WOMEN IN INDIA
By Rohini Nilekani

Rohini Nilekani is a journalist and free-lance writer from Bombay, India. Though only in Grand Rapids for a few months, Rohini has volunteered at the Center, and has graciously agreed to write this article for DIALOGUE.

Women in India share many of the problems that face their counterparts in the U.S., such as sexual harassment, lower wages, political exclusion, and physical violence which, at its worst, culminates in rape and even bride-burning. In addition, however, most Indian women, and in fact many women all over the Third World, carry the double burden of humiliating poverty and debilitating illiteracy.

Rural women typically work all day long in the fields for subsistence wages and return home to the weariness of housework and the service of the “overlord” husband. It would be hard, even for less fortunate American women, to imagine what ‘housework’ in rural India implies. Often, it means collecting firewood for fuel, walking miles to fetch water for cooking, and scraping together enough food for the average family of seven.

The urban woman’s life is only marginally better. If she is born into the middle class, she is Ibsen’s Nora. And if she is poor, she must submit to life in a hovel, to disease, to violence, to hunger, and to the demands of an uncaring husband. And she must still walk a distance for one bucket of precious water.

However, it is not all misery and gloom. The women’s movement has come into its own in India, especially since the U.N. Decade for Women (1975-1985) has brought increased consciousness of women’s rights. Women’s groups everywhere are battling discrimination on all fronts, and dealing with issues from dowry death to unemployment.

As the global village inches its way to becoming a reality, as the modern world creeps closer to the inaccessible heartland of India, women are awakening to a greater sense of their potential. They have shown wonderful resourcefulness in devising ways to protect their interests. For instance, during the now famous Chipko movement, women from the state of Maharashtra physically prevented forest contractors from tearing down precious, life-giving trees by hugging tree trunks with their frail bodies, and defying the bulldozers to run over them as well. The Chipko women carried the day, the bulldozers rolled back and the event led to landmark environment-protecting legislation.

While women in my country cross one frontier after another, it puzzles me to see American feminism in a setback mode, so to speak, after its early pioneering days. Why, in this country of plenty, is the feminization of poverty now a statistical fact? Why is there still abuse of women? Why do teenagers get pregnant? Worse still, and unheard of in India, what leads young girls to the despair of suicide? Perhaps these are the new issues that American feminists must tackle, as they try not to take their well-won freedoms for granted.

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