



Dr. Jaya Arunachalam

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Development and Welfare of Women and Children - 2009

Born: 8th February 1935

Academics: Graduate in Economics / Geography; Diploma in Management (USA);
Honorary Doctorate from Germany

Dr. Jaya Arunachalam is the President of Working Women's Forum (India), a social organization initiated in 1978 to develop the total human resource potential of poor women workers in the informal sector. She was awarded the 'Padmashri' in 1987 by the President of India for her distinguished services among the poorest women in urban and rural areas.

She holds several positions to her credit. She is the President of the National Union of Working Women, a grass-root trade union of poor working class women in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The women unionized are vendors and hawkers, other service specialists, fisherwomen, landless women, lace makers, beedi rollers, silk weavers, agarbathi workers, embroidery workers etc.

She is also the founder President of the Indian Cooperative Network for Women which is an informal banking system to suit the needs of poor women as a national delivery mechanism for country-wide operations.

Dr. Jaya Arunachalam received an 'Honorary Doctorate' from the University of Lueneburg (Germany) in the year 1999, for her exemplary work among the poorest women in the three Southern States of India.

Besides, the WWF under her leadership has oriented over 15 voluntary initiatives all over the Indian sub-continent, Sri Lanka/Afghanistan.

Dr. Arunachalam has been associated with various essential Community Development Institutions such as the Women's Consumer Society in Chennai City, two Children Homes both in urban and rural areas.

Dr. Arunachalam has promoted many Forums and Development organizations for the socio-economic uplift of women. She has led several delegations and marches demanding effective implementation of economic programmes for poor women workers in the unorganized sector through collective and social action. At present, she is establishing an International grassroots network among women from developed as well as developing countries called the GROOTS (Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood) network.

She joined former U.S. President Bill Clinton for a two day meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) Asia Meet in Hong Kong to share the exemplary work of WWF.

Under the leadership of Jaya. Arunachalam, Working Women's Forum (India) was born out of an activist commitment to facilitate women in extreme poverty. The forum initiated its maiden endeavour in the year 1978 with 800 women, now a social movement of 11,03,326 women in the three Southern States of India, spread over 3,676 villages and 2,270 slums. The forum's success lies in its innovative attempt to integrate poor women at all levels in its institutional framework, using them as an effective delivery mechanism to reach other poor women extensively.

Indian Co-operative Network for Women, as an effective wing of WWF, enhances the social and financial independence of poor women, provides low interest loans encouraging their entrepreneurship. The credit programme of ICNW reaches over 5,00,092 poor entrepreneurs affecting nearly Rs.1,745.25 million, accomplishing about 98.85% recovery rate in the urban slums and rural areas.

The National Union of Working Women, WWF's trade union wing, facilitates the poor women in their struggle to fight for labour, land and housing rights for themselves and their children. Equally, the union's concern is to fight for other human rights issues like female foeticides, female infanticides, child prostitution and child labour that affect the poor on a daily basis.

Further, WWF's Reproductive Health Care programme builds a strong network of cadres in slum/village neighbourhoods that constantly raise the consciousness of the poor women on their reproductive rights (including HIV/AIDS). Crucial to the programme was the enhancement of the decision-making power of women on their reproductive rights, with reference to the number of children and contraceptive choices. The programme impacted nearly 16,18,842 families (1.5 million) accomplishing 72% couple protection rate in the poorest communities, providing employment to 960 grass-root health cadres spread out to 720 slums and 340 villages.

The initiation of a social security programme for poor women impacted maternity benefits and insurance cover to over 7,72,891 women for life, disability and health aspects. Networking was done with several insurance companies.

WWF is a future oriented multi-pronged pro-poor initiative which helps the Indian poor women to face the onslaught of globalization. Currently, WWF's initiative is to transfer this strategy of pro-poor advocacy to other NGOs through orientation.

WWF organized women on trade lines, adopting several structural changes to facilitate poor women's participation and create a visibility to their economic contribution to family and community. This unique effort resulted in the phenomenal growth of WWF from its 800 members base to a social movement of 8,00,735 women today.

The National Union of Working Women has organized poor women to protest against the abysmal living conditions of their slums. 70% of their demands were met.

Over 5,000 women marched and submitted a petition to the President of India lobbying for 33% reservation of seats for women in the Indian Parliament.

Through the efforts of unionization of women, the National Union of Working Women has implemented wage revisions for beedi rollers, agarbathi rollers and lace artisans. For instance, the beedi rollers who were paid just Rs.3/- per 1000 beedies rolled, today get about Rs.24/- per 1000 beedies, the lace artisans paid about Rs.2/- per reel (1500 meters) of lace work today earn Rs.50/- to Rs.100/- per reel. Agarbathi workers who were getting Rs.1.50/- per 1000 sticks rolled today get Rs.30/- per 1000 sticks.

The union has been successful in providing alternate sources of livelihood. The agricultural workers in many rural centres were given strength to confront and fight for higher wages. Their wages increased from Rs.4/- to Rs.40/- per working day.

The fisher women of Adramapattinam were able to accomplish the task of breaking the monopoly of the auctioneer and reap better profits. Their collective strength also solved their longstanding problems due to silting of canals that blocked their access to the sea and solved their transport problems.

The landless labourers of the most backward districts of Bidar in Karnataka have organized themselves under an institutional framework in order to address their economic problems. NUWW's efforts elevated the status of women weavers of Kancheepuram on par with the male weavers. Today, these women get all the benefits their male counterparts get.

The efforts of the NUWW have also reduced the incidence of child mortgage and bondage. Also, its efforts enable children in integrating themselves with the formal education system. Through the UNWW's efforts 'The Devadasis' of Bellary, a sexually exploited group of women/adolescent girls, were sensitized on their rights to break away from the exploitative tradition and pursue gainful employment. With an alternate means of survival, these women have successfully overthrown the cultural barriers and are able to lead a life of dignity.

Over 20,000 women proved their leadership by demonstrating/participating in thousands in the anti-liquor agitation in the West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh.

The NUWW has initiated much needed social security schemes for the unorganized work force benefiting about 6,00,000 women. Micro insurance coverage gives women workers protection against ill health, accidents, death, etc.

The small fishermen from Adramapatinam took up cudgels against big trawler operators for their fishing rights. The appeal was taken to the Supreme Court, which passed an order stating that big trawlers would have fishing rights for three days a week and the small fishermen for four days a week.

The initiation of a social security programme for poor women in the WWF has impacted maternity benefits and insurance cover to over 4,00,000 women for life, disability and health aspects.

Since the problems of the poorest of women remain the same everywhere, the WWF's experiment proves that the model is replicable across the country. This has been done through delegates who visit the Forum for an exposure visit with the intention of replication of WWF's work in their respective State/region.

The WWF initiative has been very successful. The system of micro-credit has benefited hundreds of thousands of poor women in India that were without hope of a livable life to develop themselves, to take care of themselves and to build confidence and a sense of dignity. The Forum focused its attention to fight poverty, on the struggles of poor women to fight for land, for housing rights as well as for reproductive rights concerning the number of children they want. The successful initiatives targeting this group with a novel economic approach has proven to be applicable to many other societies as well where extreme poverty seems an insurmountable problem.

Dr. Jaya Arunachalam has been a member of the governing board of the National Credit Fund established by the Government of India and is also the Trustee in the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Smarak Trust, New Delhi. She has served as a member of National Committee organizing the 50th Anniversary of India's independence. She has been a member of the Working Group on Flow of Credit to SSI Sector of the Reserve Bank of India, 2004.

Dr. Arunachalam has been associated with various essential Community Development Institutions such as the Women's Consumer Society in Chennai City, two children homes both in urban and rural areas.

Awards and Honours

Padmashri (1987) by the President of India; Stree Shakthi Puraskar (2002) by the Government of Tamil Nadu; International Activist Award (2003) by Glietsman Foundation, USA; Rastria Ekta

Award (2004); Vital Voices Global Leadership Award for Economic Development (2005) at Washington; 12th Mandeville Award (2006) at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Contact Details

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