

# Women in Post –1961 Goa: Problems and Challenges

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When the women of Goa begin to reminiscence about the last four and a half decades of Goan history it will be a journey of mixed responses, for the women’s movement has witnessed gains and losses, successes and failures, times of expression and times of being silenced, times of vibrant activity and times of lulls and importantly, times of prolonged protests against markets and developmental forces, and media projections.

For decades the women of Goa have taken a vociferous stand against arbitrary Development practices that the Government has attempted to foist upon the people of the State and especially its women. For decades the women of Goa have demanded for a gendered perspective and an equal representation in the development processes in the State.

## **The history**

The State of Goa, is a tiny speck of land on the west coast of India that was a Portuguese, colony till 1961. Goa was then a pre-industrial economy dominated by agriculture and mining. Subsequently the economy saw a drastic change with the advent of industrialization. This also resulted in the influx of a diverse population coming in from the neighboring States to bolster its massive need for labour.

Historically, the Portuguese have displayed a deep concern for women’s rights and their egalitarian sense has reflected itself in the people of Goa. One can see this in the equal access to education and the resultant freedom to choose a full time profession, the increase in the age of marriage and the Portuguese Uniform Civil Code, later called the Uniform Civil Code which gives the daughter an equal right to her father’s inheritance and property, “as a result the position of women in Goa was better than their counterparts in other parts of the India” says Fatima Da Silva Gracias, in her book *Kaleidoscope of Women in Goa 1510-1961* (Delhi, Concept Publ., 1996). Come a decade later, however, the women of Goa soon found themselves having to fight to retain this very position they had come to believe was inextricable theirs.

In the early 80s the Governments of India and of Goa came to realize the tourism potential of the State and as the industry began getting organized and the Governments began to

boast of growing foreign exchange returns, the women of Goa began to find themselves as yet another commodity thrown into an attractive 'holiday package'. Tourism brochures and the carnival became methods to exhibit this 'exotic' product. The women of Goa were none to happy and there was a long phase of resistance to this marketing gimmick. The last three decades of tourism which has taken Goa from the destination for backpackers to an international tourist destination has had tremendous impact on the social, economic, political and cultural fabric of the State and women, as homemakers and as vital contributors to the labour requirements of the tourism industry have experienced its impact on two fronts.

The entire decade of the eighties was a time of vibrant protests, wherein women played a frontal role not just on women's issues like the lewd portrayal of Goan women but also on issues such as the easy availability and use of drugs, the land grabbing methods of the Government and denying fishermen and toddy tapers access to the beaches (as it became 'prime' land that was liberally handed over to the leisure industry). More recently women's groups have launched strong protest against the Governments' move to set up off shore casinos and against the eviction of commercial sex workers from their homes in complete infringement of their human rights and dignity.

### **The current situation**

Today, Goa has an 82.32 % literacy level and a high Human Development Index, thus making it one of the better-developed States in the country. There is a high public presence of women in the State yet one cannot use this as an indicator that everything is bright and rosy. Subtly a much too worrisome conflict is boiling, the symptoms of which can be seen through the indirect violence that repeatedly simmers to the fore. Much of this violence is unrecognized and indirect and therefore remains unmitigated.

Thousands of Goan women are employed in the tourism industry, both directly and indirectly. They are the beautiful face of the industry at the front office; they are the little known face in the housekeeping. They are the masseurs at the beauty parlours and the people running small businesses. Yet this labour market has an underbelly of dark secrets, of prostitution, escort services and little talked about pornography, to meet the growing demands of sex tourism. Not surprisingly the sex tourism demand in Goa does not attract Goan women alone. It also involves the trafficking of women from the relatively poor states of India like Karnataka, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Goa is taken to a new height with the new entrant of foreign women such as Russian and Balkan. Numerous sex rackets have been unearthed by the Goan media, when the Government of Maharashtra banned girls from the dance bar, they headed to Goa in numbers sizable enough to enrage local villagers. But few of these cases have been dealt with conclusively. Every case seems to point to the obvious yet potent nexus between the police, politicians and unscrupulous pimps.

A National Human Rights Commission report conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences on trafficking of women and children in India 2002-2003, reveals that Goa has also the highest levels of trafficking of women and children compared to other states.

Trafficking has acquired especially grave dimensions after the Baina red light area in Vasco was demolished in 2004. As a result, say NGOs working with Commercial Sex Workers in Baina, the trafficker is no more a brothel keeper and the problem has spread, become more sophisticated, complex and organized as a network. A growing concern is also that about the spread of AIDS.

It is also not difficult to understand why Goan women find themselves agreeable to provide sexual favours for economic gains. The tourism sector is one of the worst employers. Most of the hotel staff is paid a pittance, the employment is seasonal and the labour in this industry receive little or no labour benefits, it is a tacit understanding that the staff can expect an additional income from the tips that come by, often the desire for a decent lifestyle makes prostitution acceptable after all. A direct fallout of sex tourism has been the cases of women with HIV/AIDS. With the Government withdrawing on medical welfare, it is NGOs and women's groups who have had to pool resources.

Another issue, which is widely ignored and worth a close look is that of women labour employed in the industrial estates. With a high rate of literacy most women in Goa find it unimaginable to be exclusively housewives. Goa also happens to be one of the most expensive States to live in and this is an additional push to women into the labour market, which is becoming increasingly treacherous with the global search for cheap labour. Presently Goa has 12 industrial estates, which employs thousands of women and more joining each year. Although there is a range of stringent labour laws, these industrial units that are often similar to sweat shops are largely unmonitored by the labour department. The women here work under horrendous conditions, not just low wages of Rs. 1500 per month but poor work environments too. These range from damaging levels of noise, to handling hazardous chemicals, to improper safety equipment, to injuries on the work site besides long hours of work. The effect on their health as a result of being subjected to such conditions is largely ignored. Goa desperately needs a labour policy for women, especially one that seeks to adequately protect the health of women, and where the sexual harassment at the workplace law is implemented.

Goa also has a high unemployment rate. A recent report in the national daily *The Hindu* claims that if the present situation continues Goa will have a 55% unemployment rate by 2020. A high cost of living and the desperation for employment is compelling thousands of women to seek jobs in the gulf countries. Thousands of women are found working as domestic help, beauticians and nannies all over the gulf. In a recent report titled "Swept Under the Carpet: Abuse Against Domestic Workers", Human Rights Watch says that millions of

women working as domestic help endure conditions akin to slavery. Once the contract is signed and the passport taken by the employer, women working as domestic help are being harassed with long hours of work, poor living conditions, meager salaries and often sexually and physically abused. The cases of women escaping the clutches of their tyrant employers, and stranded at the Indian Embassy became so numerous that the State Government banned domestic workers going to the Gulf. This however did not address the economic pressures that are forcing women to temporarily abandon their families and risk life and limb in foreign countries some of which are oppressive towards women.

Another issue that has gone largely ignored is health. The entire country is discussing and debating a recently published study done by the St. Michael's Hospital in the University of Toronto and the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and research Chandigarh, which claims that India has lost about 10 million girl through female feticide. The census report for Goa had indicated a gender imbalance too. At a talk I had attended in 2005, the Superintendent of Asilo Hospital and the North Goa authority for the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Act had mentioned how stringent the law was, but had also pointed out ways and means by which both doctors and those interested in terminating a female foetus could get around it. Goa is yet to register a single case of female feticide and has yet to come up with a plausible answer to the gender imbalance in the State.

Mental health is yet another issue that has got insufficient public and government attention. Thousands of women, are under tremendous stress of both family and work, an alarming number are braking down under this pressure and even though thousands of patients find their way to the Institute of Psychiatry and Human Behaviour, the hospital is understaffed. Counselling facilities are minimal and there is no attempt to explore new methods other than medication to address mental disorders. Doctors are known to personally refer patients to meditation technique and yoga but there is no policy on the same. Interesting the age group of people seeking psychiatric assistance is declining. With the pressure of studies, job and relationships going sour more and more young people are finding themselves in need of counselling. Sadly, Goa lacks a mental health policy too. While all the budgetary allocation is going to putting up a super speciality wing and buying expensive machinery for the Goa Medical College, women totter from day to day, no surprise therefore that suicides in the State are on an upward swing. Safety is another growing concern. The crime graph against women in the State is growing. Problems like domestic violence when reported to the police are dealt with callously if not ignored. There have been increasing incidents of murder and rape including of minors. The image of Goa is gradually changing from one that was safe for women to one that is crime riddled. The conviction rate in as in the rest of the country is abysmal and is not due to insufficient laws, but rather due to political interference and incompetence of the police. This is amply demonstrated when one takes a look at the statistics, which show the shoddy First Information Reports (FIRs) and other documentation done by the police that aids the accused get acquitted! A long pending demand of the women's

groups has been for a women's police station in the State, where a women can approach with confidence and be assured of sensitivity. Two years back the Government did finally set up a women's police station and it pleads overburdened. There is a desperate need for more women's police stations though the long-term requirement is a gender sensitive police and counselling wings that are approachable and non-bias.

Women in Goa being well educated and earning members, making vital contributions to the earning of their families are extremely conscious of their rights and are unwilling to take any form of violence either obvious or subtle lying down. With the influence of mass media like television and also the prolonged exposure to the inherently patriarchal Indian psyche the men of Goa have been slow to accept women as their equal. This is probably one of the reasons for the growing number of marital discords, which are resulting in divorce. There is an urgent need for counselling centers that offer support to couples and assist them through these times of crisis.

With violence of women growing and an increasing number walking out or having to be rescued from violent situations there is a desperate need for halfway homes. However governmental support in the form of halfway homes is virtually non-existent and only a few NGOs have homes though the number is grossly inadequate. There is need for a comprehensive policy that provides women in distress legal assistance, half way homes, counseling and rehabilitation.

There are two other issues that are worth highlighting and that have an indirect influence on worsening the situation of women in Goa. The first is that of single parent household. A sizable population of Goan men are overseas, leaving their homes to be headed by their wives for years together, these homes are virtually single parent families. No well known studies have yet been done on the impact the stress of heading a family has on these women and their needs. The government no doubt benefits from the foreign remittances but there is little by way of support systems for women who may need help.

Yet another problem is alcoholism in the State. Eighty percent of Goan families are believed to be affected by Alcoholism. There are supposedly nine thousand legal bars and an equal number of illegal bars in the State. One can only imagine the crisis situation this has brought upon the State, yet few if any are willing to recognize it let alone address it. The Goans have come to be known as alcoholics and of the unspoken reasons that draws hordes of domestic tourist to Goa is the cheap and easily available alcohol. The Government has two detoxification centers, one each in north and south Goa, comprising of fourteen beds per centre and patients have to imaginably be booked months in advance to gain admission. The detoxification is only a medical process and there is no follow-up for the patients. Patients who are financially well off access private services but the general public has no other recourse. A concerted effort is yet to be made to understand the problem of alcoholism and its impact

on women, who not only have to deal with an alcoholic husband and the resultant violence that entails but in the eventuality of his demise have to head the family as a single parent. Even less understood but worth mentioning are women alcoholics.

### **The challenge ahead**

Goa with its high human development index, literacy rate and historically egalitarian perspective presents a unique set of problems for women. These manifest themselves in subtle ways and need to be addressed innovatively. Some of the solutions lie in movements of private initiative, others with the Government.

Goa has a diverse population profile; with nearly 40% of the population non-Goan origin, of specific interest is the women from the low-income group pouring in from the surrounding States to meet the labour requirements. These women work at the construction sites, as domestic labour and even in the tourism industry. Understandably these women come from conservative patriarchal social backgrounds and do not experience many of the benefits available to the average Goan women. Women's groups in Goa are now faced with the challenge of widening the movement to encompass this wider set of people and also deal with the attitudinal challenge they pose.

The prominent and vocal women's groups are mostly located in urban areas and have often addressed problems faced by urban women areas. There is a large set of rural groups like Mahila Mandals (women's groups) who have formed into self help groups and engage in home based industry. However, these Mahila Mandals have been slow to address women's issues. Their lack of ability to express themselves in English and access to faster means of communication has often deprived them of a voice. There is an urgent need for bridging this urban- rural divide. The challenge before women's groups in Goa is on how to create a platform to discuss issues across socio-economic and geographical divides.

In '97, the **Goa State Commission for Women** was constituted through a special social legislation to uphold and safeguard the rights and interest of women in Goa. The GSCW is primarily engaged in, investigating, examining and recommending a course of action on all matters relating to the provisions for women under the constitution and other laws with a view to improve the condition of Women in the State; it entertains complaints and takes suo moto notice of matters relating to deprivation of women's rights; and renders guidance and advice to needy women to institute proceedings in any judicial forum or tribunal for violation of constitutional provisions or any other laws relating to women. Presently it commissions numerous studies on various aspects of life affecting women. It offers recommendations and suggestions to the government but none of them are taken seriously. Therefore the needs of women are largely ignored in the budgetary plans and policies of the Government. This situation needs urgent change. There is also a need a greater participation of women from

all strata in the GSCW, which is thus far segmented in its approach. There is a need for the GSCW to create more forums at village level and upwards where women can know about their rights and seek assistance.

Interestingly Goa has 2.01 per cent more women than men voters in Goa. The challenge lies in realizing this potential and demanding greater electoral representation and reform in political parties. Presently political parties do not view women as a vote bank worth attracting and the women representation in the legislative assembly is abysmal with only a single woman legislator. During elections too, the political parties are conspicuously silent on the plans for the women electorate. It is time women in Goa collectively exert themselves for a 33% reservation and women's groups will have to take the lead here.

No doubt all this is a tall order and even while one issue begins to get addressed, new ones appear on the scene. But as we in Goa are constantly reminded, Goa has a small population and everything is achievable. The women of Goa must only keep trying.