

OVER 43,000 WOMEN OBSERVE JUNE 1 AS AIDWA ALL INDIA PROTEST DAY TO DEMAND FOOD, WORK AND STOP TO VIOLENCE

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Two months of untold hardships and suffering, total dislocation of life and livelihoods, hunger and starvation staring in the face and absolutely no money in hand, forced to reside with the abuser with no means of escape – all this and more led to women responding massively despite the lockdown to the call of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) to hold countrywide protests against the BJP central government on June 1, 2020. As per reports received from states up to June 3, more than 43,000 women participated in 3,445 centres in 253 districts in 20 states.

MASSIVE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION DESPITE LOCKDOWN

The participation of women in the major states was as follows: Kerala – 11,361 women in 1,304 centres in all 14 districts; Tamilnadu – 8,543 in 946 centres in 35 districts; Andhra Pradesh - 6,936 in 235 centres in 17 districts; West Bengal – 3,152 in 250 centres in 22 districts; Maharashtra – 2,706 in 87 centres in 11 districts; Bihar – 2,600 in 42 centres in 18 districts; Telangana – 1,120 in 72 centres in 19 districts; Madhya Pradesh – 1,000 in 25 centres in 5 districts; Haryana – 900 in 32 centres in 12 districts; Karnataka – 841 in 35 centres in 6 districts; Uttar Pradesh – 770 in 60 centres in 15 districts; Tripura – 500 in 19 centres in 8 districts; Rajasthan – 500 in 150 centres in 7 districts. In the capital Delhi, over 300 women took part in 60 centres in 10 districts. Other states of protests included Assam, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Odisha and Uttarakhand.

Women raised their voices with posters/placards in their hands with slogans demanding: 1) Immediate direct cash transfers of Rs 7500 per month since the lockdown began to all accounts of non-income tax paying people; 2) Give 10 kg free grains to all needy persons for the next 6 months; 3) Supply all essential items free through the PDS; 4) Provide MNREGA work for 200 days to all those who ask for work; 5) Apply MNREGA in town panchayat areas too; 6) Immediately start the Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme to provide work for the unemployed in urban areas; 7) Ensure treatment for regular patients too; 8) Provide free contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies; 9) Stop indiscriminate arrests on false charges of anti CAA-NRC-NPR activists; 10) Release the activists jailed on false charges immediately; 11) Ensure security to all victims of violence, especially women.

REPRESSION IN TRIPURA

AIDWA condemned the police atrocity on women protestors in Agartala, Tripura. Around 200 women gathered at Melarmath and started the protest peacefully. But the BJP regime

in Tripura sent a large police force to the protest site and tried to prevent the women from exercising their democratic right of protest. They manhandled the women, injuring some of them. AIDWA local committee secretary and sub-divisional committee member Dipika Choudhary injured her hand badly. But all the AIDWA leaders and protesting women courageously withstood this police brutality, forcing the police to withdraw. After the protest, a meeting was held in Bhanu Ghosh Smriti Bhavan.

The AIDWA West Bengal state committee planned innovative programmes of distribution of confectionaries and sweets for children after the protests, since June 1 was also the International Children Welfare Day. Several cultural programmes were organised in Kerala.

ISSUES RAISED DURING THE PROTESTS

AIDWA state committees have been in the forefront during the Covid lockdown period since March 2020 in all the activities related to relief work. In the course of this relief work, the grim situation of women came to light. The loss of livelihood and employment has led to many of the households from marginalised and vulnerable sections, as well as women in self-help groups, domestic and home based work becoming more indebted to meet their daily needs. Free ration grains are being distributed in many states but all women are not getting them. Women without ration cards are not being given anything. We have received information of black marketing of food grains in certain places. There is scarcity of essential items and the prices have sky-rocketed. Refilling of cooking gas cylinders is impossible for the poor. Along with free rations, gas cylinders must also be distributed free of cost for six months to tide over the crisis, since Ujjwala Gas beneficiaries do not include all the poor families. This entire situation is leading to increasing hunger.

The loss of livelihood of a majority of the workers has also put added pressure on the households, thereby increasing the burden of women significantly. The pathetic condition of migrant labour wanting to return home and the insensitive behavior of the administration and police towards them has been shocking. The situation of millions of migrants, including women, is agonising in the extreme, and we are seeing it daily for the last one month and more. The aggravating crisis in the agrarian sector is adversely affecting both peasant women and women agricultural workers, most of whom are out of work.

Women have been in the worst situation during this lockdown. It has exponentially increased women's labour within the house, with them having to provide food, care and service to all family members, including the elderly and children, without any respite. There are several reports of increasing domestic and other forms of violence on women.

Women in the unorganised and informal sectors are dependent on daily earnings. They are not in a position to repay the loans they have taken from banks through SHGs. Nearly 6 crore women are members of SHGs with bank linkages in both urban and rural areas. They

are utilizing these loans for income generation activities, namely selling fruits and vegetables, groceries, dairying, agriculture and also for their children's education, health and other family expenses. Banks are applying compound interest rates on the loans taken by the women in SHGs. Sometimes interest rates are as high as 18 to 24%. Moratorium should be extended to instalments on loans taken by SHGs and the interest amount should be written off too. The ₹20 lakh loan, along with being collateral free, should also be interest free.

Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) who have lured poor women into taking easy loans with high interest rates are pressuring debtors for payment of instalments. There is no monitoring of the MFIs by the government. There should be immediate stoppage of recovery of the loans and harassment of the debtors.

Women are unable to avail of any health facilities in the present situation. There have been many instances of pregnant women being turned away from hospitals. The facility for MTP being unavailable, women will be forced to have unwanted pregnancies.

The central government has failed miserably in carrying out its responsibility of providing food and work. It has also failed in protecting the people, especially women from violence. None of Prime Minister Modi's speeches have expressed these concerns. His addresses to the nation have been a series of jumbos and his so-called packages have been false and illusory.

EXEMPLARY RELIEF WORK BY AIDWA

Centre: AIDWA centre sent four memoranda to the Prime Minister and one each to the Finance and Health ministers. Press statements were released on the relevant issues of women, and also on the arrests on false and trumped-up charges on girl students by the Modi government. Efforts have been made to organise online protests with other women's organisations. Efforts were made to make use of the social media to keep the organisation active as well as raise our voice against the failures of the government.

A two-hour online meeting of the central secretariat was held on May 25, which was attended by 28 out of the 30 central secretariat members. It took a number of decisions, the two most important being a call for these nationwide unit level protests on immediate demands on June 1 and a Rs 5 lakh collection of relief for the cyclone-affected in West Bengal. It has also been decided to bring out an online AIDWA newsletter in both English and Hindi to circulate our views among women and popularize our views and stands on different issues. An online survey of domestic workers will be conducted in all states to understand their situation. Efforts will be made to conduct online classes in all other states.

Kerala:Each AIDWA unit in the state contributed Rs. 100 and the total collection of Rs 20 lakh was given to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund. AIDWA unit and village committees actively participated in the preventive action "BREAK THE CHAIN". Village committees arranged 'hand washing' points at every important junction. A total of 6,62,778 masks have been stitched and distributed free to the public. Women activists collected food grains from the public and handed over to community kitchens, and also helped to prepare the food and distribute it to the needy people.

The SusheelaGopalan Online School started educational programmes and five classes were conducted so far. Classes at the unit level are being held through WhatsApp groups. The State Committee has conducted 22 Liveprogrammes on its Facebook page. The Kannur district committee has started a "Broad Band Telecast System" through WhatsApp Groups consisting of a total of 2500 members. A digital magazine named "AriyathaAksharanga" was published by the Ottapalam area committee of Palakkad district. To help victims of domestic violence online help desks were started in all districts.

All unit committees in the state started planting vegetable seeds and saplings in every residential compound to start a kitchen garden as part of the State Government programme named 'Subhiksha' to start agricultural activities on all waste/vacant/excess land all over Kerala. Two village committees of Kozhikode district took 5 acres of property on lease and started cultivation under this programme.

West Bengal:AIDWA intervened very effectively in getting free rations for people in West Bengal. People were deprived of rations as it was allegedly stolen by TMC men. In almost all districts AIDWA deputations met the DMs for distribution of free rations. Protests were registered with SDOs and BDOs regarding distribution of ration. The protests resulted in successful distribution of rations. Thousands of AIDWA volunteers in all the districts have distributed food, baby food, rice, pulses, potatoes, pumpkin, puffed rice, soyabean, biscuits, masks, soaps, sanitisers, sanitary napkins to more than 41,734 people.

Community kitchens were also run by AIDWA in many districts. Money was also distributed to hundreds of destitutes. Food stock of one month was given to pregnant women since the midday meals scheme and ICDS centres ceased to function. Women activists spread awareness regarding precautions and the health advisory. Communication was established with thousands of traumatised migrant workers' families. Along with food, saris were also distributed to the families of migrant labourers. We have also demanded health equipment and protection for doctors, nurses, Asha workers and other health workers and safai karmacharis. Relief was distributed along with other organisations in the urban slums. Relief was also given to brothels and red light areas. Vulnerability has been much higher in the urban slums and relief was reached to many families through community kitchens. Now

the AIDWA along with all other fraternal organisations are fully engaged in the relief work for the cyclone-affected in South Bengal.

Andhra Pradesh: Due to the agitation organised by AIDWA, the state government allocated Rs 1400 crores for Self Help Groups (SHG) under the zero interest scheme. The banks and SERP (Society for Elimination of Poverty) officials were instructed not to pressurise the SHGs for loan instalment payments as per Reserve Bank directions. A memorandum was sent to the CM and Lead Bank manager. More than 5000 SHG women sent messages with their demands to the concerned ministers. The interest amounts of 91 lakh SHG members in 8,78,874 lakh groups was waived for one year.

A united protest was organised by 36 organisations against the reopening of liquor shops on May 11. 11,500 people participated in 398 areas. Women also protested in 100 places and 20 shops were forced to down shutters on the first day. WhatsApp messages are being sent to the excise minister and commissioner to close the shops and demanding work and rations. Online Facebook discussions are also being held on this issue. Nearly 30 lakh masks were stitched by 24,000 women and distributed.

Telangana: Rs 7,04,000 worth of rice and Rs 36,90,000 worth of vegetables and 10,000 masks were distributed in 18 districts by AIDWA. Rs 45,000 worth of meals have been provided to migrant workers. Rs 35,000 worth of sanitisers have been given to poor families. Widespread protests were held against the opening of liquor shops.

Tamilnadu: The AIDWA in Tamilnadu was also extremely active and organised the distribution of groceries, vegetables and masks worth Rs 16,78,300 in 23 districts. This substantial help benefited thousands of families. Anti-liquor protests took place in several centres, forcing the closure of some shops. Helplines were set up to assist women in distress. Lectures by progressive leaders and intellectuals were conducted through Facebook.

Other States: AIDWA has done enormous work in many other states, especially for helping thousands of poor and starving families. Lakhs of kits consisting of essential items have been distributed in Tripura, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Haryana, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Punjab and Uttarakhand. Memoranda have been submitted in various states to the Chief Ministers. A large number of activists have been involved in collection and distribution of cooked food, rations, other essential items, sanitary pads, etc. Local committees have run community kitchens in some states. Along with fraternal organisations, migrant labour has been helped in many parts of the country. Many districts in various states formed helplines to assist women in distress and victims of domestic violence. Enthusiastic attempts have begun to conduct online meetings and classes. State level Facebook pages have been widely used for live interviews, talks and discussions.

