

CHAPTER - I

HISTORICAL REVIEW OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

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Through out the world it has been found that initiatives developed by women themselves are potentially stronger, more adaptable and more sustainable than projects undertaken on their behalf.

So women believe that the support of women's organisations is the key to development for women and can make an enormous contribution to society as a whole.

This support is badly needed, at present a lack of income, recognition and back-up often makes it difficult for women's groups and organisations to maintain and expand their work.

THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS PROVIDING FOCUS FOR EARNING AND LEARNING.

Women's Organisations can provide support for activities at a local level. For example they are in a good position to contribute to appropriate literacy and technical training programme as well as income generating enterprises.

They can also help women to deal with the wider issues which impinge on their lives. They can provide information about women's rights, and they can hold awareness building and consciousness raising sessions. A stable organisation can pool the collective experience and knowledge of women over many years. Even if individuals move on, their contribution is not lost.

THE BENEFIT OF COLLECTIVE WORKING :

The experience in organising is important in itself. Women learn co-operative ways of working, leadership skills and methods of representing collective views. They also develop confidence in their ability to put their views. With these skills women are in a better position to participate in general community affairs.

Through organising women learn how social and political systems operate, and how they as women can negotiate with representatives of local and national government.



By working together women increase their visibility in the community and gain collective strength and status particularly, if several organisations act together. Organisations can represent women at all levels where decisions are made and challenge assumptions about the roles assigned to women.

Membership can also help women on a personal level providing support as well as interests outside the home and work-place. Many women felt isolated and powerless, Belonging to an effective organisations can increase these women's self esteem.

WOMEN ARE ORGANISING THROUGH OUT THE WORLD :

It is not easy for women to begin to organise or even to participate in organisations which are already established. Women tend to be isolated from each other with enormous burden of work; as well as the demands of child care. They have very little, time and energy or resources for other activities. Moreover there is often social disapproval of a woman having interests away from home and family.

As a result women who set up or join organisations often encounter hostility or even violence from other family members. Since childhood, women have been denied the right to hold opinions, women themselves are likely to be inhibited about becoming involved in the world outside the domestic sphere.

Despite all these obstacles, women's organisations have sprung up and flourished all over the world, providing inspiration and support for millions of women. In fact the belief in organising is not new. All regions of the world have a long established tradition of women working collectively. And it is on this tradition that many recent organisations have been built.

AFRICA

African women traditionally managed their affairs through their own independent organisations. These involved structures such as local councils or leaders like the Queen mothers of Ghana. At village level, women have always met together by age group in order to provide communal farm labour and to run savings club. In some countries women

have strong trading and marketing associations. The Ashanti Market Women in Ghana are an outstanding example of this kind of initiative. And there are many Church based groups through out the continent such as Mother's Unions. The more recent initiatives taken by African women in response to change and development have followed in these traditions. In 1977 for instance a group of researchers established the Association of African women for research and development, with the aim of formulating their own theories and programmes of development. Other women's Organisations such as Kenyan National Council of women have initiated movements to reduce the devastation caused by the deforestation.

(Latin America) LATIN AMERICA :

Organisations campaigning for women's legal, political and social rights have been active in Latin America since the early nineteenth century. The first International Feminist congress was held in Argentina in 1910.

In recent years an increasing number of women's groups have been established with large mass membership women's organisations have grown up in almost every country in the region. These organisations play a key role in

initiating and informing debate on women's issues and bringing the issues to the fore-front of political agenda. Organisations such as Flora Tristan in Peru, provide resources, research and support for the activities of smaller local groups.

ASIA

In South Asia there has been a long history of organisations with women's issues. In pre-independence period organisations such as the All INDIA WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS took up matters like access to education and laws relating to women's rights. For example concern about child marriage led to a successful campaign to raise the marriageable age of girls.

The 1970s and 1980s have seen an expansion in the number of women's organisations in India and also greater involvement by women in poor urban and rural areas. Organisations such as self employed women's Association are powerful bodies campaigning for the rights of working women. Other organisations focus on land rights and have helped to promote development of groups in remote rural areas. Meanwhile national mobilization around rape, dowry and sati (widow burning) have brought these issues to the forefront of public attention.

In some southern Asian countries such as Thailand and Philippines women have always lived relatively equal and independent lives. This has added strength and confidence to contemporary women's Organisations. Since these countries have been developed centres for 'Sex-tourism' much campaigning focusses prostitution and sexual violence. Women also organise around worker rights. Many SouthEast Asian countries have become bases for export oriented industries employing predominantly female labour.

THE PACIFIC

Women's Organisations are also flourishing in the Pacific. In New Guinea for example over a hundred groups were formed in the early 1980s. Women are organising around health and production issues and also domestic violence and alcohol abuse. Because of the use of Pacific Islands for nuclear testing, a network of women's organisations has been set up to campaign against the development of nuclear weapons.

Women's Organisations vary enormously in size and scope. Some are locally initiated and focussed around co-operative efforts to increase production. Other on

Organisations are related to wider area and focus on issues such as health, violence, education or the environment. For example in India :

- * The rural women's Social Education Centre Works on health issues with women's groups in the Chinglpet District of TamilNadu.
- * The Forum against the oppression of women mobilises around rape in the Bombay area.
- * The Chpko Movement Organise around environmental destruction in Himalayan foothills.

Sometimes these some issues are taken up by women's organisations operating at a national level. Women against violence operate throughout the small country of Belize.

In kenya, the Green Belt movement was initiated by the Kenyan National Council of women. The Korean Anti-Pollution Campaign is co-ordinated by several national women's Organisations.

In most countries Umbrella Women's Organisations promote the activities of disparate groups and take-up a range of issues at the national level. However not all

such organisations are autonomous and dedicated to women's interests. Some official women's organisations are controlled by Governments not concerned with women's rights and are used for political ends.

In recent years there has been an expansion in the number of Women's Organisations operating internationally. Some organisations take the form of regional networks like the African Association of women for Research and Development (AAWORD). Other organisations make up global network with regional subgroups. Development Alternatives with women in New Era (DAWN) is an example of this type of grouping. Most networks are concerned with co-ordinating and communicating the activities of women working on particular issues. The committee for Asian women for instance is concerned with women industrial workers. While the Global Network on Reproductive Rights focuses on issues of health and reproduction.

THE UN DECADE OF WOMEN

In 1985 a world conference of government officials responsible for women's affairs along with an associated Forum for non-governmental organisations marked the end of

the UN DECADE for women. Hundreds of women's Organisations from all over the world gathered together in Nairobi to discuss policies and to develop strategies for the future. The strength of these organisations and the conviction with which they were making their demands were clearly evident at this conference. And the acceptance by UN member states of the forward looking strategies proposed there indicates a recognition on the part of governments of the needs to listen to women's demands.

Most countries have now established official bodies dedicated to the advancement of women; and they have incorporated specific provisions for women in their development plans.

Departments for women rarely have the power or resources to challenge established practices and social attitudes are slow to change. Women themselves are still excluded from many policy making bodies.

But the Nairobi conference did provide tremendous boost to women's organisations and increased their status within their own countries. Since 1985, there has been an

an expansion in groups and networks at every level. The UN decade has put women's equality firmly on the agenda and has provided a more positive context in which women can work out their own strategies for development.

These strong and widespread women's groups and organisations face enormous difficulties. Women often find it difficult to sustain the activities of their groups because of the pressures on their time exerted by the family. Women may also be constrained by hostility expressed by other family members, resentful and disapproving of women's entry into the public activity. Other problem is that it is difficult for women to gain access to the financial and other resources needed for effective organisation.

WORK BASED ORGANISATIONS

Even women who are in paid employment have few opportunities to organise. This is because of the nature of the employment that most women have; working as subsistence farmers, self employed traders, domestic or home workers, low paid and isolated jobs. They are seldom unionised

and lack opportunities for meeting each other. Women in unionised activities may be active in worker organisations but these organisations rarely take up gender issues. A lot of women who are organised in their own sector are not yet involved in advancing the women's cause. Most of them started becoming politically aware first rather than being aware of the women's question.

FINDING NEW WAYS OF ORGANING

Women's organisations have had to evolve flexible imaginative ways of involving women who have little imaginative experience of organising, who may be illiterate and who often lack self confidence. It is by no means easy to find effective ways of working collectively. For example, the differences in social background among the women in a group may creat problems. When organisations are started by middleclass women, it may be difficult for illiterate women to play on equal part. Considerable skill is required to bring about collaborative effort. A further problem lies in the status accorded to an Organisation

which works in an unconventional way. The fact that women tend to have separate and different ways of working means that they are often not taken as an organised force. People working in more established structures may well not recognise the validity of collective ways of working.

The success of women's organisations is often hampered by women's lack of technical knowledge and skills. Skills such as accountancy are rarely made available to women in any country. Women too have less access to channels of communications, such as the media, than to men, and they have fewer opportunities to travel. Often there is no readily available information on the issues that concern women. So research has to be the first priority.

Women's organisations need support in all the areas outlined above. In particular they need.

- * Appropriate training
- * Access to information and resources.
- * Opportunities for sharing skills and experience.
- * Opportunities for assessing their own problems and achievements.

With support of this kind they can develop their capacity for collective action, and through this bring about significant changes in women's social and economic position. Organisations will also be able to act as more efficient advocates for women at the level of policy-making and to ensure that more women take their place amongst the politicians and planners.

The potential in such organisations is enormous for changing the lives of women and also for affecting the cause of world development.