



## Young Women get together

*YWCA's South East Region members congregate at Ooty for their Annual Conference. National General Secretary, Leila Passah (in pic above, extreme right) shares her views on challenges ahead, in a brief interview to The Local.*

**Ooty**, 19 August 2011: 'We're climbing uphill- up the ghats section, on a hairpin bend, please pray for us,' was the telephone call that Delhi-based **Leila Passah**, National General Secretary, YWCA India, received from a member, an hour after she had arrived at Ooty, awaiting the rest of the delegates from different parts of Karnataka, Andhra and Tamilnadu, all headed towards this hill station for the South-East Regional Conference 2011, to take stock of what has been accomplished and what needs to be done in the months ahead.

Indeed, challenges before the Indian arm of the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) are uphill - considering that the underlying objective of this organisation is the prevention of violence against women. 'Violence against women does not pertain only to physical abuse,' explains Ms Passah. 'When an unsuspecting woman marries a man who is diagnosed with HIV, for instance, it is a severe form of abuse and violence to her. One such individual, a brave young woman - now a YWCA member - though infected with HIV is fighting the cause of violence against women with great courage. She has taken up the onerous task of creating awareness among women and the potential risks to mother and child. Her husband abandoned her and their child, as soon as he learnt that he had infected her as well.'

'Education of the girl child is still high on everyone's agenda. So is equal opportunity and employment for women. However, it is our youth, the young girls, who we need to reach out to with awareness about their rights and their role in modern day society. Young women, today, though as vulnerable as they were years ago in terms of their safety, exploitation and negative influences, are greatly challenged today on account of the overwhelming advent of the internet. Earlier, the family structure would help in decision making. Today, the internet proffers information and advice, not all of which is ratified or credible - it can, sometimes, mislead an individual into a dangerous and even life threatening situation. Spreading awareness is therefore vital.

'We're over 7000 members in India, but there is a dire need to bring in more member-volunteers from a cross-section of local society across the cities and towns that a YWCA is present. When I say cross section, I mean people of different age groups, professions or occupations even communities, must come forward to volunteer in the drive to uplift womenfolk. I must add here that a lot of people perceive that the 'C' in the YWCA limits membership to those from a specific religious affiliation but that is not so. We are a secular entity having 85 chapters of YWCA spread across India.'

The idea of YWCA came about in 1855, during the Crimean War, when nurses and paramedics at the war front, required a clean and safe place to stay. Today, YWCAs the world over, provide safe and comfortable accommodation for young women travelling or at work. Their locations are central and easily accessible.

In the Nilgiris, YWCA in Ooty is located alongside the Racecourse road enroute to the bus stand, while the Coonoor YWCA is tucked away, less than a kilometre from Bedford Circle. Locally, the challenges are several and member-volunteers here are most required. The general secretary is aware that the key issues affecting women in the Nilgiris include domestic violence and alcoholism. The problem is large, but with the help of local volunteers, the uphill journey can become less difficult.