

0701. Gender Policy Paper (Oct 1996)

This is ADATS' first attempt at articulating a policy of positive discrimination in favour of women.

It lists various instruments that exist in favour of Coolie Women and goes on to define gender as a concept that encompasses not just women, but also includes the minorities and exploited people in general, without de-emphasising the importance that should be given to addressing problems faced by women.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Why an unwritten policy

This paper is the draft articulation of an unwritten policy which has been unfolding at ADATS over a period of 10 years. After deliberating for almost a year, ADATS has decided to keep its gender policy as an evolving one. The arguments for keeping this all embracing spirit in an unwritten form have, till now, over-riden any benefits that we could derive from a verbal declaration. Now we extend an invitation for dialogue. We would be grateful to receive comment and criticism from friends and well wishers in order to update our theoretical position and improve every day practices. If in addition this document helps new entrants understand ADATS better, this would be a welcome bonus.

An enunciation of our current gender policy at the end of this paper is preceded with the presentation of our experiences in the form of an elaborate case study.

1.2. Gender and gender sensitivity

We understand Gender to be an all pervading consciousness which invades every single realm of conscious and sub-conscious thinking and influences our actions.

Gender sensitivity is a mindset which recognises and gives prominence to an individual's personal identity over her sex. But it is, at the same time, mindful of the fact that women occupy a lesser status and suffer from serious impediments as a result of historic and universal sexual discrimination. It is a consciousness that goes beyond the question of women, into the general arena of combating all forms of stereotyping against ethnic groups, minorities and the under-privileged as a whole. Gender consciousness leads to gender sensitivity and instils a holistic thinking which paves the way for a faith in processes as different from products.

To single it out poses not just thematic problems. It even poses a danger of reducing Gender to a managerial input or precondition to superficially satisfy. Gender is one among the guiding principles that ADATS is committed to. But in the light of our irrevocable commitment to certain other values and principles, gender parity is taken for granted as a universal and rational backdrop without which nothing makes sense. Unity and struggle, for example, make no sense whatsoever and lose their meaning in entirety unless we have a mindset which does not discriminate against those who unite. So too the principle of representation (spokespersonship) over leadership.

Gender bias thereby becomes a problem to be rectified, rather than a principle to adhere to. Yet we, as individuals within an organisation, recognise that while we may be able to shed most other impediments to our professed faith – including concepts of god, religion, caste, personal comfort, security and property – the man:woman divide is a deeply engraved one that will sub-consciously prevail in an otherwise rational frame of mind.

What we said in July 1992 when commenting on Coolie communities is equally valid for development workers:

“Male perceptions of women represent the ultimate mental alienation which prevent a community from moving forward. The individualism that comes from a change in this most deeply held perception is the ultimate mental liberation which stands apart in strength and possibilities from the other base greed which laissez faire promotes. Gender perspective, as different from but not excluding special activities for women, therefore becomes the pivot around which sustainable development rotates to gain relevance.”

This is what enables us to recognise, among others, that “mixed” is a polite euphemism for “predominantly male”, that uni-sexing places women at a distinct disadvantage while pretending to be perversely fair minded, and a whole lot of other clever subtleties in a male dominated world.

1.3. Commitment to processes

ADATS believes that good politics should not just be a prelude to action, but also accompany it at every stage of execution and reflection thereafter. Grassroots discussions and bottom-up planning are not only pre-project requirements, but practices that must continue even during the implementation of various physical activities.

This will only enhance technical quality and not be an impediment to it. We take the position that a compartmentalisation of good politics and technical inputs into different time slots on a linear scale of project implementation is a short sighted and self-defeating approach guaranteed to not work.

2. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AT ADATS

2.1. Finding a parity between the Personal and the Political

The way we development workers live and work has a direct bearing on what we turn out. Over the years, we have tried to evolve a woman-friendly environment which goes far beyond making women colleagues feel comfortable. It makes living and working a pleasure, and enhances everyone’s overall performance.

It would be misleading if the reader were to assume that things are relaxed and casual at ADATS. Many of us are, in fact, grumpy and unsociable when at work. We run an extremely tight ship and the guiding principles are positive professionalism and a gruelling efficiency. We follow a policy of deliberate under-staffing in order to keep everyone at a slightly above optimal performance.

2.2. Salaries and benefits

Salary scales at ADATS are reasonable and the disparity between a Field Worker and the Project Director is 1:2. Nobody gets a taxable salary irrespective of their qualification, designation or delegation. Perks include a standard and uniform accommodation (based on whether they are single or married), medical benefits (only at general wards in government and church run hospitals), children’s education (at local village schools where tuition does not exceed Rs 35 per month) and subsidised mess facilities for those who find it inconvenient to cook. These are identical for all staff members, whatever be their designation.

The total administration costs at ADATS are consciously restricted to under 5%.

Everyone is encouraged to be totally open about personal finances and no staff member is permitted to undertake any business (with the single exception of family cultivation). No attempt has been made to build an individual security for staff members. The value of living on

the knife edge of insecurity is consciously promoted as an instrument to ensure relevance and efficiency.

2.3. Campus living

Wherever possible we try to build a campus for living apart, yet together. This provides a moral and physical security, and permits the sharing of common facilities like a mess, TV, guest rooms, etc.

Individual drinking is prohibited and even social occasions when we all drink together in moderation are rare. Gambling is banned. Sexist jokes are not appreciated and dissatisfaction with personal conduct are openly aired.

New forms of getting together where all the family members can participate – like around a small fire with roasting groundnuts or brewing *chai* – are encouraged. Festivals are celebrated collectively without any overt religious trappings.

We give a lot of room for sharing emotions without at the same time getting mushy and submerged in destructive self pity. We support our colleagues when they want to marry inter-caste or inter-religion, even at the risk of personal endangerment. We wait till the last motorcycle comes in from the field before shutting the gates and going to sleep.

2.4. Openness and transparency

Office timings are flexible and determined by the staff-teams themselves. We have no fixed holidays and each staff works out when they want to take time off in a responsible manner that does not effect their work or inconvenience others. Mothers bring infants to work and everyone pitches in to change diapers. Motorcycle usage is not strictly monitored since it is recognised that going home to one's village is a natural and necessary part of working. But the use of 4 wheelers is strictly logged. There is room for showing emotion and an expressed sentiment at ADATS is that "We resolve our differences by fighting!"

Though we try not to departmentalise the staff into Accounts Admn, Field and Executive wings, work load, specialisation, overall responsibilities and the chasing of near impossible targets do tend to compartmentalise our interests and participation.

There are no *in-camera* meetings or official secrets, be they financial matters, dealings with partners, or whatever. Books of accounts, statements, transaction details, and correspondence files are available to everyone. No one is made to feel left out. The every Monday "Situation Meetings" are exactly what the name suggests. They are designed to give everyone a sense of bearing and identity within the overall effort. Unless the situation so demands and everyone is interested in a particular aspect of project implementation (like for example CCF Overdue or Women Membership) they are normally not monitoring meetings.

2.5. Place for children

An important consequence of this campus lifestyle is that it alters child care practices. Children are not considered a burden and no one has to overtly worry about looking after "their" children, since they belong to everyone. This gives a lot of scope for the children themselves, with a whole lot of adults taking interest in their welfare and development.

2.6. New staff

New persons are invited to join us on a trial period which lasts for 1-3 months. During this time we mutually decide not just where her contribution will be, but also whether she will fit into and contribute to the overall organisational culture. It must be noted in fairness that as many women as men find the situation intolerable and choose to leave!

It must be mentioned in the same breath that ADATS has excellent relations with ex-staff who leave us for a variety of reasons. We deal with them on the same terms as when they were with us, and genuinely consider them a human capital that we need not pay for but always bank upon.

2.7. Solving problems

These things work only when they are not abused. If someone starts continually off loading their emotional baggage and private frustrations without making serious efforts to get a grip and move on, then the situation becomes insufferable. If the openness and freedom are misused to take too much time off, other people's work burden increases unfairly and the job gets left undone.

An ironic paradox in ADATS –as different from the Coolie Sangha– is that democratic instruments are not used to settle organisational problems. Instead the project leadership at each campus takes tough decisions to solve problems. This does not mean that discussions are disallowed or that project leaders run rough shod over the rest. There are enough checks and balances in the system to spot this tendency at an early stage.

What has happened is that senior staff have learnt to cope with being “Boss” as a job to be performed rather than a title to be defended. This is an indicator of the maturity of the NGO as a whole, where systems and hierarchies have settled down, and every single problem does not create a flutter.

The chief problem with this set up is a nagging feeling of playing mother-in-law. This rather patronising arrangement has its benefits, though. It permits minority sentiments to be expressed in an effective manner. Women staff, for example, are able to bring a problem to our attention without the risk of being bullied into silence by a male majority.

2.8. Constraints

Some women desire to be housewives and care for their growing children. The reasons are many and complex. In spite of a general disappointment, ADATS tries to understand why they take this option. But we have not been very supportive, perhaps because of a subconscious viewing of them as “traitors to the cause”.

Another problem with our policy of positive discrimination in favour of women is that we tend to tolerate women staff who are not committed to this unwritten gender policy. Perhaps this stems from feelings of fear (of being politically wrong) or apology (that we men are somehow responsible) or even convenience (it is such a problem to get women to work with us in the first place).

New NGDOs who are still in the process of establishing their self identities and internal hierarchies have told us that many of our practices sound like an unrealistic wish list that cannot be emulated. We agree. An ideal organisational culture is one which has to be painstakingly developed by each and every NGO with no models to emulate.

3. WOMEN STAFF AND FUNCTIONARIES

3.1. The sex ratio at ADATS and the Coolie Sangha

ADATS has a policy that 50% of our staff should be women, but our achievements are way under target. We monitor this at 3 levels of Village, Field and Senior staff, and in 2 ways — Reserved posts that can be filled only with women, and General.

At the village level we have an assured gender parity since the post of VHW is reserved for Coolie women. Even when most VLWs are men, the woman:man ratio is around 55:45.

Moreover there is a sharp rise when VLWs are withdrawn.

The ratio in the Coolie Sangha is always 50:50 with as many women CSU Representatives and VHWs, as male functionaries. But no woman has ever been elected Cluster Secretary, and only once has a woman become Taluk Secretary.

At the Field level, Area Field Workers have till recently normally been men. Since the past 1 year, this trend has begun to change. Mahila Trainers are always women. The woman:man ratio hovers around an adverse 1:3. The situation gets worse when we look at Executive Field Workers working in the CCF and DLDP. Not one of them is a woman, in spite of the fact that quite a few of them report to women bosses.

At the senior level the situation keeps fluctuating. For many years 3 of the 4 Field Assistants, each in charge of an entire Extension taluk, were women. Then there were only men. Presently we have 2 vacancies. Field Assistants report to 2 Projects Assistants who have specific thematic concerns like gender, participation, grassroots democracy, etc. 1 of them was a woman. When she left for health reasons, we were unable to find a replacement. The ADATS Secretary has been filling this role for the past 2 years.

3 of the 4 Agriculturists, in-charge of the DLDP and allied agricultural activities, were women. Presently the ratio has fallen to 1:1 but a woman heads the team. All the CCF Extension Workers are men.

The Accounts Admn office at Bagepalli is staffed by 2 women and 1 man. But the 3 Extensions each have only 1 Desk Worker who are all men. We have no Secretaries or Receptionists in the organisation.

In the operational hierarchy of ADATS, the first woman ranks only 5th in our protocol list which determines who is senior most to take over in the absence of the boss, though quite a few women follow her soon afterwards. The situation is offset with the resident Secretary being a woman.

3.2. Working conditions for women staff

Women staff have the same salaries, benefits and working conditions as men, except that we are more considerate to their travel, security and other personal needs. Many travel with a male colleague, but some have 2 wheelers of their own. Child care is not a major problem at ADATS. But our policy of not employing husband and wife (unless 2 staff members marry each other) creates problems for young women staff when they decide to marry outside the staff circle.

In spite of every effort to be supportive and creating a congenial work and living atmosphere, women staff do face occasional slur from the public. Since our work is extremely political and we have an abundance of adversaries, they become the easiest targets to sling mud on. But no one has ever been physically assaulted.

A rather sensitive quarter from where some of this innuendo emanates needs special mention – non working women in staff households tend to gossip out of petty jealousy and cause great damage.

ADATS is clear that women staff cannot take a vow of celibacy or defer their right to search for a partner. But this turns out to be the most difficult personal task for unmarried women staff to perform. They have to delicately balance their romance with continuing to be acceptable, not tarnishing their reputation, and upholding their credibility. More often than not, they are also caught between the 2 conflicting cultures of traditional family pressure and the one that they discover and propagate in the Mahila Meetings. Many find the discord too much and sadly choose to leave.

We encourage women staff to gang up and offer each other moral support to overcome personal problems. But this worked only to a limited extent. Finally we decided that the project leadership should develop an open bias in favour of women staff and instil sheer fear in those who taunt them. This has worked better.

3.3. Problems faced by women functionaries in the villages

In the beginning elderly and ineffective women got elected as CSU Representatives. This soon changed and extremely vocal and articulate women got elected/selected as Representatives and VHWs. Many were single women –deserted women and young widows. They faced a whole lot of problems from men who tried their best to tarnish their image. This too quickly got rectified when slightly older women, whose reputations couldn't easily be blemished, openly came out in their support.

We have seen women functionaries come out in the open and rectify matters when their CSUs falter and get suspended for some reason. But unfortunately many were not able to consolidate their grip and continue to keep the leadership in their hands (the Rani of Jhansi phenomenon). This is changing in the last couple of years.

The main problem of today is an overt emphasis on the politics of strengthening women. This has an adverse effect on, for example, the quality of health services rendered by VHWs. We are convinced that a mature solution has to be found without compromising on either – technicality or politics. This is not an easy task.

3.4. Constraints

We have been able to identify experienced and proven persons from the ranks (those who have worked as Teachers and VLWs in their respective villages, and then been tested out as Community Workers who built brand new CSUs in other taluks) to work as male Field Workers. But when it comes to Mahila Trainers, we have to rely on inexperienced new entrants. Some of them do a wonderful job, but the turnover is high. A few fail miserably and bring irreparable disrepute to the post.

Another long standing problem that we face is the lack of a full time gender specialist who can recognise opportunities and help the Mahila Meetings grab them through systematic training and sit-in reflections. We have always had a gnawing feeling that we were not quite furthering the potential that was being released in the villages. The resident Secretary of the ADATS Governing Body, who is not a paid staff member, does her best to fill in. But she cannot work full time and is not a gender specialist. For the past 2 years, a Swiss volunteer who is an environment and enterprise specialist, has pitched in. But this is not quite the same as having a full time Projects Assistant with a thematic concern for Coolie women.

4. POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION IN FAVOUR OF COOLIE WOMEN

Positive discrimination in favour of Coolie women is definitely and irrevocably in place at Bagepalli and the 3 Extension taluks. At Bagepalli it has established itself into a politically correct stance which just cannot be ignored. In the Extensions we are definitely on the way.

There has been some discussion as to how long these instruments should continue to be in place. It now appears that they will last into the foreseeable future. We give below a brief history of the various instruments that evolved, in an approximate chronological order which should portray the process as it unfolded.

4.1. Reservation

The policy first translated itself into 1 of 3 seats being reserved for a woman in CSU Representative elections. This ensured that 2 women (the elected Representative and VHW) and 2 men represented the village CSU in all forums and meetings. In the early days of Coolie Sangha building, this was a perfunctory burden on women. Elderly and not-so-effective women tended to get elected. But the situation soon changed and the older CSUs now have extremely vocal and articulate women representing them.

This resulted in a new danger. The general situation of Coolie women in the villages tended to get glossed over by the impressive presence of a few “show pieces” in the public eye. It took some time for the Coolie Sangha to catch on and make extra efforts to make all the women fully participate in CSU affairs.

4.2. Mahila Meetings

Separate *in-camera* meetings for 1 woman from each family on a fixed day every week was the 2nd instrument used by the Coolie Sangha. Over the years, this has had a tremendous impact on the status of Coolie women in their families as well as in the village. Wife beating, dowry harassment, mental torture and other forms of domestic violence came out in the open and brutally tackled. Wife desertion and second marriage got checked. Single mothers were supported. Young widows and deserted women did not have to automatically be “kept” by a lewd man or become a village prostitute.

The Mahila Meetings started with struggles for basic amenities like drinking water, street lights, fair price shops, etc. Their attention then moved on to wage issues. Then to land struggles by widows, deserted women, and sisters for a share in family property.

Now political struggle to enter into the Panchayat Raj institutions as well as participate in Coolie Sangha affairs has been added to the list. For the past few years, the role and contribution of Coolie women to the shaping of Coolie Sangha policies is becoming evident. Even financial responsibilities are gradually being usurped by Coolie women.

Almost all the Mahila Meetings faced acute financial problems to meet the transaction costs of running their assemblies. They are now trying out a solution by putting aside some moneys from their Sangha Funds to meet these inevitable overhead costs.

4.3. Decentralised health and children's budgets

9 years back, ADATS unilaterally decided to decentralise the health and children's budgets and hand them over to the Mahila Meetings for reasons of our own. We were tired of playing god to decide who should be helped and who not. Moreover, this went against our very grain and we knew that we could not continue subsidising these expenditures for ever.

There was a lot of male resistance even from within the village and field level staff since the giving of financial prerogatives to “irresponsible and uneducated” women was unheard of at that time. We cannot even claim that Coolie women were solidly behind us. It was our single minded pig headedness which saw this particular instrument through. Today the arrangement has become a natural order of things and at Bagepalli taluk these 2 service activities are being financed by the CSUs' own Sangha Funds without a rupee of outside assistance.

A total of 11,294 children from 414 villages are being supported by as many Mahila Meetings to attend government schools. Of them, 1,605 from 55 villages in Bagepalli taluk are being supported by the CSUs themselves without any external input.

First aid is given by trained VHWs to cure minor ailments in the villages themselves. VHWs also conduct deliveries and accompany patients to hospitals. In addition, the Mahila Meetings subsidise the hospitalisation expenses of patients according to the families' financial position.

Some very poor Members get a total subsidy while other better off ones are denied any assistance at all. Though the average reimbursement for each patient works out to only 10% of the families' annual medical expenditure, the activity has gone a long way in ameliorating ailments and unnecessary suffering.

The arrangement that the Coolie Sangha got into with the central government's Kidwai Memorial Institute of Oncology for the early detection and treatment of cervical cancer is worth mentioning. Gynaecologists were surprised to see the openness with which thousands of women came forward for a check-up and were willing to speak out about their white discharges and other related problems. Apart from treating cancer (and reducing the number of deaths a year to a mere handful), the arrangement has done a lot to make women understand and care for their bodies.

4.4. Vokkaku Sanchi Duddu

The 4th instrument that evolved was the petty credit fund which was set up for women at each CSU. The avowed objective of combating sexual oppression was achieved both directly as well as indirectly.

On the one hand Coolie women did not have to subjugate themselves to the coarse demands of peasant youth in order to get hand loans to tide over everyday emergencies.

On the other hand, the whole question of sexual exploitation came to the forefront with the result that forcing a woman without her consent was finally seen as a crime in a society where no one really knew that a woman had a right over her body. This should be seen as very different from objections to coveting another man's property. The number of crimes against women reported in police stations has sharply risen in the past few years and officials quite openly credit this to the Coolie Sangha.

4.5. Veto power of Mahila Meetings over CCF decisions

When first introduced, most men viewed this 5th instrument as a measure to ensure greater efficiency in the management of family finances. The common talk was that women were more careful in spending money, inclined to save, and generally ensure that their families cut their suit according to the cloth.

But Coolie women had clear notions about the feminisation of poverty. With a little training input from ADATS, they came to realise that male conceived "development efforts" would result in an increase in their work burden as well as place the families in debt traps without deriving any tangible benefits for themselves.

There was nothing perfunctory about the manner in which women used their veto power. In retrospect, we realise that exercising a veto power over credit decisions was perhaps the first instrument that went towards projecting a Coolie brand of feminism in the Coolie Sangha. It was a watershed which served as a turning point in upsetting the gender based power balance within Coolie families.

No more was the husband able to unilaterally take a monumental decision (like bringing home a cross bred cow) and thrusting it on his wife. The drunkard and debaucher was not able to sham reform for a few weeks and then take a substantial CCF loan to re-finance his old habits. Coolie women began to be taken very seriously in their own homes.

4.6. Mahila Meetings to spend all Sangha Funds

It was only a matter of time before the Mahila Meetings began to insist that they control and spend all Sangha Funds in their respective CSUs. The amounts were quite substantial and their demand caused a bit of a panic in menfolk. But by now the policy of positive discrimi-

nation was so much in place that no one dared to directly oppose it for fear of being politically wrong.

Since the major source of Sangha Funds, apart from interest earnings on previous corpus savings, was the paying of Sangha Tax, Coolie women took a special interest in ensuring that proper incomes were declared and dues paid on time.

4.7. Equal wages for women and men

Equal wages for equal work can be a misleading slogan since society can easily exclude women from many types of work and claim that if men were to do those women's tasks – de-weeding, tamarind gathering, etc. – they too would get the same wage. ADATS and the Coolie Sangha were quick to recognise this trap and the slogan therefore was “Equal Wages for Women and Men”.

Through persistent struggle, this has become an established practice all over Bagepalli taluk. The seeds of a similar movement for wage parity have already been sown in the other 3 taluks.

The DLDP was a major source of employment during 5 summer months every year. The payment of equal wages by ADATS not only spurred a re-thinking on the peasant wage structure, but also introduced a debate on all forms of work, including domestic work and child care.

At the family level, domestic work and child care tasks are increasingly being shared by men folk, but this is still not an established practice. Drinking water, firewood and family health concerns still remain prerogatives of women, even though the mixed CSUs take more and more interest in helping them out. This shows that Coolie women are still trapped in gender defined domestic rote roles. This needs to change. There already are some impressive achievements, but they have a long way to go.

4.8. Emphasis on the girl child

Children's education always was a top priority for the Mahila Meetings. But it was chiefly due to ADATS' insistence that 43% of those being supported to go to school were girls. But even we could not stop girl children from dropping out after primary school, on reaching the age of puberty.

1996 was a watershed in Bagepalli taluk when all this suddenly changed. On their own volition, the Coolie Sangha decided to bring the issue of the girl child to the forefront. This has had a tremendous impact.

4.9. Women's enterprises

Our main thrust has been to make men realise that there are no such things as “male enterprises” in a peasant economy. So-called male ventures, including agriculture, the rearing of a cross-bred cow or flock of sheep, petty shops and trade, et al would crumble without the unpaid and unrecognised household labour of women. We have used various instruments like the Mahila Meetings and CCFs to make a dent in this direction, and have to a large extent set right this deliberately fostered misconception. Coolie women are increasingly participating as equals in decision making at the family level and this is being consciously monitored.

Coolie women have also been experimenting with various new ventures that they can collectively undertake in the village itself, or even in their individual homes since they prefer to not go too far away in search of work. Some of these, like vermicompost units have shown promise and some like *Agarbathi* rolling not. ADATS and the Coolie Sangha are prepared to support all such innovative trials provided there is not too much of a financial loss. When groups

like Women for Sustainable Development are prepared to under-write the risk, we gratefully assist them.

ADATS and the Coolie Sangha consciously encourage women to defy the traditional division of labour and work-style. Many have taken on cultivation responsibilities and some even plough their own lands. Hundreds of young widows, deserted women and young girls have learnt a skill and gone to Bangalore to work in a factory. They live on their own to escape the narrow traditions that keep them bound in a village environment. They are bound to face new problems and we hope to have the resilience to help identify and overcome these.

4.10. Sexuality

ADATS and the Coolie Sangha are not afraid to speak out on this issue which is often consciously avoided in polite society. We know that fundamental changes have taken place. Some we have consciously fostered; others just happened and were thrust upon us. We believe that both, the NGO as well as the People's Organisations have sufficient clout and presence in this region to not hide behind excuses like offending popular sentiments.

Even in relatively new Mahila Meetings, young widows have spoken out about their bodily needs and women have supported their *liaisons* with single men, provided these did not disrupt other women's marriages. Widow re-marriages have also been conducted in open ceremonies. While extra-marital affairs by men have been dealt with brutally, Coolie women have been far more considerate in trying to understand the reasons for similar misadventures by married women. Choice marriages have suddenly become normal in the Coolie Sangha, even when they are inter-caste and inter-religious. Simple marriages conducted at Taluk Coolie Sangha Meetings, without the involvement of any priest or religious trappings are now common place.

Coolie mothers in Bagepalli taluk have openly declared that they cannot and do not wish to control their daughters' pre-marital romances and the looming possibilities of choice marriages. They realise that the marriage premium on "unspoilt virginity" has disappeared in the cities and the same is bound to happen in village society also. Instead, mothers have started advising their daughters not to get pregnant before marriage, and how pre-marital sex can mess up their emotions. Fathers are being asked why sons are being told different.

It would be brazen to claim that all these changes have taken place because of the Mahila Meetings. What the weekly fora of village level women's meetings have achieved is to take quick stock of emerging realities and react in a cool and rational manner instead of spitting against the wind with false pride and affected ceremony.

5. SANCTIONS

Over the years, a whole lot of staff members have left our organisation. Most of them quit during the initial trial period and some left after long years for unavoidable personal reasons like wanting to be with their partners, better prospects, etc. In retrospect we realise that the number of staff that we have terminated are very few and far between. And these unfortunate cases have occurred for only 2 reasons – financial misappropriation, and a lack of adherence to our unwritten gender policy.

We are prepared to sack even senior staff who somehow rise to the level of project leadership, but do not fit in with the spirit of this unwritten and evolving gender policy, whatever be the consequence for the "smooth functioning" of the organisation and project implementation. A sign of everyone's commitment to the policy is that every single staff member is prepared to work double time and extra hard to offset such vacancies. Gender policy adherence, we repeat, ranks only 2nd to financial integrity in the organisation.

We also realise that our subjective interpretations come heavily into play when taking such decisions. So be it. Gender is a subjective appreciation and we are prepared to make tough choices.

6. DISCERNING THE CURRENT GENDER POLICY

We have now reached a stage in this writing where we must sharply discern where our current emphasis should be for the next couple of years.

6.1. General statement

We will stick to our integrated approach with no separate “women’s programmes” but will, at the same time, continue to evolve special instruments like the Mahila Meetings and *Vokkaku Sanchi Duddu*, exclusively for women, as and when the need arises.

We will continue to implement the general policy of positive discrimination in favour of women. This will be a 3 pronged approach which will give attention to the building of a congenial atmosphere to live and work in, creating a human infrastructure of effective women staff, and implementing the various instruments that we have developed to strengthen Coolie women in the villages.

The project leadership will, through contact with women activists and feminist literature, continually enhance our knowledge and impart the same to the rest of the staff. Mahila Trainers and Field Workers will provoke debate and discussion to allow a Coolie brand of feminism to unfurl and take roots.

6.2. Organisational culture

While preserving what we have already built up, there are 3 specific areas which need our urgent attention:

Firstly, we strongly believe that a gender neutral and non-sexist frame of mind will not come “naturally” to the present generation of menfolk. It has to be consciously cultivated and intellectually fostered. Alcohol interferes with intellectual choices made by men and surfaces a negative social consciousness. Drinking has to stop forthwith.

Male staff have to squarely take the responsibility to instil a gender consciousness and sensitivity which embraces both, woman:man relationships as well as ethnic questions, in their families – especially with their wives. The campus lifestyle has too many advantages that cannot be forsaken just because a few women, due to jealousy, frustration, and even secret encouragement from their husbands, wag their wicked tongues.

Far more support has to be given to single and unmarried women staff to resolve their personal problems through frank and sympathetic discussions. We do realise that these are highly personalised and individual balances that each woman colleague has to herself strike. But we can support their efforts in a sincere manner without exploiting their vulnerable positions. While promiscuous and indecent behaviour need not be tolerated, the benefit of doubt should always be given to women staff when they try to develop professional and platonic relationships.

6.3. Women staff

Extra efforts will be made to recruit a senior woman as Projects Assistant and give her the thematic responsibility for gender. Her responsibilities will include organising special training sessions for the Mahila Meetings so that they can reflect on achievements and set higher targets. She will also be entrusted with the task of articulating experiences through periodic progress reports and occasional papers.

We will strive to bring about a better woman:man parity in our staff by appointing more women in the general categories of Area and Executive Field Workers, Extension Workers and Desk Workers. At the same time, the quality of women being appointed as Mahila Trainers will also have to be improved.

Just as male Field Workers intimately identify their own political futures with the posterity of the Coolie Sangha, we have to somehow instil in the Mahila Trainers a similar sense of identity and belonging. This may include, among others, an institutionalisation of the efforts of Coolie women through the creation of co-operatives, etc.

In spite of problems faced by single women who are forced to quit after marriage, ADATS is not prepared to employ husbands of women staff.

6.4. Coolie women

We will continue working with the various instruments that have been developed to strengthen Coolie women in the villages. 3 areas will receive special attention, and we will actively involve and collaborate with specialist NGDOs in planning and executing these targets.

Income generation through the identification and promotion of viable group and home based enterprises that Coolie women can undertake.

Address fuel wood and cooking problems through a systematic effort to plant *Seema jali* trees, build and maintain smokeless *Chullas*.

Strengthen children's education and community health with a greater emphasis to technicity.