



By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA

#WeGoaWomenToo

#WeGoaWomenToo. We also face discrimination. We also face sexual harassment. We also find this discrimination and harassment is aggravated with the model of development that is being pursued where our work, or the invisibilisation of our work, is not valued and factored into the accounting of development.

Post-1961, the legislators in Parliament said there could be no dowry problem in Goa, because sons and daughters have equal rights to parental property. That was in fact the reason advanced for not extending the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, to Goa, when the various pre-December 1961 Indian laws were being extended to Goa. It took a lobbying effort to get the law extended to Goa, saying #WeGoaWomenToo face dowry problems, including dowry deaths.

We are often told that women are equal to men in Goa, and don't face discrimination because of equal property rights and communion of assets in Goa at the time of marriage, but #WeGoaWomenToo face discrimination. We face it in our homes, in the workplace – whether we work in the fields or whether we work in offices or whether we are self-employed. Communion of assets does not automatically translate into equality for women unless women are made aware of what the assets are, so that they can stake their claim to such assets. This requires that control over property should reside with women (and controls are different from ownership!).

The authorities trumpeted that our indicators for health are good. But women were measured with the yardstick of maternity, and the low maternal mortality rate is flaunted to say women in Goa have no health issues. But about 40% of the births taking place in private hospitals and clinics are caesarian and so are 19% of those in Government hospitals and clinics. There is something seriously wrong here, which needs redressal?


What about the prevalence of anaemia among Goa's women? According to the National

Family Health Survey IV (2015-16) [NFHS-IV], 31.4% among women in the reproductive age group of 15-49 years are afflicted by this condition. Where do the health programmes even begin to address this issue? Even the nutrition division in the Directorate of Health Services, Government of Goa, has been closed down and the Government is only chasing solutions for lifestyle diseases with super specialities.

And if you thought there was no son preference in Goa, the sex ratio for children born during the last five years continues to be adverse at 966 females per 1000 males, as per the NFHS when, as per the laws of nature, the sex ratio should be skewed in favour of women. It has been, as a matter of fact, more adverse in the urban areas of Goa, at 894 females per 1000 males. This only confirms the findings of studies in the rest of India that the more the affluence, the more adverse the sex ratio. Possibly because the affluent are keener to consolidate their wealth through the male line, where, like most other places in India, Goa's society is also patrilocal, and the daughter is 'handed over' to her husband at the time of marriage.

Another issue that points ominously to the skewed figures against urban society in Goa, is that of spousal violence against women. According to the NFHS IV, the spousal violence stands at 15.3% of urban women and 8.7% of rural women. Additionally, 1.6% of pregnant women have faced spousal violence.

They say Goa is safe for women, in terms of possibilities of maintaining bodily integrity. Really? The issues being raised yet again through the unnatural death of Police Constable Arsela Parsekar, that has just hit the headlines, are a stark reminder, in fact, of a form of sexual harassment that stalks many a workplace in Goa. It might seem natural and, in fact, all right to relate sexually by consent with a person who is a colleague or even a superior at the workplace. But behind the veil of this seemingly consensual relationship, and at the heart of this issue, is the power dimension involved in the relationship. Which is why so many women do not speak out. You speak out about the sexual harassment, they will expose your transgression of societal moral codes. It was the encouragement from the #MeToo campaign that resulted in so many women in Goa coming out with their #MeToo stories on social media, when the whole campaign broke out.

 *Our Goan women sit like queens at home while their menfolk are toiling long and hard, did someone say? Many of #WeGoaWomenToo get up at 4 or 5 am, help our children study, prepare their breakfast and tiffin for recess time, then drop the children to school, chisel away at the budgeting for the household with the limited money we have, do the marketing, cook, pick up the children from school, clean the house, take up the children's studies again. The list goes on and on, and yes, yet *our women don't work and sit like queens, we are only housewives*. And #WeGoaWomenToo are not only singing and dancing and doing nothing else as those glamorous ads for tourism seem to suggest, though we do sing and dance as well.*

For #WeGoaWomenToo, there are schemes for women, which are in fact reinforcing the problems that women face, such as the Laadli Laxmi scheme which offers a rupees one lakh dowry at the time of marriage (though not calling it dowry). And as for the monthly doles that are being disbursed as schemes for women, apart from all else, if women were dependent on them, they would have to fly kites or may be fry *pakodas*, if the suggestions of Prime Minister Narendra Modi are anything to go by.

But hang on. The regulation regime for those who want to set up pakoda stalls is just getting more and more strict and complicated. This when the regulation for SEZs (they are off the radar for the moment in Goa) or SEZ-like places (Information park, biotechnology park, food park) include one stop windows for all the permissions and quick time commitments for responding to the SEZ developers' applications for setting up shop in the SEZ and SEZ like places.

And the pakodawalis will soon have to go digital? Do we have access to IT services in Goa to address the digitization problems? Would pakodawalis have amenities of water and electricity? Will women be inviting inspectors from the Food and Drugs Administration, the local self-governance authorities, the Tourism Department, the Electricity Department (if they have a wire/connection illegally pulled from somewhere), the Income Tax authorities.... In other words, #WeGoaWomenToo are facing the brunt of this exploitative and oppressive development model that makes it super-easy for corporates to access investment opportunities and super-difficult for women to even continue with their traditional occupations.



#WeGoaWomenToo, that is, the traditional fisherwomen, do not even have proper market places to sit in. Mobile vans and cycle boys are allowed to steal the show, thanks to the gender unfriendly schemes designed by the Fisheries Department and thanks to the State reinforcing the image of a 'dirty market' but a 'clean mall' by not ensuring the required amenities in the local markets. At another level, #WeGoaWomenToo cannot find the shell fish and oysters and our men cannot net fish in the *rampons*, because they won't get enough fish or it is not feasible to do so, so #WeGoaWomenToo have to get up early in the morning by 4 a.m. to go and buy fish from the jetty to sell the same in the local market.

#WeGoaWomenToo pay taxes, direct taxes, and yet we pay more taxes and yet more taxes, including even for sanitary pads. They say sanitary pads are multinational products. But hey, where has the Government created appropriate opportunities for making enough hygienic sanitary pads for the whole of India's menstruating women, that we can afford to ignore the multi-nationals manufacturing these pads. After all, it is we who pay the taxes.

On the other hand, #WeGoaWomenToo face the problems created for us by the sources that are designed for generating revenue, such as casinos for instance. And yes, the casinos generate some jobs too, but then matka and selling drugs also generates some jobs, don't they? Is the casino style development the path Goa wants to walk? There are examples galore of the change in Goa's fabric caused by criminalization and consumerism induced by casinos, as it has been by the indiscriminate mining. Women have borne the double brunt, all in the name of revenue to be generated for schemes and that too schemes for them, considering that it is argued that casinos are required to generate revenue for the various schemes for women.

#WeGoaWomenToo are painted with stigma, stigma as being easily available women to easily sexually harass, stigma as belonging to depressed castes, tribal communities, who must hide these identities, so they cannot socially assert the rights available to them under the Constitution. There is a waiver of hostel fees for tribal women, and tribal women are staying in the hostels, but there are barely or no takers for the hostel waiver, for what this comes to signify in terms of the opportunity costs – socially and maybe even economically.



Speaking of tribal women, the State took away our (tribal women's) land for water sports, for instance, and our houses remained huddled in one corner of the land, and so there were no spaces for our own toilets, and now they are talking of Swachh Bharat, but where will the State build the toilets? #WeGoaWomenToo are watching the Swachh Bharat scheme with both amusement and anger, for it is painted so glamorously but simply cannot deliver. This Swachh Bharat scheme does not come to the rescue of scavengers whose families #WeGoaWomenToo may not be a part of, but whose families reproduce these men who are made to scavenge. The State is still taking away our land for various mega projects, or they are soon going to make our lands unusable with coal peppering them and highways stomping through. Yes, Goa is Against Coal. Our gram sabhas have passed resolutions against the coal hub that will, apart from many other ills, also lengthen our work days as we have to tend to ill family members caught in the net of respiratory problems. #WeGoaWomenToo face the double or triple brunt of this dispossession.

And of course, #WeGoaWomenToo can contest Assembly elections from the general seats. Who prevented Goa's women from contesting or from getting elected? Oh, yes, of course, that is why there are only two women presently in the Goa Legislative Assembly. And women in decision-making processes are nominated as tokens by whichever party that rules.

Yet #WeGoaWomenToo hope and strive towards a just world and just transitions towards this just world.

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