs 2,000 to be directly transferred to tribal women's bank accounts. AIDWA units in Thane-Palghar and Nashik districts began a mass

campaign for filling forms of thousands of women to avail of this scheme. In Thane-Palghar district, seven effective tehsil conventions were organised by AIDWA in the first week of September, which together mobilized over 2,500 women.

Bihar and Haryana have intervened in cases of atrocities against women and dalits. AIDWA leaders have stood by the victims in their fight for justice. A painting competition based on Premchand's stories was organised in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh.

The Government of India has issued a notification for changes in the EIA, 2006. There is a big uproar over the suggested changes as they are totally in favour of the big corporates and against the people who will be affected by the projects. AIDWA state committees have sent memoranda to the MOEFCC against the changes in the EIA.

Enthusiastic Use of Social Media

Many women activists had so far been far away from the use of this new social media technology. But the pandemic has forced large number of women to become adept at operating the different arms of the social media – WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. All states are conducting Facebook Live sessions on a number of topics.

During the lockdown period the AIDWA Kerala education sub-committee formed a WhatsApp group, named Com. Susheela Gopalan online "padashala" and have so far conducted 13 online classes on current issues. The voice clips of these lectures were sent right up to the village committee level.

A total of 47 multifarious programmes like speeches, political awareness programmes, music concerts, etc. were conducted through Facebook in Kerala. Three webinars - In memory of Capt Lakshmi Sahgal, Awareness about prevention of Covid-19 and Politics of trial by media were also conducted.

Special attempts are being made in Kerala to create WhatsApp groups at the unit and booth levels. Five persons from a unit committee will be deputed to coordinate the panchayat election preparatory works such as examination of the voters' lists, adding new voters and to publicise the developmental activities done by the sitting elected panchayat members.

The young women committee of AIDWA, Delhi has been conducting an education series through FB. An online petition was also started against indiscriminate arrests of anti-CAA-NPR-NRC protestors on trumped up charges of engineering the violence in Delhi.

AIDWA in Tamilnadu initiated a novel project of starting classes for government school students who were denied education due to online classes in rural areas. Two day training sessions were held by the Science Forum and Platform for Public Education for preparing AIDWA district leaders as teachers. This significant initiative of classes started on August 15 at 75 centres. Parents are eager to send their children with masks and text books. Many

graduates, post graduates, BEs and MBAs have offered to teach them. Residents are offering their rooms and porticos for conducting classes.

The All Women Federation, a joint platform of 40 organisations in Tamilnadu held a popular online campaign on five topics for five weeks. Topics such as strengthening the public distribution system, violence against women and children, action against microfinance companies, releasing all political prisoners and how to tackle rising unemployment were taken up during this campaign.

AIDWA has started holding online state committee and district committee meetings and efforts are being made to hold local and unit level online meetings too in some of the states.

Other Joint Activities

AIDWA has been a part of the platform of nearly 500 organisations, groups and movements, 'Hum Agar Uthe Nahi Toh' and all states participated in this joint action on September 5. A successful Twitter campaign was organised as part of the joint national call for protection of our democratic and constitutional rights in West Bengal.

AIDWA took part in the 'Janata Parliament' from 16-21 August and co-conducted sessions on issues of women, minorities and LGBTQ groups.

AIDWA actively participated in all states in the action programmes of the CITU, AIKS, AIAWU on August 9 and September 5, and also against the arrests of anti-CAA and human rights activists.