

# AIWC at a Glance

The First Twenty-five Years  
1927 - 1952

Prepared by Mrs. Usha Nair

# The Genesis

- All India Women's Conference (AIWC), the oldest national women's organization in India was born in January, 1927 in Poona. But the genesis had actually begun much earlier.

# An Idea Takes Shape



- Early in 1926, at a prize-giving ceremony in Bethune College, Calcutta, the Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, Mr E F Oaten, had addressed women “who alone can help adequately to remedy what is wrong in women’s education,” and called upon them to “tell us with one voice what they want and keep on telling us till they get it”. This call prompted Mrs. A.L.Huidekoper, a lady from Ireland who had been teaching in Bethune College, to write a couple of articles in *Stri Dharma*, a monthly magazine published by Women’s Indian Association of Chennai. These articles caught the attention of another Irish lady, Mrs Margaret Cousins who decided to do something concrete to achieve the objective of improving women’s education in the country.

# An Appeal to Women of India


- Mrs Margaret Cousins addressed an appeal to women all over the country to form local committees and hold Constituent Conferences for the purpose of declaring their views on problems of education. Margaret Cousins had written, " From each of these conferences, representatives should be elected who would attend an All India Conference in Poona." She wanted this conference of "not more than 40 to 50 women" to synthesize from the proceedings of the preliminary conferences "an authoritative and representative memorandum by women on educational reforms".

# An Eventful Journey Starts!

- The appeal was published widely and sent to all Indian educational authorities. Her appeal met with wide and enthusiastic response and conferences were held in 22 different places during the months of September to December, 1926.
- Thus started the eventful journey of this organization that assumed leadership among organizations fighting for women's rights and equality.

# The First Step

## Pune 1927

 The first conference called the “All India Women’s Conference on Educational Reform” was held at Fergooson College, Poona from 5 to 8 January, 1927 under the Presidentship of Maharani Chimnabai Saheb Gaekwar of Baroda. The Resolutions passed at the Conference related almost without exception to education, ranging from matters concerning Primary Schools up to those relating to College and Adult Education. The sole and notable exception was the resolution supporting Sir Hari Singh Gaur’s Age of Consent Bill. While considering the educational requirements, it was found that social reform was inevitably bound up with it. It was felt that early marriage was among the main impediments in the path of education of girls.



# Delhi 1928

- The Second Conference was in Delhi in 1928. Her Highness the Begum Mother of Bhopal was the President. Lady Irwin, Vicereine of India, opened the proceedings. The Conference, attended by about 200 delegates from 30 different constituencies all over India, resolved on compulsory primary education for girls. This conference marked the origin of the All India Women's Education Fund, "to serve not only for propaganda but also for starting of institutions based on the ideals of the Conference". The issue of differential treatment of Depressed Class children was also taken up. Smt Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, one of the articulate leaders of the conference, declared, "Education is the birthright of every child that comes into this world and it claims that right from society."

# Noteworthy Campaign

- ▶ In addition to reaffirming the Resolutions of the first conference, resolutions were passed in support of Rai Saheb Haribilas Sarda's Bill for Restraint of Early Marriages. A detailed plan for campaign was worked out to this end, which included propaganda meetings and lectures, literature and posters, petitions, postcard campaign (to be sent to representatives in the Assembly) etc. One of the most important features of the Conference was the Women's Delegation that waited on the Viceroy and the leaders of the different political parties in the Central Legislatures, to secure the support of each in abolishing child marriage.



# The efforts bear fruit

- Delhi Women's League, the Delhi branch of AIWC, played an important role in mobilizing support for the Sarda Bill. A small Sarda Committee was set up which took upon itself to register all marriages of small children that came to the notice of members. They also sent a circular of warning to parents of such children pointing out the evils of child marriages, giving sections of the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Age of Consent Act for their information. Delhi Women's League had been founded by illustrious women such as Rameshwari Nehru and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur.
- A great achievement of the Conference was the passing of the Sarda Act. At the Conference in Bombay in 1930, it was pointed out that in the face of much severe criticism and attacks, the practical sense of the members had succeeded in getting the Act passed in a short span of two and a half years.

# 1930

- In 1930, March 1 was observed as Women's Day by holding meetings in almost all the branches to popularize and explain the work of the Conference. This was a noteworthy innovation. It was only much later that March 8 came to be observed as Women's Day internationally.

# First Home Science College

- An important milestone in the history of the organization was the setting up of the Lady Irwin College , a women's college for Home Science, Educational Research and Training for Teachers in Delhi in 1932. The college was set up under the Education Fund of the Conference. The College has grown to be one of the foremost colleges for girls in Delhi.

# 1935

- An interesting development in the year 1935 was the appointment of a committee to report on the ways and means that could be adopted for the realization of a common language for India. Resolutions were also passed supporting the necessity of instruction in methods of birth control through recognized clinics.

# 1936

- ▶ In 1936, Maharani Sethu Parvathi Bai of Travancore was the President of AIWC when, in a revolutionary step, temples of Travancore were thrown open to all classes of Hindus. Women of that state were also admitted into the Secretariat offices. Female literacy rate was highest in this native state as compared to all other parts of the country.

# AIWC and Politics

- Many of the women who came forward and gave a lead in the formation of AIWC were women involved in the freedom struggle and in political life. But all of them were determined that this national organization of women should be kept out of party politics. But at a time when important matters like the position of women in the Constitution of India, their fundamental rights, their representation in various bodies, conditions of their enfranchisement etc were being discussed, it was felt that AIWC could not avoid concerning itself with politics in the widest sense of the term if it was to perform its function of establishing women in their rightful position in the state and in society. Hence the following amendment to the AIWC Constitution, proposed by Sarojini Naidu, was passed in 1932 – “ The AIWC shall not belong to any political organization nor take an active part in party politics but shall be free to discuss and contribute to all questions and matters affecting the welfare of the people of India, with particular reference to women and children.”

# AIWC on world stage

- The Conference was gaining access to international bodies and working jointly with them on issues like universal adult franchise. A Memorandum on the Political, Legal, Social and Educational Status of Women in India was submitted to the League of Nations. Mrs. S C Mukherjee was appointed as a delegate to the Conference of the Central Authorities of the League of Nations. Charulata Mukherji was the Vice President at an international Conference on the prevention of immoral traffic in women and children held in Indonesia under the League of Nations. Representatives from women's organizations from abroad attended AIWC sessions regularly highlighting the high level of co-operation and joint efforts.

# The journal *ROSHNI*

- A journal *Roshni* started publication in 1938 as a quarterly in English. It has had an eventful journey – during different periods, it was trilingual carrying articles in English, Hindi and Urdu; had separate editions in English and Hindi; was published monthly / bimonthly / three issues in a year; and now, is back to being a quarterly publication. All issues of this journal are available at the MCM Library at the Central Office of AIWC in New Delhi.

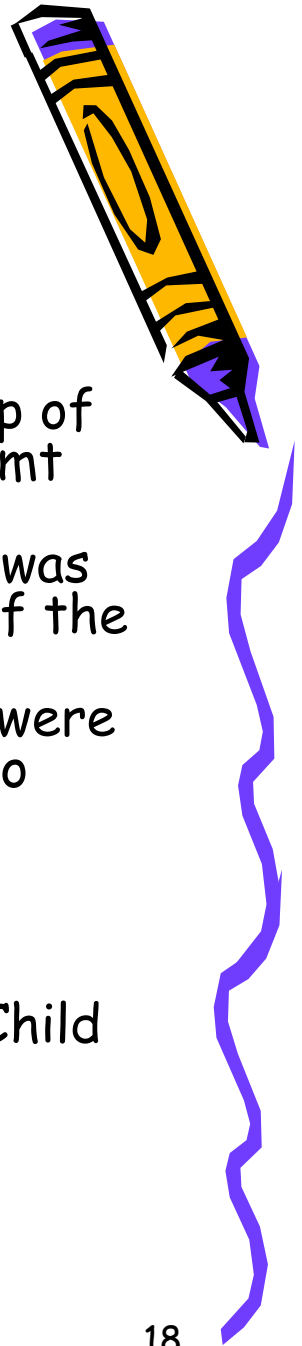


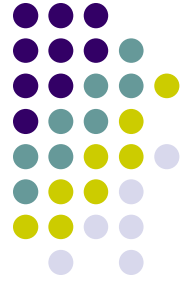
# Training of Workers

- The conference at Coconada in 1941 under the Presidentship of Vijayalakshmi Pandit started the scheme of Training Camps for Provincial Organisers. The first such camp attended by more than 50 women was held at Abrama, near Surat, in 1942. They were given instruction in thirty subjects necessary in reconstruction and organizing work for the masses.

# Save the Child

- The terrible famine in Bengal in 1943 saw the setting up of the All India Save the Children Committee by AIWC. Smt Vijayalakshmi Pandit, President and Smt Urmila Mehta, Secretary were the moving spirits behind the same. It was felt that the care of homeless children should be one of the prime concerns for the Conference, not only during an emergency but as a long-range measure as well. Homes were set up in Bengal, Orissa and Malabar. It is interesting to note that Madam Chiang Kai Shek made a sizeable contribution of Rs.50,000/ to the fund. Later, in 1949, Swaraj Bhavan in Allahabad was handed over to the Committee to set up a Children's Home. The Save the Children was the forerunner of the Indian Council for Child Welfare.





# Health Vans

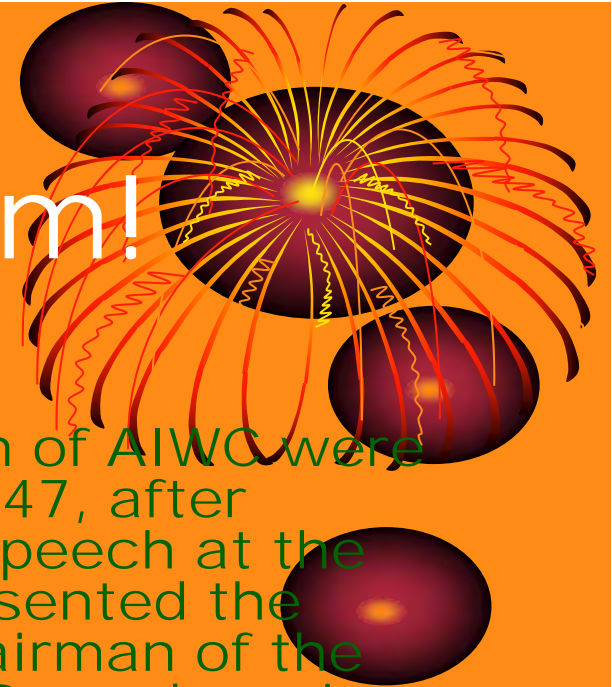
- In 1946, Hilda Seligman of UK (author of several children's books featuring Skippo, the donkey) donated a van to AIWC which was put into service for rendering health assistance to the rural areas near Bombay. The mobile van (called Skippo van) was a huge success and by 1950 AIWC had similar vans rendering yeoman service in six provinces.



# Post-war Years

- The years following the Second World War saw several women from AIWC being deputed to international bodies. Hansa Mehta was appointed in the UN sub-commission on the Status of Women. Later she was appointed as the Indian representative to the Human Rights Commission. Lakshmi N Menon and Hamid Ali took her place on the commission on Status of Women. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was the leader of the Indian delegation to the General Assembly of UNO. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was elected Vice President of UNESCO. Maitreyee Bose went to the International Labour Conference. AIWC was granted Consultative Status with United Nations.
- Kitty Shiva Rao attended a UN meeting in New York and Dr Ganguben Hadkar attended another meeting in Geneva, both as AIWC consultants. Smt J K Handoo attended the Congress of the International Alliance for Women. Ammu Swaminathan was sent to the Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Hannah Sen and Mithan Lam attended the Conference of the International Union for Child Welfare.

# India wins Freedom!



- When India attained freedom, women of AIWC were again in the limelight. On Aug. 14, 1947, after Nehru's historic 'tryst with destiny' speech at the stroke of midnight, Hansa Mehta presented the national flag, the *Tiranga*, to the chairman of the Constituent Assembly, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, saying: "It is in the fitness of things that the first flag, that is to fly over this august House, should be a gift from the women of India." Most of the 80 odd members of the Flag Presentation Committee were members of AIWC. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur became the first woman Cabinet Minister in the Central Government.

# Rebuilding the Nation

- Several members were associated with the rebuilding and rejuvenation of the new India.
- Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay worked hard to revive the arts and crafts of India through the All India Handicrafts Board.
- Dhanavanthi Rama Rau helped to organize the Family Planning Association of India.
- Women's Indian Association, branch of AIWC, under the leadership of Dr Muthulakshmy Reddy was instrumental in setting up the Cancer Centre in Chennai which continues to render valuable service to this day.
- Raksha Saran was the first Chairman of the Women's Advisory Committee of the Indian Standards Institution (now BIS).
- AIWC representative was included in the Certification Marks Advisory Committee of ISI.
- Promotion of co-operative societies was taken up in right earnest by AIWC.
- A school for mentally challenged children in Delhi and several schools in Mumbai, Calcutta, Chennai and other parts of the country set up at the time are active in the field of girls' education even to this day.

# AIWC and Elections

- In 1951, with impending elections, it was felt that AIWC should strive to ensure active participation of women in exercising their right to vote. An Election Department was set up. AIWC approached leaders of all political parties to include a fair proportion of women candidates in their lists. But the results were not encouraging.

# Reservation for Women

- AIWC, along with Women's Indian Association and the National Council of Women in India, submitted a Memorandum to the First Round Table Conference regarding the status of women in the Indian Constitution. The essential points were equal rights and obligations of all citizens, no disability to any citizen with regard to employment or exercise of trade, adult suffrage, women to fight elections on equal terms with men and no reservation of seats for women nor nominations or co-options.



# Equality and No Privileges

- The principle of reservation of seats for women in legislative bodies was rejected outright stating, “by merit and merit alone do we wish to find – and we are confident we shall find – a place in the Councils and Federal Legislatures of our country.” Three representatives of AIWC – Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Dr Muthulakshmy Reddy and Mrs Hamid Ali – gave evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee headed by Lord Lothian in London. The eloquent demand of AIWC was “Equality and no privileges, a fair field and no favour”.
- It can be seen that with the Women’s Reservation Bill, 2008 still in limbo, the dreams of the pioneers of AIWC in this direction remain unfulfilled to this day.

# Marching towards the Goal

- Changing with the challenges of the times, AIWC now runs computer centers, training programmes in alternate energy, hostels for working women, vocational training centers etc in addition to fulfilling its original goal of improving female literacy. AIWC continues to be a dynamic organization working quietly at the grassroot level, fulfilling the aspirations of the millions of women who give it their unstinted support and sustain it with their valiant efforts.