

Women Fight Traditions that Discriminate

Many customs and traditions around the world hurt women and are to the advantage of men. The Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted by the UN in 1979. Yet most women continue to face discrimination. A recent international seminar reviewed the progress made by countries towards implementing the Convention. This correspondent attended the proceedings.

Eve Koudri Kuhn writes from Vienna

In parts of east Africa it is a tradition that women do not eat chicken or eggs — they would grow beards if they did. Only men eat these foods. Elsewhere in the same region, women are told not to eat goat or lamb meat because they might get a rash. However men are not discouraged from eating these meats.

Customs and traditions have often been to the nutritional advantage of men, world-wide, not just in isolated parts of Africa.

"Culture is what men revert to when they want to win an argument and keep their privileged position," says Unity Dow, a lawyer from Botswana. Dow was speaking at a meeting of Non-Governmental Organisations in Vienna at the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Women are often considered subservient if they try to improve women's rights in African countries. Dow fought and won a court case so that her children could have Botswana citizenship.

Her children had been prevented from obtaining citizenship because their father, her husband, was not a citizen of that country. Botswana law at the time allowed only fathers

to pass on nationality, not mothers. This made it difficult for her children to get education benefits and re-entry permits after travel abroad. They also had to get residency permits to live with their mother.

After seven months of deliberations Dow won her case in the Botswana High Court in June 1991, setting a legal precedent. It was the first case of sex discrimination under the Botswana constitution.

Dow says governments often regard women who try to press the cause of women's rights as subversive. The usual line is that these are people influenced by outsiders and that they are threatening our culture," she says.

She is convinced that the governments want to avoid international regulations on human rights. "The UN Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women talks about real problems but hardly any woman knows about it," says Dow. "It is because there are only men in government positions and they are fearful of it."

The Convention, a binding legal document concerned with the rights of women, was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1979.

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Her story

Links between the status of women and the pace of development are becoming increasingly clear. Women's education and empowerment are crucial for future generations. It is estimated that in developing countries each additional year of education for a mother reduces her children's mortality risk by up to 9 per cent

To mark the International Women's Day that passed on February 8, Gemini News Service focuses on the world of women.



Indian Women Battle Against Bottle

Alcohol abuse can lead to wife battering and much misery. A group of Indian women in the southern State of Andhra Pradesh, fed up with dealing with their alcoholic husbands, are forcing the closure of shops selling arrak, or liquor, across the state. It is a daunting task. The women are up against a huge business with close political links. Nevertheless they have made significant gains. Here is a report, on India's growing prohibition movement.

Atiya Singh writes from Hyderabad, India

An innocuous book Seethamma Katha (The Story of Seethamma) has given birth to a mighty woman's movement against arrak, a popular liquor distilled from coconuts or other local produce.

The story, set in rural Andhra Pradesh, India's fifth largest state, is about Seethamma, an agricultural labourer who is anguished by her plight, and that of her sisters, all married to alcoholics. The family bread-winners don't bring home their daily wages but squander them instead in the village's arrak shop. When drunk, they barge home demanding food and end up beating their family members.

After remaining passive for a long time, Seethamma decides to act. She mobilises all the women in the village and collectively they raid the arrak shop and force its closure. Peace returns to their homes.

This simple story caught the imagination of women in Dubagunta village, in Andhra Pradesh. They decided to translate Seethamma's story into reality. There was a ready reason for that. A few months earlier, three men labourers from the village, having had their fill in the arrak shop, lost their way home and drowned in the village water tank.

Armed with broomsticks, chilli powder and sticks, the women of Dubagunta, descended on the village's arrak shop and shut it down, just like the fictional Seethamma.

As news of this event spread to neighbouring villages, social activists jumped to action. In village after village, women rose up, closing more than 300 shops in the districts of Nellore, Nalgonda, Khamman, Nizamabad and Mehraboobnagar.

More than 50,000 women gathered in Nellore town and successfully prevented the district officials from holding its annual auction for arrak permits.

This victory not only boosted the moral of the agitators but also spurred the women in other parts (of Andhra Pradesh), says MO Farooq, a resident of Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh.

The struggle against the "devil of drinking" is nothing new to Andhra Pradesh. Earlier, the Marxist guerrillas of the outlawed People's War Group (PWG) banned the sale

of arrak in some areas under their sway. In others, they had allowed arrak contractors to sell liquor at cheap rates.

This PWG action had already caused a revenue loss of \$10 million a year to the state, when the village women's fury against the sale of arrak burst on the scene.

"Initially the government feigned ignorance of the agitation," says J. N. Reddy, a local resident. "It nursed a misplaced hope that the movement will fizzle out." But when the reverse happened, the government was forced to sit up and take notice.

Almost 100 of 292 members of the state's Legislative Assembly are themselves in the arrak business. A majority of them belong to the ruling Congress (I) party in the state.

By law successful bidders at the arrak auctions agree to buy a minimum quantity of arrak from the government distillery at a set price. In return, the contractor has the exclusive right to sell arrak to the public in 100-ml sachets at his own price.

The state government is firmly against the women's prohibition movement since the exchequer stands to lose \$288 million a year from the sale of liquor permits.

However, women's organisations are not convinced that the government is dependent on this revenue. "If this is so, we are willing to contribute one day's wages for the government's upkeep," says a women activist at Nellore. "But let the government close down the arrak shops first."

Political observers think that there is an ulterior motive for the spontaneous outburst against the arrak shops. Prohibition was lifted in 1969 in the Andhra region, but to date there has been little protest against it. Some think that the poor people's anger is directed at the government's decision to reduce the subsidised rice quota for low-income families. Even these supplies don't get delivered regularly through the government's public distribution shops.

Whatever the reason, almost all opposition parties — the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, Telegu Desam, and the communists are openly in support of women's demand for prohibition.

But the liquor lobby is not giving in. They hope that the

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Women Writers are Balancing the Books

The developing world has few women writers. Culture and economics work against them. Many women resent the way they are written about by men. A just-concluded international women writers workshop attended by more than 100 writers reviewed the state of women's literature. More and more women are challenging the male-dominated profession.

B UCHI Emecetta, one of Africa's best women writers, describes the present status-quo in the literary world as "scandalous". That women should still play the under-dog in the writing profession, and the way they are written about by men, must not be allowed to continue.

Emecetta, a Nigerian whose critique focuses mainly on Africa, thinks the problem is so acute, that significant changes have to be made not only in the literary world, but also in politics, economics and culture, "so as to meaningfully empower women, and let them do what they can do as well as men."

Emecetta was speaking at an international workshop for women writers, held in February at the Commonwealth

Vincent Magombe writes from London

Institute in London.

The conference, the tenth of its type at the institute, was attended by more than 100 women, and, unfortunately, very few men. Its programme included presentations and readings by some of the most celebrated women writers this century. In the discussions that ensued, a number of themes were touched upon, including the place of women in a male-dominated profession. But is the situation that bad?

Seemingly, not. Today many women writers around the world continue to marvel readers with no less powerful creations than those written by

their male counterparts. Authors such as Jamaica Goodison, of Jamaica, and Katie Campbell, from Canada, said women writers had done well in their countries.

Other notable examples included the Nobel Prize winner South African Nadine Gordimer and Indian author, Nayantara Sahgal, whose eight novels and analytical works on Indian politics are of great importance in the history of women writings.

Emecetta, who has written ten highly acclaimed novels, children's stories, radio and television plays, as well as many critical essays and articles, has proudly described



MRINAL PANDE "Through literature, women can find a voice"

herself as, "One of the rare breed of writers who are able to live, feed and send children to school, on the money from a writing profession"

Many women hold the mantle of authority. For example, Margaret Drabble, who in 1980 was awarded the CBE (Commander of the British Empire) is one of Britain's leading novelists, and has also authored such works as The Oxford Companion to English Literature.

However, the Arts Council of Great Britain, which is the principal state agency for the promotion of the arts, doesn't have programmes specifically supporting feminist literary projects. Says Alastair Niven, the Council's Director of Literature: "There are already enough avenues open to women writers, and women have proved that they are as capable as men in the profession."

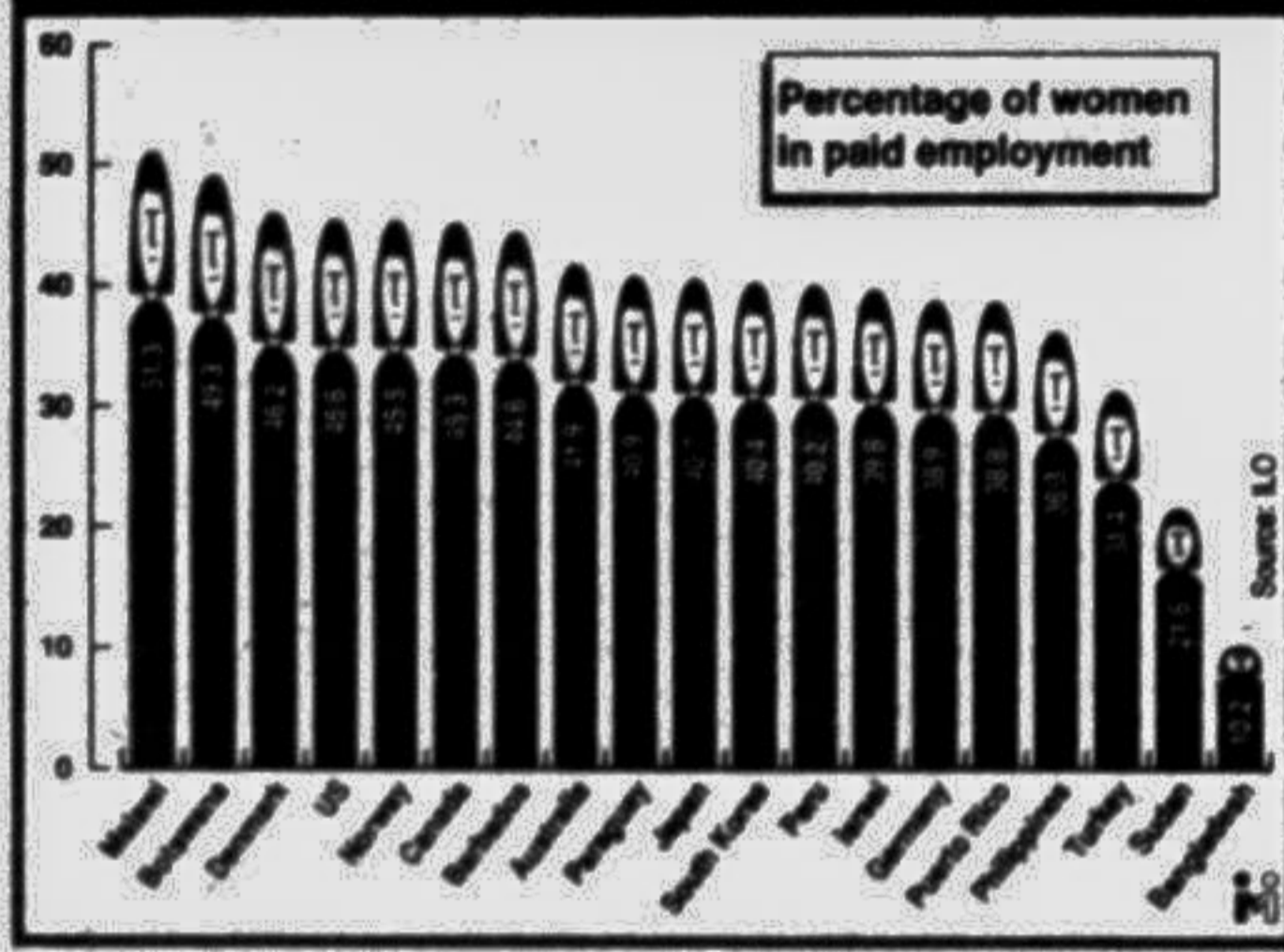
Ronald Warwick, Literature Officer at the Commonwealth Institute, says there has been much progress. "Ten years ago the main theme at such conferences was women trying to identify their place in the literature profession. These days women writers gather to celebrate their successful enterprise and to build on that success."

But some participants were more cautious in their assessment of the success of women writers in Britain.

Olga Kenyon, who teaches Women's Studies at the University of Bradford and has written extensively on women's literature, believes that women are always fighting against the odds, at the expense of men. "Three-quarters of literature books getting published in Britain, in any given period of time, are by men. And 90 per cent of the books

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Women at work



F EARS that 24-hour music on Asia's satellite television would smother the region in western pop culture have been proved wrong. In fact, viewers from Manila to Karachi seem to be switching to homegrown Asian singers.

The hip and lively Music Television (MTV) began beaming non-stop US pop music all over Asia via satellite in 1991 as one of five channels offered by the Hong Kong-based Star TV network.

But MTV executives have found their sophisticated Asian audience switching off rap and heavy metal and turning on the Thai or Taiwanese singers instead.

"The first year was spent putting out Western music," said MTV Asia general manager Don Atyeo. "This year we are pulling in the local artists from each individual country."

Half of the music broadcast to Asia by MTV is now locally produced material. The tactic already seems to be creating a whole new generation of regional stars.

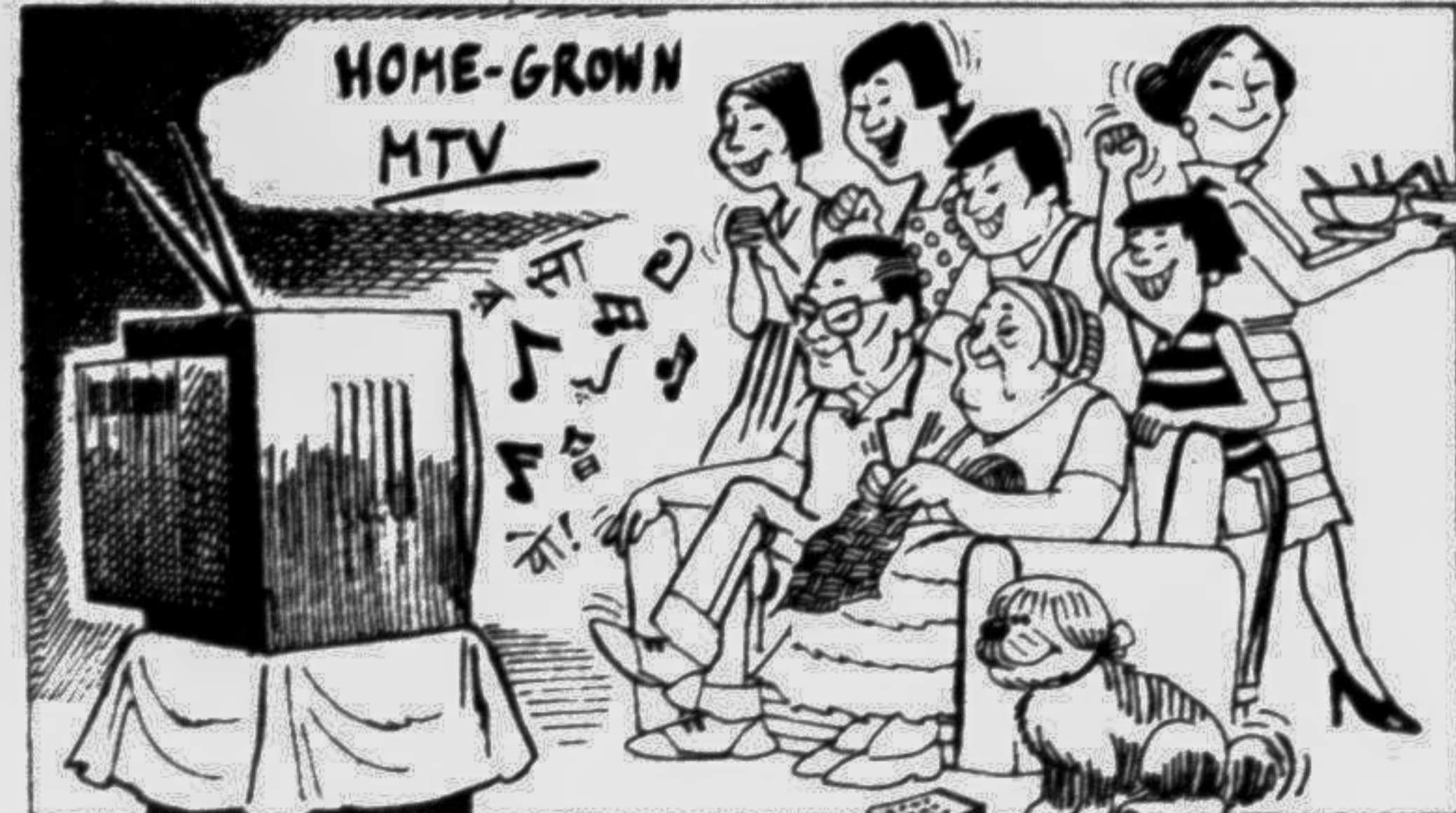
Khaled, an Algerian artist singing in Arabic, has become widely popular in India where his music videos were aired by MTV's Asian channel.

Taiwanese singer Harlem Yu has also become a sensation in India after his songs were translated into English and gained airtime in the channel.

And Thailand's pop star Christina, who had previously never released her songs outside her home country, won the top MTV Asia Video Music Award last September on the strength of popular votes from India, Hong Kong and the

Thwarting a US Pop Invasion

Viewer preference forces the Asian spin-off of the popular MTV channel of the United States to allot more airtime to Asian videos. Yojana Sharma of IPS reports, from Hong Kong.



Philippines.

"It's not that stars never existed," said Atyeo. Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong have huge stars but they were self-contained music markets. None of these megastars in their own countries ever ventured outside."

He said Asian artists, regardless of their countries, are generally more appreciated by MTV viewers — mostly those in their teens to their twenties — than those from the West.

"A two-hour rap show, a mainstay of MTV in the United

States, was taken off because it generated no interest here," Atyeo said. "It was so patently an import from another planet."

The MTV official said Asian youngsters find current trends in US music "quite alienating and disconcerting". They cannot identify with rap, he explained, which he described as a "cry for help. But in Asia, we don't have gangs of disenfranchised youth."

Asian videos are also much tamer than the Western versions, making them less offen-

sive to parents who monitor their teenagers' TV fare.

In contrast to the likes of the US superstar Madonna's often raunchy videos, some of which have elicited protests even in the United States, the farthest that Asian music videos has gone is perhaps Khaled's 'Didi' spot where the singer is surrounded by a bevy of women in skimpy costumes.

Atyedo also said MTV's Asian audience does not find language a barrier in appreciating the music, unlike in Europe

Learning to write



Adult female literacy rate in developing world

| Highest | Lowest |
|----------------|------------------|
| Jamaica 98% | Burkina Faso 9% |
| Uruguay 96% | Sierra Leone 11% |
| Argentina 95% | Sudan 12% |
| Costa Rica 93% | Nepal 13% |
| Cuba 93% | Guinea 13% |

Source: UNICEF, 1990