

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 36

It was my first trip to a foreign country. That too all alone. And, especially without knowing a soul there. Of course, I had reason to be nervous as hell during my flight to Washington. After reaching there, a retired official welcomed me cordially on behalf of the American State Department. My trip to America had been on the invitation of the American State Department for the 'International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP)' that had been based on the topic of 'Role of NGOs in addressing women's issues'. Across the world, representatives from 23 voluntary organisations from 21 countries had been invited for this program. My experience of working with rural women for approximately 15 years had helped me in getting selected for this program. The elderly person who had received me at the airport also received another woman delegate from Sri Lanka called Sinthu Vivekanandan, called a cab for us and sent us to our hotel. By the time we had reached the hotel, Jonathan, the coordinator assigned to our team for our three week stay by the American state department, was waiting for us. He took care of all the arrangements for us at the hotel and told us to take rest for the day, and informed us that there would be a Washington city tour for our team the next day. Before leaving, he also gave us a file containing the list of programs for the upcoming week in Washington, and a Citibank card, which he then proceeded to activate, and told us to use the money in the card during our stay there.

Our delegation team members came one by one from all over the world, including from Asian countries like Nepal, China, Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and African countries like Morocco, Nigeria, Swaziland, Liberia, South Sudan, Tunisia, and from countries such as Moldova, Romania, Trinidad & Tobago, Israel, Egypt, Albania.

Even before the state department officials could come and introduce us formally, we all introduced ourselves to each other at the hotel. All of them were working on various women-related issues in their respective countries. In a team consisting mostly of women, Hadi from Haiti and Yousuf from Morocco were the only men.

As the next day had been a Sunday, there were no official programs; so, they took us on a Washington city tour. This also provided our team an ample amount of time to get to know each other. We got to see all the Washington monuments such as White House, Capitol building, National mall, Lincoln memorial, Martin Luther King memorial, etc. There were four coordinators in total for our team — Jennifer, Ella, Voytek and Jonathan. They told us that they meet numerous delegation teams like ours every year and that they

loved their job because it involved meeting people from various countries and getting to know more about the conditions there. They weren't just saying it, we would observe with our own eyes their passion for their work over the next three weeks. After the end of the city tour, they dropped us at the hotel and told us to come to the lobby by eight o'clock in the morning to go to the state department office. As they had warned us that if anybody was late, they had to come on their own to the office using the address printed in the program file that they had given us, I told Sinthu to wake me up by 7 o'clock and slept. For the duration of my stay there, I didn't have the need to tell the hotel staff to give a wakeup call to me. Sinthu is a very active girl. At dawn, she would wake me up by calling 'akka'. That girl knew Tamil very well. She learnt to say 'akka' in Telugu.

On Monday, which was the first day of our program, our first appointment was with Robert Means. He was the organiser of this whole event. After 3 weeks, our last meeting was also with Robert in Seattle. Since it was already afternoon by the time he explained about the program details, the precautions we needed to take during our time there, etc., we directly went to the lunch organised in the office in our honour by the US State Department and came back to the office.

A retired Foreign Service officer, Hugh Ivory, spoke next on American federal system. After he stated that each state in the USA had a separate constitution, he started discussing the constitutions of all the countries whose representatives were present.

As it had been just our first day at the event, we just had two programs for the day. Later, they dropped us at the hotel. As our hotel was quite near the White House, we walked towards it in the evening and spoke to some LGBTQ+ groups doing a protest in front of it, and enquired as to what their problems were, why were they protesting there, etc. In the one week we spent there, we went to the White House for five days. There was always a protest going on everyday there. Speaking for some time with them about what problems pushed them towards the movement became a daily habit for us there. The next day, our first program was at the office of the Institute of International Education. Doctor Stephen, a professor at the George Mason University explained to us about the non-governmental organisations in America. He told us about the history of the nonprofit sector in the country and their related laws. While elaborating about the sector, he stated that approximately 10% of the American workforce was working in the nonprofit sector; therefore, if we look through the lens of employment generation, the nonprofit sector was amongst the biggest providers of employment in the country. From there, we went to the office of the National Woman's Party at Belmont house. It was called the Belmont-

Paul Women's Equality Monument. Mille, the administrative coordinator of the place, took us all around the monument. That house was not only a focal point in American women's fight for voting rights, and its eventual win in achieving it, but also for various other women's rights movements. Items related to those historic movements, including old newspaper clippings, photos of various women's movements, banners and pamphlets used in those movements were carefully preserved there. After looking at the history and the sacrifices behind the freedom experienced by American women today, I felt how responsible each one of us needed to be towards the rights we are enjoying no matter which society or community we belong to.

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