



Understanding and Acting: Women's Human Rights Mechanisms

Geneva the 8 of March 2010

By: Annelise Ebbe

In December 2008 I was asked by Ila Pathak, the President of the Indian Section of WILPF if I would join her and Jharna Pathak who is Vice-President in the Gujarat Branch, in visiting refugee camps in the Kandhamal district in the Orissa state. Following the assassination of a Hindu fundamentalist, the Christian minority was attacked throughout the district. The whole conflict was similar to what had happened in Gujarat in 2002 when Hindus attacked Muslims. There are tribal communities in both Gujarat and in Orissa and a huge portion of the involved population is below the poverty line. There are many different conflicts in both areas.

Kandhamal is named after the Kandha tribal group. As already mentioned communal riots took place in 2008 between different groups, religions and communities. A lot of people were attacked, men were killed, buried alive, women were raped, children attacked and many made homeless and therefore ended up in refugee camps.

The women needed the state to help them but the state did not know how to help, so they had to be told and come to understand the plight of these women with the help of the international community – in this case WILPF.

More than 12000 women found themselves in camps with no privacy at all. The doors to toilets were cloth and blew open or disappeared. Some of the decision makers (for instance the state Governor) said that these women were used to going outside, however we pointed out that the risk of being raped grew, if they went outside the camp.

Minimal clothing was given to the displaced women – (the authorities said two saris, but they only got one – the corruption is also a 'player' that should be taken into consideration) and poor nutrition to women and children, including some children born in the camp. When the person in charge – The Commissioner-cum-Secretary, Revenue and Disaster Management Department – was told that the women had only got one sari (in stead of the two he knew were supposed to be sent, he seemed not to realize what had happened, which proves that for instance ordering two sets of clothes and curtains, is not enough to ensure that everything is received.

Because of an international presence, WILPF in the guise of me, people listened to the delegation. They even asked further questions. Guidelines, a mechanism were suggested for displaced women and others. It was also stressed that women needed to be included in the Peace Committees. During the interviews it had turned out that there were extremely few women in the Peace Committees and no refugee women at all.

This was the way we did it. We were very, very concrete when we were talking to for instance the man from the Disaster Management Department. We took CEDAW and other human rights instruments and pointed out that women's rights had been violated according to this and that paragrph... And nearly all these men – some of whom were interested and listening, knew that

India has the obligation under CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and the UNSC resolutions , and they were not making as if there had been no violations, because they got examples of very concrete, measurable and visible violations.

Ila, Jharna and I felt that this was a good way of working with the ‘women’s rights’ mechanisms’. It made sense – was in the core of on part of our WILPF work, working very concrete at the grass root level as well as the decision making level with and for women’s rights during armed conflict, with a rather high level of analysis taking the women’s stories from one level to the other. The proposal from the three of us is, that this way of working could be copied at other places.