

Report on the One Day National Seminar organized by the WDC- AURO University Women's Empowerment: Role of NGOs

On February 8th 2019 , the Women's Development Cell (WDC) of AURO University organized a One Day National Seminar on the Theme – Women Empowerment : Role of NGO's. Dr Bhavina Joshipura, the first Lady Mayor of Rajkot was the guest of Honour . Other Eminent Guests included Dr Manju Kak, Treasurer of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), Dr. Balasaraswaty , Founder of Prayas Foundation, Dr Sheetal Shah, Ms Jill Ellis, Ms Jyotiben, senior members of the Akhil Bhartiya Mahila Parishad, and officials from AIWC Surat Branch. There were more than 80 participants from NGOs, Industry & Academia .

With this seminar, AURO Women's Development Cell sought to build a bridge between spheres of thought and action or practice. NGOs are non-governmental organizations that are taking on the government's work of development; that are shouldering some part of the task of development. As we learnt from the panelists' talks, the different NGOs that were represented today are intervening in different domains: education, menstrual hygiene and sustainable development, health (including mental health), legal literacy, and awareness. One theme that emerged across the two panels was that of activism in the realm of education. The Former Mayor of Rajkot talked about making women self-reliant by teaching them skills. AURO University emphasizes value-based education Dr. Bala Saraswaty spoke of her work in educating children with learning disabilities. Ms. Beena Rao's organization educates children in slums. Ms. Shruti Jain runs a footpath school. The Shakti Foundation works with the tribal communities of Gujarat, on different issues: education is one of them.

In all the talks we observed a distinction between Us and Them. Those who are like us and those who are different from Us—Them. Those who are different are those who suffer from mental health issues; those who are tribals, or poor; those who suffer from learning and other disabilities, and so on. Mostly, NGO activism takes the form of Us helping Them. Us taking on the task of educating, rescuing and rehabilitating Them. This becomes a somewhat one-sided dialogue or pedagogy. We want to rescue, rehabilitate and educate those who are different from Us. Can we also learn from Them? Can we make the conversation mutual, so that it does not remain a conversation of part silences? Moreover, when we take upon ourselves this task of uplifting Them, can we do so without bringing in our own frames of knowing, our ethical systems and values? For instance, one of the panelists spoke of child labor and her organisation's intervention in stopping it. Let us pause for a minute and consider this. In many agricultural societies, childhood is not seen as a special phase of life. Children are seen as young adults. They are made to shoulder the responsibilities of work; they marry early. This may be wrong from a modern, urban, rights perspective. Should that perspective be imposed on these agricultural societies?

The category of 'women', however, is equally deceptive. We may need to ask whom this category includes and whom it leaves out? The Us and Them distinction can be brought in here too. Are these the conversations of women who are like us – Hindu, upper caste, upper /middle class, heterosexual, married and mothers. Who deal with Others from our own social location? How can our deliberations on women be more inclusive? There was a lot of emphasis on "*Matrutva*" in the panel discussions – the power of women to give birth and the care and nurture associated with motherhood. What about those women who are not wives or mothers, or do not wish to be? What of the sex worker? Will we see a day when we put a sex worker on the dais and listen to her speak of her experiences and her work? Also, there are forms of activism that are not centered on the state or the NGO space. There are more radical or revolutionary forms of activism. Is there a space for them too in our deliberations?

Overall the seminar sparked many thoughtful conversations among young professionals, students and social activists and opened avenues for future collaborations ,