

► PUNE, MAY 30 – JUNE 02, 2003

# Information empowers women

The International Conference on Empowering Women Through Information and Knowledge: From Oral Traditions to ICT held in the verdant environs of the Mahindra United World College of India in Paud, Pune, provided a rich variety of ideas and experiences. The Conference was an unparalleled opportunity for scholars, researchers, information professionals, policy makers and activists to meet and interact. It was an opportunity for over 120 participants from 21 states of India and 17 international delegates from 13 countries to exchange ideas and develop communicative networks.

The extensive intellectual and creative inputs were extremely stimulating and created a strong synergy of ideas. The emerging perspectives from diverse disciplines ranging from social sciences, information technology, women's studies, literature, engineering, home science, management,

culture studies, library and information science, education and several other allied fields pointed to new areas of research, action, training and networking. Additionally, the presentations focused on a range of techniques and strategies for the communication and transmission of information and knowledge across the boundaries of time and space. These included oral traditional modes, mass media such as the print, radio, TV and the emerging electronic media.

In course of the 3-day conference, the participants were together through four plenary sessions (including a panel discussion), 15 concurrent academic sessions, and five workshops. Apart from the rich intellectual feast that these sessions offered, they witnessed extraordinary cultural programmes, exhibitions and participated in interactive group discussions in pleasant surroundings.

Welcoming the participants, Prof. Harsha Parekh, Professor of Library Science and University Librarian, SNDT Women's University stated that the Conference was born out of the long years of collaboration between two institutions, namely the SNDT Women University, Mumbai and the Centre for Women Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi. Both these institutions have rendered invaluable services towards the empowerment of women. SNDT has, since its establishment in 1916, sought to empower women through education, research and extension and to uphold its mission encapsulated in its motto which states that "An educated woman is a source of infinite power" (Sanskrit Stree Para Shakti); while the CWDS has sought to create power and equality for women (denoted in its motto of Samya Shakti) through research, advocacy, policy interventions and documentation.

Prof. Rupa Shah, Vice Chancellor of SNDT Women's University and several distinguished delegates opened the Conference by lighting the traditional lamp. In her inaugural address, Prof. Shah commented on how the proliferation of knowledge through ICT was rapidly transforming societies. Tracing the growth and development of efforts for women's empowerment in the country, she spoke of the role played by men like Mahatma Gandhi and Maharshi Karve in bringing women out of their condition of 'emaciation' to 'emancipation'.

In particular referring to Maharshi



*Prof. Rupa Shah opening the conference by lighting the traditional lamp*

*Keynote address by Dr. Kumud Sharma*

Karve, the founder of the SNDT Women's University, who sought to empower women through education, she added that in the process of his work, he had to face social ostracism as he married a widow and sheltered women. She concluded her address welcoming the participants and appreciating the work put in by the organizers of the conference.

In the keynote address entitled *Women and ICT: Communicating across the Divides*, Dr. Kumud Sharma, President, Indian Association of Women's Studies said that the last century had changed the world in fundamental ways for it was marked by profound changes in the world economy and increased global communication facilitated by ICT. She added, the alliance of interest between feminist scholarship and the women's movement had made women keenly aware of the politics of the production of knowledge. Women's Studies has developed its own pedagogical traditions and ways of knowing and communicating. The use of oral history, personal narratives, biographies, literary texts had played an important role in contemporary feminist politics. With the pluralism of communication methods and the expanding knowledge base, she cautioned that the knowledge glut may also create new barriers between the haves and the have-nots, for it could keep out from the mainstream those who do not have access to technology and knowledge.

### Plenary Session 1

The first plenary session entitled *Women's Knowledge and Information Repositories* had three presentations: Dr. Jashodara Bagcchi, Founder-Director, School of Women's studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, speaking on Research on Women's Writings, emphasized of the need to be aware of the basic foundations of the new information technologies. Women from different class and caste groups are often powerless and outside the basic pool of knowledge. The key issue is, how do we



cut across the nexus of knowledge and power so that information may be retrieved as a tool of resistance and not of complicity.

Dr. Antonia Byatt, Director, The Women's Library, London, presented on the theme *Repositories of Women's Information - The European Scene* and referred to the politics of knowledge generation that had, over the ages, kept women out of the pages of mainstream history and mentioned the efforts made by women to recover and preserve women's historical records in specific women's archives and libraries.

Ms Anju Vyas, Librarian, Centre for Women's Development Studies, Delhi, Spoke on *Making Women's Information Visible* emphasized the need for making women's information visible. She referred to the knowledge and information repositories in South Asia.

### Plenary Session 2

This session on *Organizing and Disseminating Women's Information* also had three presentations. The first paper on *Organizing Women's Resources* by Phyllis Holman Weisbard, Librarian, Women's Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison, U.S.A. indicated the changes that had taken place in modern libraries as a result of the information revolution. The impact of technologies was particularly evident in the archival repositories and units within libraries. The task of librarians to collect, preserve and organize the intellectual products of humanity is intensified by the glo-

bal spread of new forms of communication and publications. The major challenge faced by librarians and information managers was to enable users make sense of all the information available in new formats.

The second paper, *Dissemination of Women's Information in India: A Conceptual and Historical Framework*, by Prof. Harsha Parekh suggested that providing women with a capability to leverage to information and knowledge was the means to enable women to acquire an equitable position in society. The task however was not easy and had several layers of complexity. It meant enabling women to use local as well as global information. Further, providing an interesting typology of information needs and uses, she said that dissemination is meaningful only after the cognitive frame is made ready to receive the new information. The third paper on *Dissemination of Information to Women: Oral Traditions* by Ms. Nishi Mehotra, a Development Consultant earlier working with Mahila Samakhya in Lucknow, U.P., described her experiences of using indigenous modes of folk art and communication medium to disseminate new values among women and enabling them to become aware of their rights. Describing the phad, a traditional medium of religious communication through painting and story telling, she said, it was successfully adapted to raise awareness and enhance women's participation in public life.

## Plenary Session 3

The first paper in this session on *Women and Information Communication Technology* looked at the issue from an information perspective. Prof. Harsha Parekh, in her paper, *Women and ICT: An Information Perspective*, underscored the need to reassess the potential of ICT to enable women to communicate with other. It had the potential to establish gender justice, but the medium also needed to be adapted to local contexts and the existing human skills. The important ingredients for successful use of ICT were motivation and commitment on the part of the knowledge managers and a willingness on their part to innovate, experiment and its adaptation. The second paper on *Why Women Should be Concerned with WSIS* by Dr Rhona O Bautista was presented in her absentia by Anju Vyas. The paper mentioned the following preconditions for establishing the WSIS process: 1) building a global consensus; 2) people-centred development; 3) respect for diversity; 4) peace and human development; 5) human rights framework; and 6) supporting local solutions;

## Plenary Session 4

The fourth plenary session was a panel discussion on *Sectoral Issues and Initiatives*. Dr. Suma Chitnis, Former Vice Chancellor, SNDT Women's University moderated this panel discussion. There were three discussants. Dr. Anand Phadke, CEHAT, Pune, spoke on how simple health information given to women at the grassroots

helps to empower them. Prof. Chitra Natrajan, Homi Bhabha Institute of Science Education Mumbai, spoke on environmental concerns. Critiquing the reductionist basis of modern science, she presented a case for the recovery and popularization of women's traditional knowledge. She argued that the data should be made integral to the education system.

In her presentation, Monica Sekharani, Advocate, Mumbai, discussed the use and limitation of law in realizing women's rights. She said that the legal framework was a legacy of the colonial state. Its practice, even today, was mired by the patriarchal overtones of the past, which is to be seen as a deterrent to make the laws work for women. Very often, women's dying declarations and even testimonies in cases of rape fail to stand the rigorous standards set by the legal machinery.

## Concurrent Sessions

In the course of the conference there were 6 concurrent sessions each day scheduled in two time slots of forenoon and afternoon. Three concurrent sessions (in which about 5-6 papers were presented by the participants) were slotted on the following topics :

- *Women's studies and Women's Knowledge; Narratives and testimonials; Women's Writings.*
- *Folk and Oral Traditions; Organization and Dissemination;*
- *ICT Uses and Application; Adopting Technology Methods and Strategies; Net-*

*works and Networking.*

- *Employment and Work; Health, Law and Environment; Education and Capacity Building.*
- *Leveraging ICT, Information for Rural Development; Dalit and Marginalized Women: Issues and Concerns.*

## Workshops

Five workshops conducted in the evening sessions were extremely interesting and interactive. The workshop *Constructing Meaning in Media*, conducted by filmmaker and journalist Ms. Madhushree Datta, focused on the ways in which truth was constructed in documentary films. Using the images projected on CNN and BBC during the Iraq war as an example she said how embedded journalism could manufacture consent through its audiovisual projections.

*Evaluating Women's Resources on the Web*, by Librarian on Women's Studies from the University of Wisconsin, U.S.A. Dr. Phyllis H. Weisbard provided information on the criteria for evaluating web sites in terms of the criteria to heed attention for ensuring the credibility of the resources. She also gave a list of useful articles and sites for further reading. The workshop on *Developing a Phad* by field activist, Ms. Nishi Mehotra gave the participants hands on experience on how to develop and use the *phad technique* for the empowerment of women.

*Building a Digital Library: Using Open Source Technology* by the faculty from the Library science department of SNDT University, Ms. Parul Shah and Dr. Bharathi Sen described the software termed Greenstone developed by UNESCO which has unique capabilities for the search and essentials for an information system.

*Mapping the world of Women's information* by Ms. Tilly Vriend, Coordinator of Databases, International Information Center and Archive for the Women's Movement (IIAV) was a presentation of the database of more than 240 women



*Participants at the conference*



*Exhibition during the conference*

information centers in more than 100 countries. She demonstrated the ease of the access and web site search by subject, keywords and free text..

### **Cultural Events**

The evenings were filled with an assortment of cultural fests, exhibitions, and workshops. The powerful rendition of the life of Savitribai Phule by Ms. Sushma Deshpande followed by the Sangeets Dwanda by the Lasya group, led by Smt Rajashri Shirke, will remain embedded in our memories of this conference.

### **Looking Ahead**

The outcome of this Conference with such a variety of professionals from India and abroad, was the identification and commitment to support and further work collaboratively on four fronts viz. 1) Collaborative Research, 2) Inputs to WSIS (World Summit on Information Society), 3) Training needs and 4) Joint action programmes. Participants met by self-choice and discussed at length in the evenings the future action in the above four directions. The four groups shared their conclusions

with the other participants at the concluding plenary session and the following areas of consensus emerged.

### **Collaborative Research**

Collaborative research would strengthen the quality and scope of research and lead to a strong knowledge base. Several key areas of interest to participants from various parts of the country were identified; these included women's writings, folk knowledge, media, environment, education, women's crafts, trafficking, minority women etc. Some participants volunteered, in their individual and institutional capacities, to act as facilitators to develop collaborative research proposals.

### **WSIS**

The implications of the information society on women and their needs called for study; participants were unanimous in agreeing that comments be sent to the forthcoming World Summit on Information Society for consideration. Since the issue required greater deliberations, participants agreed to discuss the issue on email and authorized the CWDS to formulate a comment for the Summit.

### **Training Programmes**

A range of training programmes in ICT for women were identified – general computer and network literacy, special application level skills, and higher order skill development for capacity building were

required for women at regional level. Academic institutions, NGOs and research organizations could get together to provide these training programmes. Access to a database on existing training programmes would facilitate women to choose programmes according to convenience of time and venue. Development of training materials in different local languages was a critical requirement and was suggested several ways how this could be achieved.

### **Joint Action Projects**

Considering the different success stories of using ICT to empower women, shared by the participants at the conference, the delegates decided to work towards evolving and applying technology solutions to women's empowerment. The synergy created by the joint working of SNDT Women's University and Centre for Women's Development Studies, so evident in the conference, should continue to be used to document various activities and programmes undertaken in different parts of the country.

Developing databases of training materials and programmes, projects and initiatives, best practices and making them available on the *gendwaar* site were suggested. Developing topical discussion groups and using *gendwaar* site to disseminate news and information – such as judgments on women related issues - were additional suggestions. A joint project of mapping the women's resource centres in the country and networking them for lobbying and advocacy should be considered as a priority.

The participants re-affirmed their willingness to network, personally and professionally, with each other to enhance the quality of work they were doing. ■

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