

Organising Women

Why Women's Groups?

Why should women as a group organise separately and what interests do they share which bind them together? Women are often divided along caste, class, religious, or ethnic lines. However, in their gender-ascriptive roles they have traditionally organised around a number of concerns related to their practical needs, although these are often not formalised. Isolation, cultural norms, and heavy workloads have made it difficult for women to organise themselves and sustain the initiative (Moser 1993).

It has been argued that collective action is required to confront the powerlessness of poor women (Wignaraja 1990); that it is the recognition of subordination, in the household and society, which provides the basis for cooperative coordination (Moser 1993). Mountain women have long understood that, by working together, they are able to accomplish and enjoy tasks that are

otherwise tedious and difficult to complete in the necessary narrow time frame (i.e., planting, harvesting). In times of stress, other women in the community can be counted on to share resources and labour as needed.

But traditional cooperative groups of women have yet to realise that the benefits of collective action can extend beyond the spheres of their households and farms to provide them with a voice to attract outside assistance to their communities. Group formation is particularly powerful in weakening the 'inside/outside dichotomy' that constricts women within the boundaries of the family household and farm (Bennett 1992). Collectively, women can approach development agencies for assistance to meet their needs, determined by themselves, through self-help projects, extension services, or credit. Such initiatives have the advantage of being built on women's perceptions and indigenous knowledge of the environment and are, therefore, culture-specific. With membership limited mostly to women, the group can assure that issues related specifically to women will not be undermined by men.

In the process of developing institutional networks, women themselves develop self-confidence and a sense of empowerment; all have the opportunity to arise as leaders - a chance which is very difficult when men are also members. Group meetings are arranged around women's work schedules and usually held informally, allowing more participation of all members. Common struggles and common constraints serve to bring a sense of solidarity to the group, which increases its enthusiasm to become involved in activities to improve their status and living conditions.

Examples of Successful Women's Organisations

Over the past 10 years, it can be seen that when women organise and participate as active subjects rather than as passive objects of development programmes, they can move from a condition of mere survival to one of sustainable development (Wignaraja 1990).

a. Pakistan: The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme

Women's organisations have been formed as separate entities from the AKRSP's village organisations, through which all programme activities are implemented. The AKRSP enters into a contract with women's organisations to provide technical assistance and training for specific women's production packages (home-based poultry, vegetable production, nurseries) and labour-

saving technologies, and training in organisation and management. Women agree to meet regularly and contribute to a savings' scheme. A second interim evaluation concluded that progress in each of the three districts was remarkable, giving equal emphasis to institution building and enhanced productivity. These women's organisations have benefitted members by facilitating their access to much-needed social services and providing a conduit through which technical services can be delivered to them. They have also reduced women's isolation and built up their self-confidence in identifying their needs and requesting external agencies to supply services. For the first time, women in Gilgit have access to agricultural production credit. The existence of separate women's groups, able to articulate their needs, has made it easier for agencies to respond and for visiting female staff from such agencies to directly contact women.

The AKRSP Project staff have realised that women work more hours than men on every household and farm production activity, making a compelling case for all interventions in village or women's organisations to have a specific gender focus. It is their belief that improvements in agricultural and natural resource conservation will be achieved only if both the quality of female labour and women's access to productive resources are improved (World Bank 1990).

b. ***Bangladesh: Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)***

Grameen Bank's objective of extending credit to the poorest and creating opportunities for their self-employment led to their interest in building women's groups through raising awareness, providing training in organisational procedures, and developing cooperative groups for health care, child nutrition, literacy, and family planning. Loans are provided to poor women, who have been considered the greatest credit risk. This bank, which started as a small village credit society for the poor, has developed into an exemplary alternative banking system able to overcome constraints to reach poor women. Much of its success can be credited to the attitudes and behaviour of its staff who undergo training in action research methods and ways of listening and learning.

BRAC is an NGO which aims to help the poorest men and women without assets. They place a strong emphasis on awareness creation and empowerment, responding to the social as well as to the economic priorities of the poor. They facilitate the creation of women's groups through functional

literacy programmes, which develop social consciousness and then provide credit for group schemes. Small personal savings are encouraged, then followed by small income-generating activities. Institution building and human development, including leadership training, are major programme areas (Wignaraja 1990).

c. *Nepal: Production Credit for Rural Women (PCRW)*

The Production Credit for Rural Women Project is an initiative of a government ministry which has been able to be flexible enough to address a wide variety of issues, such as health, education, credit, and income-generating activities, in response to the needs of the poor. Planners of PCRW recognised that the simple delivery of services and technical assistance in a fragmented manner were insufficient to improve conditions for women - extension approaches had to be reoriented to women's realities. Through women's groups, this programme addresses economic and social needs simultaneously, recognising the interrelatedness of the two for rural women. Women Development Officers are trained as catalysts to mobilise groups and help them to articulate their needs - first within the group, then to government agencies (with the WDO's help) to receive technical support (Baer 1988).

d. *India: Chipko Andolan, the Working Women's Forum, and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)*

1. Chipko Andolan: In 1972, villagers from Chamoli (including women) in the U.P. hills challenged contractors, who were felling trees for commercial interests, through non-violent collective action. Women came later to be at the forefront of the campaign for reforestation and forest protection; they were successful in blocking the cutting of a large oak tract for establishment of a potato seed farm and other infrastructure, which were desired by the village men for income generation. Women coined the slogan, "Planning without fodder, fuel, and water is one-eyed planning." This group of women started a successful campaign to rid the villages of male alcoholism (Agarwal 1988).

2. The Working Women's Forum (WWF): Initiated as a response to urban poverty, the WWF was set up to free poor women from the circle of indebtedness and exploitation by forming their own solidarity groups to manage savings and offer credit. The WWF encourages the creative potential of poor women by mobilising them, raising their awareness, and organising them through participatory processes into cooperatives completely managed by themselves who are its shareholders and directors. The training of group

organisers, technical training, and non-formal adult education are key to the programme's success.

3. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA): Based on Gandhian principles, SEWA began as a trade union to deal with the total problems of poor women working in the informal sector. SEWA provides poor women with a support system not only in their workplace, but also in their homes in relation to the totality of their lives. Twenty-one thousand members (in 1990) are organised into small groups, according to their livelihoods as vendors, home-based producers, and labourers, which elect their own leaders. In addition to its work in advocacy for women's rights, SEWA manages its own bank and credit society (Wignaraja 1990).

Features of Successful Initiatives

Several features of the successful initiatives described above can be identified to provide guidelines for building and supporting programmes to develop women's groups and organisations. These are as follows:

1. the government has provided a policy framework, support system, and 'political space' for experimentation, allowing alternative mechanisms to traditional credit and services' institutions; and
2. intermediate organisations act as catalysts to mobilise, raise the awareness of, and organise women by:
 - * sensitising them about organisational matters,
 - * organising homogeneous groups to meet common needs,
 - * mobilising savings to support activities, build assets, and serve as collateral,
 - * introducing new knowledge and activities,
 - * developing strategies for sustainable use of natural resources,
 - * integrating survival needs with social needs, and
 - * ensuring that the poor are beneficiaries.

The process should be culture-specific, drawing on women's indigenous knowledge and participation as critical components. At the national level, the government must reorient its delivery system to respond to women's needs. Intermediate institutions will be needed to coordinate a dialogue between the women's organisations, NGOs, and government agencies (Wignaraja 1990).