

IARF SACC-RFYN Meeting with UN Special Rappourter –Chennai, India

The UN HR (Human Rights Commissioner's office) meeting of the Special Rapporteur of Violence against Women was held in Chennai on 27th April 2013. The office had invited IARF-SACC to attend the meeting in Chennai. The Special Rappourter for Violence against Women Ms. Rashida Manjoo has been on an official visit to India from April 22 to May 1, 2013. The cities covered by her team were Delhi, Jaipur (Rajasthan), Gandhinagar (Gujarat), Mumbai (Maharashtra), Chennai (Tamil Nadu) and Imphal (Manipur). Ms. Anbu Arumugam, President, RFYN International and Ms. R. Nithya, Young Adult Leader, RFYN, India attended the Chennai meeting of the UN Special Rapporteur. Unfortunately, the UN Special Rapporteur Ms. Rashida Manjoo could not attend the Chennai hearing instead due to a change in the schedule landed in Imphal, Manipur in the north-eastern part of India for the official visit. Instead we had Mr. Paul Panis, Human Rights Officer with the UN and Assistant of Ms. Rashida Manjoo who was attending the meeting on behalf of the Special Rapporteur. The meeting in Chennai was held between 1:00pm in the afternoon till 4:00pm in the evening in The Raintree Hotel, Chennai. The gathering of civil society, human right defenders, NGOs, etc. was more than 100 people from different levels of society till the grassroots level and also included victims of violence. Photography was not allowed inside the conference hall due the gravity of hearing and sensitive nature of people present for the hearing.

Ms. Anbu Arumugam and Ms. Nithya met Mr. Paul Panis and discussed on the general nature of the visit. They handed over the IARF-SACC HRE Report and Annual Report for the activities held for 2012-2013. Mr. Paul recalled Mr. Morse Flores, IARF UN Representative in Geneva, Switzerland and the work done by him in the UN on behalf of IARF. They made their brief presentations on Communalism and Violence against Women. Ms. Nithya spoke on the effects of communal violence that women and children endure and highlighted the role of IARF-SACC-RFYN in HRE programs to shape young minds for communal harmony and inter-faith tolerance. Ms. Anbu spoke about IARF, SACC and RFYN and gave a brief introduction to the work done in the South Asian Region by RFYN in association with the SACC.

The meeting was coordinated in Chennai by local NGOs with the southern region of India bringing victims, civil society organisations and human rights defenders from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka states to the hearing in Chennai. This was done to enable people from all spectrums of civil society to bring to the UN Team about the Violence against Women in this region, also due to the fact that the UN Special Rapporteur visited Mumbai and then Chennai in south India, so the four states had to converge in Chennai for their representations.

The meeting was divided into four parts with regard to the presentations.

- 1) Family, Workplace Violence against Women
- 2) Gender-Intersectionalities
- 3) Women in Transitions
- 4) Institutional Response

Issues in each Space

1) Family, Workplace Violence against Women

The issues covered were domestic violence incidents, legal responses, declining sex-ratio in India, violence at workplace, micro-credit and micro-finance issues and implications, status of sanitary workers, rape and sexual assault etc.

2) Gender-Intersectionalities

The issues covered were status of Muslim women, issues of the girl child, minorities and Dalit women, single women in India, issues relating to Tribal women, religious and cultural impact on women from the perspective of violence against women.

3) Violence against Women in Transition

Issues relating to violence against women migrant workers, refugees and resettled communities.

4) Institutional Responses

The discussions were centered on the institutional responses to violence against women, role of the state and local governments and experience sharing of women human rights defenders.

Some observations

The meeting started with a briefing by Mr. Paul Panis on behalf of the UN Special Rapporteur.

Ms. Sheila Jayaprakash, Advocate, Madras High Court spoke on the legal responses for violence against women in a general context.

Mr. Henry Typhagne of People's Watch coordinated the meeting with the UN Team.

Mr. Sasi Perumal, Tamil Nadu Region spoke on the ill-effects of alcoholism and the effects on women. He is an ardent activist against alcoholism in Tamil Nadu and is a follower of Gandhian philosophy. He recently sat on a fast unto death against the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) or liquor shops run all across Tamil Nadu state by the state government. The 57-year old homeopathy doctor was forcibly shifted to a government hospital after his condition worsened due to the fast for 33-days in Chennai. This later resulted in the Madras High Court ordering the state government to shut down all TASMAC liquor shops in the high ways of the state and public places.

Ms. Pallavi, Andhra Pradesh elaborated on the theme of alcoholism in Andhra Pradesh, another southern Indian state. She mentioned liquor shops are not regulated and hence posed a greater threat to safety and lives of women across the state. The ratio of schools is 1: 140 households and the ratio of a hospital to households is 1: 440 but the ratio of liquor shops is 1:70 households.

Ms. Kandhimathi, Tamil Nadu spoke about the declining sex-ratio and its concerns in Tamil Nadu. She gave statistics that in India in more than 25 states there is still a denial of birth to girl children.

Another activist Ms. Sheilu elaborated on micro-credit, micro-finance, Self Help Groups (SHG) and their adverse effects on women in India.

Ms. Bimla, activist spoke on the sexual harassment in the workplace which affects women.

Testimonials

The afternoon we were sad witnesses to two testimonials by women from diverse backgrounds in all grounds.

- 1) Ms. Suja Jones Mazurier - a 37-year old mother of three and wife of Bangalore-based French diplomat Pascal Mazurier accused her husband of repeatedly raping and sodomising their nearly four-year-old daughter. In a letter to the ambassador of France in New Delhi that was made public, Jones claimed the abuse could have begun when the child was just two. He was arrested and later released and is on his way to South Africa to take on his next posting. Ms.

Suja Jones attended the hearing in Chennai and shared her story with us; it was heart wrenching to hear her statement.

- 2) Ms. Lakshmi – This young woman comes from Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. She is illiterate and married and is living with her husband, in-laws, brother-in-law and her sister in a remote village in the district. Their village is inhabited by very few families and theirs is one. She narrated the incident of repeated gang rape allegedly by a group of local police men from the local police station. She, her sister, her neighbour and her mother-in-law all four of them were repeatedly gang-raped by four policemen. She narrated the trauma of being raped when she was 3-months pregnant with her first child. The entire gathering was in tears to this testimonial. The gathering was even more disturbed to hear that the police officials from the nearby police station to the district level police officials were keen on closing the file by traumatizing these four women to withdraw their case against police rather than pursuing the case in a just manner as per law. The activist Mr. Ramesh, elaborated on the present status of the case, it is pending in the Madras High Court for enquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). He also alleged intimidation by the higher police officials to withdraw the case.

Presentation by IARF-SACC-RFYN

Ms. Anbu Arumugam spoke briefly about IARF and its role in Human Rights Education across India. She also elaborated on the role of SACC and RFYN and the work done by them across South Asia and the stream of young adults being involved in programs on human rights education. She handed over the documents of IARF-SACC to Mr. Paul Panis. Ms. R. Nithya spoke briefly on the need for communal harmony in India and elsewhere. She elaborated on the effects on women and children arising out of religious and communal conflict situations and impressed upon the gathering the importance of communal harmony and inter-faith tolerance.
