

**Proceedings of the Convention on Freedom for Girls
Sundarayya Vignanam Kendra, Hyderabad
15th - 16th July, 2017**

Over 300 adolescent girls from several villages in Telangana who were part of the campaign for Gender Equality and Girls' Education participated in the Convention 'Freedom for Girls' on 15th and 16th July 2017 at Hyderabad, Telangana. They were from the districts of Ranga Reddy, Vikarabad, Suryapet, Jogulamba Gadwal, Nagarkurnool, Hyderabad in Telangana and Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh.

These girls included school children studying in grades 8 to 10. They were active participants in the school girls' committees in their respective schools and have been taking part in school related programs for equality between boys and girls in the school and classroom as well as in the family and their neighbourhood. Many of them have shown leadership qualities in reporting on child marriages to the school teachers and local police, motivating school dropouts to re-join schools, better facilities in schools for girls, on gender discrimination and sexual harassment.

Meetings of the girls' committees were held in schools as preparation for the Convention. Their representatives were to share the issues that are to be raised at the Convention.

Day One 15th July 2017

The Convention began with the 'Welcome and Introduction' session by R.Venkat Reddy, National Convener M V Foundation. He addressed the girls, introduced the agenda of the Convention and spoke on the theme of 'Voices of Girls' and its importance to bring about transformation in their lives and social transformation. Girls were asked to raise slogans to set the mood of the conference. It reverberated with the slogan of 'Ika Chaalu' ('Enough is Enough', 'End all violence on Girls', 'End physical violence', 'End mental violence', 'End sexual violence', 'End Gender Discrimination', 'End Child Marriages', 'We want Free Education until Completion of Secondary School'.)

The second session focussed on formation of groups where the delegates were mixed with children from all districts. 15 groups with 20 girls each were thus formed. There were ice-breaking exercises and at the end of it girls knew about other girls from other districts, their family background, role of girls' committees and the issues taken up by the girls in their respective areas.

This exercise created a sense of solidarity among the girls, they recognized their strength and that they had all shared a similar predicament on gender discrimination and their battles for education. This session was facilitated by 'Voice of Girls' a training and resource centre for girls.

The third session was a plenary on "Gender Violence, Child Marriages and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012". It was facilitated by lead Resource Person, Ms. Satyavati, from Bhumika Women's Collective. The session was based on giving information on the related laws with concrete examples that emerged from discussions with the girls. Thus, children became aware of the legal instruments that were available and the functionaries who were responsible for protecting children.

In the fourth session the 15 groups met separately to discuss each of the following points that are crucial from M V Foundation's perspective to bring about Gender Equality and Girls' Education:

- All children must be in a full time school or any full time education stream until completion of 18 years.
- Girls and boys must enjoy equal opportunities to pursue education and build their capabilities.
- The discourse on gender equality must be introduced into the school curriculum from Class 1 onwards.
- Presence in an education institution should be a pre-condition for building awareness on reproductive health care, sex education and life skills for both boys and girls.
- Arguments that control girls' bodily integrity and deny them autonomy such as domestic work, distance to schools, lack of safety for girls, eve teasing, and increase in dowry, sibling care, poverty, and pressure of marriage are unacceptable.
- Youth clubs must be non-gender segregated, secular spaces where all members are equal, without distinctions of gender, caste, religion, disability or any other forms of discrimination.
- No girl shall marry before attainment of 18 years of age. Child Marriage law must be amended to nullify marriage of all girls until 18 years of age.
- Even after attainment of 18 years, the girl's decision and choice for her marriage is to be given full support.

Children's discussions in groups on this led to a commitment by them to press for all the above. Children related to each of these values and understood the challenges and implications of actualizing them.

Day Two 16th June 2017

Children met at the plenary charged by the new found strength from the previous day.

Each group made presentations on the deliberations in the previous evening interspersed by songs and dances that they had composed. They put forth the following set of demands from the government that emerged from their group discussion:

1. Create institutions and safe spaces that values girls and protect us when we seek support.
2. More high schools and hostels for girls
3. Free text books, transportation and all other facilities until completion of graduation;
4. Set the goal of 'Education for Girls' and not bind us with the goal of marriage through programs such as 'Kalyana Lakshmi'
5. Nutritional support and midday meal program at all stages of education.
6. Regular health check-ups.
7. Free sanitary pads.
8. Introduction of gender equality in the school curriculum from class one onwards
9. Accountability of all concerned departments – women and child, labour, education, police, revenue and welfare towards girl children.
10. Equality begins with our father treating our mothers as equals. Mother's need protection from domestic violence, sexual violence, ill-health, alcoholic husbands and male domination.

The speakers at the session were as follows:

Mr. Gaddar, Peoples Singer and Poet

Ms. Mallu Swarajyam, Freedom Fighter and Senior Feminist Leader

Mr. Ramesh, Chief Information Officer, TSWCDSC

Dr. V. Rukmini Rao, Director, Gramya Resource Centre for Women

Ms. Linda van der Wijk, Stichting Charities Fund Rijsholt

Ms. Rekha Wazir, Senior Associate, ICDI

Shri. M.R. Vikram, Secretary Trustee, MVF

Prof. Shantha Sinha, Former Chairperson – NCPCR

Gaddar spoke about the exploitation of girl children in rural areas and emphasized the importance of education. He offered to join the campaign to bring about gender equality, compose songs and poetry. Girls joined him in chorus at the songs sung by him on the occasion.

Mallu Swarajyam talked about her journey as a child to fight the shackles of feudalism and oppression of landlords. She stated how she went through her own school education at a time when girls were not allowed to go to schools. She encouraged them to study stating that times have changed and education is indispensable to live a life with self-esteem and dignity. She also talked about the need for girls to learn to defend themselves through karate classes.

Ramesh from the Department of Women and Child Welfare mapped out all the programs in favour of adolescent children that included education, health and nutrition, protection and care.

Rukmini Rao spoke about gender discrimination at every step. She talked about sexual violence, good touch and bad touch stating that girls will have to confide without fear in an adult person or school teacher should they encounter violence. They could also call up the Childline help line 1098.

Linda van der Wijk spoke about how inspirational it was to interact with girls (in the two day convention) who showed courage and determination to fight all forms of violence and pursue education. She also stated how she was impressed with the girls who came to the podium and speak to the audience with such clarity on complex issues relating to gender discrimination. She suggested

that the girls should take back the spirit of the Conference to their homes, schools and community and work towards a lasting change towards gender equality.

Rekha Wazir asked girls to dream about their new aspirations and goals and wished that they get educated to realize their dreams.

Vikram stated how M V Foundation is focussed on bringing about a change in social norm towards gender equality. He stated that it would draw upon M V Foundation's experience on child labour where communities in 1200 villages no longer tolerate children being out of schools and track every child until completion of secondary education. To bring about change in norms on gender too is possible and doable, he said.

Shantha Sinha concluded the session and stated that all the demands made by the girls in their deliberations would be taken up with the government. She said that voices of girls and their struggles for freedom and dignity would not go unheard and gave courage to M V Foundation to do more. It is their phenomenal journey towards gender equality and education that would pave the way for future generations of children in the country.