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# Gender and Neoliberalism

The All India Democratic Women's  
Association and Globalization Politics

Elisabeth Armstrong

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Association and Globalization Politics

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# Gender and Neoliberalism

This book describes the changing landscape of women's politics for equality and liberation during the rise of neoliberalism in India. Between 1991 and 2006, the doctrine of liberalization guided Indian politics and economic policy. These neoliberal measures vastly reduced poverty alleviation schemes, price supports for poor farmers, and opened India's economy to the unpredictability of global financial fluctuations. During this same period, the All India Democratic Women's Association, which directly opposed the ascendancy of neoliberal economics and policies, as well as the simultaneous rise of violent casteism and anti-Muslim communalism, grew from roughly three million members to over ten million. Beginning in the late 1980s, AIDWA turned its attention to women's lives in rural India. Using a method that began with activist research, the organization developed a sectoral analysis of groups of women who were hardest hit in the new neoliberal order, including Muslim women, and Dalit (oppressed caste) women. AIDWA developed what leaders called inter-sectoral organizing, that centered the demands of the most vulnerable women into the heart of its campaigns and its ideology for social change. Through long-term ethnographic research, predominantly in the northern state of Haryana and the southern state of Tamil Nadu, this book shows how a socialist women's organization built its oppositional strength by organizing the women most marginalized by neoliberal policies and economics.

**Elisabeth Armstrong** is an Associate Professor in the Program for the Study of Women and Gender at Smith College.

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**For Vijay, Zalia and Rosa**

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# Introduction

In 1991, the Indian government publically mandated a new agenda known as liberalization. The agenda was the domestic variant of neoliberalism, namely the giving over of large areas of the state and social life to the private business sector. In every aspect of their lives, people experienced the impact of liberalization. Survival in agricultural areas was damaged, cultural imaginations of people were foreshortened, and the well-being of the most vulnerable people became more precarious. Liberalization produced a churning of Indian society, with grotesque social consequences. Religious and communal violence increased; in 1992, the tearing down of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya during the anti-Muslim riots in India signaled future carnage. Caste conflict intensified. The Mandal Commission recommendations to reserve more seats for lower caste students, among other policy suggestions, were enacted in 1989. The vociferous protests in response to these new reservation policies revealed the hardening of caste hierarchies across the country. Landlordism gained new weapons. The blatant theft of common lands and the loss of political will around land reform matched the private property dogma of the new world order. Conspicuous consumption spiraled upwards, putting pressure on gendered traditions of accruing capital. Dowry harassment became an epidemic, with the overt violence against and murder of daughters-in-law often linked to demands for ongoing payments and goods from the woman's natal family. The precarious social value of women eroded further in these patriarchal economic regimes. Older forms of social, religious, and class fissures took on incendiary new forms with liberalization, and social justice movements were caught in the crossfire.

The Indian women's movement, with its amalgamation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), autonomous feminist groups, and national mass women's organizations, was knocked sideways by the rapid changes in India's political terrain. Groups across the movement saw the weaknesses in their organizing strategies and reassessed their goals. While some retreated, others found ways to carve their own place in the upheaval of old certainties. This book follows the response of one national mass organization, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), which

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chose to directly oppose liberalization and the combustible forces it fueled. As a left-wing women's organization, AIDWA did not blink. The bulk of its membership was among rural and urban working poor women, and its strength in numbers was bolstered by its ideological tenets that sought to combat feudal and capitalist forms of women's oppression and exploitation. For the first ten years of its existence, AIDWA had operated with a theory that working women could unite with middle class women on common issues such as high commodity prices and anti-woman violence. After 1991, this theory of women's solidarity was seen to be insufficient.

AIDWA formed in 1981 as a federal women's organization with state-based units located across India. Socialist women's mass organizations in states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Tripura, as well as Kerala and West Bengal, coalesced into one national federation with a founding membership of 590,000 women. By 2006, its membership grew to ten million women. These membership numbers are striking for a few reasons. First, AIDWA became one of the largest women's organizations in the world. Second, rural poor women alongside working poor urban women formed the largest base of its membership. Even more salient is that AIDWA accomplished its steady growth during the high point of neoliberalism, a doctrine composed of economic and social policies that typically works to render mass organizing ineffective if not almost impossible.

A central question of this book is how AIDWA managed to grow so rapidly across India, with its strength built from among the women most severely disenfranchised by neoliberal policies and governance. My contention is that during the 1990s, AIDWA pivoted away from its earlier strategy of organizing women around what were primarily common issues that crossed class and community locations toward a new praxis of inter-sectoralism that enabled its success. As it grew to become a large mass organization for women, activists at local levels developed methods that successfully organized people within *and* outside of their workplaces, inside their communities and beyond the norms of those community affiliations. In the process, inter-sectoral organizing created a stronger organizational fabric to resist the hallmarks of neoliberalism: the fragmentation of and competition between peoples and interests.

During the late 1980s, state and national leaders of AIDWA began to develop a sectoral theory of women's gendered lives. A sectoral theory of women's lives embeds an understanding of those social groupings in a systemic and historical class analysis. The term sectoral is not a new one: sectors or sections are words used interchangeably by members to describe the particular social groupings (such as those around religion, caste, class, language, location, and work status) that structure a polity and define people's lives within that polity. Early on in their organizing, AIDWA members defined sectoral issues nominally more than analytically. That is, sectoral issues denoted the specific needs of a subcategory of particularly oppressed women that demanded greater knowledge and targeted political attention.

After the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984, the visibility and political mobilization of anti-Muslim and other communal tensions rose. In the early 1990s, liberalization policies had infiltrated into Indian governance itself. In this context, AIDWA members' identification and analysis of particularly vulnerable sectors of women facilitated the emergence of the more integrated inter-sectoral method of organizing in the mid 1990s.

Inter-sectoral organizing refers to how this sectoral analysis of women in neoliberal India produced specific strategies, tactics, and even goals in AIDWA's political practices. I first heard the term 'inter-sectoral organizing' from Brinda Karat, the general secretary who led the organization from 1993 until 2004. Inter-sectoral organizing methods paid heed to the overlapping rather than discrete or bounded facets of women's lives. AIDWA members at the state and national levels combined their attention to specific women's issues with inter-sectoral organizing between these often porous and inter-related issues. As an organizing method, inter-sectoral organizing sought to create bridges of solidarity between distinct and seemingly conflicting groups of women. I use the term inter-sectoralism to describe these connections between AIDWA's ongoing conceptualization of women's sectoral issues and its inter-sectoral organizing.

Inter-sectoralism took the lived conflicts around women's differences as the daily stuff of women's inequality. To know and then effectively challenge rural Dalit women's oppression, for example, demanded a class analysis of agricultural day laborers, bonded workers, and landholders with very small plots of land. It required an understanding of the sexual politics of power and the gendered untouchability practices in rural localities. In addition, it had to take into account the sites where overlapping structures of casteist and feudal hierarchies met class exploitation and time-honed patriarchal systems of gender oppression. Campaigns fought Dalit women's oppression through methods like the public exposure and condemnation of atrocities. These campaigns sought to dismantle accepted caste norms through laws on the books alongside careful ideological work within the organization itself so that anti-casteist activism became every AIDWA member's struggle, not just a Dalit women's issue.

The organization's sectoral analysis sought to understand the specificities of an increasingly competitive and fragmented social polity. Its inter-sectoral organizing efforts attempted to knit anew the solidarities between women that could reach across these exclusionary, if not violent, divisions. Sectoral analyses and inter-sectoral organizing sought to foster movement leaders from precisely these oppressed and marginalized sectors of women. They also sought to build a stronger unity against divisions of caste, class, and religious bigotry, but it was a unity reconceived. Karat described this method as "inter-sectoral, inter-class and crossing" to explain their seemingly risky campaigns, which linked women's political activism across class, religious, and caste lines within the organization's membership and beyond.<sup>1</sup> Sectoral analyses and inter-sectoral organizing methods lived

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and breathed along the grain of neoliberalism and communalism to better derail their logics of fragmentation and their momentum toward antagonistic competition.

Attention to AIDWA's activism during the 1990s and early 2000s reveals what might seem obvious. It shows that organizing large numbers of women is tremendously difficult. The daily tasks for local, unpaid activists are sometimes tedious, such as ongoing communication, the logistics of membership, and the details of campaigns. At the core of this book are the stories of many women who worked at all levels of the organization, from local unit members to national leaders, who lived mainly in rural Haryana, rural and urban parts of Tamil Nadu, and New Delhi. These women took part in a highly visible and an often dangerous political refusal of neoliberalism. Their campaigns, many of which are ongoing, share a long-term goal to replenish the uneven social fabric. Yet each campaign, whether for access to common lands, women's physical and sexual safety, or caste-based autonomy and equality, had its own complexities marked by each locality's history. The campaigns described in this book open up another set of questions about how AIDWA functions as a leftist women's organization: in its membership, its decision making, its leadership structures, and its internal reproduction. For if neoliberalism partly inspired sectoral analyses and inter-sectoral organizing methods, this book explores what allowed that counter-response to emerge from AIDWA.

AIDWA has deep ties with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. It is politically independent of the CPI(M), but is part of the Party's universe of mass organizations. AIDWA shares with the CPI(M) a general orientation toward the Indian state and political economy. It also leverages its own power through the Party and its other mass organizations (labor union, youth, agricultural worker, agricultural cultivator, and student organizations). Many of its national and state-level leaders are also members of the CPI(M) who regard bringing women into radical politics as integral to their Marxist commitment to fighting for socialism. AIDWA is an enduring and militant part of the women's movement in India, focused on mobilizing the largest numbers of women to determine their own lives and build a more just future.

Membership is open to any woman regardless of her political affiliation, as long as she upholds the central organizational tenets of equality, emancipation, and the liberation of women. From its beginning, AIDWA has been an education for both the Party and the larger women's movement. It pushed its left allies to give more prominence to women's issues like dowry violence, and sexual violence in the home and by the state. It has sustained and deepened a gendered analysis of class exploitation. It also pioneered new ways for feminists to approach struggles against casteism and religious communalism through attention to the gender and class specificities of these bigotries.



This book represents the first major study of AIDWA to look at its geographical reach (across the country) and its class depth (from middle class women to landless women). It is also the first major study to look at AIDWA since its groundbreaking organizing strategy (inter-sectoral organizing) led to an expansion of its membership in the 1990s and 2000s. The earlier work on AIDWA (notably by Amrita Basu [1992] and Raka Ray [1999]) was published before this expansion.<sup>2</sup> These previous studies have been based on work in either one or two states and do not tackle the rural and urban parts of AIDWA. The sheer productive force of AIDWA's activism during the 1990s and into the 2000s, and the lack of attention given to it by scholars of the Indian women's movement, calls for analysis beyond what this volume provides.

AIDWA's differences from the autonomous women's movement in its organizing methods, its membership base, and its ongoing adherence to socialist ideals do not fully explain why it has attracted so little academic attention. Many early books written about the Indian women's movement gave primary attention to autonomous groups, and were written by women active in these groups.<sup>3</sup> Even the more recent work that provides a richly informative window on feminist NGOs, small women's collectives, and governmental women's agencies has little to say about *any* of the national leftist women's organizations.<sup>4</sup> Collections of essays purporting to represent South Asian feminisms and gender politics in India also hold an impoverished view of the movement as a complex whole.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from Ray and Basu, the academic literature on AIDWA is minimal. There are, however, two other kinds of writing on its analysis and activism. The first is AIDWA's own texts. There are the documents produced for its conferences held every three years. AIDWA publishes magazines in many states, in a host of languages. Each campaign and major issue that AIDWA selects to analyze generates pamphlets and research documents. These are not kept in one central archive, but are to be found in the many offices of AIDWA across the country and in the homes of members. The second is the work of journalists who cover AIDWA's campaigns and turn to AIDWA for its opinions on the myriad issues germane to its activism. Most magazines and newspapers tend to avoid AIDWA, but a few dedicated journalists such as Asha Krishnakumar and T.K. Rajalakshmi have followed AIDWA's work over many years. None of these writings can afford to stand outside the time of their production—they are about events and struggles that are ongoing and decisive. This means that none of these texts take the longer view in order to assess AIDWA's transformation from 1981 to the present.

This research project began in the early 1990s. It has taken me from the back roads of Haryana to the fisher communities of Tamil Nadu, from the members' homes of Mumbai to the organization's offices in Kolkata, from the headquarters and the legal clinic of AIDWA in Delhi. I have interviewed veteran and new members of AIDWA at the national level, the state