

## A STUDY ON EKTA AND WOMEN'S WELFARE

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### Abstract

*Voluntary organizations are those that are working with the poor, needy, destitute children and women, peasants and labourers and people belonging to Vulnerable Section of Society. The Voluntary Organizations that are being understood and recognised today have emerged from the colonial days, though Service and Social work existed prior to colonial period, but not to the extent that we see today. In a Post- Independent India the expanding role of different organizations of this nature could be seen more. The rise and growth of these organisations ensuring their participation in the governmental obligations envisage the inability of the latter in working for the larger majority of its subjects on its own.<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** *peasants, labours, welfare, social transformation, development, social change*

In this paper an attempt has been made to have a study on women's welfare measures of EKTA, a voluntary organisation and a resource centre for women in Madurai, to social development. Dr.Salima Camer, observes that social development is a process that aims at the total development of people visualising institutional and structural reforms to provide social justice."<sup>2</sup> Mahatma Gandhi also offers more or less same meaning in this regard. Gandhian concept of social development is *survodaya* which means upliftment of all or welfare of all the people.

The off-used phrases like "social change", "social transformation", "social welfare", and "wholesome development" in the context of explaining what constituted "social development", have been directed towards transforming traditional societies into modern societies. However the social development does not mean the development of the few at the cost of many in modern societies. It refers to wholesome development of the society where there is no exploitation, discrimination and injustice. The role of voluntary organisation in any given society assures significance in this context, for victims of governmental indifference and inequality are taken care of by them.<sup>3</sup>

Madurai regions are Socially, Economically, Culturally and politically very important. Voluntary Organisation's working for Social Development go on increasing steadily since independence. Both registered and unregistered Voluntary Organization's involved in the services have different aims and goals. The victim of Governmental indifference and others seeking help out of Social and Economic necessity and above all the genuine desire of an individual or a group of people to render service to the needy, caused

the rise and growth of a number of Voluntary Organization's in India in general and Tamil Nadu in particular. They are Ideological, Secular, Religious and Communal Oriented. They render service within their limitations and concentrate on specific fields.<sup>4</sup>

EKTA is started by Bimla Chandra Sekar in 1990 in Madurai. Located at 73, Williams cottage, S.S.Colony, Madurai-625016, EKTA has been working for youth and women welfare. It has been organising meetings, lectures, seminars, workshop and training programmes for women and makes them aware of their rights and involves them in social, economic and political activities. It serves as a resource centre for women in Madurai.<sup>5</sup>

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aims and objectives of EKTA are to work for the empowerment and advancement of women facilitating women to become active partners in building a gender-just society; to organise seminars, workshops, training programmes, lectures, meetings etc., in furtherance of the aims, objects and concepts of women development; to give information and documentaries on a variety of issues related to women; to work for the empowerment of women; to extend solidarity to women's in initiatives with similar goals; to involve in a continuous dialogue with women students, facilitating them to be gender sensitive; and to take up research programmes, to study in depth the issues related to women, with a future projection for action.<sup>6</sup>

### **Management**

An Executive committee looks after the activities of EKTA. It consists of seven members: one President, one Secretary, one Treasurer and four Executive members.<sup>7</sup>

### **Funds**

EKTA takes care of women's welfare. It receives government assistance and Foreign Funds. Subscription and donation form the sources of income for EKTA.<sup>8</sup>

### **Women's Welfare**

After many rounds of informal discussions with different constituencies, the 'STUDY CIRCLE' was initiated by EKTA on 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1992. The objective was to create a space for women from different professional backgrounds to come together to discuss, debate on women's issues and thereby evolve strategies for collective action.

The forum meets periodically and discusses important current issues; organizes lectures, shares information and exchanges views. The issues discussed include the following: Supreme Court guidelines on prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace; need to monitor the enforcement of SC guidelines, particularly the formulation of Committee against violence in Government Departments, educational institutions and

NGOs; enforcement of the Prevention of Domestic Violence against Women Act, impact of war on women and children.<sup>9</sup>

EKTA underwent number of Research Studies namely Socio economic status of Women migrants in Madurai Slums in 1994, Changing scenario in employment pattern for women in 2000, Forms of violence faced by Women in 2002, Functioning of GramaSabha in 6 districts of Southern Tamilnadu in 2003, Gender concerns in the context of Tsunami in 2005, The factors responsible for the incidence of HIV/AIDS and their impact on Women in 2007, Family Courts in Tamil Nadu in 2008, "Single but not alone" A survey report on the situation of single women in select villages of Cuddalore district in 2008 and A Study on 498-Ain 2010.<sup>10</sup>

Its publications are Pathu Pengal Mithikum Cycle in 1992, Anathikkam (patriarchy) in 1993, Platform For Action in 1994, Namathu Udalum Seyal padukalum in 1994, 73 vathu Satathirutha Masoda 1994, Paraka Thudikirom in 1995, Sudandira Poratta Valvilsila Pakangal in 2000, Paliyalai PorinthuKolvom (Understanding Gender) in 2003, CEDAW in 2004, Namathu Udal Namathe in 2006, Engal Urimayum ManithaUrimaye in 2007, Sigarathai Nokke in 2007, EvarkalinVazhvu or EatchiaPayanam in 2007, CEDAW Concluding Comments in 2008, NamathuVazhvumVaralaruAgum in 2001, Gender and Masculinity TOT Report in 2009 and Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act -2005 in 2007.<sup>11</sup>

### **Survey on Single Women**

A survey on the situation of single women confirmed the lack of access to livelihood options leading to economic stress and lack of social security and recognition causing greater vulnerability among women particularly the single women. There upon, the women and the single women have been organized into groups and discussions held focusing on strategies to strengthen their livelihood base and also their legal rights.

### **Promotion of Women's Rights through Advocacy and Campaigns**

EKTA promotes networking among women to influence for appropriate implementation of existing policies and laws, apart from demanding for relevant amendments and enactment of new laws. It is actively engaged in advocacy and policy dialogues at the state and National level for effective implementation of the protection of women from Domestic Violence Act-2005 and formation of Complaints Committees under Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace. It is also a part of National forums that contribute to action and monitor the obligations to the International Conventions/ Treaties like CEDAW, Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), ICPD and United Nations Convention on Child Rights (UNCRC) to which India Government is a signatory. The specific objectives of this initiative are to

- Strengthen the linkage between various interest groups through networking to address issues of Violence against Women
- Disseminate information in the form of posters, handbills, campaign alerts to the interest groups to rally around key issues concerning women and evolve collective decisions and
- Gather knowledge about various issues and other current trends.

In the past, it has concretely advocated for the following concerns along with other organizations;

- Girl Child Policy for the human development report of Tamil Nadu (2003)
- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence passed in 2005
- Formation of Complaints Committee in different institutions in Tamil Nadu Keeping with the guidelines of Supreme court against sexual harassment (1997).
- Lobbying with the political parties for 33% reservation for women in Parliament and legislative assemblies, through the campaign is yet to yield Results. However, a change in public attitude is visible as more women are Contesting in general seats (not just seats reserved for women) in local body Elections.<sup>12</sup>

#### **On Going Advocacy and Lobbying Efforts of EKTA Violence against Women**

In this context EKTA in 1994 launched the 16 days campaign against gender based violence (Nov-25 to Dec-10) and initiated WOMEN IN BLACK demonstration in Madurai. On every third Thursday a group of women in black dress stood in silence for one hour (5-6pm) in front of the Madurai Railway Station holding placards to politicize the issue of violence against women. Hand bills were distributed and discussions on issues were held after this stipulated time. The support from public, media and also the police created the much needed public visibility to the issue of violence against women. The impact of this was seen in the number of men, women and families coming for counselling, support and guidance. During this period, EKTA also took up cases of individual women who were victims of violence and through this promoted a common platform to campaign against violence, ranging from family to custodial violence at work place.

Signature campaigns, street protests and public meeting and were platform was used as platforms to create public awareness and thereby exerting pressure on the law and order authorities to punish the culprits of those indulging in violence against women March 8<sup>th</sup>, women's day was observed collectively to reflect on the emerging issues of women in all the realms of women's lives. EKTA was also an active member in the campaign against female infanticide and many other local and regional campaigns on this issue.

**Monitoring of Functioning of PWDVA**

With the enactment of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, Indian women's movement can rejoice on having achieved a milestone long overdue. However, after achieving the first milestone, the journey towards domestic violence-free life for women has just begun. It has been seen that countries have strong laws but if not implemented properly fail to serve the very purpose for which they were drafted. The need today is to make effective utilization of this piece of legislation to protect women and to provide them some relief from being revitalized.

EKTA is closely associated with Lower's Collective and also holds membership in Women Power Connect (WPC) who is engaged in monitoring the implementation of this awareness at various levels and also the monitoring of the country wide implementation of this Act. To strengthen the monitoring process at state level it engaged in awareness programmes, trainings at various levels and organizing interface with different stake holders involved in the implementation of this Act on a regular basis.<sup>13</sup>

A Nationwide Campaign called Reservation Express was launched by ANHAD, a Delhi based organization in collaboration with women's organization across the country, to create public pressure towards the passage of this Bill. EKTA is one of the e coordinators in Tamil Nadu.

EKTA has conducted trainings at various levels and its team is represented in the committees of various institutions. Posters in both Tamil and English explaining about this committee was printed and widely distributed for reference and use.<sup>14</sup>

Gender inequality is not women's issue but a larger socio-political and development issue. Therefore, though empowerment of women and girls is absolutely essential, sensitizing men and boys are a pre-requisite. While all men are not to blame for the oppression of women, they all benefit from this patriarchal society that privileges men over women in terms of access to power, resources and learning that encourages men to use violence as a tool to control women. In fact, qualities such as aggression are celebrated. Women and men are socialized to value the so called masculine virtues as inherently superior to value the so called feminine ones. Therefore, there is a need to change the mind set of men as well as women. If men knowingly or unknowingly play the part of superiors and exercise power over women, then clearly they are the part of the problem that arises against this violence. And if so, they must be the art of the solution too. Men who understand this and want to do something about this can help other men to examine the violence that is in them. In fact initiatives to make other men non-violent should be encouraged. Therefore EKTA as an art of its mission towards gender equality works consistently with the sensitization of men and boys along with women and girls.

With leadership of the male members in its General Body of EKTA, the White Ribbon Campaign was launched in the year 2000 since then, the campaign has undertaken various activities like holding public meetings organizing writers' meet, film shows and facilitating debate and discussions among youth to create awareness and influence men to drop the weapon of violence against women.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from this, training programs on gender and masculinities are conducted on a regular basis for women and men, seminars and workshops in various colleges and universities have become a regular feature. A networking at the south Asia region is in its initial stage.

#### **Field Intervention Programme at Cuddalore District**

In the aftermath of Tsunami, on 25, EKTA initiated a study on Gender and Tsunami in collaboration with NGOs and affected community women in nine districts of Tamil Nadu. During the interaction with the women from the coastal communities the vulnerability of the single women emerged as a key issue. The livelihood needs of women in general and single women in particular remained unaddressed. The women were not recognized as working people and therefore they did not receive any compensation. It was observed that the Irulas and other marginalized communities working on the river beds were affected by Tsunami but were completely left out in the compensation package. School dropouts, early marriage, child labour, migration, unwed pregnancy mal nutrition and anaemia were the other predominant issues found in this region.

Following this understanding EKTA identified 21 villages in Cuddaloredistricts(the second worst hit district) and directed its work with children, adolescent girls and single women. The working villages have 685 single women. At present, there are 231 adolescents who have dropped out from schools, because of their failure in 10<sup>th</sup> and +2.

CESVI an Italian donor came forward to support the EKTAs initiative with focus on protection and promotion of child rights. Since then using the framework of UN-CRC activities have been undertaken to protect and promote the rights of children in these villages in particular and districts at large.<sup>16</sup>

The women development is given due importance by the government as well as the EKTA. There are many social problems regarding women in our country viz., general discrimination, unemployment, underemployment, dowry problems, atrocities committed on women and sexual harassment at work place. EKTA rendered service to women through short -stay homes family counselling centres, training centres and employment units. Women awareness campaigns through seminars and public meetings made a change in the attitude of the society towards women.

EKTA implemented multifaceted programmes for the development of women. It founded a home for destitute girls, young widows and deserted wives to infuse confidences and strength in them through education and vocational training. It provides psychological and legal support to ventilate and overcome from the desperate mentality.

The concept of development of women has been modified as empowerment of women. The NGOs on understanding the concept of empowerment of women started to implement programmes to sensitize the women to contest in Panchayat elections. The NGOs conducted meetings for the elected candidates from GRAM PANCHAYAT to district Panchayat council to make them aware on their rolls in the system.

The NGOs motivated the women to setup micro-enterprises which will lead to the all-round development of womenfolk. The ability of the women make money through economic activities and to participate as elected bodies in the local Panchayat systems, the women are being empowered as expected by Gandhiji. The NGOs have contributed to a greater extent for empowering the women by implementing various programs.

Children are most important asset to the nation and therefore government has been implementing many programs to the welfare of children. The problem relating to the children are increasing because of varied reason. The EKTA established homes for Orphan and destitute children. Great care is taken till a boy or girl is married or given adoption even care is taken after the marriage and adoption.

The school drop-outs also pose major problems in the district. It is due to the poor economic background of the family and the children are seen as child labour working in industries. Many VOs take up the cause of the children and organize literacy programs for them besides actively indulging in propaganda campaign against child labour. As children are the most vulnerable group in the society, EKTA implements a number of programs to develop and rehabilitate the children.

The contribution towards the elimination of child labour, ensuring education to the children rehabilitation of bonded child labourers EKTA improved the educational status of the children in the district.

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