

7TH MAHARASHTRA MAHILA AROGYA HAQ PARISHAD

The 7th Maharashtra Mahila Arogya Haq Parishad was held in Shivaji University, Kolhapur from 15th-17th November 2018. Several women activists from across Maharashtra attended and contributed to this dialogue! The first address of the Parishad, by Lata Bhise addressed Babasaheb's call for right to live with dignity for all women. The category all women includes - old, young, destitute, agriculture workers, rural women, women in sex work, workers alike.

Meena Seshu called for all people to reclaim the Constitution in the quest for life with dignity. She said that, "The Constitution is for all of us and belongs to all of us. We are at a cross road today where we are fighting to reclaim rights for all marginalised people - be they women, transpeople, people who have been othered by caste, religious minorities... if they are not ready to give us those rights, we have to be ready to fight for it."

Manisha Gupte, Masum made an opening statement on bringing back personal is political - for all women and questioned the way we view women's health. She spoke about the importance of 'rights' in women's health, and how, in the current scenario when fundamental citizenship rights are being taken away from people belonging to minority communities or lower caste backgrounds-and then it becomes even more difficult to address anything else.

The second day of the Parishad addressed the challenges and implications of inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. It was emotionally distressing for the speakers to share their experiences and how their families have ostracized them. The struggles which come ones way after exclusion from society and family were discussed. There were also powerful singing performances on caste and gender.

On the second day, there was also a session on Health of Marginalised Communities. Raises the curtain on Marginalisation and its impact on Women - A sea of voices speak out about what marginalisation does to women - Muslim Women, Sex Workers, Transgender sex workers, Rural Dalit Women, Single (deserted, divorced, widowed) women speak out of the oppression.

Shabnam Ata from Nazariya said, "We work to convince the Jamaat in Miraj, Sangli of women's rights. It is a tough issue. When we realised that the Koran was being used to take away our rights, we decided to learn more about the Koran and status of women in it. Today we have learnt that the Koran gives women equal status. So why do people tell us otherwise?"

Sangita Manoji, sex worker from Veshya Anyaya Mukti Parishad VAMP said, "Why do you always address us as women who sell our bodies? We consider sex work as work. Why do people find it so difficult to treat us with the dignity given to all other workers? To manual scavengers, ragpickers, construction workers - they are all treated as workers. But when it comes to us the stigmatising term used is selling our bodies. I reject that definition."

Roshni from Muskan said, "Transgender sex workers find it very difficult to get services. Their identity itself is questioned by all. We tried to get ourselves registered but the official at the registration office refused saying that we are not normal but an aberration. Recognition of our identity is necessary for us to access all our other rights." Sulabha Howal from VMM, "Poor women have no negotiating capacity when they go to health care providers."

Vibhuti Patel concluded the day by addressing the importance of speaking up against privatization of resources- water, forests, land.

The beginning of the last day of the Parishad was with a play on mental health of women. Conversations around mental health are essential and the play highlighted the many ways in which women can feel or suffer from mental illnesses.

In the concluding session, Meena Seshu spoke about the necessity to have an inclusive society and an inclusive platform open to people from all walks of life - for marginalised, minorities, dalits, women and transgenders. This inclusivity is a huge step towards change.

Rajan Gavas spoke about the need to have a new and an empowering language for women - a language which doesn't stigmatise and demean their experiences.