



from the December 11, 2007 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1211/p07s02-wosc.html>

In India, a party for women only

Launched last month, the United Women Front is demanding more parliamentary seats for women.

By Nachammai Raman | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Madras, India

When she's not scouting for office space in Madras to house the local branch of India's newest political party, Sundari Ramachandran is traveling up to New Delhi to meet her mentor and party chief Suman Kant.

Ms. Ramachandran is one of more than 100 women in India who've been inspired to join the country's first national all-women's party, the United Women Front.

The party was launched last month by Mrs. Kant, a social worker and the wife of a former vice-president, to boost women's representation in traditionally male-dominated Indian politics.

First on Kant's agenda is getting 50 percent of elected parliamentary seats reserved for women.

That's a tall order considering that a longstanding demand by women's groups for 33 percent of seats has met mostly with resistance. Various versions of the Women's Reservation Bill have been awaiting parliamentary approval since 1996. The current elected representation of women stands at just 8 percent.

"We believe in equality. Women are not beggars," says Kant. "I don't believe in asking for just 33 percent when women make up half the population."

Not everyone thinks that parliamentary seats should be reserved for women, citing fears that it will preclude quotas for other disadvantaged groups. And even many women activists seem to feel 50 percent is overly ambitious.

But Ramchandran thinks it is important to try for such equality – and she has confidence in Kant.

In a way, fighting is in Kant's blood. Born into a family of Indian freedom fighters who participated in the Quit India movement against the British, Kant worked as a teacher in the state of Punjab before she married her husband, Krishan Kant, who also came from a family of freedom fighters and went on to become vice-president of India from 1997 until his death in 2002.

Kant made a name for herself as a social worker when her husband was governor of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, where she fought for tough laws to curb rampant alcoholism and violence against women.

Before launching the United Women Front, she headed a national charity called Mahila Dakshata Samiti, which works for the socioeconomic empowerment of women.

Kant, who could have retired, says that she's been driven into politics by her desire to help women. "I don't need anything for myself. I have seen everything," she says. "My ambition is to make women happy. They should be allowed to contribute to the development of society."

Kant, who sees visitors without appointments, says she launched a political party because she felt her charity was limited to social issues. "I wanted women to become lawmakers."

She promises her party will provide a "clean" alternative. Besides gender equality, she says her party will focus on poverty, universal health care, and creating employment, though she's rather vague about her plan of action.

Getting a new party off the ground is no easy task. In Tamil Nadu, where party loyalties are intense, "the

situation is not so encouraging," says Ramachandran, who is particularly worried about their lack of financial resources. But her boss is unfazed. "We are not competing with other parties and the willpower of our party members is very strong," says Kant.

Limited media coverage means that many people, including political analysts, haven't heard of the new party. Others seem skeptical of a political strategy built on gender identity. "One can understand why some women have found it necessary to come together as a political party because the whole of society is gender-biased, discriminatory, and patriarchal," says Sudha Sundararaman, Delhi-based general secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association. "We feel that having a separate party may not necessarily serve the purpose of gender equality."

Besides, mere numbers don't guarantee anything, says Ms. Sundaraman, citing the example of former Tamilnadu chief minister, Jayalalitha Jeyaram, whom she says played "an undemocratic role" that didn't further women's causes.

Kant and Ramachandran say they aren't interested in power. "We only want women's voices to be heard in parliament," Ramachandran says.

The United Women Front plans to field candidates from all the states in next year's elections. "We will put up women of merit," she says. "In the present system, the women put up as candidates are usually somebody's wife or somebody's daughter. They're not always good candidates."

The Inter-Parliamentary Union in Geneva, which ranks women's parliamentary participation in 189 countries, ranks India 107, below neighbors Afghanistan (25) and Pakistan (48).

But Kant is not looking to emulate other countries. "In my opinion, the situation of women is not comfortable anywhere. Women may be working, but they're not equal anywhere," she says.

Women in Parliament

Percent of women in lower or single houses, as of Oct. 31, 2007:

1. Rwanda – 48%
2. Sweden – 47.3
3. Finland – 42.0
4. Costa Rica - 38.6
5. Norway - 37.9
6. Denmark - 36.9
7. Netherlands – 36.7
8. Cuba – 36.0
68. USA – 16.3
107. India – 8.3

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union

[Full HTML version of this story which may include photos, graphics, and related links](#)

www.csmonitor.com | Copyright © 2007 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.