

Of late, the residents of working women's hostels in different parts of the country have raised their voices in protest against arbitrary quit orders, bad living conditions, inadequate food, obsolete rules and maltreatment by the authorities. In Madras, the residents of a working women's hostel have been engaged in a long-drawn-out legal battle against what they consider to be illegal eviction. The case of the church-run women's hostel in Panaji, Goa, is well-known. The residents there objected to a unilateral decision of the Archbishop to replace the hostel with an ultra-modern multi-storied commercial complex. The residents refused to vacate the hostel. In retaliation, the authorities resorted to blackmail and even physical assaults.

In Hyderabad, the residents of two working women's hostels have protested against arbitrary eviction, insulting and tyrannical wardens, and bad living conditions. They even dared stage demonstrations. The response to this collective, public protest was truly amazing. The authorities turned fiercely punitive, and tried to split the women by threatening them, even by highlighting regional loyalties like: "Why do you Tamilians join the Telugu girls?" The authorities were not ready to negotiate on specific demands. In all these cases, the attitude of the authorities has been: These women do not deserve any better.

The self-image these institutions try to impose on women is as negative, self-destructive and contradictory as the one perpetuated by society at large. Far from supporting women in their effort to enter the workforce, those institutions only add more restrictions to those which women have to constantly fight.

The conditions in most working women's hostels are appalling. The

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# Living Outside The Protection Of Marriage

## Patriarchal Relations in Working Women's Hostels

food is bad, water facilities inadequate, rooms dark and depressing, maintenance poor. The wardens are indifferent, even tyrannical often contemptuous of the residents. This is not surprising since the wardens receive their salaries from the management and therefore seek to please them rather than to serve the residents. Most members of the management of these hostels do not attend the committee meetings, have no contact with the residents and do not even know what is happening except when, there is a crisis. Accounts are hardly ever presented, let alone questioned. Many hostels for students and working women have become centres of corruption but the residents dare not protest as they are constantly under the threat of eviction. Let us consider the cases of two Hyderabad hostels.

The YWCA working women's hostel is one of several all over India. However, the local YWCA is autonomous and not answerable to the national organization. Local members elect a board of directors and the board appoints a warden, who, in this case, is also ex-officio secretary of the board. The hostel, housed in a large building in the heart of the city, has room for about 40 women and a flat for the warden and her family.

When the residents finally took out a demonstration in February 1980, their grievances had piled up. They were served inadequate portions of badly cooked food and refused

second helpings, even of rice, in spite of the high mess charges, there was no water in the bathrooms, not because of any city-wide shortage but because the warden refused to "waste" electricity pumping water out of the tank; they were not allowed to switch on lights or even use candles after 11 pm, and were thus prevented from preparing the next day's class assignments; rent and mess charges were often arbitrarily increased; corridors, bathrooms, visitors' room, and even kitchen and dining room were filthy and dilapidated. Residents reported that the warden even slapped them at times. She insisted that the residents explain all their activities to her. On top of all this warden's husband, an alcoholic also lived on the premises harassed the women by shouting at them, listening in on their telephone conversations and even peeping into bathrooms. Presumably out of respect for his male presence, residents were not allowed to hang their underwear out to dry or come to the dining room in informal dress. Whenever the residents questioned anything, they were abused and called liars. The warden accused them of being badly brought up, and claimed to know all about their "dark pasts". She even claimed she had the authority to throw out any "girl" with 24 hours' notice. The residents were so afraid of this threat that they did not even think of consulting hostel rules which explicitly state that this is not

possible. The accounts were not audited neither were they available to the residents. Elections to the board had not been held for several years and many members had either dropped out or become inactive. The handful of women who continued merely accepted whatever the Warden said. Some members never received notices until the meeting was over. As a result of all this, the hostel was managed entirely by the warden who was answerable to nobody. Therefore it is not surprising that the residents' repeated appeals fell on deaf ears. Finally, they decided to take a protest march to church. Stree Shakti Sangathana, a local women's organization, extended its full support.

The residents silently walked into the church compound and squatted outside while the service was going on. They held placards asking for better food, water facilities and demanding the resignation of the warden. Meanwhile a member of the board, upset at the sight of the girls daring to take out a protest march on Sunday, went and called the police to disperse them. However, the police left in embarrassment when they were told that their entry into the church was unwarranted. The same member of the board gave vent to her anger and shouted at the demonstrators: "You are *kachra*, you are behaving like rickshaw wallahs! You are illiterate and..." we waited for the revelation "I am an army officer's daughter". With that statement, she stormed out of the place.

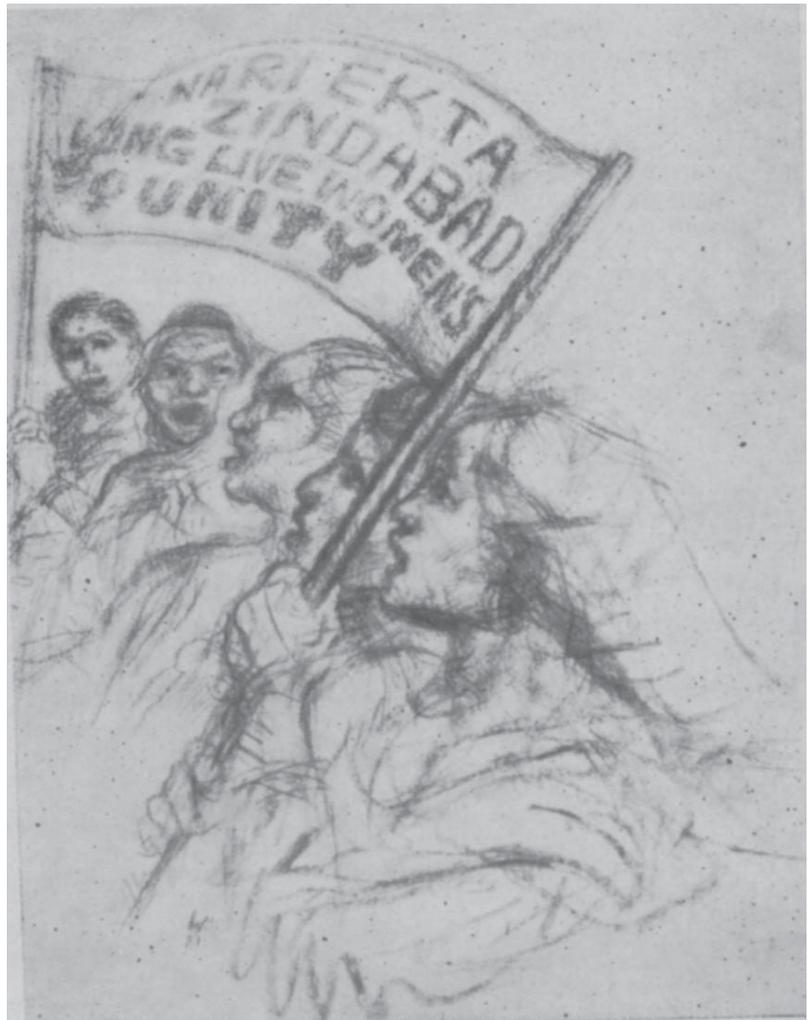
The protest was effective in that the warden was no longer able to keep everything under cover. The residents insisted that the board should meet and demanded that the mess be handed over to them. The board agreed. The residents ran the mess successfully. They spent less, food improved both qualitatively and quantitatively. But they were

burdened with the problem of no administrative help. The warden went on leave and a new warden was not appointed for several months. The long-term effects are more dubious. The authorities tried to split the residents, deliberately setting one group against the other. New women entering the hostel were warned against associating with those who had been active in the struggle. For several months, the authorities totally abdicated their responsibility and left the residents, all of whom have full-time jobs, to run the hostel all by themselves. This, though the residents continued to pay service charges which included the salary of a full-time warden and assistant warden!

The Andhra Yuvathi Mandali

working women's hostel has a capacity of about 60, and is also run by a voluntary agency. Here too, managing committee members are supposed to be elected by the general body, but in recent years elections have become more and more of a mere formality. Many members of the board were inactive and admitted this when the residents went to meet them individually to press their demands. The show was run by the secretary who had been there over 20 years. The warden was less tyrannical but she was sympathetic to the management, not to the residents.

In this hostel too, residents faced similar problems. Breakfast was never ready on time for those who had to leave by seven in the morning to



commute to work, On the other hand, if one was a little late for a meal, the food was often finished. Residents were scolded and insulted when they asked that dinner be served earlier. The food was bad, and those who took a second helping were called greedy and uncivilized. Plumbing repairs had not been attended to for months, drains were blocked, washbasins broken, bathroom curtains that had just crumbled with age were not replaced, corridor were rarely swept. The common room which also served as a visitors' room was kept locked and used only for managing committee meetings. Residents had to meet their visitors on the steps or under trees. There were no recreation facilities, no place for any group activity.

The warden often spoke insultingly to residents, and the protest was finally triggered off when six residents were orally asked to quit this hostel. There seemed to be no consistent policy underlying this action. Later, the management issued written quit notices to three residents who had been in the hostel for three years. The management's excuse was that no resident could remain there for more than three years, but this was not mentioned in the published rules. Also, there were some residents who had been in the hostel for over six years. Of course, the ones asked to quit were those who had taken a lead in pressing their demands!

The residents staged a demonstration on the premises. The management responded with utter contempt. One board member snatched a placard and tore it to bits. Another remarked: "Look, they are going on to the streets where they belong." Apparently, they had committed an unforgivable crime by speaking out publicly! When the residents went on a hunger strike, the authorities punished them by immediately closing down the mess,

on the grounds that the residents had not given prior notice of their strike so food had been "wasted". The management even tried to instigate police enquiries against the residents, accusing them of belonging to "extremist groups." Letters were sent to employers and parents, warning them about the residents' activities. The residents were threatened with closure of the hostel. When the mess was finally re-opened by the residents themselves, the management behaved in a most petty manner, locking up all cooking utensils and stopping milk supply.

When we study the origins, history and present condition of working women's hostels we begin to understand not only the problems faced by single working women but also the interests and attitudes of those women's institutions which have their ideological basis in the liberal reform movements of the early 20th century.

Only a single, working woman who has tried to find a house for herself can appreciate the problems involved. It is not just a question of whether she can afford to pay the rent. It is a question of what clothes she wears, whether she is good-looking, whether she will have visitors or not, what time she will come home, and so on endlessly. Most homeowners consider single women a liability, and would rather not rent out accommodation to them. It is amazing how thin the line between "reputable" and "dis-reputable" is for a single woman attempting to live her own life, outside the "protection" of marriage. Often, especially if her income is limited, she has to make do with a hostel.

The question is one of security and housing, which are crucial issues for all women. What does it mean to live in or belong to a house? For a man a house provides shelter and other basic amenities like food, and is

also a place where primary relationships can be developed. A house is also a mark of his lineage. His ancestry derives from birth into the house, and may not be questioned. For a woman, a house has quite a different significance. For her, to be housed is— not to be on the streets. In a house, she belongs to one man, be he father or husband, and is protected from other men. Traditionally, she does not own



property, but she achieves a position within the property structure—often herself as property of the patriarch who takes her into his house. Her status and her value are entirely dependent on this housing. In our society today, the main form of housing for women is indeed marriage. Marriage provides a woman with status, security and shelter. Above all, marriage confers on her a certain "virtue." The *thali* or *mangalsutra* ensures her "reputation." But a single woman has to constantly "prove" her virtue, has to struggle for shelter and security. It is this security and shelter that working women's hostels are supposed to provide.

What a resident pays for when she lives in the hostel is not really food or lodging. She pays for the respectability that the institution provides her. A "good hostel" is not so much one where the living conditions are good, but an impeccably respectable one. Once this is provided, (usually by the "impeccable" reputations of those who run it) the assumption is that the residents must put up with the living

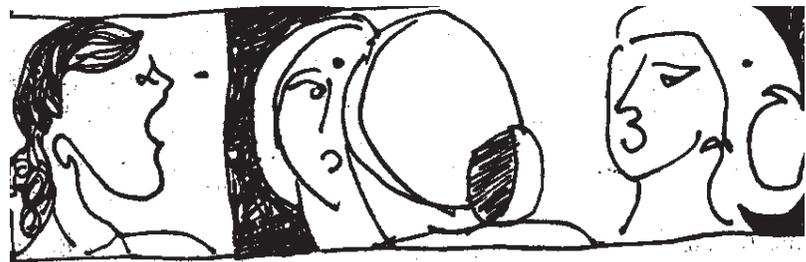
conditions, however bad. They are certainly not to question these conditions, or to assume that they are paying for food and shelter.

The condition in hostels for scheduled caste and tribe women students also reveal how much "honour" a single woman gets. In one such hostel which houses almost 200 schoolgirls, none of the doors or windows had bolts or could be shut. Cows, buffaloes and constantly wandered in and walked over and around the girls who sleep on mats on the floor. One night, a girl found it was not a buffalo but the night watchman who had come in and was lying next to her. Her protests of course, were not heeded. The authorities accused her having called him inside, and doors continue to be without bolts.

Even more horrifying is the general assumption that girls living in these hostels are always "available to any man who wants them." Parents send their six year old daughters to these hostels, thinking this is the only chance for them to make something of their lives. But as these girls grow up they learn to fulfill the demands made on them and are grateful for the little money or the trinkets they may get in exchange.

In all such institutions it is taken for granted that authority is always right. And further, that the women live there only by the grace of the management. A woman who questions authority must be "badly brought up". The other attitude is that any woman who needs to work and has to stay in a hostel is inferior and must have risen from the lowest strata of society. "We know your backgrounds", the residents were told, "Each one of you has something seamy to hide." The management does not hesitate to take up this line of attack. When the residents asked for breakfast on time, one of the accusations hurled at them was: "You

have had abortions and we have had to look after your babies." In one working women's hostel, when residents returned at nine pm, after seeing a film show, the warden called them prostitutes. Residents who make demands or even speak up are made to feel guilty. In one hostel the secretary said: "For 20 years we have had no complaints. How is it that now you have so many complaints?" Far from being ready to listen, the authorities refuse to believe that a resident who stands up for her rights, could possibly be speaking the truth.



-Lydia Victor

The authorities assume that a woman who speaks out must be either telling lies or must have been misled by "outsiders." The autocratic attitude of the authorities is evident from their having called the police into action against the women's demonstration.

Why have these institutions, which are concerned with reforming the traditional position of women, failed to evolve new modes of action or to carry the women's movement to a higher stage? Many of these institutions were founded by western missionaries or by those involved in the liberal reform movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of the working women's hostels are run by religious organizations or quasi-religious groups. Others are run by voluntary agencies which sprang up in response to the major liberal reform movements like Brahma Samaj and its revivalist offshoot the Ramakrishna mission. To regard their contribution as negative would indeed be wrong. They played a very

important historical role. But they have the strength and weakness of liberalism in which they are grounded. Their fight was always against the more blatant forms of injustice to women, such as sati, child marriage and purdah. For example, the Andhra Yuvathi Mandali hostel, whose residents have waged a long and demoralizing struggle against a powerful management, is run by a voluntary agency which came into being in the 1930s. Its major aim was to bring women out of purdah. At a time when the Nizam was still ruling

in Hyderabad, this was not only a progressive but a very courageous move. Also, these crusaders against purdah later went on to participate in the nationalist movement, at great personal risk. A now retired founder member of the organization proudly told us that there was a time when any woman who joined the organization ran the risk of her husband being thrown out of his job. Yet today the hostel run by this organisation is no different from any other.

The weakness of these liberal reform movements which also took up women's issues, was their failure to analyse the causes of women's oppression. Liberalism upholds the idea of individual responsibility and freedom, social justice and compassion for the underprivileged. Therefore its methods of operation are charity and social service aimed at helping the oppressed but not treating them as agents. The liberal notion of charity does not permit or

tolerate any questioning from those to whom charity or patronage are extended. Most of these institutions, run by upper middle class women have contented themselves with extending charity to the less fortunate.

None of the women's institutions developed any perspective regarding class relations or male-female relations. The institutional framework of oppression—that is, a class-divided and patriarchal society—was not questioned. The liberating impact of the reform movement was limited to urban, educated, middle and upper class women. More women began to work—many compelled by financial necessity. Yet as women they continued to be by the same old feudal notions and values of society. Thus the working woman has to confront many contradictions. Working and earning an income release her from the domestic walls without giving her any real freedom from male societal oppression. She moves on from a totally feudal form of oppression only to be subjected to new bourgeois forms of oppression. She is made a sex object and becomes prone to attack outside the home, yet she has to keep her “virtue” and “respectability” in order to survive. Thus she is not allowed to transcend the traditional structural definition of woman as appendage to man.

Women's movements and welfare institutions that were the outcome of the reform movements, fit basically, despite their good intentions, into the oppressive structures and value systems, and in fact extend them. Institutions run by women also take on the same class and male ideology as the rest of society. Over the years, in the post-independence era, they have become social clubs of upper and middle class women. The more benign ones are a little more active and run institutions like working women's hostels but hold them as their little enclaves where they think nothing

can go wrong.

If these woman's institutions are to make any progress towards emancipation, the very premises on which they are based must change. They can no longer be treated as charitable institutions—which they are not, as the residents pay for service. It is in changing these premises and turning the institutions into centres for conscientizing women, that women's movements deriving their strength from women can play an important role.

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#### Errata

“We forgot to acknowledge that the folk song published in **Manushi** No. 8, under the title “The Sita Who Refused The Fire Ordeal”, was taken from “*Lokgitan ki samajik vyakhya*” (A social analysis of folksongs) by Shrikrishna Das published by Sahitya Bhavan Ltd, Hindi Sahitya Press, Allahabad, 1956.