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ON PARTY'S PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S ISSUES AND TASKS

(Adopted By the Central Committee

At its December 14-16, 2005 Meeting)

Introduction

The importance assigned to the Party's work among women is determined by the Party's programmatic understanding regarding the people's democratic stage of the Indian revolution and the role of the different classes and social groups towards its fruition. Capitalist development in India was undertaken without completing the basic tasks of the democratic revolution, i.e. the eradication of pre-capitalist relations centering on the land question. The bourgeoisie struck an alliance with the landlords and as a result refused to undertake basic land reforms by which the semi-feudal fetters on the productive forces could be eliminated. This compromise with the feudal forces determined the nature of the Indian State which has been characterized in the Party programme as being a bourgeois-landlord state led by the big bourgeoisie with increasing collaboration with foreign capital. The axis of the people's democratic revolution is therefore the agrarian revolution.

The achievement of this task also requires sweeping measures to reform the social system through which remnants of pre-capitalist and feudal society keep vast rural areas tied to backwardness hampering the mobilization of forces for the agrarian revolution. The party programme has identified two such major issues linked to the agrarian revolution. The first is the continuation of the caste system that further oppresses and subordinates a vast section of the basic classes who belong to the scheduled castes. The second is the subordinate role of women and the operation of systemic discrimination. This in particular doubly oppresses women of the exploited classes who form the majority of the female population in India. It is necessary to understand and identify the often invisible forms of women's oppression in the Indian context.

The global experience is also relevant. Even in the highly advanced capitalist countries where historically capitalism developed after the destruction of feudal fetters by bourgeois democratic revolutions under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, the status of women remains inferior to that of men. This is because the intrinsic nature of capitalism is such that it cannot create the material conditions necessary for women's equality and emancipation. On the contrary, it builds and utilizes oppressions that are a legacy of pre-capitalist societies for its own benefit. In countries like India, where the bourgeoisie did not carry out even such bourgeois democratic revolutions as was witnessed in

the advanced countries, the position of women is even worse. Since the task of carrying forward the democratic revolution in such countries falls on the working class, it is only under the leadership of the working class that the basic steps for the emancipation of women can be taken. Starting with the people's democratic stage of the revolution, the material basis for this emancipation can be created.

In capitalist society, the working class seeks to change its material conditions through class struggle although it knows that its ultimate liberation will come only in a communist society. Among the working class are women workers who face a double burden, exploitation and oppression on the basis of her class and also gender. Struggles for the particular demands of working class women and rural women workers are a very specific and important part of class struggle. Additionally, the general struggle of women against discrimination, subordination and unequal citizenship is an important part of the democratic mobilization against the present unjust society.

Any weakness to grasp the full significance and import of Party work among women is to miss an important component of the democratic revolution.

Increasing Participation of Women

With the growth of democratic women's movements and the increase in the participation of women in the public sphere – in the panchayat system and local bodies; in struggles of the peasants, workers, agricultural workers, youth and students; in general democratic mobilizations and in their own struggles – there is an acute need for the Party to develop a clear perspective on women's oppression and exploitation, both at the general theoretical level and at the level of practice in the Indian context. It is equally necessary for the Party as a whole to identify the tasks of work among women. These tasks must have as their objective the strengthening of women's struggles against the present unjust and unequal order; of bringing more women into the Party; of paying special attention to their development as Communists; and of ensuring an important place for women within the Party at every level. It is also necessary for the Party itself to take up issues related to women's emancipation.

Part I

Marxism And The Women's Question

Marxism traces the roots of women's subordination to the growth of class society. In his seminal work, 'Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State', Engels shows the dialectical links between the development of productive forces, control over the means of production and evolving social relations.

The first division of labour in human history was as Engels described "between man and woman for child breeding." The survival of the species was of primary importance to early societies. Human beings were exposed to the uncontrolled and powerful forces of nature. As life expectancy was low,

women's reproductive role was considered crucial for the very survival of the human race. Historical evidence of the woman's central role in the nurturing of the family, in food gathering, and at a later stage in the practice of primitive agriculture, textile and pottery production, indicates women's control over the means of production at that stage of human development. Women held a place of high respect, and indeed were at the centre of early social structures. In such 'mother-right' societies, kinship ties were decided through the mother.

“History teaches us that the class or social group which plays the principal role in social production and performs the main function in production must, in course of time, inevitably take control of that production. There was a time under the matriarchy when women were regarded as the controllers of production. Why was this? Because under the kind of production then prevailing, primitive agriculture, women played the principal role in production, they performed the main functions while men roamed the forest in quest of game....” (Stalin, Anarchism or Socialism)

The Roots of Women's Subordination

Human needs and labour developed the frontiers of knowledge leading to a higher level of development of productive forces which in the course of time enabled the production of a surplus over the needs for survival. In the early pre-class stage of society, fixed wealth had consisted almost entirely of “the house, clothing, crude ornaments and the implements for procuring and preparing food: boats, weapons and household utensils of the simplest kind” (Engels: Origin of Family, Private Property & The State), and these were possessed by both men and women. A transition from this hunting-fishing system took place with the domestication of animals and pastoralism, so that wealth came to be held increasingly in the form of livestock herds, which provided a stable surplus and gave rise to the first class societies. Although possession of herds was initially communal, private ownership developed early with the tribal and clan chiefs controlling the most wealth in livestock, and appropriating the largest surplus, while the ordinary members of the clan or tribe possessed little wealth. Certain sections of society gained control over most of the means of production or the wealth of society, as private property. Society was divided into classes, bringing a fundamental change in social relationships.

The development of classes was marked by two related and important changes. First, it was mainly men who gained ownership of the herds as means of production, for roaming with the herds over pastures was a male activity as opposed to pottery and textile production, which the women undertook. This put the men in an economically and socially dominating position over women. When slave society developed these slaves also passed into the hands of the men of the newly forming classes of property owners. The patriarch owning herds also owned slaves captured in battle and used for tending to livestock. With the development of the means of production outside the domestic sphere, the service that women performed in the household lost its social character and

became nothing but a private service. This made for a fundamental change in the relations between men and women.

The second most important aspect was that the development of class society had its impact in changing the form of the family.

With private property there arose the need to establish the right of inheritance. To secure his right over property a man had to establish that the child from his relationship with a woman was his rightful heir. To do this he had to first exercise control over the woman herself. Engels points out that “This was impossible as long as descent according to mother right prevailed. The reckoning of descent through the female line and the right of inheritance through the mother were ... overthrown and male lineage and right of inheritance from the father instituted.” Thus the structure of the family and customary rights underwent a fundamental change. Earlier, it was as Engels describes, women themselves who had affected the change from group marriage to pairing marriage. With the changes wrought in primitive societies through the development of the economic conditions of life, the old forms of group marriage were degrading and oppressive for women and they effected the transition to pairing marriage. It is with the development of private property that a form of marriage, that is monogamy emerged which became the instrument to exercise control over the woman. It was not the form itself, which was necessarily oppressive, but the historical circumstances of its emergence, which were based on inequality between men and women.

Engels describes the development thus:

“Monogamy was a great historical advance but at the same time it inaugurated along with slavery and private wealth that epoch lasting till today in which every advance is likewise a relative regression, in which the well being and development of the one group are attained by the misery and repression of the other”.

“The first class antagonism which appears in history” Engels wrote, “coincides with the development of antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male...”.

Class Society, The Evolving Family and Patriarchal Cultures

The subordination of women is a requirement of societies based on private property. Historically, in the different stages of social development the core link between societies based on the exploitation of classes, private property and women’s subordination mediated through the unequal division of sex-based labour which remained constant, although the form of it changed.

One of the institutions in class society that reflect the unequal relations of men and women is that of the family. As Engels wrote “The overthrow of mother right (in deciding the descent of the progeny), was the *world historic defeat of the female sex*. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was enthralled, the slave of man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children.”

He analysed the power relations within the family thus: “The modern individual family is based on the open or disguised enslavement of woman: and modern society is the mass composed solely of individual families as its molecules.” He went on to emphasise that “The first premise for the emancipation of women is the re-introduction of the entire female sex into public industry, and this again demands that the quality possessed by the individual family of being the economic unit of society be abolished.”

The development of modern industry through the processes of capitalist development led to a change in the forms of family under feudalism which had been based mainly on the need for provision of agricultural services and comprising a much wider concept of family than the typical nuclear family of developed capitalism. Capitalism provided a role for women outside the domestic sphere in large-scale industry and other employment avenues thereby providing the material possibility of enhancing women’s independence and equality within families. But the needs and interests of capital dictate as well as circumscribe women’s role in socially productive work. Moreover, the continuing aspect of inheritance rights and control over women remain as central features and will do so as long as private property remains the base of the socio-economic structures -- until the introduction of the “entire female sex into public industry which again demands that the quality possessed by the individual family of being the economic unit of society be abolished...”

At the same time, even though in all epochs and stages of human development following the primitive stages of “mother right” societies, the vast mass of people did not own any private property to bequeath as inheritance, the ideologies of male-supremacy and women’s subordination became dominant ideologies, perpetuated and propagated by the ruling classes for their own interests.

Thus alongwith the struggle for a change in material conditions, Marxism places great emphasis on the sustained struggle against ideas and ideologies which propagate women’s subordination and which act as a major barrier to the achievement of women’s emancipation

Capitalism and Women’s Exploitation & Oppression

In capitalist society although the development of the productive forces has created the means to eliminate the unequal division of labour between men and women, the intrinsic nature and contradictions of the capitalist system itself prevent it from doing so.

Capitalism by employing women in large-scale industry broke the cycle of isolation and dependence they suffered from during feudal times. But at the same time, the conditions under which women work supposedly as “free workers” remain unequal.

Capitalism has co-opted and strengthened male supremacist cultures. Such a framework permits wage differentiation between working men and women and gives capital access to cheap female labour, thus allowing an intensified

rate of extraction of surplus value from a sizeable section of the labour force who are female. Women also add to the reserve army of the unemployed that keeps general wage levels down.

One has only to look at the condition of women in the most developed capitalist countries to understand how women's subordination is a major instrument of capitalist profit. In the United States of America, the recommendations for equal wages for women made in 1977 by the Equal Wages Commission are yet to be accepted. It has been estimated that US capitalists are making an additional profit of 200 billion dollars annually by not paying women equal wages.

In India, as in many developing countries, cheap female labour is a perennial source of profit for both landlords and capitalists. There is ample evidence of a high incidence of unequal wages between men and women and non-payment of minimum wages to women that benefits employers, including landlords in the rural areas, to the tune of crores of rupees every year.

Another aspect of the sex-based division of labour in capitalist society is the role of women of working class families in the reproduction of labour power through unaccounted domestic tasks performed by them. In general even in the most advanced capitalist societies women bear a disproportionate share of domestic work. Even though this may be perceived as a "private" matter, objectively it is a requirement of capitalist society. As Marx showed, the wage earned by the worker is equivalent not to the value he or she produces, but only to the sum of the values of commodities required to maintain him or her and to reproduce labour power. The amount of time the worker spends in a working day to produce the value of his or her means of subsistence was defined as necessary labour by Marx and the value produced over and above that was called surplus labour. The domestic tasks performed by women is an invisible component of necessary labour and helps keep the costs of the means of subsistence of the worker down. The processes of globalisation and privatisation have only intensified this process. As sex based division of labour gets reinvented in new forms and the State retreats from its minimum responsibilities in the provision of welfare measures, the privatization of essential family and child care services and the increasing costs mean that women have to shoulder greater burdens in domestic work and family care.

The devalued status of the woman in the workplace has a corresponding impact on her social status as also within the family. There is a huge increase in the incidents of violence against women in the capitalist world. Evidence of the increase in domestic violence also shows that the family increasingly has become a site of violence against women. The leading country in this respect is the United States of America.

Capitalism and specifically the new forms of loot and plunder of the neo-liberal framework has shown clearly that it has intensified inequalities and increased women's subordination.

Women's Emancipation

The basic requirements for the emancipation of women can be met only in a Socialist society based on the abolition of private property. These include firstly, the requirement to bring women on a mass scale into socially productive work on equal terms and opportunities with men so as to help them become economically self reliant, break their isolation and allow them to develop their potential and skills in productive work which alone can help them achieve equality. Secondly, to break the cycle of domestic drudgery, socialize the entire responsibility of petty housekeeping through the large scale establishment of public catering facilities, nurseries, child care centres, public laundries and easy access to new technologies to lighten domestic work, which is to be shared by men and women equally. As Engels wrote "With the passage of the means of production into common property, the individual family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into social industry." This will also change the unequal division of labour based on sex. Thirdly, to ensure the independent role of women in social and public life.

To sum up, historically, it was class society that gave birth to patriarchal ideologies and the subordination of women. In contrast to current feminist theories, Marxism does not see patriarchy as an autonomous system, unconnected to the basic economic organization of a given society. On the contrary it is societies based on class exploitation and in particular the current phase of capitalism through neo-liberal policies, which have intensified women's subordination in myriad ways and strengthened patriarchal cultures.

It is only in a socialist society when the means of production are socially owned that the material conditions are created for women's emancipation through the introduction of the mass of women into the sphere of socially productive labour on an equal footing with men. It is only under socialism that public bodies at different levels can provide the essential requirements for child care and the socialization of domestic responsibilities which helps to eradicate the unequal division of labour as also to ensure women equal participation in public life.

Women In Socialist Societies

The experiences of women in socialist countries substantiate this reality. The collapse of the Soviet Union and East European Socialist countries, the deviations and violations of Marxist-Leninist concepts and practices by the then leadership which ultimately led to the success of the counter-revolution in these countries cannot detract from the reality that women in these countries and elsewhere in the Socialist world achieved rights and benefits that are unprecedented even in the so-called most developed democracies of the capitalist world.

The chain of women's subordination was broken by the great and historic Bolshevik revolution under the leadership of the working class. It was the fledgling Soviet State under the leadership of Lenin, which, on the morrow of its assuming power in November 1917, legislated total equality for women and

men. It was the first country in the world to establish equal suffrage for men and women aged over 18 years. Patriarchal family codes were scrapped in this first Socialist State sixty years before the Western feminist movement challenged male supremacy within the home. The first Family Code of the new Socialist State, ratified in 1918, and further amended in 1926 constituted the most progressive family and gender legislation ever passed. The rights of divorce, alimony, compulsory registration of marriage, equal rights in matrimonial property, abolition of the concept of illegitimacy and giving all children the right to parental support whether born in wedlock or out of it, were guaranteed. In 1922 the Soviet Land Code was ratified which granted gender equality in all commonly held land. At the same time, as industrial development increased, women were given equal opportunity in jobs and were encouraged to become equal partners in social production. The double burden, or double shift at work and in the home, was sought to be abolished by establishment of a wide network of childcare facilities, laundry rooms, communal dining halls etc. The problems accruing from the sexual division of labor were thus sought to be solved by creating the material infrastructure to transform individual domestic housekeeping into large scale socialist economy. The most stringent punishment was meted to those guilty of sexual harassment, and rape.

The results were dramatic. Women advanced as never before. During the Second World War the role of Soviet women partisans in the war against fascism, as the major producers in wartime industry and agriculture, and as fighters, was unparalleled. Women fought so hard in the war because they had a stake in the new system and because of the spirit of internationalism that was the hallmark of the new socialist society.

Not only in Soviet society, but in all the East European countries which became socialist after World War II, women and children were perhaps the greatest beneficiaries. In the Soviet Union which was one of the most backward countries at the time of the revolution, by the 1980s, 51 per cent of all the work force were women and as many as 68 per cent of all doctors were women. By the 1980s and 1990s in most of these countries 75 to 80 per cent of women in the working age group were employed compared to just 32 per cent of women in West Germany. In the GDR, women's position could be seen by the fact that women comprised 45 percent of all judges, 30 percent of lawyers; 57 percent of dentists, and 52 percent of doctors. At the same time, to help working families and specifically women, there was a huge network of child care centers and education facilities. 85 to 90 per cent of children were availing these facilities. Comparative figures in 1987 for the UK show that women made up only 4 percent of lawyers, 23 percent of doctors and 20 percent of dentists. In the United States women comprised only 8 percent of lawyers, 6 percent of dentists, and 17 percent of doctors.

The gains made by women in socialist societies had a great impact in capitalist societies, where women's movements, like those of other sections of society, inspired by the socialist example, sought equal rights. Capitalist states were forced to grant many concessions precisely as a result of the existence of the socialist alternative and the tremendous strides made by women.

Today with the advent of capitalism in all former Socialist countries, it is the women and children who are the hardest hit. 75 per cent of those unemployed in the former GDR are women. The figure for the the former Soviet Union is 70 per cent. The slashing of State expenditure on child care and health has greatly increased the burden on women. Women's participation in decision making bodies has come down sharply. A comparison of figures available for 1987 and 1990 show that the number of women in Parliament came down in Bulgaria from 21 to 9, in the former Soviet Union from 66 to 28 and in the former GDR from 32 to 21.

Within the short span of seven decades of Soviet existence, and even less in case of other countries, it has been seen that a socialist society does provide the material basis – the prerequisites – for the elimination of gender oppression. Not even the most bitter critics of the former socialist countries can deny the unprecedented advances of women in those societies.

The rights and benefits of women in China and Cuba are far advanced compared to capitalist countries in the matter of right to work, of equal opportunities in education including higher education and importantly in the provision of networks of social services for family and child care. To give a few examples, in Socialist China rural and urban women workers comprise 44.8 per cent of the total employed. In urban work units 38.1 per cent are women. By the end of 2004 women comprised 43.6 per cent of professionals and technical staff employed by State owned enterprises and institutions nationwide. The State takes the major responsibility for education, health care and housing. In Cuba, in the most adverse of circumstances caused by the US imperialist blockade of Cuba for decades, the status of women in Cuba has advanced compared to that of women in the Unites States. To take just one example, Cuban women comprise more than half of the number of doctors, engineers, teachers (including in universities) in that country. The facilities for child care are universal and decrease substantially the double burden on women which is a hallmark of capitalist societies.

At the same time, the experience of Socialist countries also points to the essential requirement of the struggle in the realm of ideology and culture against patriarchal thinking and practice. The goal of women's emancipation in a Socialist society can be achieved with State intervention through affirmative action to strengthen the material basis for women's independent citizenship along with the conscious efforts and sustained struggles to change social thinking and root out ideologies which are alien to the goals of socialist equality.

Part II

Oppression of Women in Contemporary India

In contemporary India, women have been the worst victims of capitalist and feudal exploitation. The last decade has seen a sharp deterioration in the status of women in general, more so amongst women who are dalits, adivasis and from the minority communities. The declining status of women is reflected in official statistics.

- ✍ ✍ The all-India average literacy rate for women is only 48 per cent, a situation that can only get worse with cuts in education budgets and increases in fees. The gender gap in education is 86 females for every 100 males at the primary level and 68 at the secondary level. The drop-out rate for females is much higher than males. Literacy rates for dalit and adivasi women are worse.
- ✍ ✍ More than 80 per cent of women in the reproductive group are anaemic, reflecting high levels of mass malnutrition.
- ✍ ✍ The growth rate of employment in the organized sector for women has declined from 8 per cent to 2 per cent in the last decade. 96 per cent of working women are in the unorganized sector with no legal security. Dalit and Adivasi women constitute 70 per cent of the rural female work force. In most parts of India they are paid one-third less than men's wages which are themselves depressed and below the statutory norms.
- ✍ ✍ The devaluation of women is reflected in the declining sex ratio. In the 0-6 years age group the decline is from 945 to 927 in the last decade indicating an alarming increase in sex-selective abortions reflecting son-preference cultures. Moreover, this is led by the better off sections of society with the sex ratio in Delhi at a low of 868. Whereas the sex-ratios for non-SC-STs populations (0-6 years) are 919, for STs it is 973 and for SCs 938.
- ✍ ✍ There is an increase in social practices like dowry, which has intensified domestic and dowry-related violence against women. It has also led to an increase in child marriages, sale of girl children in certain parts of India and trafficking in women. Sexual harassment and rape has greatly increased. One-third of the registered cases of rape are committed against minors. The conviction rate is dismal with over 75 per cent of the accused being acquitted. The position of single women, widows and deserted women is particularly bad and their problems are not addressed by governments.
- ✍ ✍
- ✍ ✍ Women's representation in elected bodies is dismal. In Parliament it is below 9 per cent and in state assemblies it is even less. Women make up only 7.6 per cent of Central Government gazetted officers and even less than 10 per cent of the IAS. There are only 16 women judges out of 526

in the High Courts and Supreme Court. This is despite the fact that girls have topped school leaving examinations in almost every State.

Increased Exploitation of Women Workers

Whereas globalisation and neo-liberal policies have increased the exploitation of all workers and adversely affected their rights, women workers are the worst affected. Acute economic distress is bringing a much larger number of women into the workforce at a time when the job market is shrinking as a result of Government policies. As the largest employer of women, the Government ban on recruitment and the lead Governments are taking in contractualising work has hit women badly. Traditional industries in which women were employed have faced a crisis resulting in a huge loss of jobs to women workers. In the special economic zones where women get employment in some industries, employers impose poor working conditions, including less than the minimum wage in many cases and with the virtual ban on trade union rights in these areas, women workers are further deprived minimum benefits of protective legislation. Women are being forced increasingly into contract and casual work with its attendant low wages, insecurity of service and dismal work conditions including increased vulnerability to sexual harassment. More women are being forced into the unorganized sector and in home based work at extremely low piece rates. In the rural areas it is poor women agricultural workers who bear the heaviest burden of poverty and vulnerability. The majority of these rural workers are dalits and tribals. Decreasing work in agriculture, lack of opportunities for non-agricultural work, low wages, increased vulnerability to food insecurity, increased landlessness, increased distress migration are some of the features of the situation as far as rural women workers are concerned. Tribal women along with tribal men are deprived of their rights to land but women face added problems including harassment and brutality at the hands of forest guards because of their additional role in collection of minor forest produce, wood for fuel etc.

Economic independence is a pre-requisite for women's advancement and in this context the growing unemployment among the ranks of the female work force has a specific dimension. The policies of globalisation, liberalization and privatization have greatly undermined the economic status of women.

The retreat of the Government from welfare responsibilities and cuts in social sector spending have hit women hard and they have to spend longer hours in non-productive work.

Thus the struggle against the new economic policies by the Party and mass organizations must also address in a most conscious manner the specific dimension of vulnerability and increased exploitation of working women.

Caste As An Instrument of Women's Oppression

Historically, religion has been used to legitimise class inequalities and gender oppression of women. Additionally, in India, the caste system accorded legal and ritual sanction to an immutable form of hierarchical inequality that had

both economic and social dimensions. Although it developed as a part of the Hindu religion, it has also influenced other religious communities. Caste ideology sanctions brutal forms of subordination for all those of the lower castes and against untouchables. On women its impact was and continues to be particularly oppressive.

The caste system like the iron bars of a prison not only constitutes the most resilient framework against any change in the lower status of women, the caste system itself is a most crucial instrument in creating that status. The significant and inalienable factor of the caste system is the system of hierarchies it establishes between different castes, in which women are considered uniformly the lowest in each caste. The so-called “blood purity” conditions intrinsic to the hierarchies imposed by upper caste men set out a strict code of conduct for women, based on the control of a woman’s sexuality, drastically subordinated the status of women within that particular caste and were consciously followed by the castes downward throughout society. It is also true that the strength of the caste structures that subordinate women are inversely in proportion to the distance between that particular caste and the highest link in the hierarchy, although for various reasons the more democratic relations within the lower castes are also getting eroded.

The right to choose their own partners circumscribed by caste boundaries, results in ‘honour killings’ sanctioned by caste panchayats. In caste conflicts, women from the lower castes become the special targets of humiliation and violence from the dominant castes. This is a direct assault on the minimum human right for self-choice partners.

Dalit women face the brunt of caste oppression by the upper castes, men and women. Dalit women are not only the objects of sexual exploitation by upper caste men, but also a source of free or cheap labour for the ruling classes. The caste system, as with gender oppression, legitimises free/cheap labour of dalits. Dalit women are burdened with three inequalities—by virtue of their class since most dalit women belong to the exploited classes, caste and gender. In the Indian context, women’s emancipation is linked with the uprooting of the ideological as well as material basis of caste structures.

Impact of Communalism And Fundamentalism

Communal and fundamentalist forces target the rights of women in the name of religion and tradition. The representatives of the Hindutva platform, the Sangh Parivar has supported the most retrograde social practices like Sati and remains committed to the anti-women understanding of the Manu smriti that denies women an independent identity. These forces have gone to the extent of trying to impose dress codes on women and shamelessly propagate that increased violence against women is because of the way that women dress. This highly objectionable approach is not only providing sanction and justification for the guilty criminals but also impinges on women’s independence. The communal violence unleashed by the Hindutva forces has particularly targeted women belonging to the minority communities. Utilizing the religious sentiments of large numbers of women, the majority communal

forces try to mobilize them as a political constituency. There have been disturbing trends of women mobilized by the Hindutva forces actively participating in communal mobilizations, including against Muslim women. This must be actively countered by our work among women. This must also include programmes that help to inculcate a scientific outlook and against obscurantist practices.

At the same time, the fundamentalist forces in the Muslim community refuse to reform personal laws and undermine the constitutional rights of Muslim women. Muslim women themselves are coming forward to protest against the retrograde fatwas of the fundamentalist forces within the community. Pro-reform sections within the community are also becoming more active. These are extremely positive trends which must be noted by the Party and supported in appropriate ways. Special efforts must be made to increase work among Muslim women among whom there is increasing ferment. Issues concerning minority women including the discrimination faced by them by virtue of their religious beliefs in many States particularly those where the Sangh Parivar is active or is leading the Government are issues which the Party should address.

There can be no compromise with the anti-women platforms of the fundamentalist forces. The Party has to take the lead in mobilizing public opinion against the anti-women platforms of these forces. Communal forces in the various communities directly mobilize women by appealing to their religious sentiments. This poses a big threat to democratic struggles and has to be countered effectively.

Multi-faceted And Increasing Violence

The cultures spawned by globalisation has directly contributed to the growing number of sexual attacks on women, child sexual abuse, sex rackets, incidents of sexual blackmailing and so on. With all pervading consumer values promoted through neo-liberal policies there is an increasing trend in the media of commodification of women and there is a proliferation of serials and films etc. that portray women in a demeaning and degrading way. Driven by poverty, more women are forced into prostitution. Trafficking in women and girl children has greatly increased. Blind consumerism fuelled by market values has also led to the spread of dowry demands. The practice of dowry knows no boundaries and like an epidemic has spread throughout the country, to all castes, regions and communities including those communities where dowry never existed. Shockingly, the practice of dowry itself has virtually got social sanction and it is only the violence connected with dowry that is considered a crime not the actual practice itself. This has had a cascading impact on the status of women and is one of the main reasons behind the shocking increase in female foeticide. At the same time increase in domestic violence is taking a heavy toll of women's lives, their physical and mental health.

The pro-women practices among several communities are getting subverted as for example in many of the regions in the north-east where there was no dowry

practice or as in Meghalaya where matriarchal systems existed the trend is to weaken women's control over property.

Anti-Capitalist, Anti-Feudal Struggles

There are new forms of subordination of women which require struggles against both capitalist and feudal inequalities. Understanding the various issues facing such a large section of the Indian population, it is incumbent on the Party to lead movements that deal with these issues linking up these struggles to a wider movement for social reform that will mobilize the masses against caste and gender oppression.

Part III

Party Programme And Women's Issues

Party documents have laid down the basic framework of the Party's approach.

The Party Programme in Chapter V clause 5.13 states:

“With India's independence, the women of India, equal participants in the freedom struggle had hoped for emancipation from the shackles of centuries old feudal and gender oppression. But leave alone advance, five decades of bourgeois-landlord rule have perpetuated patriarchy in every sphere. Women are exploited at different levels, as women, as workers, and as citizens. The process of liberalization has brought in its wake newer forms of gender exploitation, in both the economic and social spheres, leading to increased violence against women. Economic independence and an independent role in social and political life are basic conditions for the advance of women. Resistance against this unequal status and the women's movement for equality are part of the movement for social emancipation.”

(a) Women as Women

In defining women's oppression and exploitation at three different levels, the Party Programme lays out the framework for a Marxist understanding of the women's question in the Indian context.

As women face oppression on account of their gender, all women in India have a stake in the struggle against discrimination suffered by them. At this level, women across class, caste and community face oppression that take the form of sexual exploitation and violence, demands for dowry, domestic violence and inequality within the family. The unequal share in resources both within the family and society leads to further vulnerability and violence against them.

This understanding is elaborated in Clause xiv, Chapter VI in the Programme of People's Democracy. It is stated:

“Removal of social inequalities and discrimination against women, equal rights with men in such matters as inheritance of property, including land, enforcement of protective social, economic and family

laws based on equal rights of women in all communities, admissions to professions and services will be ensured. Suitable support systems in child care and domestic work will be part of the thrust to democratize family structures.”

The last sentence on “democratization of family structures” is premised on the reality that the family as it exists today is undemocratic, that relations between members of the family are unequal, and that control is exercised over the weaker members of the family like the women and girl children. It also specifically addresses the issues of domestic work and childcare. This is a critique of the unequal and unfair equations within many families wherein the major burden of domestic work and family care is borne by women and often by girl children.

The Party Programme thus addresses the need for reform of inequality in social relations including within the family.

(b) Woman As A Worker

The second aspect mentioned in the Party Programme, that is the exploitation of woman as a member of an exploited class, encapsulates a number of premises. A working class woman is doubly exploited, facing class exploitation, as well as other forms of gender oppression. Class exploitation is intensified due to her gender, and she is more vulnerable to gender oppression because she is poor. There are two aspects to understanding the status of women workers which are not separate but linked to each other. The first is that unlike non-working class women, a woman worker directly faces class exploitation. Women are not a homogenous social group and the specific exploitation faced by women who are workers has to be properly understood and movements for women’s equality led by communists must give special emphasis to the issues concerning women workers, whether rural or urban. The second aspect is that in relation to the working class to which she belongs, the exploitation a woman worker faces has an added dimension other than those faced by the male worker. Thus when working class issues are taken up by organisations of the working class led by communists the specific issues that a working woman face must form an important part of the struggle.

(c) Women As Citizens

The third aspect of oppression concerns the attitude of the State and the Government to women’s issues, and the impact of macro-economic, political, social and developmental policies on women as independent and equal citizens.

The question of the denial of equal rights to women in decision making processes and specifically in elected bodies impacts on their rights as citizens and also weakens the democratic processes. The struggle for one-third reservation for women in elected bodies would form part of the understanding of women’s equal rights as citizens. Similarly the aspect of discrimination in

access to education, in access to health care etc. would all form part of this understanding.

This aspect would include struggles against communalism, for the rights of minority women, against casteist structures etc.

Other References In The Party Programme:

There are important references in the Party Programme identifying the struggle against gender oppression as an important task. Discussing the agrarian question in Chapter III clause 3.15, the Party Programme states:

“The agrarian question continues to be the foremost national question before the people of India. Its resolution requires revolutionary change, including radical and thoroughgoing agrarian reforms that target abolition of landlordism, moneylender-merchant exploitation and caste and gender oppression in the countryside.”

Para 3.18 of the Party Programme refers to the huge increase in the number of agricultural workers under the impact of the penetration of capitalist relations into agriculture. Women form the majority of this class in some states. Para 3.20 notes the wage discrimination against women agricultural workers. In Clause 5.20 it is stated with reference to cultural development: “Pernicious customs and values are perpetuated in the name of tradition and religion which are degrading to women and the oppressed castes...Bourgeois culture retains much of the obscurantist and casteist values”.

The Party Programme lays emphasis on the fight against gender oppression.

Party Policies

The history of the Party is closely linked with the initiatives taken by the Party at different times to fight for the rights of women challenging retrograde practices in the name of tradition and culture. It is the founders and leaders of the party who both in their theoretical work and in their practice have been the champions of women’s rights. It was in the revolutionary Telengana struggle led by communists that women were encouraged as equal participants and where they won equal rights to land in the liberated areas. In Kerala, it is the untiring and sustained work by communists guided by an emancipatory vision and aided by the tremendous insights into women’s oppression provided by Comrade EMS Namboodirpad in his many writings on the subject that has helped the state emerge as a model in advanced social indicators, recognized as such even by the most die-hard anti-communists. The period under CPI(M)-led Governments in Kerala saw unprecedented initiatives to increase women’s participation in public life through the democratization of panchayats and through the processes of peoples planning and encouragement to women’s self-help groups. In West Bengal, the Left Front Government led by the Party is the only state government to have distributed over 80,000 pattas in the name of single women, and as many as 4 lakh land pattas in the names of both husband and wife, establishing the importance of equal rights in land. In the last panchayat elections, the number of women candidates who contested and won

was around 40 per cent, well above the reserved seat limit of 33 per cent. West Bengal from the early days of the Left front Government has played a pioneering role in enhancing women's participation in the panchayat system, with special focus on women belonging to the socially oppressed castes as well as tribal women. In Tripura, the Party has set a record in women's participation in the panchayat system with 43 per cent women participants at different levels. Several initiatives have been taken for tribal and scheduled caste women in particular through the formation of cooperatives and self-help groups. Establishment of tribal girls hostels, special attention to education and development needs of tribal girls and women are some examples. Tribal women in Tripura have been in the forefront of the most heroic battles against separatist and extremist armed forces led by the Left forces, providing an inspiring example to the whole country. In Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura the effort by the Party in government has been to enhance the economic and social status of women. The difference between self-help groups in these states is that the thrust is on developing women's skills in production of different saleable items, to help develop markets for the products so as to help women become self-reliant. The government unlike in the World Bank model of such self-help groups, does not retreat from its responsibilities but plays an active role in helping the groups.

The Party's unequivocal stand in support of reservation for women has been a contrast with the vacillating positions of other parties. The Party has also come out strongly against fundamentalism of all hues whether against the anti-women platforms of the Hindutva brigade or against the fatwas and retrograde steps against the rights of Muslim women advocated by Muslim fundamentalists including during the Shah Bano case.

A most important and far reaching intervention in defence of the rights of women workers was made in the working class movement under the leadership of Comrade B.T.Ranadive when a separate coordination committee of working women was formed as part of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) to highlight and focus on the specific aspects of exploitation and oppression that women workers face. This has undoubtedly given an impetus to the struggles of working women and the class struggle as a whole encouraging a much wider section of women workers to join the struggle.

The Party has established itself as a supporter of women's rights. However there is scope for improvement in the Party's understanding of and practice concerning women's issues.

Ruling Class Interventions Among Women

It is important to note that with the increase in women's mobilization and movements, parties representing the ruling classes are also directly increasing their intervention among women through the formation of women's wings of their parties and also operating through a network of NGOs set up by them. At the same time, bourgeois parties are making a specific attempt to mobilize women on caste and communal grounds. The Hindutva brigade has also been mobilizing women through various women's organizations in which women

are imbued with the highly communal bias against minority communities and are trained to propagate the Hindutva version of the ideal Hindu family to the masses of women. The communal mobilizations of women during the Gujarat violence by the Hindutva brigade, showed the extent of their intervention among a section of women.

Caste has also become a tool for women's mobilization with several caste-based women's organisations being formed by interested parties with sectarian agendas. At the same time, several dalit women's groups have been formed which have highlighted specific oppressions faced by dalit women.

Bourgeois politicians have in some cases successfully won women's support through focused propaganda on women's issues even though their actual policies militate against women's interests. In several states bourgeois parties have taken the lead in trying to mobilize women.

At the same time, there is a proliferation of NGOs and autonomous women's groups, many of them foreign funded working among women who seek to depoliticise movements of women. There are divisions among feminist groups on inclusion of issues concerning class and caste in women's movements. One section has been working with the Left and democratic women's organizations on an issue based approach which has in many cases helped to advance women's rights both in the legal and social sphere. But a section is still committed to exclusively anti-male ideologies which are their hallmark along with their opposition to positions of the organised Left. Some efforts, though unsuccessful have also been made to form separate women's trade unions in factories where there are both men and women workers, thus dividing the work force to help the employers.

These latter trends strengthen the status quo of inequality and women's subordination. The Party while stepping up its independent work among women will have to take note of this increased intervention of different parties, representing different classes, castes and communities. The Party will have to guide the various mass organizations in their approach to the different organizations and groups working among women on the basis of the specific situation prevailing in the state taking into account the experience of the women's organization in their work among women.

PART IV

Party's Role

The Party sees the task of mobilizing the mass of women as a strategic task. The identification and removal of weaknesses that prevent this mobilization are necessary for the fulfillment of the goals of the people's democratic revolution. It is with this spirit that we need to identify the tasks of the Party among women. The rectification document of the Party and the political-organisational reports adopted by various Party Congresses have mentioned some of the wrong trends which need to be eliminated. There are broadly three main areas

where attention has to be paid to improve our work among women. (1) Mobilisation by the Party and other mass organizations on issues concerning women (2) More efforts to bring women into the Party and increasing their responsibilities, increasing intervention and mobilization of women in mass organisations led by the Party (3) Eradication of wrong trends within the Party concerning women's issues.

(1) Expanding Party Mobilisation on Women's Issues

As mentioned earlier there is a big increase in the participation of women in class struggles as well as in mobilizations on democratic issues. It is necessary for the Party to give special attention to such participation of women and to see how it can be enhanced. Since women face different levels of exploitation and oppression it is necessary for the Party to directly take up issues facing women on the Party platform. At the same time mass organizations in which Party members work must also take up issues of specific concern to women within the social group so mobilized as well as on general issues concerning women.

While urging Communists to understand the importance of working among women and taking up the issues that affect them, Lenin wrote:

“Mobilisation of the female masses, carried out with a clear understanding of principles and on a firm organizational basis, is a vital question for the Communist parties and their victories. (Many) do not realize that developing and leading such a mass movement is an important part of all Party activity, as much as half of all the Party work.... They regard agitation and propaganda among women and the task of rousing and revolutionizing them as of secondary importance, as the job of just the communist women. This is wrong, fundamentally wrong.....It is equality of women reversed.”

The women's question is a political question that needs to be addressed by the entire Party.

While taking up issues, the Party at different levels must be able to identify the needs and aspirations of different social groups among whom women constitute a big section. As enunciated in the earlier section, our work among women must be guided by our understanding that the stage of the revolution means that a wider section of masses, among them women, have to be mobilized.

The Party's main work is among the basic classes and the Party gives priority to organizing the poor exploited sections of our society. It is necessary while taking up the class issues of women of these sections the Party and mass organizations under its leadership must also identify, and address the issues of gender oppression, in other words all the problems arising out of the double burden that this section of women face. This will greatly help the Party as well as the mass organization concerned to expand its base and appeal among poor women.

At the same time, it is necessary to take up issues of social oppression of different sections of women. Party leaders have to lead campaigns against the

social oppression of women, speak on these topics while addressing general political gatherings and public meetings and not consider this “non-political” or feel that such issues can only be taken up by women.

One such issue is that of the increasing prevalence of dowry. The Party in its Seventeenth Party Congress and then again in the Eighteenth Party Congress had very specifically given a call for struggle against dowry and other forms of social oppression of women. This also affects our basic classes and is the cause of debt, loss of land etc. However this issue has not got the attention required, including in the states where our mass base is strong enough to challenge such anti-women practices. More attention must be given to these issues. These will also help to change and expand political agendas and platforms to include social issues of concern to vast sections of our people.

The Multi Dimensional Oppression of Women

In this context it is also necessary to have a clear understanding of the Party’s approach to certain specific areas of gender oppression.

In the early days of the formation of an all-India organization of women in which many party members and leaders were involved, there was a wrong understanding among several comrades including among women comrades. This was that struggles on issues like domestic violence or dowry were of secondary importance. According to those who held this view, a Left women’s organisation must concern itself only with issues directly related to the problems of “toiling women”. There was a tendency to underplay the oppression of women within the family sphere to dismiss it as a “ non-class issue” and one that is of concern only to “bourgeois feminists”. This understanding still persists among certain sections of the Party. It is a view that fails to recognise the multi-dimensional oppression of women including of women from the basic classes. It does not appreciate the importance of struggles against the gamut of socially oppressive and anti-women practices, and the need to project alternatives founded in the practice of democracy, equality, and the rule of law. It ignores the increasing influence of the cultural values of globalised capitalism. It also ignores the reality that issues like dowry also impact on poor families.

There are some in the Party who believe that addressing issues of domestic violence within the working class or any other section of the working people is “divisive”. They are of the view that class unity is disrupted as the male is pitted against the female. Such an attitude of surrender to the inequality in the domestic sphere is itself discriminatory. Domestic violence or inequality within the family wherever it exists, including in families of the poor and working people must be addressed.

Among some comrades, there is an incorrect understanding that issues arising out of capitalist created inequalities are not to be taken up by the women’s organization which is a multi-class organization. This is feminism upside down! Trade unions have the responsibility of organizing all sections of

workers and leading their struggles. However, there are issues on which multi-class organizations also campaign such as gender based wage discriminations, sexual harassment at workplace etc. The main issue here is coordination between the different organizations working among the poor including women. The work done by the women's organisation in the mobilization of many sections of working women such as anganwadi women, health workers and so on has helped the formation of trade unions. This is as it should be. At the same time, the trade union work among these sections has also helped the growth of the women's organisation. Similarly work done among rural women should be properly coordinated to strengthen struggles.

At the same time, mass organizations other than the women's organisation, who have a large women's membership must address the gender related issues that their members may face. There is a gap in this regard. For example a reading of documents of conferences of mass organizations even in some of the developed states reveals an absence of any analysis of gender specific issues facing the mass of women who are being mobilized by that organization. Class and mass organizations must address all the different problems that women face, as workers, as citizens and as women.

(2) Recruitment of Women in The Party and Related Organizational Issues

The Party's work among women is performed at different levels and through many mass organizations. The increased participation of women in struggles under the banner of different mass organizations, as also through Party mobilisations, has been noteworthy. An increasing number of women are participating in the panchayati raj system, contesting as candidates on the Party ticket.

The 18th Party Congress political-organisational report shows that women constitute only 10 per cent of the entire membership. Although this is an improvement from the earlier years there is a tremendous potential to recruit more women into the Party. If we take five major states – West Bengal, Kerala, Tripura, Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh – they constitute more than 90 per cent of the total Party membership. If we see the proportion of women Party members in these five states that will give a fair indication of the position of women Party members in the total membership. The figures are as follows: Kerala 10.11 (7.77 in 2001), Tripura 20.11 (17.6 in 2001), West Bengal 9.37 (7.72 in 2001), Andhra Pradesh 10.17 (7.5 in 2001), Tamilnadu 11.02 (9.8 in 2001). The position is better in states like Maharashtra 12.9, Assam 13.49, Gujarat 14.12, Karnataka 16.18, Madhya Pradesh 11.38 and Delhi 18.3. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab and Jharkhand have poor representation of women membership. Tripura provides the best example with women constituting 20.11 per cent of the total membership.

Some Party State Committees have taken a decision to improve branch wise recruitment of women members. The West Bengal State Committee in its Party Letter No. 4 enjoined each branch to recruit at least two women. If implemented properly this will lead to a substantial increase in women's membership. In Kerala also a directive was given to all branches to recruit at

least two women in the branch. However, the decision has not yet been fully implemented.

Branches have to be made aware of the importance of this task. To strengthen the recruitment of women in the Party, help can be taken from the women's fraction committees at different levels to identify women activists who can join the Party. Their names can be recommended to the relevant Party unit.

It is also to be noted that the main recruitment of women in the Party comes from the ranks of women working in the women's mass organization. Even though other mass organizations like the peasant and youth organization have a larger women's membership than the total membership in the women's organisation in many of the politically advanced States, the recruitment of women through these mass organizations into the Party is much less than the potential. The kisan organisation which has the highest membership of women and the youth organization can certainly improve their record in this respect. The trade unions are marginally better. In the agricultural workers organisation also recruitment of women into the Party can be much improved.

This weakness shows up a related problem that exists in most mass organizations, namely, the utter failure to develop women as leaders. The promotion of women at different levels in the mass organizations through timely interventions by the Party committees working in these organizations is essential if the recruitment of women in the Party is to increase. The inclusion of adequate numbers of women in all the committees of mass organizations such as peasants, agricultural workers, trade unions, students, youth and so on is essential.

The Fraction Committees working in mass organisations where there is a high percentage of women in the total membership should take as an important organisational task the development of women cadre in the mass organization and their entry into the Party.

Political Education

An essential task before the party and mass organisation is the political education of women cadre. Attention must be given to arrange special classes for women at different levels starting from the basic level of women activists in the mass and class organisation, women members of panchayats etc. Often because of their daily family responsibilities, women sympathetic to the goals of the Party and active in some of the organizations led by the Party are unable to develop their own potential as political workers and leaders and are unable to devote sufficient time for self-study. Given the need to deploy more women cadre in different fronts, political education of women activists is a very important aspect. At the same time, large numbers of women activists of the poorer sections are unable to read or write. The Party and mass organizations particularly the women's organisation must make special efforts to help them in this direction.

Branch Functioning

In some states, separate women's branches have been formed. This became necessary because often branch meetings are called in the late evening when it is difficult for women members to attend. This affects both her own development and that of the branch. The experience of separate women's branches is a mixed one. Its advantage is that the timings and place of the meetings can be more easily adjusted to suit the convenience of the women members. However, the disadvantages are that the integration of the work of the women comrades with the general Party work is hampered. This problem concerns only area based branches as women Party members organized in trade union and factory based branches or in teachers and student based branches do not face these problems.

However if the higher Party committee pays special attention and makes a conscious effort to integrate these women's branches into the general Party work in the area, the problems mentioned above can be overcome. Alternatively, some way should be found to adjust branch timings to ensure women's attendance.

Policies for Women Whole-timers

There is, unfortunately, no specific policy to encourage women whole-timers even in the states where the Party is strong. In situations where the husband and wife are equally committed to the Party both should be encouraged to become wholetimers. In case of financial restraints for the Party, it is often the case that it is the male comrade who is chosen as the whole-timer while the woman comrade is expected to find a job to support the family although they may be equally qualified in terms of Party's assessment of their work. Any discrimination should be avoided. Special attention should be given to the development of women in the youth and student front who should be encouraged to become wholetimers of the Party and take responsibilities in different mass organizations. In Kerala, the decision that there should be one woman wholetimer under each area committee is being implemented.

At present the number of women whole-time cadre in the country working in the women's mass organisation is around 500, of which approximately two-thirds are given allowances by the Party. The numbers in the trade union need to be increased while those in the other organizations are negligible. This is extremely inadequate and reflects indifference to encouraging women to becoming wholetimers. Separate criteria for recognition of women as wholetimers should be worked out in the states as many women who are not employed anywhere work fulltime for the Party but are not recognized as wholetimers.

The Party must make every effort to increase the number of women whole-timers and to give them the requisite responsibilities in political and organizational work.

Inclusion in Party Committees

There has been some improvement in inclusion of women into different committees but this is insufficient.

There are very few women secretaries of branches or committees. At present the number of women in district and state committee secretariats is woefully low. There are few women in the State Secretariats of the Party for the whole country. It is necessary for Party committees to ensure that an adequate number of women are included in the official panels of the Party at different levels.

Women comrades should be encouraged to take additional political and organizational responsibilities directly for the Party and not only for the mass organization in which she may be working. They should also be projected as Party leaders in mass struggles and given opportunities to address Party public meetings. Women should also be given responsibility in taking Party classes. Recently, West Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu have given women cadre such responsibilities. This should be done in other states also.

The Party should also make special efforts to nominate women as candidates in elections at different levels.

Relations Between The Party And the Women's Mass Organization

One of the most important task in the work of the women's mass organisation is how to take forward the process of politicalisation of the women being drawn to the movements through their own demands and to develop a democratic consciousness. The Party has an important role to play in fulfilling this task through proper guidance to women Party members working in the women's movement.

Since at present the large majority of women cadre in the Party are working in the women's mass organization and also since the large majority of women recruits in the Party have come through the work in the women's mass organization, the correct relations of the Party with the women's mass organisation is crucial to the advance of both the democratic women's movements on the one hand and the development of women communists on the other.

The difference between the women's organizations and others is that unlike other organizations that are of a mixed character in which many male Party leaders have important positions, in the women's organizations they cannot play a direct role. Thus, the method for the guiding role of the Party for Party members working within the organization must be absolutely clear if the basic principles laid down in various Party documents and resolutions on the issue are to be implemented. The Central Committee resolution of October 2004 on Approach to Mass Organizations states: "The Party provides guidance to the

mass organizations not by dictating to the mass organization but by working through its Party members and fractions to influence the mass organization membership.”

There is a need to regularize and strengthen the functioning of women's fraction committees at different levels. In some states, these committees are yet to be formed. Whereas there has been substantial improvement at the central level with the Party's guiding role and intervention scrupulously done through the Party Fraction Committee, through regular meetings and consultations the same cannot be said for the state and district levels.

The CC resolution reiterated the most important guidelines of the 1981 document on Mass organizations “The work of the Party should not be identified with the work of the mass organization among the masses, otherwise the links with the masses will be broken. This is an absolute law of guidance of the mass organizations.” Elaborating further, the resolution stated.. “Guiding role does not mean dictation, domination, vamping the executive, but carrying conviction with non-party members who may differ with the Party.”

Starting from the decision of the period of membership for the mass organization to its activities and programmes, every effort must be made by the Party to encourage the independent and democratic functioning of the mass organisation. There have been instances when even if a mass organization is to continue its membership drive throughout the year, the Party Committee has overruled it. It is true that where different mass organizations plan their membership some coordination and planning is required but it cannot be an iron-clad rule. At the local level it is not unusual even today for local Party leaders to attend the women's organization meetings. Even now, including in some of the stronger states, it is customary for Party leaders to attend the public functions of the women's organization. Certainly where the Party leader has played a prominent role in taking up the specific issue of concern to women he may speak at such meetings whether in his capacity as an elected member or as a leader of a mass organisation that has taken up the issue or even in some cases directly on behalf of the Party. However it should not become a common practice as it is now that by virtue of his position in the Party he inaugurates the conference of the mass organization or speaks at its public functions.

Another issue is that of deployment of women cadre. There are two trends in this respect. In some states there is hesitation to deploy women in class fronts on the understanding that women are best suited to work in the women's organisation. On the other hand, there is also a trend that ignores the needs and requirements of cadre in the women's organisation on the plea that it is not a “priority organisation” and deploys women cadre working in that organisation to other fronts without adequate discussion with the mass front concerned. Both trends are wrong. It is necessary to deploy women cadre in class fronts. The Party will also have to deploy cadre in the women's front. In this context, the Party needs to make proper assessments of women cadre after consultations with the leaders of the mass organisations concerned.

With the work among women increasing, it is necessary to have a better coordination between the different organizations working on issues concerning women. For example, on the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace the coordination between the relevant committees of the women's organisation and the trade union women's committees should be strengthened. Similarly if there are organizations working among rural women, the coordination between the organizations where Party members work on specific issues should be improved. This will help to advance the movement.

In this connection the CC Resolution On Approach to Mass Organizations states:

“To ensure coordination between mass organizations on common issues, the Party can play a role by taking up such matters with concerned Party functionaries and committees connected with different mass organizations. Relations between mass organizations and question of allocation of cadres should also be discussed in the Party committees so that the all-round development of mass organizations is undertaken.”

Different mass organizations including the Kisan Sabha and the Agricultural Workers Union should after discussions within their own committees at the appropriate level, form sub-committees of women that should meet regularly to discuss various aspects and issues facing women of that particular section. Party can also help coordination between the different sub-committees. This will help increase women's participation in different struggles and organizations.

Building Confidence Among Women Cadre

The feudal outlook that permeates sections of the Party is not limited only to our male comrades. Women comrades have to consciously fight against the trend of dependence and under-confidence. Even as the Party has to consciously avoid a direct intervention in the affairs of the mass organization and function through the relevant Party committees, the women comrades have to be more self-reliant.

Another trend that has to be fought is that of a form of “frontism” that expresses itself in wanting to exclusively work only for the mass organization and not paying sufficient attention to Party building or in fulfilling Party tasks. This will be harmful for the movement itself and must be consciously overcome. Whereas the entire Party has to take up the challenge of increasing recruitment of women into the Party, women communists working at different levels have a special responsibility in this regard. They must make increased efforts to bring more women into the Party. Members of the women's organization should be encouraged to participate in other class and mass organizations to play their due role in furthering the class struggle and broad based emancipatory struggles.

(3) Rectification Within Party

Communists have to set an example by their own attitudes and behaviour. Writing about the need for reform within the Bolshevik party Lenin wrote: "What is at the bottom of the incorrect attitude (of some sections within the Party)? In the final analysis, it is an underestimation of women and their accomplishments. That's just what it is!"

As the Rectification Document of the Party has noted,

"...some Party members succumb to social and religious practices alien to Communist standards with the family and the community on questions such as dowry taking, inter-caste marriages, child marriage, equal status to girl child etc. The tendency is to go along with family or community pressures rather than have a firm and principled stand behoving a Communist."

While taking into account the level of social consciousness in the society we live and work in, it is important for Communists not to compromise with trends of social conservatism that hamper women's increased participation in public life on an equal footing with men. Communist families should discourage conformity to stereotypical roles expected of women, particularly newly wed women, of head covering, taking to the purda, of shouldering the main burdens of domestic responsibility etc or of discrimination between sons and daughters. Party members should set an example within their own homes also. There should be a conscious effort to set standards of communist morality and ethics in relations within families.

Party members and especially leaders should encourage women family members to be politically active in whatever way is best suited to them. It should not be the case, as sometimes happens that Party members discourage their wives from joining political work on the plea that "at least one of us should stay at home."

Communists have to uphold democratic practices like registration of marriage within their own families, equal treatment to daughters and sons within the family, eschewing of rituals and religious ceremonies many of which have an anti-woman and casteist bias. There have been many examples of two active comrades in the Party deciding to get married of their own choice. In some cases the marriage then becomes a barrier for the woman's advance because once married she is expected to play the role of a housewife giving up her political life. By not intervening, the Party actually loses a talented and committed cadre apart from the negative impact on the woman herself.

The Party has to make conscious efforts to root out alien patriarchal notions about women and women's role within the family and in public life. Setting examples in personal life also will be of immense help in fulfilling the political task of mobilizing larger sections of women.

Conclusion

The Party Programme states that for the complete and thorough going fulfillment of the basic tasks of the Indian revolution, in the present stage it is essential to replace the present bourgeois-landlord State headed by the big bourgeoisie by a State of People's Democracy led by the working class. The nature of our revolution in the present stage is essentially anti-feudal, anti-imperialist, anti-monopoly and democratic. This stage of Indian revolution requires the mobilization and participation of all those sections that are oppressed and exploited. Amongst them stand a majority of the female population as workers, as women and as citizens. Throughout the course of history, in every movement where the masses have moved to eliminate and destroy the systems that oppress them, women have been equal participants of the revolutionary movement for change. As Lenin has said: "No movement of the oppressed can succeed unless it has in its ranks the vast mass of oppressed women"; and again: "The proletariat cannot achieve complete liberty until it has won complete liberty for women."

It is the duty of all Communists in India, men and women, to unitedly resist the multifaceted attacks on women's rights, to help the struggle for women's emancipation and to draw in and develop the advanced sections amongst them into the Party with equal status and responsibilities.

Tasks:

1. The Party and mass organizations under its leadership must be able to integrate within its understanding and programmes the various issues concerned with the multi-dimensional oppression that women face. On important issues like the demand for the women's reservation bill and other required legal reform, against spread of dowry practices, the increasing incidence of female foeticide etc. Party should hold programmes and organize campaigns. At the same time, the Party can take initiatives to form broad platforms on these issues.
2. The increasing spread of obscurantism, superstitious practices which specially affect women and act as a barrier in the fight against women's subordination must be countered through a broader and united mobilization for the spread of scientific understanding.
3. The Party must give special attention to the struggle against the penetration of communal ideologies and the misuse of religious sentiments of women. Different methods of struggle and interventions should be evolved.
4. There must be a target set for recruitment of women into the Party which should be closely monitored. Political education for women cadres has to be stepped up. There must be a conscious policy for promotion of women into committees and posts at all levels of the Party.
5. Party fractions should strive to set up sub-committees of women in the mass organisations after discussion within their own organisation. The Party should help coordination between class and mass organizations to

- strengthen intervention on issues concerning women. Promotion of women at different levels of the mass organizations should be ensured
6. Party syllabus to include Marxist approach to women's question and related issues should be prepared.
 7. Implement the guidelines of the rectification document regarding the eradication of discriminatory approaches towards women within the Party.
 8. Women in various fronts should be encouraged to be members of the women's organization as this will help take forward the united struggle against the different aspects of women's oppression.