

Senior Single Women's Residential Seminar: 12th and 13th August 2016

Nishtha Single Women's group organized a 2 day residential seminar in Nishtha Community Center for 46 senior single women. The programme was organized by the single women's team, led by activist Radha Raghwal, and Dr. Kishwar Shirali was the primary resource person. The slogan for the meeting was "Maan Ki Awaz Ka Agaj" which means, "Begin to listen to the voice of the heart".

The meeting started out with a warm welcome to all the participants and a discussion about the single women's forum. Sixty percent of the participants have been members since it began in Himachal Pradesh in 2006. They are our most committed and valued members and are therefore the best people to ask about their thoughts and feelings about the forum and how we can steer it to cater for their needs and make it relevant to them.

During the first discussion we talked about the economic status of single women, and what steps could be taken to improve it. Our appeal to the government to provide all single women with the same pension still stands as even now only 90% of our group attending the meeting receive the widow's pension; the remaining 10% are not eligible for reasons such as that they have a son in a government job or the family own more than a certain amount of land. The women definitely feel that they should get the benefit of all government schemes due to single women irrespective of other conditions. They appreciate the single women's forum for assisting them in accessing government schemes such as to get financial aid for the marriage of a daughter, to start a small business, to build a home, for medical help or to get their widow's pension.

Radha and Dr. Kishwar presented a beautiful game to enable the women to come to understand their inner feelings which they can't describe in words. Plain pieces of card were distributed among the women and they were asked to think quietly and then draw something. One can easily imagine the shyness and shaking hands around the room as they were drawing because most of the elderly women had never done such a thing before. They were thrilled with the results, most women

drew a house, flowers or birds which could be interpreted to mean that their greatest desire is for a separate home, a life like a beautiful flower which always smiles and to fly like birds with nobody to obstruct or control them.

In the evening, after such a meal as they rarely experience, the women walked together up the hill to the famous ancient temple of Ahaganjar Mahadev set in a sacred forest next to a mountain stream. They relaxed in the temple in peace and contemplation and heard the ancient story of the temple founded by a famous Saint and continued by his disciples over the centuries. When they returned to the centre the women sang local traditional and religious songs well into the night enjoying the once in a lifetime experience of staying as a group with no pressure or hindrances.

During the second morning after breakfast together, the women engaged in lively and meaningful discussions about domestic violence, land less women, court cases, and again the importance of the single women's group in all these issues. By the end they had come to know that the issues the group works on are not less and not weaker. The only way to fight against them is to stand in unity with the single women's group. They said: "it's just the feeling of the single women's group behind us that enables us to ask for our legal and fundamental rights." Today no one is isolated because they have the big supportive family of single women behind her. The women all agreed that they would like to participate in future workshops to learn more about their rights and about what government schemes are available to them.