

# *Dedicated Lives*

WOMEN ORGANISING FOR A FAIRER WORLD

Helen O'Connell



**An Oxfam Publication**



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**Helen O'Connell**

**Oxfam**

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**Front cover photo:** *An Oxfam project worker talking to a woman's group in Bangladesh.* Tanvir/Oxfam

**Back cover photo:** *Vanete Almeida at the grave of one of the Tolpuddle Martyrs.* Oxfam

The photographs of the eight women visitors which appear at the head of each section were taken by Robert M. Davis/Oxfam

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# *Contents*

Foreword

Introduction: 'You have struck a rock' 1

Restoring women's dignity: Mariam Dem, Senegal 10

Employment and empowerment: Vigi Srinivasan, India 15

Re-defining health: Mouna Odeh, West Bank 21

'Why the silence?': Mmatshilo Motsei, South Africa 27

A new woman: Aida Seif El Dawla, Egypt 33

Organising rural women: Vanete Almeida, Brazil 39

Banking on feminism: Josefa Gigi Francisco, Philippines 45

Education for organising: Carola Carbajal Rios, Mexico 52

Conclusion: South/North relations 59

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# *Foreword*

The dedicated lives described in this book are special but not unusual. The commitment and will to promote positive change in favour of women shown by the eight women portrayed here are shared and demonstrated by a great many of the women with whom Oxfam works.

These eight women came to the UK as part of the initiative organised by Oxfam's Gender and Development Unit (GADU) to mark the organisation's 50th anniversary. The first stage of the Anniversary Linking Project was the visit of these Southern women to meet with women from a variety of kindred organisations in the UK and Ireland, to share experiences of their work and find ways of working together and supporting each other. Future stages of the project include a conference and further exchange visits between people doing similar work in different countries of the South.

GADU has set up this innovative project as a way of strengthening partnership and encouraging networking among women's organisations, and it marks a new stage in relationships with Southern NGOs. It is a way of developing joint strategies for development which combine the perspectives and realities of Southern organisations and funding agencies such as Oxfam.

**Eugenia Piza-Lopez, GADU, Oxfam**

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# *Introduction:*

## *'You have struck a rock'*

These words of Albertina Sisulu spoken on 9 August 1956, when 20,000 women went to Pretoria to protest against the extension of the pass laws to African women, are borne out in the lives and work of many thousands of women worldwide who are refusing to accept inequality on any grounds. Each of the eight women whose story is told in this book is in her own way playing an important role in working for justice, not for women only, but for men and children too. They are working for a world in which everyone's human rights are respected regardless of gender, race or class, and in which resources are allocated more equitably and used more sustainably. For them the struggle for women's rights is fundamental to creating this world.

The last decade of the twentieth century is an inhospitable time in which to work for equality and justice. There is increasing disparity in rights and access to resources. This disparity is based on gender, race and class differences within countries as well as on the ever-widening gap between South and North. Economic and environmental problems are widespread, and armed conflict rife in many regions.

One-fifth of the world's people — one billion — are living in poverty; most are in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and a disproportionate number are women. The last two decades have witnessed growing poverty amongst women. Each year half a million women die in childbirth or from pregnancy-related causes; that is one every minute. The majority of these deaths are in Southern countries and can be attributed to poverty and inadequate health services. According to Unesco, there are around 960 million adults in the world who cannot read or write and two-thirds of these are women. It is feared that the literacy gap between women and men will increase further as rising poverty and ailing economies increase the demand for women's unskilled labour. A recent study by the International Fund for Agricultural Development reported that in the last 20 years poverty for rural women had increased by 48 per cent, compared to 3 per cent for rural men. The causes are many but include the failure on the part of governments and aid donors to support women farmers. In around one-third of households worldwide, women are the primary source of income; in some countries the figure is over 50 per cent. In the UK nine out of every ten single parents are women and almost half of these are living in poverty. Growing male unemployment, desertion and divorce, migration, and war

are some of the main reasons for the worldwide increase in women-maintained households.

### ***Economic crisis***

The debt crisis and the measures proposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to deal with it, namely structural adjustment programmes, are dominating life in many of the countries covered in this book. Debts continue to spiral and become unpayable as new loans are borrowed to pay interest on old. Each year Southern countries transfer more to Northern governments, financial institutions, and commercial banks than they receive in aid. More and more foreign currency is absorbed in interest payments at the expense of essential imports such as medicines, petrol, or spare parts for machinery. Most new loans, and further aid payments, are conditional on the implementation of structural adjustment programmes. These programmes drastically cut government expenditure, liberalise economic and trading relations, promote privatisation and production for export. Their primary aim is the continuance of debt repayments to ensure the survival of Northern economies.

There is widespread evidence that structural adjustment programmes have disastrous implications for everyone in the lowest income groups, especially women. Currency devaluation, required by these programmes, causes a sharp fall in real wages, and the removal of subsidies on basic necessities such as food and fuel results in immediate price increases. Cuts in public spending on education, health, housing, and transport increase women's workload and also increase women's unemployment levels, as these are the sectors in which most women work. Privatisation of health-care services and education disproportionately affect women and girls: women have limited access to the services which they need to fulfil their caring roles; and when money for schooling is scarce, boys rather than girls are given priority. Structural adjustment programmes are founded on women's capacity to cope, to economise, to work even longer hours, and once again to put their own needs aside.

### ***Environmental crisis***

Recent decades have also seen a mounting anxiety about environmental degradation. Industrialisation and the modernisation of agriculture, with the consequent unsustainable exploitation of natural resources and wanton waste and pollution, have resulted in significant damage to the natural environment. Here, again, the poorest social groups and women in particular are the worst affected. It is they who live and work in degraded rural areas or in polluted urban slums. In rural areas women and their families are totally dependent on the natural environment for survival.

### ***Conflict and human rights***

Worldwide there are already around 20 million refugees, 85 per cent of whom are women and their dependent children; there are another 25 million people displaced within their own countries. The reasons people flee

their homes are many, but persecution on political or religious grounds, or because of people's racial or social category, and the fear of armed aggression are amongst the commonest. Open and violent conflicts are going on in the home countries of three women featured in this book. Mouna Odeh lives in the Occupied Territories where daily life is marked by checkpoints, curfews and the Intifada resurgence; Gigi Francisco is from the Philippines, large areas of which are heavily militarised; while in South Africa, Mmatshilo Motsei's home, political violence increases side by side with the negotiations about a new constitution. State-backed violence is commonplace in many countries, and blatant human rights abuses — arbitrary arrests, torture and 'disappearances' — all-too-frequent occurrences. When governments overtly or covertly support the use of armed aggression to quell opposition and retain power they are unlikely to champion basic human rights for women or men.

Thus the four freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (freedom from fear and want, freedom of speech and belief) are a dream rather than a reality for millions of people. Many countries have enshrined equality for women within their constitutions and improved women's access to education and employment but none has deliberately reallocated resources towards creating societies in which women could exercise their rights fully, or reorganised paid work to enable women and men to fulfil their family responsibilities. Few, if any, countries teach boys as well as girls the value and importance of caring for others. Few governments have taken thorough and systematic action on male violence against women.

It is in this context that the women described in this book live their lives and carry on their work — work which is as exciting and rewarding as it can be stressful and frightening.

## *Women organising*

Since the 1970s women's organisations and movements have flourished in almost all countries. They vary widely in perspective and activity. The organisations in which the eight women in this book work share a particular analysis of women's oppression. They argue that women are discriminated against specifically on the grounds of gender, and that the majority of Southern women face additional discrimination based on class and race, as members of disadvantaged social groups, as members of ethnic minorities within their own countries, and as citizens of underdeveloped countries.

Although these three tiers of oppression experienced by women are inextricably linked, discrimination on the grounds of gender is the starting point. Women and men are allocated very specific gender roles and rights within each society and are educated and conditioned for these from birth. In all societies there is a division between the social, cultural, economic, and political roles that women and men are expected to fulfil, although the actual tasks women and men do can vary widely from one society to another. If all roles were regarded as being of equal merit by society, and open to both genders, then a division of roles would not be necessarily problematic. However, the roles assigned to women and men are imbued



with differential values which in turn confer differential rights and power; and there is a clear, and universal, bias in favour of men.

The implications for women of bias based on gender are manifold: the 'triple burden' of home, work and community; the sexual division of labour; the fear or experience of physical and sexual violence. Almost invariably women have primary responsibility for caring for children, for the elderly, and for those family members who are ill or disabled. This responsibility usually brings with it a range of domestic obligations which can include growing, buying and preparing food, rearing animals, washing and cleaning, fetching water and fuelwood. It is women, too, who maintain close ties with other family members, organise social functions like weddings, run community health-care initiatives, and attend at births and deaths. This work, so essential to human survival, figures nowhere in the national accounts of societies which increasingly recognise only monetary value.

### ***Gender constraints***

The sexual division of labour within home and family is mirrored in the segregation of occupations in the workplace. By and large, women predominate in the lower-paid sectors of formal employment, such as the public services and manufacturing, as marginal workers in the informal sector, as seasonal agricultural labourers, or as domestics, or street traders. Lower educational and training qualifications combine with family obligations and cultural constraints to make it very difficult for most women to obtain secure well-paid employment. Even when they are employed, women face gender-based discrimination: they are, for example, perceived to be 'secondary' earners — the dependents of men — and therefore to need less income; and many women are exposed to sexual harassment.

There is another major constraint on women's opportunity to plan and control their own lives: violence or the threat of violence. Men use violence against women as a conscious means of controlling women's fertility, freedom to come and go, to speak out or to organise. In most societies this violence is condoned by other family and community members, by religious organisations, and by the state. Women are regarded as men's property to be used or abused at will. The use of violence is one extreme manifestation of the unequal social and economic relations between women and men; it is an abuse of power. It is only recently that a few countries have begun to treat male violence against women in the family as a serious matter and a punishable offence.

The gender-based constraints women experience daily are deep-rooted in all societies. Girls are brought up to behave in certain ways, to put the needs of others before their own and to regard themselves as less than equal; this is as true in the UK as in India. A woman is educated to accept that the family is her primary world and thus her identity is defined in relation to the men in her family: she is daughter, wife, sister, mother or niece. There are rules — strict in some societies and more lenient in others — which define those people with whom she can associate and communicate.

This discriminatory treatment is further reflected in the fact that mothers and fathers give better health-care, food and education to boy infants and



John Ogie/Oxfam

*Girl children help with domestic tasks from an early age.*

children. In Southern Asia and Africa nearly 40 per cent of young girls of primary-school age are not attending school. Vigi Srinivasan is all too aware of the cultural and economic obstacles which prevent girls receiving full-time education. From an early age young girls are expected to take on domestic tasks, such as fetching water or fuelwood, caring for younger siblings, and watching over grazing animals.

Gender constraints prevent women from participating on an equal basis in the family, in their community, in the marketplace, and in decision-making structures. They shape a woman's capacity to control her own fertility, her rights and access to education, to land, and to other resources. They determine what health care she will

receive, and her ability to obtain credit, and to use technology. They limit her opportunities to organise, to make links with women outside her own community or country, and her access to political power.

### ***Challenge and change***

It is not surprising, then, that millions of girls reach adulthood having had no opportunity to develop a sense of self-worth or self-confidence. Challenging and ending this internalised inferiority is the aim of all of the women featured in this book. They believe that women must create space for themselves to meet and talk. They see collective discussion and action outside the immediate circle of the family as central to women's empowerment and to changing gender relations in the home, workplace, trade union and decision-making structures. Women's groups which focus on education for consciousness enable women to see themselves in a new way, to question the basis of their inequality. It is only in this way that women can begin to develop a sense of identity and a perception of what their own interests may be separate from the welfare of the family. Then they can begin to take action to transform their situation and press for changes in the wider society.

A critical first step for organising is women's health issues, as demonstrated in the work of several women who appear in this book. An understanding of how one's body works, in particular with respect to sexuality and fertility, is crucial to gaining some control over one's life and the courage to overcome barriers at home and outside.

## ***Strategies for action***

Women and their organisations have adopted different strategies to achieve their objective of ending discrimination and transforming their societies. Some, like Vigi and Mariam for example, decide to work primarily at local level to encourage women to get together and speak out about their needs and interests. Others, like Gigi and Vanete, choose to work with women in mixed organisations to create a space in which they can press for their demands. All agree that women's groups and organisations must first and foremost be independent. From this position of strength, women can then begin to build alliances of solidarity with other social movements.

Of course, changing relations between women and men takes a long time: although conventional women-men relations are unjust there is a certain security in following the norm. Centuries of subordination and putting the needs of others first make it difficult for women to press for their own rights. Furthermore, it is impossible to work to remove the inequalities women face without challenging social structures, such as the family, and certain aspects of a society's culture; and those who benefit from the *status quo* are frequently quick to react with criticism or hostility. Where cultural values and religious beliefs are closely connected it is even more difficult to achieve change. Religious fundamentalism, of whatever persuasion, hampers women's efforts to achieve equality.

It is likewise impossible to achieve empowerment and equality for women without challenging wider economic exploitation and political marginalisation. Equality for women is not possible within economic and political structures which are oriented towards the interests of elite groups. The women featured in this book share an approach to their work which relates the daily lives of women and issues of women's health, education, and economic survival to national economic and social policy, human rights, trade, the environment, and international relations. They are equally concerned with promoting education and consciousness-raising with women at a local level, finding ways to assist women in day-to-day survival, campaigning for equal rights for women and other oppressed groups, and challenging national and international economic and political structures.

It is this breadth of vision that gives women's organisations a central and leading role in the social movements of their countries: in the trade unions, peasant federations, and other progressive movements for change.

## ***Reshaping development***

The eight women featured in this book share a vision of a different world. They are seeking a fundamental shift in priorities and in the allocation of resources. In particular they are questioning the economic model which has determined the development, or underdevelopment, of their countries over the last 40 years and which has exacerbated gender, race and class inequalities.

Since the 1950s the development policy pursued by economic planners from Southern governments and Northern donor agencies was founded on economic growth as the means of reducing poverty. They promoted the Northern model of economic development, namely industrialisation and

modernisation of agriculture — which of course was only made feasible in the North by cheap imports of raw materials from the South and trading relations firmly fixed in the North's favour. The belief was that if Southern countries produced and sold more they would prosper, and general well-being would filter down to the poorest social groups. Women were perceived solely as housewives, as bearers and nurturers of children, and as passive consumers of food, health care and other services. It was assumed, wrongly, that women and children would automatically benefit from any increase in men's earnings. No one troubled to examine economic relations within households and families.

When it became apparent after some decades that development based on economic growth had not worked, it was decided to direct special programmes towards women. These aimed to meet people's basic needs for clean water, health care and nutritious food. Some years later, when evidence that poverty was diminishing still failed to materialise, additional programmes were devised to enhance women's access to money through small-scale income-generating projects, in handcrafts for example.

Throughout, the planners failed to rise above their narrow assumptions about women's work. They did not recognise that women have multiple responsibilities and roles, or that income earned by men did not automatically benefit all family members equally. Not only were women not helped by development programmes, they were often adversely affected in a number of ways. Many development projects in agriculture, for example, increased women's workload on cash-crop production controlled by men while reducing the time women had available for the cultivation of their own fields.

A new strategy called 'integrating women in development' (known as WID) was adopted by some government and multi-lateral development organisations during the 1980s. Special components were added on to agricultural development programmes, for example, to improve women's access to training, credit, inputs and sometimes land. But, again, women's existing roles and responsibilities were ignored; and the WID strategy failed to question the model of development on offer and seemed to take for granted the inequalities in international and national economic structures and thereby to reinforce them. The effects of following a model of development based primarily on economic growth have been growing poverty, economic and environmental crisis, and widespread failure to meet the basic needs of most people and respect individual rights.

Women's groups and organisations are now demanding a different development model, one which recognises the importance of social functions, in addition to economic activities. They are arguing for development policies which put people first and which are founded on respect for human rights. These policies would reallocate resources towards meeting the basic needs of women, men and children for food, health care, education, childcare and housing. They would ensure that women and men received training and access to resources to enable them to earn an income for themselves and their families. The necessary pre-conditions for such development are an urgent solution to the debt crisis, a fairer global trading system, regulation of the operations of multi-national companies, and aid programmes aimed genuinely at reducing poverty.

## ***Women and environment***

This development model is long-term and sustainable, does not jeopardise the rights of women and other oppressed groups for the sake of a limited notion of global well-being, nor endanger the future in favour of short-term profits. Women's organisations reject narrow concepts of environmental protection or conservation. They want full recognition and strengthening of women's roles as environmental managers and decision-makers.

The relationship between the environment, poverty, and human rights is particularly highlighted by the women in this book. As Vanete Almeida says,

We can not talk about ecology separate from the reality of people's lives. If people do not have land to grow crops on then they have to cut down the trees... How can I respect nature, if I, my children and my family are not respected?

They refute the view that blames population size for poverty and environmental degradation and are critical of population programmes which aggressively promote the use of contraceptive methods or sterilisation at the expense of women's reproductive health and choice. Research has shown that with improved social status and access to education women are able to take greater control of their lives, have greater capacities to earn income, and can better guarantee their own health and that of their children. The knowledge and right to control one's own fertility is basic to all other rights for women. Access to safe, appropriate and affordable fertility regulatory methods allows women to exercise this right.

## ***Social transformation***

Simultaneously the women's organisations featured here are pressing for a redefinition of human rights and their full extension to women. Such redefined human rights would include not only civil and political rights, but also social rights to education, health care and housing. For Vanete and the other women there can be no development unless fundamental inequalities are tackled.

The vision of transformation shared by the eight women also extends to the decision-making structures of their countries. Political structures have largely failed women. They do not consult, represent or protect the interests of women or other disadvantaged groups. Carola and the others are calling for empowerment for women and for all who are marginalised; for the democratisation of structures from the family to national governments and international institutions, to enable women, men and children to take an active and creative role in shaping and running their societies and in determining priorities and policies. For them democracy is not about periodic elections or a multi-party system, it is about information, consultation, open decision-making and accountability in the interests of the majority.

Through organising into social movements women, and others who are exploited and marginalised, can begin to ensure that their voices and views are heard. They can begin to exert some influence over decisions that are

taken locally, nationally, and internationally in their name.

The women featured here want to place power in the hands of people who once capacitated can build caring and efficient societies. They are demanding the right and the opportunity to build societies based on social and economic justice and respect for human rights.

Shahidul Alam/Oxfam



*Women's group meeting, Bangladesh. By organising into social movements, women can begin to make their voices heard.*

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## *Restoring women's dignity*



*MARIAM DEM*

Mariam Dem's destiny as a young woman in Senegal was to marry, have children, take good care of her husband and children and in this way get to paradise. She comes from a traditional Senegalese family: her father came from a Marabout family of judges and educators, her mother's family were leading landowners, members of the Fulani tribe. Mariam was brought up by an uncle, who wanted Mariam to be a model Fulani woman. As a girl she had to return to the house immediately school finished each day and help prepare food for the household.

Mariam was introduced to political ideas by an older cousin who came to live with them when Mariam was about sixteen. This cousin had caused a lot of trouble in the family because of her views and her involvement in student politics. She was sent to live with the uncle 'as he was the person who put things right and would make her conform to being a good girl'. Mariam and her cousin shared a room and quickly became good friends:

She had my mother's name and that made a very strong bond between us although I did not share her views. I thought I should support her in the family as I did not think it was right that they gave her such a hard time just because she thought differently. So we went around together, she introduced me to friends in the student movement and in the peasant movement... I began to come out of myself a bit, to see the world was larger than my home and school.

When she left school Mariam went to university and, like her cousin, joined the student movement. In the holidays the movement sent students out into the villages to enable them to understand the living conditions of rural people and to work with farmers' organisations. This first-hand experience of poverty altered the course of her life. For the first time she realised that the majority of Senegalese people did not have enough food, and were not healthy, that it was difficult for their children to get to school.

I saw women in one family — there were only women left as the father had died and the grown-up sons had gone to Dakar to work or

to university — it was they who cultivated the rice field. They had to give over half their harvest back to the organisation that gave them credit for seeds. If they got six sacks, four sacks were given back ... They got up very early, they were the last to go to bed, all the time they were either in the field or processing the rice or cooking. The family did not want me to know that they had nothing; they went and got coffee on credit for me. So I took my grant and bought some things ... That was a shock. They were really living in deprivation, yet they had so much courage and strength and even enjoyed life.

Mariam began to question the social, economic and political structures in Senegal. She was struck by the paradox of the important role that women played as producers and reproducers and their position of inferiority. Deciding to work for change, she was first attracted by a clandestine left-wing movement, then joined a non-governmental organisation working with young unemployed graduates. In the late 1980s she became Programme Officer for Oxfam in Senegal with special responsibility for work with the poorest groups of women in rural and urban areas. She says:

I devote myself to development because I think that one of the monsters that women have to overthrow is under-development.

### *More work but no reward*

In the rural areas, although women work in farming and grow much of the food, they cannot own land. In the towns most women work in small-scale trading or in factories, and here, too, provide an important part of the family's income, although they have no authority in the household. Day-to-day survival has become increasingly difficult for the majority in Senegal. The government has embarked on a structural adjustment programme in an attempt to repay its external debts. Social investment in health, education and training has been cut, subsidies to poor farmers have been removed.

The most striking effect is that women have become poorer... Enterprises are closed, men have lost their jobs, women have to work harder to get money to keep the family, or they become head of households when the men migrate or emigrate to look for work.

The drought in many rural areas is making life even more difficult. When the men go, the women stay because, as they say in Senegal, 'a woman cannot abandon her family':

Women have to work the land, but without easy access to agricultural credit. The woman has a little bit of land to feed her children; it rains for three months. During the dry season they go to cities to work or they stay and do more livestock farming as well as agriculture.

Under-development and poverty are not the only problems facing women in Senegal. The Islamic religion places women in the position of minors in relation to male family members. As Islam allows men to have up to four wives, around 60 per cent of marriages are polygamous. Mariam points out that the Koran says that a man can only take four wives if he can look after



all of them and treat them fairly. This qualification is usually forgotten. From women Mariam hears two responses to questions on polygamy: an official, public reply and a private view:

In public women will say to you: 'Oh it is not bad, when it is not my turn, when I don't cook, I can do other activities.' But when you get to know women better and spend more time talking to them, the contrary opinion is expressed: that 'polygamy is a catastrophe.'

Mariam explains that for many women it is a catastrophe economically, because each mother has full responsibility for her own children and if the husband has several children he cannot take proper care of them all; and it is a catastrophe socially because, contrary to the myth, there are frequently conflicts between the women.

But to challenge polygamy is to challenge religion, an almost impossible task for women right now. In Mariam's view attitudes to polygamy will change only through education and pressure from women's organisations for improvements in the legal status of women. There is a growing fundamentalist movement in Senegal, especially among young people, which has serious implications for women. There are now young Senegalese women who wear long dresses and do not speak to men in public. Mariam believes that in times of economic and political stress people turn to religion hoping to find solutions to their problems.

Economic hardship has opened up new opportunities for women but building equality between women and men is slow and difficult. Mariam says, women do want to change, but have first to change their mental attitudes: 'the culture is very tenacious, very strong'. Because women's social position has not improved, women's perceptions of themselves and their aspirations for a different future are limited and they sometimes doubt if change is possible:

[Women] asks themselves all the time, 'when is this going to change? Why I am doing more and my status is still low?' They think that things will never change. That is a dangerous feeling of impotence.

### *'Wake-up, free up'*

In the early 1970s Mariam became active in the emerging feminist movement. This movement was started by women political activists increasingly frustrated by the failure of political movements to devise



*Senegal: Market traders.*

Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

alternative policies which would include equality for women. Mariam adds:

We realised we were not changing the existing conception, in terms of giving more power to women as a whole part of society.

Some politically active women came together to think about how to change the situation of women in Senegal. Some studied the position of women in factories, others looked at the historical background to analyse and understand the place of women. Through research and discussion they developed a policy which they presented to the political movement. It was rejected out of hand. The women were reminded that all workers and peasants were oppressed and that the class struggle had to come first.

So they decided to create the first feminist movement, calling it *Yewu Yewwi* — Wake Up, Free Up (become conscious in order to liberate yourself). They met with a hostile reaction from the religious authorities, the government and the political parties, and were accused of destabilising society with Western ideas. Despite this strong opposition the movement gradually gained greater credibility. Although not large it has been influential. It has, for example, been able to stimulate public debate on such issues as family law, Islam and women, and mental health.

### *Strengthening women's groups*

It was through her involvement in the student movement and with women factory workers that Mariam's interest in development issues grew and deepened. She began to understand more fully the position of women within the economy and to see other issues, like health, more clearly. She also recognised the importance of women organising. In Senegal there is a wide range of women's organisations concerned with trading, small-scale enterprises, health care, or water supplies. In her work for Oxfam, Mariam is able to reinforce these organisations in a variety of ways: by providing training in management, a health worker to teach about different contraceptive methods, or wells and health centres.

Mariam's aim, which is shared by Oxfam, is to help women to express themselves on topics that concern them, to speak about their own health problems, family planning, the land question and other injustices; and to show them the possibilities for action that exist. Mariam wants to restore women's dignity, she wants women to regain confidence in themselves, to make society realise their importance. She makes the following powerful plea on behalf of Senegalese women:

In the countryside, give her land so that she can till it and feed her family. Give her the means to decide whether she wants to have children or not so that she can have them in the best conditions — so that she does not have to die after giving birth to a child because the health facilities were ill-equipped. It is a long process. In my opinion the development of our country depends on this.

Her plan now is to organise all these scattered women's organisations into a network. She is enthusiastic and hopeful that collectively women will succeed in obtaining justice, but organisation is essential:



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

*Mariam Dem (right) talking with a women's group.*

As long as women do not constitute a force, it is difficult to bring about change. If they get together they can see how others succeed, and that success is possible for them. Solidarity is very important for women. They often believe that there are things that they cannot have access to, but if they see other women in the same town who have managed it then it seems possible.

### ***Bringing work home***

In her personal life Mariam has worked hard to counter the practices that devalue women. She met her husband, who was involved in the peasant movement, through her student political work. It took Mariam a whole year to persuade her family to allow her to marry without the full eight-day traditional marriage. Her marriage consisted of religious rites only, and 'it was a whole drama amongst the relations'. But the mould was broken and some years later Mariam's sister was also able to have a non-traditional marriage ceremony. Mariam's work and views caused many difficulties for her family in the early days but slowly they have come to accept her ideas and now the family is very close again. Even her uncle now brings his personal problems to her.

Within her marriage, Mariam has also been trying to break new ground. Her husband respects her work, which she combines with being a mother of two children, but she admits that things have not changed when it comes to housework. Her husband, like almost all Senegalese men, does very little in the house, and this is a source of great frustration to her. She says:

*We are battling all the time! We share some of the same vision even if he has a bit of feudalism.*

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## *Employment and empowerment*



*VIGI SRINIVASAN*

Vigi Srinivasan was a young married woman before she began to understand how the poor in India lived. It came as a revelation to her that apathy was not the cause of their poverty, as she had been led to believe. Vigi was born and brought up in the shelter of an affluent middle-class family in Madras in South India. Her parents were both educated and had an unconventionally egalitarian relationship. Vigi was one of three daughters, who were educated primarily to make better wives and mothers. Vigi finished university, married quite young, had one child and then looked for employment as a lecturer. When she heard that a local community-development project was looking for a Tamil-speaking woman she went along and worked there for the next six years.

The people in the community, who had previously lived on the streets in Madras, had been resettled on land near the coast. Their situation was appalling:

They were put there in the winter; children, chickens, goats died. They had to borrow money at high rates of interest and the loans had built up into huge amounts. The women had lost their livelihood as domestic servants in the city, as they could not travel to work and leave their children. The men continued to work in the harbour, they could still commute. Many were alcoholic and they beat up the women. The women were still cheerful, they wanted to make the best of any kind of opportunity provided. They had so much guts in them.

Vigi worked with the women to make the most of their skills. They set up a batik project, established a revolving fund to avoid paying exorbitant interest rates to money lenders, and started a health education and family-planning project. Seeing the lives of these women made Vigi a feminist:

To see the alcohol, the violence, the dowry, and the debt — a lot of which was for the dowry — to see their misery... There was always idealism in my family. My grandfather worked in Kerala with the

untouchables. I applied that idealism to the situation I saw, a total subordination of women.

Indebtedness was a huge problem: on pay day the women would have to give most of their batik earnings to the money lenders, so they went home with very little. They could never get out of debt because they would always have to borrow again, and money lenders were charging many times the legal rate of interest. Eventually, funds from Swallows, a Swedish agency, enabled them to pay off all the debts and set up their own revolving fund from which women in need could borrow money at no interest and repay it at the end of the month.

There are many other problems facing women in India, especially the poorest women in rural areas with whom Vigi has worked for 30 years. From birth there is discrimination against girl children expressed subtly through socialisation and more overtly through differential feeding and health care. Vigi explains why this happens:

The mother subconsciously gives more food to the boy who is going to remain with her and provide for her in her old age — he often does not, but that is a different issue. The girl child will go away to another family, she is not going to be with her.

In Vigi's opinion, because of increasing consumerism and parallel increasing dowry demands, the status of the girl child has become even lower. Dowry-related deaths seem to be more frequent and young married women whose families cannot fulfil the dowry demands are victimised by their in-laws. Although by law a daughter can now inherit land or other property, in practice a woman rarely inherits land. The dowry is regarded by her brothers as her share of the inheritance; or else she dares not claim her share for fear of alienating her brothers, on whom she will have to rely in the future if widowed or deserted. For the majority of people, of course, there is no land to inherit; and Vigi believes that at the moment it is impossible for women to achieve change in the land-ownership system.

Religion and culture are strong forces in Indian life and, as in most societies, contain elements which are detrimental to women's position. The caste system is a system of perpetual subordination and within each caste women are also subordinated. Hinduism, the religion of 80 per cent of people in India, prohibits widows, even child widows, from remarrying. In a society where marriage is the only acceptable way of life for most women, this has serious implications.

The Government of India's recent adoption of economic liberalisation policies has brought new problems. Prices have gone up, subsidised shops for the poor have been withdrawn, health and family-planning services have been cut, and unemployment has risen. The migration of men in search of employment has placed even more responsibilities on women's shoulders. As Vigi explains, to survive and care for your children:

You need four occupations, you cannot have one. Waged labour is available about 90 days in the year, then you have a craft, an animal (pigeon, ducks, goat), and a few trees.

## *Adithi*

Although the situation for most women is grim, Vigi, and the women she works with, are not disheartened. In 1988, after around 25 years working for foreign non-governmental organisations, like Swallows, Ford Foundation and Oxfam, Vigi and a group of women in Bihar decided to establish their own agency, Adithi. Vigi outlines the advantages of being locally based:

You really know what is happening at the grassroots level because you can stay in villages, you live there, you learn to articulate better and more strongly what are the women's real priorities. We are from the middle-class; let's face it, unless we live there and work with the women day after day, we can never really get an understanding of the forces which are acting on their lives, and what are the flexible, creative, innovative, decentralised strategies which are needed.

Secondly, I think we have to get the grassroots women to articulate their priorities, develop their own strategies and implement them. Hand things over to them. That is very difficult to do from the external donor's perspective.

Adithi's main aim is to 'organise, develop capabilities and train rural women through their own organisations'. After 30 years of working with women Vigi is aware of the successes, however small and local, and aware, too, of the limitations. With support from the Ministry of Education, Adithi set up and ran 200 non-formal centres for girls with 25 girls in each. Most of the girls are between six and fourteen years old, and they all help their mothers and graze goats or buffaloes, so they attend classes for just two hours each day. The response has been tremendous:



Vigi Srinivasan

*Vigi Srinivasan with a women's group. She has worked for over 30 years with grassroots organisations developing strategies for action to improve women's lives.*

The mothers see that this is the only way their daughters will ever get an education. Many of these girl children are married and would not be allowed by the husband to go to school for a whole day. Classes cover some basic literacy and numeracy. Then, depending on the child's occupation, for the tribal children, we talk about the tree and the science related to the tree, then go on to biology; for the goat rearers we talk about goats and go on to science and how to take better care of goats, goat diseases; then her own body, and human diseases. Also some craft skills are taught.

Some girls are able to go back into the formal system, but not those who are married because the schools are co-educational and their families would not allow them to mix with boys.

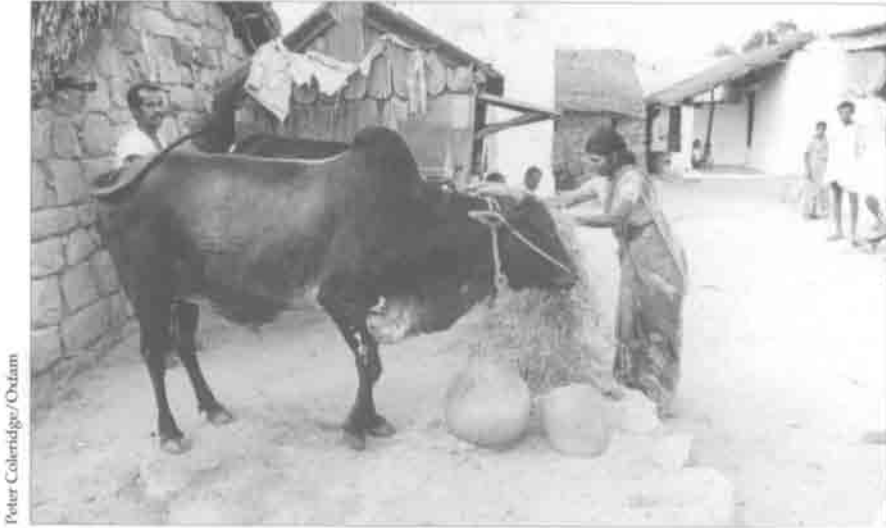
### *A two-pronged strategy*

There are certain things which Vigi regards as impossible to change at present because the women's groups and organisations are not strong enough: the religious and cultural perceptions of women, the land issue, women's day-to-day drudgery. She is convinced that to change things for women a two-pronged strategy is necessary which links up livelihood, employment, and income generation with empowerment. She believes firmly that you cannot just organise the poor because the state, the police, the politicians, and the landowners are powerful and very willing to use violence. Thus her strategy is alternative employment and alternative power structures at the local level achieved through building and strengthening women's groups. It is only in this way, Vigi believes, that women will gradually be able to have their interests taken into account. At present, she thinks, political structures, local and national, are almost irrelevant to the poorest women. As more women, from the Women's Dairy Co-operative and the women's fisheries societies, for example, stand for the local councils, things might gradually change.

Adithi is introducing women to non-traditional skills which are usually reserved for men, such as carpentry, pottery, and weaving. Vigi sees that as one way women can earn a better income. She describes how women's work is normally not regarded as productive because she does not get the money:

The man sits on the wheel and makes the pot, the woman brings the clay from long distances and mixes it with her feet but he has made the pot so he sells it and controls the money. Similarly, the weaver: the woman does all the drudgery, the monotonous pre-processing, the warping, the starching. He sits at the loom, weaves it and in return he gets the money.

Adithi is also working with women who are dairy farming with one or more cows. In India there are over three million women in dairying: they get up early each morning, clean out the cow shed, fetch water and fodder from long distances, wash, feed and milk the cow, yet they are frequently not regarded as productive workers. Vigi explains that when the National Dairy Development Board set up co-operatives they enrolled all the men, whose sole contribution was carrying the can of milk across the road and collecting



*Three million women in India are involved in cattle-rearing and dairying, most having only one or two animals.*

the money! Adithi has been working with the dairying women and the fisheries women to get resources from the relevant ministries. They have had some success: recently, for the first time in Bihar, 200 fishing women were allocated ponds in groups and money to develop them.

Working with government ministries is one of the constant frustrations in Vigi's life. India now has a Department of Woman and Child Development (formerly called Welfare) in the Ministry for Human Resource Development. While the existence of this department is welcome, Vigi is keen to avoid the marginalisation of women: other ministries, such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and fisheries, have much more money and must be persuaded to integrate women into their work. The time it takes to lobby and discuss with government bodies is often a barrier to poor women, as Vigi reports:

The women say, 'come on, rather than lose our wages and go one hundred times, we'll do it ourselves.'

The women's groups are also finding new ways of gaining access to land and indirectly challenging the land-owning system. For example, some groups are leasing land with fish ponds from the government for ten-year terms. They work collectively to clear the pond and build higher embankments to prevent the fish being washed away when the floods come. These women have a longer-term vision than the men who, when they had the ponds, did not invest in improving them. At the end of ten years Vigi expects that the group will be so strong that it will be able to re-rent the land and thus continue to benefit from the investment.

Democratising decision-making, the second part of Adithi's strategy, is a long and slow process. It requires time for a whole group to discuss every aspect, for example, when craft workers are pricing one of their products. It is not easy for women who have had no experience of counting their labour hours or putting a value on them. Although the women do want to take control of their own work and decisions, there is also, according to Vigi, 'a



fear of freedom' which makes them look to others like the Adithi workers to take the lead. Yet progress is being made.

### *Reaction of men*

In general the reaction of the poorest men to the women's groups is positive. According to Vigi, they can see that the women are using the money they earn for their children. Ironically, this can have an unfortunate result, as sometimes men stop contributing to the family as the women begin to earn more. The village functionaries and local government officials often react negatively to the women's groups. On one occasion, the local officials had a case filed against Adithi saying it was not paying the minimum wage of around 25 rupees. This was true: during a training programme in basket making, the women agreed to work for 10 rupees as there was so little money. (The local landowners pay around 3 rupees per day to their workers but no official would dream of making a complaint.)

Vigi says that middle-class men are much more threatened by the fact of women organising and making some demands; they do not like their wives to go out of the house and also they do not want to divide their land and other property between their sons and daughters. A women's group leasing land or fish ponds represents a threat.

Although some things have changed or are slowly changing, in Vigi's experience, the everyday life of women has altered very little, and in some ways it has got worse as poverty has increased. The division of labour within the home is unchanged: women still walk long distances for water and fuel, do all the cooking and cleaning, and care for the children. In every one of the traditional embroideries women make, men are depicted sitting playing cards and drinking while the women are working all around. This makes Vigi angry but when she gets angry the women laugh and say, 'you are different, your husband is different'. She believes things will take a long time to alter because women do not have the same influence over the boy child as in some other cultures. From an early age, the boy goes out with the father while the girl stays with the mother.

But now Vigi at least gets a response when she says there is discrimination against women and argues that the patriarchal system has to be changed; 30 years ago no one listened. Now women's needs, issues, and aspirations are much more visible, and there is a strong women's movement and numerous women's organisations.

Throughout her working life, Vigi has been lucky in having the support of her family, husband and daughter; her husband now works for Adithi too. They all approve of the work she is doing. She admits, with a smile, that her in-laws preferred it when she worked for the Ford Foundation as they regarded it as more prestigious. Vigi has no doubts:

Work has changed my life. I am happy.

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## *Re-defining health*



*MOUNA ODEH*

Mouna Odeh was a five-year-old living with her family in Jerusalem at the start of the 1967 war in which her father and eight-month-old baby brother were killed. Terrified, Mouna ran away, ending up in hospital with an injured foot. Two months later she was reunited with her mother, brother, and two sisters. The psychological impact of that experience remained with Mouna for years to come, part of the collective Palestinian experience of war and displacement.

Mouna's mother was 27 years old when she was widowed. She was a strong woman who brought up her children to be independent and self-confident. There was not much money around; in the early years, she worked as a social worker. She was very keen on education and was determined that all her children would go to university. According to Mouna, education is almost an obsession for Palestinians, it is the only guarantee for the future. Mouna went to a Catholic school and then took a degree in biology in the United States. On her return in 1985 she got a job at the Community Health Unit in the University of Birzeit in the West Bank, where she has worked ever since, except for a period when she studied for a master's degree in the UK.

Mouna's family was unusual. Palestinian society, like many others, is conservative, male-dominated, and quite restrictive for women. There is a deep bias in favour of boy children which is reflected in the behaviour of mothers themselves: boys are weaned later, and are given better and more nutritious food. The result is higher infant and child mortality amongst girls. The main role of young women is seen to be to marry and have children, as Mouna explains:

The rite of passage is to become a wife. This means you have fulfilled a certain role. Soon after marriage come children. Little by little, as women have children, and especially boys, they gain ground at the level of the extended family. Women with no children suffer very badly, but to have only girls is worse. The man can remarry and it is very difficult for the wife to say no.

## *Living under occupation*

To add to the restrictions imposed by cultural attitudes and values, throughout Mouna's lifetime there has been violent conflict between her people and Israel. Historically, Palestine was composed of all the land now forming Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, but the country was formally partitioned and the State of Israel recognised by the United Nations in 1948. There was a mass exodus of Palestinian refugees from the new state. During the 1967 war, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. In December 1987, an uprising of the Palestinian people against the occupation began, known as the Intifada.

It is in this context of military occupation and popular resistance that Mouna carries on her work and everyday life. Israeli soldiers are always on the streets and rooftops. This is Mouna's description:

The main restriction is the possibility of being arrested at any time without explanation, or for being in the wrong place at the wrong time... Checkpoints are an everyday thing for us. Some are fixed, others we call 'flying checkpoints': suddenly, the jeep stops in front of you and there is a checkpoint. You don't even ask why because you are not supposed to. Curfews are another daily occurrence. If, for example, in the morning I am setting off for Ramallah, I don't know whether there is going to be a curfew or not. That often happens. Or I could be visiting a friend's house and there would be a curfew without me realising.

The University where Mouna works has been officially closed since the beginning of the Intifada. But life goes on; teachers continue to teach and



Tordai/Oxfam

*Soldiers and women on the West Bank. The military presence and the Intifada are a fact of daily life which women have to learn to cope with.*

students to study and take examinations, although under impossibly difficult circumstances. Libraries and laboratories are sometimes open and sometimes not. As Mouna says, 'We have adapted'. Schools are also closed for long periods.

### *The Community Health Unit*

The Community Health Unit where Mouna works was set up to look at health in a more rounded way, to include the social, economic, environmental aspects of people's lives, as well as the physical. It wants to depart from the more limited Western medical model. The Unit has specialists in fields such as nutrition, water and sanitation engineering, biology and parasitology, who all work together. It provides a range of services: detailed surveys to determine needs for health planning; publicity for issues not raised by conventional medical professionals; an information centre for students, organisations, and health projects; and popular educational materials.

The Unit is committed to working on primary health care principles. Health problems are addressed firstly at the local community level using local and traditional knowledge and preventive methods where possible — for example, clean water supplies, and a better understanding of nutrition. Health professionals share information and power by ensuring that people are involved in decisions and actions which affect them. Because of its credibility, the Unit is able to act as a catalyst for larger changes in the health-care system.

Mouna has been involved in several projects concerning women, whose health needs are not given high priority either by themselves or by society. Normally women's needs are seen only in terms of child-bearing but even here care is inadequate. Eighty per cent of Palestinians live in rural areas and although it is a small country, some villages are very isolated because of poor roads and transport, and have few medical services.

One study in which Mouna took part looked at mother and child health needs and priorities in a rural area. Infant mortality, women's fertility levels, the height and weight of children were all assessed. The results indicated clearly that rural women's health is directly linked to their social and economic position, and to the religious and cultural beliefs and practices in their communities. This study was part of a feasibility assessment of setting up a model clinic and primary health care programme for the village and surrounding communities. The clinic was set up in 1987.

More recently, Mouna was involved in a major study looking at the lives of women in the old city of Nablus. This area is very poor, with overcrowded, inadequate housing conditions. It is also an area in which the conflict was especially intense during four years of the Intifada. The methodology of the study was designed to empower women as active participants in the research and not treat them as passive subjects. The aim is to work within women's own definition of health, and women of all ages are included in order to get a full view of women's life cycle. Health needs differ relative to age group, marital and social status. The traditional conservative ethos of the old city, and the current political situation, dictate the mobility of women and their access to health services.

Mouna is particularly concerned with those health problems which have increased as a consequence of the Intifida, such as stress, hypertension, and stress-related illnesses. Ordinary women are in no doubt about the impact on their health. Many women suffered miscarriages after being exposed to tear gas, which was used extensively during the Intifada. In addition to the stress resulting from the army's raids on houses, Palestinians also suffer a range of physical injuries received during clashes with soldiers.

### *Disability — heroism v stigma*

Mouna has been able to devote time to an issue which has always been important to her, disability. While studying for her master's degree in the UK, she wrote about the stigma attached to disability, and in particular the contrasting attitudes within Palestinian society: the heroic status and positive image of men injured in the Intifada and the marginalisation of women and men with congenital or accidental disabilities.

I wanted to see how to bridge this gap, to see disabled people as people who face the same barriers, because when this euphoria dwindles the heroes of the Intifada will face exactly the same environmental and attitudinal problems.

Shortly after she returned home she and a sociologist (who also has a disability) carried out a small study of the lives of nine women from different backgrounds and geographical areas. The study was small but its findings are backed up by research from elsewhere. For Mouna, an important part of the study was to allow the women themselves to have a voice, to express in their own words the dual discrimination they face, as women and as people with a disability, and how they survive. The study showed that the attitudes of other members of society varies widely depending on the nature of the disability, and their educational and class background. Marriage was a very sensitive indicator of acceptability in society:

If you are blind the likelihood of being married is much greater than if you have polio, for example. This is part of being a woman and what a woman's body should look like — she should be perfect, that is physically intact. With blindness the body is less damaged, being blind you can still fulfil your roles as mother and wife. Disabled men are more likely to be married, and are also



Peter Coleridge/Oxfam

*Women with disabilities face a dual discrimination, and are less likely to marry; a problem in a country where marriage is the acceptable way of life for women.*

more visible on the street. Only two of the nine women [in the study] were married.

Mouna hopes that this study will begin to raise awareness of the issues of women and disability. It has at least established that women and men with disabilities have views on the matter which should be listened to by health professionals.

### *The Intifada*

The occupation and Intifada have had wide implications for women, some negative and some positive. On the one hand women are regarded as the 'mothers of the martyrs' and are seen as supporters of the struggle, though not active participants. A strong popular image is of a woman breast-feeding her child with the 'milk of nationalism'. In times of uncertainty about national identity, it becomes very important to reinforce traditional cultural values. Such values usually contain very specific views on the role of women in society and the family. This is the case among Palestinians and is illustrated by a decrease in the age at which women are married, which is influenced by several factors, including the widespread closure of schools for long periods, and parents' desire for their daughter's security; marriage is seen to offer security and conformity.

On the other hand the Intifada has enabled much more public participation for women and opened up new roles within the context of supporting the struggle. As Mouna explains:

During the four years of the Intifada every second house has someone in prison, often very young boys of 13 or 14. It is women who appoint a lawyer, who visit the prison, who deal with the authorities. This brings great pressure but also mobility. Now women, who never



Peter Coleridge/Oxfam

*Women's co-operative committee meeting, West Bank.*

before left their community, are travelling from one town to another. This gives women strength.

At the level of the women's movement and women's committees the Intifada also opened new avenues. Recently, there was a day conference on domestic violence, an issue barely mentioned before. The women's movement is making energetic efforts to revise its agenda and to base priorities on consultation, rather than assumptions, about all women's needs and interests.

There is also very important empowerment training taking place designed to give younger women skills and so prepare a new generation of women for leadership who, because of the Intifada, have had quite a different background from that of the current leaders. There are three training centres, which work closely with the Women's Committees but are independent, one in Gaza, one in Nablus and one in Jerusalem, and the responses have been very good. One, for example, gives training in writing and researching with a feminist perspective. Another gives short courses on women's issues. Mouna is very optimistic about this search for new ideas and new leaders.

Mouna knows that the coming of an independent Palestinian state would not automatically remove all difficulties for women. But she is confident that the strategies being followed now by the Women's Committees will ensure that the momentum will be maintained to press for changes and come up with innovative ideas on legislation and practice. This will not be easy. There are many people within the Palestinian political movements who regard women's rights and equality as secondary to the national question.

### *'I don't have a life apart from my work'*

At present it is almost impossible to lead a normal life in the Occupied Territories, yet women and men work, marry, have children, and carry on despite the constraints. Mouna is not married and does not have children. She feels fortunate in having a family which is both understanding and supportive of her work and lifestyle. Mouna's greatest enjoyment and satisfaction is clearly her work; she feels it has enriched her life because through it she has met and got to know so many different people. She is particularly happy about her work on disability.

Mouna sums up what life is like in the Occupied Territories:

The level of tension is amazing but the level of adaptation, the level of steadfastness is amazing also. As much as one is a victim, one is a survivor, too.

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## *Why the Silence?*



*MMATSHILO MOTSEI*

Mmatshilo Motsei spent the first ten years of her life in a close-knit village community outside Pretoria in South Africa. She was unaware of the apartheid system and the different rights possessed by black and white people until her family moved to a black township in Pretoria when she was in her early teens. There she was exposed for the first time to the prejudice of white people. She recalls vividly her first experience of apartheid:

I remember one time I was in town with my Mum. I was tired. A bus stopped. It was full of white people. My Mum said, 'You can't go in there'. I asked 'Why?' She said, 'Because they will not let you.' I remember crying the whole day because I did not understand why I could not get into a bus. So I became aware of people who were more privileged than me.

The eldest of five children, Mmatshilo was brought up to be both sister and brother to her younger siblings and to protect them at school. She says, 'I grew up with the feeling that I was supposed to be a boy.' Her father had a very strong influence on her, telling her that as a woman it was more important to be strong because everyone expects you to be submissive. He would make her climb up on the roof of the house to clean the stove chimney, and get under the car to help him when he repaired it; while in the evening he would take her to jazz concerts and treat her 'like a lady'.

In 1976, when Mmatshilo finished her matriculation there was no career guidance and only two professions were open to young educated black women: teaching and nursing. Half-heartedly, Mmatshilo decided to take up nursing and trained in a black hospital in the eastern part of Transvaal. After three months she wanted to quit but with the support of her family stayed on. She did well in her examinations and enjoyed the sense of fulfilment achieved from helping people but was frustrated by the regimentation of nursing — the starched cap and immaculate dress did not fit easily with Mmatshilo's tomboy up-bringing.

More fundamentally, Mmatshilo felt that the nursing education system was brain-washing the students: they were taught that nursing and politics



did not mix, that a ward full of malnourished children, or over-crowding in black hospitals and empty wards in white hospitals, had nothing to do with politics, that it was unprofessional to question the system. In Mmatshilo's opinion the Nursing Council, the body which regulates the profession, colluded with the apartheid system: black and white nurses train in different colleges and although they sit the same examinations have different pay and working conditions. Most black nurses live in fear of being struck off the roll if they step out of line. Mmatshilo decided early on that as soon as she had the skills, knowledge, and courage she would challenge that system.

Following her training, Mmatshilo worked in a casualty department in a hospital on the outskirts of Pretoria and there came across many women who had been battered by their male partners. At this stage she just treated the injuries and did not see any way of breaking the cycle of violence. Two years later Mmatshilo went back to university for three years to do a nursing degree and was again struck by the strictness of the rules and the lack of participation of the nurses in student politics. After graduating she worked as a clinical tutor in a hospital outside Johannesburg but was totally dissatisfied with what she called 'the monotony of teaching people what to do without questioning it'. She left after six months and became a junior research officer at the Centre for Health Policy. At last, she was in a position which allowed her to think, study, and research. She then became involved in the Project for the Study of Violence and later started work at a clinic in Alexandra Township. The objective of the study was to document the nature and extent of the injuries that women sustain and the weapons used in the assaults and to evaluate the health service response to battered women.

### *A culture of violence*

Violence is part of everyday life in South Africa. There is the structural violence of the apartheid system which still permeates every aspect of life, and the political violence of the anti-apartheid struggle. Women are often victims of political violence; when, for example, as objects of revenge they are raped by men in opposing political groups. Violent crime is also commonplace. Beneath all this, and inextricably related to it, is male violence against women. Mmatshilo explains the links:

Men say apartheid has taken away their masculinity: so someone who during the day at work is a nothing, who has got someone on top of him telling him what to do and abusing him verbally, when he goes home suddenly he is boss. So he exercises his power over his wife and children.

Violence against women is very common in all races and social groups and is regarded by some men as their traditional right; but Mmatshilo has studied her own cultural history and discovered that as early as the 1890s some of the chiefs in Botswana outlawed it. Her own grandfather told her that in his youth it was a punishable offence for a husband to beat his wife. As she says, 'somewhere along the line, men have twisted the tradition to suit them.'

There is a danger that where violence is endemic throughout society, domestic violence will be dismissed as unavoidable or insignificant. Mmatshilo wants to question the whole culture of violence and is determined to ensure that people who are concerned about the violence in the street should also be concerned about 'the torture and terrorisation of women and children in the home'. She is conscious of the irony of progressive black male leaders talking about freedom, equality, and peace on public platforms while at the same time condoning, or at least refusing to address, violence against women.

You ask yourself: is the freedom in post-apartheid South Africa going to have any meaning for women, or is it freedom for men only?

Black women in South Africa have the lowest social standing of all — below white men and women, coloured men and women, and black men. Mmatshilo's research has found that doctors record cases of battered women as common assault. Thus most women who have been beaten by their partner get no special care; their injuries are treated and then they go back home to face the same person. Even when the problem is recognised there are few resources available to help these women. There is the added problem that most of them do not readily admit to being beaten; and many believe it is their own fault, a view which is reinforced by most doctors and nurses.

In South Africa when you have a black eye, you say 'I knocked against the door.' Everyone knows who the door is.

Mmatshilo has ambitious plans to tackle domestic violence. In addition to setting up a refuge to provide short-term shelter to battered women, Mmatshilo wants to tackle the root causes of violence through a training programme to teach community counsellors, doctors, social workers, and nurses how to deal with battered women; and they in turn can run individual and group counselling for women. She also plans to lobby health institutions to develop policy statements and protocols on the treatment of abused women.

She plans to run workshops in a wide range of institutions in the community — in churches, schools, women's clubs, men's organisations, and unions — to find out if women and men see violence as a problem and, 'if yes, why the silence?'; and to discuss what can be done to eradicate it. To ensure that men take part, a male facilitator will run separate workshops. Mmatshilo is convinced that men must be involved in order to begin to question their own behaviour and attitudes. She also wants to launch a strong educational campaign in the community, with posters and leaflets, to make women aware that violence is a violation of their human rights and that they should not accept it.

Mmatshilo knows that to expose and question male violence against women is to challenge the whole social system of attitudes and beliefs which perpetuates women's inequality. This is particularly difficult in South Africa, as she explains:

In a country like South Africa where people have been forced by apartheid to look down upon themselves, liberation means recapturing

our past heritage and finding ourselves. But we need to move beyond that. It does not mean that the African tradition is all perfect ... we should also critically examine the practices that are detrimental to certain groups amongst us, particularly women. We can't have our heritage at the expense of other people's lives and well-being.



John Byrne/Oxfam

*Bethany village women's group. Many women in rural areas in South Africa are involved in development organisations.*

### ***Holding the knife at the sharp edge***

There is a saying in South Africa that a mother can 'hold the knife at the sharp edge', in other words that a woman will always find ways of protecting her children and ignore the risks to herself. It is hard to comprehend how black women in South Africa, who have had such a history of resistance to the apartheid system, should have such low status within their own societies. Throughout this century women have taken the lead in finding ways to counter apartheid's laws and abuses. As recently as March 1992, two trains full of women travelled from Soweto to Johannesburg to make a statement about the government's failure to stop the murderous attacks on black workers going to and from work by train.

Black women are active in many organisations and groups: political organisations, trade unions, human rights groups, and community-based organisations. In the rural areas, where many women are involved in development organisations, a new umbrella organisation has emerged, the Rural Women's Movement, with the aim of linking women from isolated rural areas together for skills sharing and discussions on social and economic problems. Women in the trade union movement have been pushing ahead on such issues as sexual harassment, occupational health,

Matthew Sherrington/Oxfam



*Women's literacy class, Bulamahlo, South Africa. Learning to read and write can open up new opportunities.*

and maternity and paternity leave. In general, women's organisations have been more successful in combating apartheid than in challenging the oppression of women.

Many black women leaders have spoken of the potential power that women have but of which they are unaware. Women's organisations have an important role to play in making women aware of their strength but, in Mmatshilo's view, these organisations must first believe they have power themselves and trust their own ability to bring about changes. She is hopeful that things are changing, that women are beginning to see themselves as separate from their husbands and children,

in the sense of having their own needs and rights. She quotes the words spoken at a rural women's meeting:

'All the time my husband has been expecting me to iron his shirt and press his suit because he has this African National Congress (ANC) meeting to attend; but now I am saying to all of you, when he gets ready, you also get out a dress for yourself and wash and go to the meeting with him or go to your meeting because issues that affect you are also important.'

Mmatshilo is very conscious of the differences between black women of class, education, ethnic group, rural or urban living. She is critical of women who do not use their privileges for the benefit of others. In her opinion, educated women, like herself, are empowered already so should support the empowerment of others. She regrets that sometimes women seem to be no different from men when it comes to wanting status and power. She argues:

We end up being undemocratic, not delegating, taking travelling opportunities for ourselves, for example. But when on international platforms you talk about the empowerment of women, in practice it is over-empowerment of yourself. You bask in glory.

### ***Hopeful for the future***

The responsibility of ensuring that South Africa after apartheid is a better place for all women, but especially black women, rests with the women's organisations. Mmatshilo is optimistic that women's rights will be reflected in the new constitution if the women's movement is constantly vigilant and learns from the failures in other African countries, where after indep-

endence women's rights were postponed indefinitely. Women's organisations are preparing discussion and policy papers on a whole range of issues. Mmatshilo herself is on the Coordinating Committee of a women's health project which is researching and formulating policy in a number of key areas, such as reproductive rights, cancer, occupational safety and violence. These policy proposals are discussed in workshops with women's groups before being presented to the political organisations.

There have been some attempts recently to build a coalition of women's organisations across race and class boundaries. The Women's National Coalition was formed in September 1991 when women from about 40 organisations met at the initiative of the ANC Women's League to discuss equality and the new constitution, and identified some common areas of concern on gender oppression. Such alliances are courageous and far-sighted but the obstacles to working across race barriers are formidable.

### *Retaining her identity*

Mmatshilo is married and has two young children. Her relationship with her husband has not always been easy; she was brought up to be strong and independent and to speak her mind whereas her husband had a different upbringing. The matter of which family name she would use became a symbol of their differences. Unusually, Mmatshilo kept her own family name when she was married but later agreed, at the insistence of her husband and his family, to take their name. She found this very difficult and felt she was losing her identity. After many months of questioning her own attitudes, of wondering whether it was easier to toe the line than try to change things, she decided to reclaim her own name. Gradually her husband came to accept this and their relationship has grown strong and close. She is very happy that she was able to work through these difficulties and to

...come out winning, believing in myself as a separate person rather than a wife and a mother. To come out feeling so good about using my own name in a community where that kind of thing is not allowed. I feel so good about being me.



Sarah Christopher/Oxfam

*Plattenburg Women's Group with their banner.*

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## *A new woman*



*AIDA SEIF EL DAWLA*

Although brought up in the comfortable surroundings of a middle-class family by educated parents, Aida Seif El Dawla was conscious that there were certain things her brothers could do which she could not. She was not allowed to have dancing lessons in school, to go out alone, or to go on trips which meant staying over-night. As she got older she was not allowed to have a boyfriend. Culture in a strongly Muslim country like Egypt lays down that young girls should not mix with the opposite sex. By contrast, Aida's brothers could come and go and mix as they pleased. Aida attended a German school in Cairo because, as she explains, it was fashionable for middle-class parents to send their children to foreign-language schools where education was a much more participatory process than in the more conservative Egyptian schools. She enjoyed school despite the discrimination she and other Egyptian girls experienced at first because they could not speak German.

On finishing school she went to Ain Shams University in Cairo to study medicine. This was not her first choice; she would have preferred to study English literature but she had not studied it at school. It was when working as house officer in the University hospital in her first year after Medical School that Aida came across psychiatry and realised this was an area of medicine that appealed to her. As she says:

It seems to have a lot of things besides medicine in it. Psychiatry is the branch of medicine which promises not to reduce the individual to a system or an organ, a branch that forces the practitioner to consider the social context of the individual and the whole person.

Over the next few years, Aida obtained further qualifications: a master's degree in Neuropsychiatry in 1983 and a Doctorate in Psychiatry in 1989. Now she is a lecturer in Psychiatry at Ain Shams University, sees patients in an out-patient clinic and treats others in the hospital. She is also involved in a number of other activities.

## *The position of women*

Life for most women in Egypt, except for the very rich, consists of work: work at home caring for the family and work outside earning an income in whatever way possible. Everyone's economic situation has deteriorated over the last ten years. This is especially true for those on very low incomes but also for many middle-class people who are public employees, like Aida. She explains:

I was married in 1977 and I earned 13 Egyptian pounds a month because I had good schools and university so you get a bonus. My husband worked as a doctor and his income was 35 pounds. We lived quite well — short of buying clothes or going out extravagantly, we were both smokers, we would afford that, we could afford a cinema once a week. This income can not provide bread and milk for a family of two, now. People do live with official incomes of 50 pounds, but they do all kinds of other things: they sell things, they borrow, they share, they find irregular outlets.

Egypt has a large external debt and in recent years has followed an IMF structural adjustment programme. Aida is concerned about the impact of privatisation on health care: government hospitals, previously free, have now begun to charge prices which are well outside the reach of the majority.

One response to rising unemployment has been a questioning of women's role in the workforce and an emphasis on the importance of their roles in the family. This trend is a consequence of the growth in Muslim fundamentalism, which has gained renewed influence recently. One fundamentalist slogan is 'women go back to your homes'. Aida points out that for the majority of women in Egypt this is simply not feasible. While many women may well wish to devote all their energies to caring for the family, it is an impossibility — their income is essential to the family's survival. The fundamentalist messages about staying at home, wearing the veil, sending your children to religious schools, have had a greater impact on middle-class women.

In 1956 Egyptian women were given the vote, and opportunities in education and employment. In Aida's view the dream of being equal, of being educated, of having paid employment, has failed. The dream held the seeds of



Liba Taylor/Oxfam

*Fundamentalism has gained ground in Egypt.*

disappointment from the outset. Aida points out that the same government that gave women the right to vote and equal pay simultaneously dissolved the Women's Union and prohibited the right to organise. There was no expectation that men would share family caring or domestic roles. There are few creches or nurseries so women with young children have to rely on family or neighbours. Added to this, transport is inadequate and wages low. These factors, when combined with fundamentalist messages, presented middle-class women, at least those who could afford it, with only one choice: to stay at home full-time.

### *The 'New Woman Group'*

In 1984 Aida and a small group of friends, all educated and in full-time employment, began to meet regularly to discuss the position of women. They had known each other since student days and had then believed that women's specific problems did not require a separate struggle: when other inequalities in society were removed then women's position would be automatically improved. The awakening came when these women married

Most of us were married to progressive men and we began to realise that life was not as progressive as we had expected it to be. There is a difference between how progressive men and women feel when they are not married, and how they feel when they are married.

They formed a small study group that lasted for around three years. They met weekly, talked, discussed books, and once a month took turns to give a presentation about the Egyptian and other women's movements. After a while their meetings became public knowledge and people began to question who and what they were. They decided to publish a magazine, 'The New Woman', to share ideas. The response was overwhelming. Many women wanted to have copies and began to ask more questions about the group and its activities. This encouraged the group to clarify its objectives and priorities and open up to allow other women to join. They specified a number of priority areas for action: health issues, adult education, human rights, violence, networking. In early 1991, the group decided to seek official registration as the New Woman's Research and Study Centre. The Centre organises workshops and publishes an annual magazine.

At first, when the group was meeting informally, they often wished they could have more contact with women in poor communities. The problem was that all the group members came from middle-class backgrounds, and had full-time jobs, which left them little spare time to set up a project in a poor area. In retrospect, Aida can now see that the group members were so focused on the need for a newly-created initiative that they failed to make the connections with their own day-to-day work. So, for example, when she was involved in the primary health care centre, Aida says, she never imagined that it would lead her into work specifically with women.

### *Health problems*

The health problems that affect most women are those related to poverty and drudgery and to women's low social and cultural status. Aida's main



area of concern is women's mental health problems, and she has started a psychiatric clinic in the primary health care centre where she works voluntarily. She soon realised that the psychiatric problems of the women were rooted in their low position in their family and community and that conventional psychiatric treatment, while it may help in the short-term, would not address the real causes. She and another doctor attempted to start some counselling work involving other members of the family. This initiative failed partly because family members, especially husbands, would not co-operate. Aida and her colleague also realised that they did not have the training to deal with the wider cultural framework. For the moment they have to be satisfied with treating women on an individual basis.

A major difficulty in addressing women's mental health is the attitude of the medical profession. For the most part women who come with depression or anxiety are prescribed anti-depressant drugs irrespective of whether the causes of the problem are physical, emotional, social, or economic. Psychiatrists in Egypt have no training in counselling and no support services from social workers or social psychologists to do follow-up work. At Aida's clinic, 30 to 40 patients are seen between nine o'clock and one o'clock each day; five to ten minutes per patient allows little time for listening, let alone counselling. The hostile attitude of the medical profession and the wider society to women's mental health needs often results in these problems taking a physical form. When one clinic after another fails to find a physiological cause the women are finally referred to the psychiatric clinic. Aida explains:

This is very understandable. If a poor woman said, I feel down, I feel blue, I cannot do my household work, the reaction would be quite unfriendly. But if this woman suddenly develops an intractable headache or develops a functional paralysis, things change — even if the motive is to keep the housework going. She receives attention, she is brought to a doctor, she is investigated and so on and maybe she can have some rest if it is very severe, or she can have one or two weeks' admission to hospital.

### *The Amireya Primary Health Care Centre*

The centre where Aida works was started in 1987 in a poor district of Cairo by a group of doctors with the aim of providing basic preventative health care at low prices. Some of the doctors, including Aida, work voluntarily. Funded by Oxfam, it provides a range of services to around 600 families, that is 3,000 to 4,000 people. It has a child clinic which caters for the under-fives, an ante-natal clinic run by a woman doctor, a general practitioner clinic, and the psychiatric clinic.

An important aspect of the concept of primary health care is that people take responsibility for their own health. Once or twice a month the Centre holds a discussion on some health issue. The subject is sometimes chosen by the Centre workers but often also by the women who come to the centre; as in other countries, it is women who are responsible for family health care. Usually one of the doctors gives a short talk with slides and then there is an open discussion. Aida explains how initially women were reluctant to voice

an opinion: they regarded the doctors as experts and themselves as passive consumers. However, when it came to issues such as female circumcision, they spoke out.

Another concern of the health centre is to set up a system of health visitors and promoters to visit people in their homes and work with the community on health-related issues. Initially, young women were recruited and trained and everything went well until these young women refused to make home visits on their own. Firstly, they were embarrassed because people would know they were not doctors and would not respect them; and secondly, it was not permissible for young women to go into strange houses alone. So it was decided to recruit older women, who were respected in the neighbourhood and who were used to being consulted on a range of problems. These women were very enthusiastic in preliminary discussions with the centre workers, and a training programme was agreed. Then it emerged that several of the women were illiterate. They said:

We cannot read or write and if you are going to give us health education classes and we are going to discuss this with you, we would want literacy classes first.

As no one in the health centre had any experience of literacy teaching, they sought assistance from Caritas and embarked on a literacy programme which is going very well. This whole process was very enlightening for Aida and the other doctors. As Aida points out:

This was maybe the first time that the community had rescheduled our priorities and put its needs first and demanded their fulfilment.

This event was a turning point for Aida and strengthened the links between her discussions in the New Woman Group and her work in the community.

### ***No tradition of organising***

A big problem facing all progressive women and men in Egypt is that there is no tradition of organising. It is very difficult for voluntary organisations to get official approval and, once registered, their activities are subject to regular monitoring. The result is that most women have no experience of participating in campaigning and pressure group activity; men, on the other hand, are more likely to be involved in party politics. Another barrier is that it is only recently that small organisations in Egypt began to receive funding from non-governmental organisations in Europe and the United States; and there is still a lot of suspicion about foreign funding.

One of the biggest frustrations in Aida's life, which she says is shared by many people in Egypt, is the restriction on freedom of speech when it comes to matters related to politics or religion:

When something happens in my country and you so much want to express your view concerning it, no matter how trivial or how big — it can range from some comment written on some woman's issue in a magazine or to your stand on the Gulf War — you discover you are living in a country where you do not have access to any means of expression at all.

## ***Gaining confidence***

In this context it is a sign of hope that women in the Amireya Primary Health Care Centre are beginning to question the social and economic influences on health and that the *New Woman* magazine is flourishing. Aida identifies a number of interlinked factors which she sees as fostering women's empowerment: adult education and literacy, organising, and economic independence. Aida particularly stresses education and literacy, by which she does not mean only learning to read and write, but

...knowing how to go about things, how to gain self-confidence, to be able to express yourself even if everyone else tells you that you have nothing to say, to break this vicious circle of lack of confidence, inferiority and not being heard — so long as you are not being heard, why talk in the first place?

Women need the opportunity to discuss problems and solutions in groups or organisations 'when they think together they can get somewhere'. Of course, without money, as Aida says, this whole process is severely hampered.

Events in Aida's private life have shaped her perspectives and priorities. The consciousness of restrictions on her mobility as a young girl and the male-dominated hierarchy of the University Medical School spurred her interest in women's issues. The failure of her first marriage added a new consciousness of gender relations. Her parents gave in to her persistence and accepted her divorce, although they were unhappy about it. She returned to live with them. Many years later Aida married again to someone who shares her priorities and concerns. They have a young son, Hossam.



*Liba Taylor/Oxfam*

*Assembling television sets in an Egyptian factory. Economic independence fosters women's empowerment.*

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## *Organising rural women*



*VANETE ALMEIDA*

At the age of two Vanete Almeida was sent to live with her grandmother because her older sister was very ill. This experience was to shape the whole of her life. Her grandmother lived amongst ordinary working people in the poorer end of a town in the Sertao, a semi-arid region in north-east Brazil. After some years Vanete's parents wanted to take her back to their comfortable home in a nicer part of town but her grandmother would not allow it.

Leonor Almeida, Vanete's grandmother, was a strong, courageous woman who brought her up with tenderness, gave her time to play and study and taught her (and her boy cousin who lived nearby) how to do traditional crochet. (Vanete says that there was only one difference in her up-bringing compared to that of her cousin: she was taught to sit properly with her legs together.) Vanete left school when she was 12 but she had already started to earn an income from her embroidery to help support herself. This was a happy period of her life, she loved the colours and the visual nature of this work and liked having her own money. She also did voluntary work helping older people who were living in poverty. After her grandmother's death, Vanete moved to the unfamiliar environment of her mother's house — her father had died when she was nine. She hardly knew her mother or her brothers who had been brought up in a conventional middle-class way.

When she was 18, Vanete decided she wanted to find out more about the lives of people in the rural areas. She was struck immediately by the injustice and oppression, and the poverty made worse by drought, a constant problem in that part of Brazil.

I realised how hard the peasants worked and how much food they were able to produce and yet how excruciatingly poor they were. What struck me most was the way the peasants lost their harvest. They were so poor and malnourished. They worked four or five months to produce a crop and suddenly when the crop was ready the cattle of the rich landowner were driven in to eat the crop.

Angered by what she saw, this experience gave her the courage and energy to devote her life to the struggle of the peasants, which she has done for more than 20 years.

### *The struggle for land*

Land is the major issue for everyone living in the rural areas of Brazil. At one end of the spectrum are the large landowners who own or control most of the land. At the other end, are peasants: some lease land and a good deal of what they produce goes to the landowner; others work as agricultural labourers in return for cash or use of a small plot of land; some own a small amount of land and farm independently. In desperation groups of peasants sometimes 'invade' an area of land, fence it, and farm it until they are expelled, usually by force. Vanete explains that the situation for the majority of peasants has got worse in the last 10 to 15 years, due mainly to government policies which favour large-scale modern farming and provide little assistance to the peasants. Vanete tells us:

When you talk to a peasant family, they will tell you, 'ten years ago we had ten strips of land, now we have only two. Ten years ago ten people would be working the land, now there are only two.'

The rest of the children have to move to urban areas: the boys look for casual work while the girls work as domestics, or if everything else fails, as prostitutes.

### *A culture of slavery*

Life in the rural areas is hard for everyone but doubly hard for women. 'Boys are brought up with incredible freedom' but girls and women are expected to serve and obey their father, brothers, husband, and all other men in the family. According to Vanete, a woman is like a slave, whereas a man is socialised from infancy to regard himself as superior to every woman:

His attitude is that he is made of a very special, expensive and valuable material. He has a very superior attitude towards women and would make you think he is doing you a favour by falling in love with you, taking you out or even marrying you.

What makes this situation worse, Vanete continues, is that women are 'prisoners in their own body', a woman's body belongs to her children, her work, and her husband. Most women have little or no understanding of how their body functions.

Although women are active in every aspect of agriculture, their work is regarded as family labour and not valued as 'real work'. It is usually the men who sell the produce and gets the money:

The woman never sees the money, never sees the economic value of her work.

Women labourers who do at least as much work as a man get lower wages. Even so, it is difficult for women to find work: the law in Brazil allows 120



*Women agricultural workers, Brazil.*

days maternity leave which most landowners avoid by not employing women in the first place.

When women start to talk about their own problems, when they start to compare how much they earn and how hard they work, it generates an enormous anger inside to realise they do as much work as men and yet their salary is much lower.

### ***Working with the FETAPE***

After many years of working on a voluntary basis with the peasants, Vanete went to work with the Federation of Agricultural Workers of Pernambuco (FETAPE) whose members are peasants, share-croppers, and labourers. She had no experience or knowledge of trade unions so her first task was to learn how they operated, and who had the power. She quickly realised that the only role women played in the organisation was to make coffee and food — to talk to women at a trade union meeting you had to go to the kitchen. Vanete spent two years trying to talk to women, trying to arrange small meetings, but it was a hard and thankless task as the women had no experience of organising in this way. She recalls one occasion when she managed to get three women together to talk and had eight men watching and listening. Vanete also talked to the men to persuade them of the importance of women's participation in the trade union movement.

A turning point came during the severe drought years of 1983 to 1985. The Brazilian government started a drought-relief programme of road-building, but only for men. The women were ready to work, so some male trade union leaders sent a document to the government protesting at their exclusion. The women met and discussed how they could become involved in the relief programme. The government wanted them to prepare food for the workers, but they refused; they wanted to work on the building project, like the men. The union used radio programmes to inform women in other areas so they,

too, could ask their trade union leaders to take the matter up. Although there was some resistance within the Federation to working specifically with women, many local trade union leaders did give their support.

A big step forward came in May 1985, when there was a national congress of workers in the capital, Brasilia. Women trade unionists prepared a policy statement asking for recognition of women's full participation in the union, which they presented to the FETAPE leaders, who said it was too late to put the statement on the congress agenda. With the help of Oxfam, the women produced 5,000 copies of their statement, and 130 women set off to the congress. Vanete describes the excitement of the occasion:

When we arrived ... we rushed around madly, putting 5,000 copies of this statement in the hands of 5,000 delegates. One of the woman trade union leaders agreed to defend the statement. It was discussed in one of the most important committees, the Committee on Trade Unionism, and it was accepted in its entirety.

'A new theme at a new moment' is how Vanete accounts for this major success. Some of the men present saw women's participation as a force to strengthen the movement.

### *Developing a methodology*

Gradually, Vanete developed a way of working with rural peasant women who, because of age-old oppression, found it almost impossible to talk openly. It was important to base any new learning or understanding on the daily lives of the women, and to respect their experiences.

The concern was to get women to speak, to be aware of themselves, to build up an awareness of who they were, of their strength and to gain knowledge of the women's struggle and about the position of women in trade unionism. We used to organise small meetings where we would ask the women just to introduce themselves, to say who they were, how many children they had, where they worked, what they did, where they lived. We had to take it very slowly to make sure we were going at the pace the women could cope with.



*Domestic workers' union meeting. 'We have the same rights as other workers, and must be respected as professionals. Don't be exploited,' says the poster.*

In order to have some control over one's own life, in Vanete's view, it is crucial that each woman learns about her body, how it functions, what brings her pleasure, what makes her sad.

What really comes out in these workshops is women's fears and anxiety, because they know it is a workshop on the body and they do not know what is going to happen.

Gradually, through talking and sharing information, the women become aware of their situation and began to be able to analyse the reasons for their poverty, landlessness, and their low status in relation to men. This ability to analyse and question is the first step towards identifying ways of changing things, 'to find new ways of seeing things, new ways of living'.

This transformation is very profound but it can also be very painful, because a woman's greater understanding of her own life, and her desire to regain control over her body, can cause conflict with her partner. In some cases, relationships have broken up because the woman would no longer accept domination or violence. In these situations the women rely on each other for support.

### *The Rural Women's Movement*

An important and exciting development has been the forming of an autonomous Rural Women's Movement in the Pernambuco region. The movement has three tiers: community groups, municipal groups and a regional committee. At the community level women come together to discuss their situation as women, mothers, and workers and usually do some productive work together, such as making soap or growing vegetables. Many rural women are involved in both the groups and the trade unions. One complements the other, especially as the Rural Women's Movement aims to build up women's capacity to participate, so that more women can take on official responsibilities. Links have been established with similar movements in the north-east of Brazil and with the Latin American feminist movement.

### *A lonely struggle*

Vanete's work within the trade union movement has never been easy. In the early days, she had little support and the involvement of women was regarded as a matter for jokes and insults. She was constantly having to balance her commitment to building a space for women within the trade unions with the need to avoid conflict with the movement as a whole.

At home, as a single woman with two adopted children, a girl and a boy, Vanete also had her struggles. She has aimed always for coherence between her personal and political life:

As my children were growing up, I tried to have a system at home that was based on justice and not *machismo*, and I had a lot of trouble with my son over that. It is very difficult to live with any coherence within a society which is based on consumerism, full of prejudice, and with many stereotypes about women, poor people and so on.



Vanete's family is very hostile to her work. Her mother, in particular, is bitterly unhappy about what Vanete is doing; she wants her to get a good job like her sisters and stop questioning everything and involving herself in so much conflict. Although Vanete is saddened by this hostility, she is strengthened by her hopes for the future. She thinks that one day Brazil can be a fairer country:

It is a wonderful country with plenty of resources. There is no reason why everyone could not have a good life.

Vanete has always worked to try to make peasants aware that they have the power to change their lives and to change Brazil so that the country's wealth is more equally distributed. She believes that individuals must learn how to exercise power and assume responsibility. She admits that this process will take a long time, because the immediate struggle for most Brazilians is to survive, to have enough food. The next struggle is to end illiteracy. 'Then', as Vanete says, 'comes a sharing of political power.'



Jenny Matthews/Oxfam

*Planning the next year's activities, at a meeting for women trade unionists.*

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## *Banking on feminism*



*GIGI FRANCISCO*

Josefa Gigi Francisco, known as Gigi, attributes her awakening to feminism to what she calls two stigmas in her life. Firstly, she was illegitimate, the eldest of four children which her mother had with a very wealthy married man. Secondly, she was a separated woman: she had married at 21 and had two children before her marriage broke up. An additional disgrace was that she had left her two young children in the care of her husband and his mother because she had no money and no family to support her and 'wanted to put some sense into her life'. In the 1950s and 1960s in a Catholic country like the Philippines, middle-class morality regarded illegitimacy and separation as socially unacceptable. The struggle with these issues brought Gigi to understand what it meant to be a woman.

Gigi and her sister and brothers lived the life of upper-middle-class children; they had a good education including piano lessons, ballet, and elocution. Although her mother had not finished school she was determined that her children should all go to college. When her mother died in a car crash, Gigi, at 13, became head of a household, the youngest of whom was six. The freedom from direct parental intervention allowed her to become a student activist in the late 1960s, campaigning against the Vietnam War and neo-colonialism. This was the beginning of her involvement in national political movements.

The organising of students spread around the schools like wild fire. I was in an exclusive girls school and we had the distinction of being the first chapter of the most militant student group in a girls school. I am very proud of this.

Gigi describes her role in politics as one of a supporter and a follower, not a leader. In her opinion, the fact that she came from a privileged class background, together with her family responsibilities for her younger siblings, meant she could not be a leader.

In 1980, Gigi started work at De La Salle College and began to take an interest in women and development issues. At the same time she was becoming aware that there was a women's movement distinct from the

nationalist movement. She quickly became involved in women's politics and in 1985 joined a small feminist group. She began to focus on the problems facing the poorest communities in the rural and urban areas.

### ***Poverty and militarisation***

Poverty dominates the lives of the majority of people in the Philippines. In the rural areas, where most people live, 80 per cent of the land is owned by 20 per cent of the people. Most rural women and men earn a meagre income working as agricultural labourers on large *haciendas* growing sugar, rice, tobacco, bananas, or pineapples for export. Employment is very dependent on world commodity prices; for example, when the price of sugar fell, workers and their families in Negros faced starvation. It is estimated that the minimum subsistence income for a family of six is around 3,500 pesos per month; most workers only earn around 1,500 per month.

Added to poverty is another problem. Since the early days of Marcos's regime in the 1970s, but more especially since the mid-1980s, many areas of the Philippines have been totally militarised. On a day-to-day basis this means that there are widespread military operations aimed at controlling the activities of movements opposing the government, such as the New People's Army. Villages are taken over by the military and frequently local women are forced to become the temporary mistresses and servants of the soldiers. Blockades are also a routine occurrence on the roads in rural areas. Gigi explained:

Civilians who are bringing in food are being stopped and the food is confiscated; if the military says your size of family would consume 10 kilos of rice, anything more will be withheld at the checkpoint. Mercy missions carrying medical supplies that we have sent from Manila have also been stopped.

The army does not admit that these blockades take place and argue that they are looking for guns and ammunition. The Philippines now has a large number of internal refugees who have been forced to leave their homes and villages because of aerial bombardment and arson. The army's view is that the villagers are members or supporters of the New People's Army. Human rights abuses are



Oxfam

*This refugee family in the Philippines have been driven from their home by military activity.*

commonplace. To add to the terror, the rural areas of the Philippines have become fertile ground for a plethora of counter-insurgency vigilante groups which have recently been legitimised and integrated into the military machine. They monitor all local activities, threaten and 'disappear' anyone considered to be harbouring anti-government feelings. In recent years human rights organisations have begun to expand their activities in response to the needs of people living in the countryside. They are trying now to set up centres within villages where people can stay while they rebuild their lives.

In 1990 and 1991 a number of environmental calamities devastated large areas in rural Philippines: a volcanic eruption, an earthquake, and flash floods. In one coastal area alone, over 2,000 people were killed. Many thousands of people were forced to leave their homes.

In recent years more and more women and men have left the countryside and moved to the towns and cities in search of employment. Once there, they have swelled the ranks of the urban poor in the squatter areas in each town and city.

The Philippines has the fifth largest foreign debt in the world. The resulting economic crisis, coupled with the global recession, have resulted in high unemployment in all sectors of the economy. Unemployment is particularly high among men and so the responsibility of raising an income has fallen to women.

In order to earn more dollars to service the debt, the Philippines government has devised a plan to promote three major industries, each of which is dependent on women: export of labour, which since 1987 has been dominated by domestic workers; tourism, which, according to Gigi, is really legitimised prostitution; and micro-electronic and textile manufacturing, both of which employ mainly young women. Abuses of women's rights are inherent in each of these industries. Officially, prostitution does not exist, but it is widely acknowledged that the hospitality girls working in the licensed tourist bars engage in prostitution.

### ***The Women's Resource and Research Center***

It was in this context that in 1987, Gigi and four other women active in the area of women's studies founded the Women's Resource and Research Center (WRRC).

From the beginning WRRC was seen as a support organisation to the popular movements in the Philippines, particularly to the organised poor in the urban areas, the rural workers, and the trade unions. The founders wanted to share the skills and information they had acquired as middle-class educated women. Because WRRC is based in Metro Manila much of its work is with urban organisations. The support available includes information and research, skills training, sharing resources, contacts for funding, and communicating grassroots issues to researchers on women's issues or development policy. WRRC also carries out feminist research on poverty, debt crisis, and human rights, and is active in a wide range of women's networks and coalitions.

## ***Working with 'non-women's' organisations***

A central part of WRRC's work is offering training and support to women who are already organised but maybe isolated within the mixed popular movements, such as fishing community groups or trade unions. WRRC does not set out to organise women but to build a relationship, usually over two years, with each organisation during which time they provide training to the women members.

Our centre is known as a centre for popular education and research. We try to reach out to the women who are organised in popular organisations in order to generate a feminist consciousness and to raise issues of women in relation to class and national consciousness among key women, and support their rise in the organisational leadership of those organisations.

An interesting feature of the WRRC is that although it is a women's organisation it has chosen to work enthusiastically with what they call 'non-women's' or mixed organisations. Building close links between organisations such as trade unions or peasant federations and the political women's movement is seen as an important part of the process of achieving long-term change. In Gigi's words:

We are banking on feminist women leaders within the people's movements to make the difference... The way I see national transformation taking place is when there are dynamic changes happening on all fronts.

WRRC is very conscious of the dilemma that women face: on the one



Belinda Coote/Oxfam

*Striking sugar workers in Negros demand improved conditions and equal pay for men and women.*

hand, women have different ways of working together but in order for their needs to be addressed have to work through male-oriented structures. WRRC's belief is that once women are empowered through feminist consciousness and are an organised force, they will be able to transform these structures.

They see their work as complementary to the activities of other women's organisations who have chosen to work exclusively with women. Gigi believes that all these efforts have had some success. Feminism is no longer regarded as a non-issue, as being divisive or secondary. There are now more women leaders in non-women federations who are very active in raising women's issues. Of course, this does not mean they are listened to all the time. Gigi regards feminism as 'a very radical, totally transforming, deconstructing spirit' which 'will invigorate the people's movements'.

Gigi stresses that women in the popular movements need a lot of support and realises that the fact that 'there is space for discussion now' does not mean that policies are changing. She knows also that while the increase in the numbers of women's projects within popular organisations is good, one has to be cautious in assessing them, as some may be merely token programmes. She is also aware of the limitations of WRRC's role as a service organisation, and therefore outside the popular organisations. She gives the following example:

WRRC did a gender assessment of the alternative people's agenda that is being proposed by the major fishing community organisations. We identified shortcomings from a gender perspective. For example, the view that the productive people are the men who catch the fish, and that the women and the children are the dependents. So we pointed out that the production process is from catching to processing to marketing and if you look at processing and marketing these are mostly done by women, so they are also a productive element. Now how far it will go we do not know, it will depend really on the push from within the sector which is outside of our mandate; we can only support. We have to plant the seed and put water on the seed for about two years and see where it takes us. That is the best chance we have to make things more gender fair.

### ***Beyond politics***

The popular movements, such as the woman's movement, trade unions, peasant federations, fishing community organisations, and human rights groups play an important role in the Philippines and many of their members are very politically aware. In Gigi's view, the formal political system is failing to bring about any real change for the benefit of the majority, so people are turning instead to the popular movements to find a space in which to discuss their problems. They want their voices and concerns to be heard. Opinion polls report that the credibility of government in the eyes of the people has dropped dramatically.

People in the rural areas have reached the point of crying out, of telling the world what is happening, or else they will be annihilated. If

you ask an ordinary Filipino urban or rural poor person 'what do you think life will be like tomorrow, the same, better or worse?' Many of them say, 'it will be worse.' No one is saying it will be better.

When daily survival is such a full-time struggle in itself, it is hard to see how women and men find time to organise and work for change. Furthermore, support organisations are constantly faced with the question of what their priority should be: offering support to set up more immediate alternative employment schemes, or working for longer-term changes in attitude? Poverty and hunger are real needs that have to be addressed yet short-term measures do not tackle the root causes of poverty. Gigi stresses that:

We must realise that a large percentage of the poor have reached a certain level of political maturity and analysis. They have been asking for food for a long time and food has been coming in terms of donations but the next day when there is a crisis they are left with nothing. So they have reached a point where they have to advocate political changes.

One concrete demonstration of this is an 'alternative people's agenda' which argues the need for genuine land reform, selective repudiation of the external debts, protection for migrant workers, and a reassessment of the labour export policy.



Nancy Durrell McKenna/Oxfam

*Health care worker talking to a women's community group in an urban area, Philippines.*

### ***Impact on her own life***

To be a radical activist and a feminist in the Philippines, as in any other country, is to be engaged in a long and arduous struggle which knows no

boundaries. Feminism is not a nine-to-five commitment. It involves challenging and changing every aspect of life, at work, in the community, in popular movements, and at home. Gigi is not alone in making this commitment and like others has been willing to pay a high price for high ideals. In 1985 she was dismissed from her teaching post and diverted into full-time research because she supported a student strike over tuition fees. She left after a short time and went to work at Maryknoll College where she had previously been a student.

In her personal life, she has worked hard for a relationship based on equality and honesty with her second husband. Her biggest frustration is 'having to struggle it out with the male' but it is a struggle to which she is committed. She now lives with her husband and four of her five children. Gigi would like to be remembered as a teacher and a mother. Being a feminist mother is not always an easy role as can be seen in the mixed reactions of her oldest daughter:

On the one hand she is quite happy to have a mother who is not like other mothers, but on the other hand, she sometimes tells me that I am too much, that my demands on her step-father are not the normal demands of a woman. We argue; she says 'you want me to have my own mind, I am having my own mind now and now you are being authoritarian.'

Gigi's relationship with her father has never been easy but they are in touch and meet periodically. Now that he is elderly and living alone she is trying to make time to take care of him. She says he is more puzzled by than proud of her. Her sister and brothers have fulfilled their mother's wish of moving to a better life in the United States. Gigi has chosen a different way:

I do my work because I am happy about it and it gives me a personal affirmation, and that would also be my wish for my children — that they would do things that affirm them as well as give them peace. It is ironical that a very active and conflict-laden public and personal life would give you peace ... but there is an inner peace in me. I am doing what I should be doing.



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## *Education for organising*



*CAROLA CARBAJAL RIOS*

The year 1968 was a turning point in the life of Carola Carbajal Rios. She arrived in France to study languages one month before a general strike started which raised many questions about the world's economic, social and political situation. A few months later there was a massacre of students back home in Mexico, which put her country into the news. For her it was a rare opportunity to think about the events in Mexico from a distance and discuss them with other Latin American and European students. She began to see Mexico in a new light:

It was good to see Mexico from afar. While you are there everything seems natural, the way it is. Then you start questioning, you say, 'No this is not the way things have to be.' I decided to change all my goals.

She returned home clear in her decision that she would give up being a bilingual secretary and work to support the struggles of low-income groups in the cities and rural areas. Carola's happy childhood in a close-knit family had instilled in her the principles of discipline, work, justice, and respect for all human beings which prepared her well for her new life.

In Mexico the late 1960s saw the emergence of popular social movements, among them the Mexican women's movement, as people looked for new ways to voice their opinions outside the formal political parties. Carola found a way of expressing her commitment by working as a popular educator in the rural areas of Mexico. (Popular education is informal education which aims to provide women and men with the tools and information to analyse the forces which are oppressing and exploiting them so that they can begin to get together to improve their situation.)

After eight years working with mixed organisations in the rural areas, Carola joined a women's organisation called CIDHAL (Communication, Exchange and Human Development in Latin America), which was founded in 1969 and is now one of the oldest of such organisations in the region. She has worked in CIDHAL for the past 15 years.

Our goal is to contribute to women's revaluation and transformation

of their lives, both in the personal-private intimate sphere as well as in the public-political one.

CIDHAL fulfils this goal in three main ways. It carries out popular feminist education with groups of women in the poorest urban and rural areas and runs intensive workshops on gender issues. It has a documentation centre on development, health, employment and other issues; and it runs an alternative health service for women.

Carola has been involved in popular education with groups of women in the rural areas of Morelos State for many years; she is also a member of the Co-ordinating Group of CIDHAL. The groups she works with are made up of women who come together through their local church, through the peasant federations or other organisations, or to make handicrafts or other products. As word spreads from group to group, CIDHAL is invited to assist them in their work. CIDHAL sees its role as accompanying the group in its educational process and thus starts its involvement with whatever the group is interested in — nutrition, health, or earning an income. CIDHAL workers help the group to look at their situation, their workload, their skills, the problems facing their family and themselves, and then to decide what action they will take.

CIDHAL believes that you have to do practical things side by side with analysis. So, for example, a group would learn first-aid skills or nutrition alongside discussing and analysing wider issues and problems. As Carola says:

The practical things are very important because women have always been devalued and small practical things help ... In that way they feel they have something to show their family and that makes them feel better.



Carola Rios

*CIDHAL committee meeting. (Carola is third from left.)*

## *From knowledge to action*

Learning practical skills can take the women forward in their understanding of wider social and economic issues and lead them to challenge some of the inequalities they face. An interesting example is of one group which, having learnt more about nutrition, decided to grow food that was too expensive to buy. This quickly brought them face-to-face not only with the unjust system of land ownership but also with the hostility of the local male-dominated peasant groups. They had decided to ask the local government for land because at that time, although only widows could have land transferred to their name, Mexican law permitted a group of women to lease a piece of land together. The local men did not like the idea of the women applying for land, and certainly did not want the women in their peasant groups. However, the women persevered and, after a struggle, got the land by taking their applications direct to the regional officials. As landholders, the women were now eligible to go to the local meetings, and so the second battle started. The meetings of the local peasant groups are arranged at times which only suit the men, and most women, even widows, do not usually attend. Undaunted, the women decided they had to be there to give their opinions, regardless of the opposition to their presence.

Throughout this long struggle CIDHAL was able to assist the women to analyse the resistance they were facing, discuss strategies, and decide how best to achieve what they wanted. It was a continuous process of talking, analysing, taking action, analysing again — a good example of how CIDHAL supports the efforts of local women.

## *Gender relations and personal rights*

Generally speaking, women in Mexico are not considered equal to men. In practice, of course, the relations between women and men vary widely depending on their cultural and ethnic background and their social and economic situation. Where women are more active in farming or in trading they get more recognition and respect from their men. By contrast, where peasants are slightly better-off, and women participate less in agricultural work, they tend to be regarded more as housewives.

Analysis of gender, class and racial differences is fundamental to CIDHAL's way of working. Through practical skills training and discussions, women in the local groups begin to analyse relations between women and men, between different social groups such as small peasants and large land-owners, and between different racial groups within their society. Mexico has a large indigenous Indian population who experience great discrimination. Women discuss the inequalities in decision-making powers, in access to resources such as land, education and health care, and look for possible ways to bring about change.

In Mexico young girls are educated from early childhood to be good wives and mothers. Speaking from the experience of her own work with local groups in the rural areas, Carola explains that it is much easier for women to organise for the family's benefit than for their own personal rights.



*Carola (sitting at a table at the back) acting as study-group secretary in a workshop for rural women.*

Women will organise very fast for what will benefit the family in general, whether economically, for example, through setting up cooperatives, organising services or negotiating with the government about water supplies. But for their own problems, for their own personal rights, it is very hard for them to organise.

That is not to say that women are not interested in their own health and sexuality or in issues like contraception, abortion or violence. It is just that it takes longer for them to build up sufficient confidence to press for their own rights.

All forms of contraception are available free from drug stores or health centres but women have very little information. Carola explains that while access to birth control has changed women's lives it has not necessarily made women freer. So the local groups, with Carola's support and input, discuss family planning and the advantages and disadvantages of each contraceptive method, to enable women to choose the safest and most appropriate means for them and take some control over their own lives and bodies. Carola is very conscious that each woman has to change at her own pace. Sometimes a woman may reach a certain point in her consciousness and say, 'I am not interested, I am scared of going on, I will stay at home', while other women may want to go on much more quickly. It is always hard to get this balance right but it is essential to try.

### *Negotiating a place*

The response of the local men to the women's groups tends to depend on which issues the women are addressing. Sometimes men are supportive because they can see the benefit to the family; but when their own position

is under scrutiny they become defensive. Then negotiations have to take place, because without at least the tacit permission of the local men the functioning of the women's group becomes very difficult. If CIDHAL and the group explain what they are doing and why, this is usually sufficient to calm the men's fears and allow the work to carry on. As the women gain in confidence the negotiations are less about appeasing the men and more about satisfying the women's priorities.

Negotiations are not always possible or successful and change can be painful. As women gain fuller understanding of the attitudes and traditions that are limiting their independence they inevitably pose a threat to the existing order within their relationships at home. Sometimes the outcome is separation or divorce. In Carola's own case, she and her husband separated. She explains the reasons:

It was very hard for him to accept that I also had important things to do, that I could have success in my work, and have other loyalties. For me it was good that he accomplished things he liked to do, but my accomplishments were insults for him.

### *Living in harsh economic times*

The day-to-day circumstances of women are closely connected with the larger economic questions that dominate Mexico. Since the 1980s the Mexican people have been staggering under the burden of repaying the loans borrowed in the previous decade. As in other countries the government has embarked on a rigorous programme of economic adjustment which has severely affected the lowest income groups. The new Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Mexico, the US, and Canada allows a free flow of manufactured goods and investment between the three countries and is likely to favour the better-off. Before the agreement was made, the laws pertaining to land leased by peasants were changed to allow private ownership — a necessary step to permit foreign investors and national private investors to buy land. The quantity of imported goods is increasing, at prices lower than local small-scale manufacturers or co-operatives can produce. Although Carola admits that it is too soon to understand fully all the implications, people in Mexico are already feeling the impact of the agreement:

In rural areas where there are still optimum conditions and where ecological deterioration is not as visible, foreign capital, especially North American, is beginning to be introduced, converting our farmers and peasants into labourers. Nor is the outlook for workers promising: the FTA is going to have unfavourable repercussions in the reduction of workers' rights, particularly seniority and social benefits. In the place of collective contracts between the workers and industry, there will be productivity agreements that no longer have the welfare of the workers as a priority.

CIDHAL and other organisations working in the rural areas reacted against the land-reform law because they knew that the small collective women's organisations would not be able to survive. National meetings of

rural women are being held and it is hoped that a national organisation will emerge which will be able to express women's views. CIDHAL and other organisations are also trying to link up with women's organisations in Canada who have had some years' experience of the free-trade agreement between the US and Canada.

### *New possibilities?*

Times of economic change and turmoil bring added hardships to everyone but especially to women. Male unemployment and migration, deteriorating public services and support systems, all make it more difficult for women to survive and to fulfil their family responsibilities. Yet difficult times can also give women opportunities to break out of their traditional roles. Increased economic activity, essential to survival, is making women less isolated. For example, thousands of young women migrate to the US border areas to work as agricultural labourers or factory workers:

The women broke with everything: they are single mothers, just making a living. They are all women together, like another kind of family, lots of women living together, helping each other with their children, going to work. These women are having a very confused identity right now. They are changing everything.

Carola admits that it is not clear where this will lead but she is hopeful that positive changes for women could be salvaged if women are given the encouragement and support they need to organise.

Maybe we can see how that can be a way of organising among ourselves and find ways of proposing new roles for women and men. Many things can happen, many situations can come out of that. If we don't organise around those things, the benefits go to the big employers. Furthermore, women who break with their traditional roles educate their children differently, and thus create another possibility for change in the future.

The dire economic situation has resulted in CIDHAL reassessing its role and priorities. To date the emphasis has been on education and organisation, organising for change rather than organising to generate income, and CIDHAL has been critical of conventional income-generation projects in which women spend long hours for very little return. Yet CIDHAL knows that women have to survive and so it is now searching for ways of generating income that will not be harmful for women. However, the orientation towards education will not be dropped:

We think it is important that we do not stop our education and organising work but that we have a slower pace and give time to reflect what is going on and analyse it with the women themselves.

### *Ending the isolation*

Carola is convinced that only through organising locally and nationally can women make their voices heard on the large economic and political issues

and obtain genuine equal rights; Mexico's laws, which give women equality with men, are rarely implemented or respected.

Our isolated little works will not change anything unless we get linked and organised and force things to happen.

CIDHAL is not working in isolation; it works in alliance with other women's organisations and with other movements, and with networks concerned with issues such as the FTA or health. The feminist movement works to have a strong voice in the whole social movement. Carola admits that it is hard work building alliances and constantly ensuring the feminist voice is heard:

The groups and organisations listen and understand and try to include our demands in whatever negotiations are going on. Our insistence can seem threatening but at the same time they know it is essential.

The feminist movement in Mexico has also built very strong connections with other Latin American movements and networks on health, reproductive rights, violence, and on foreign cooperation. There is also a network of documentation centres. In Carola's words, these networks are 'all starting to strengthen us'. CIDHAL in particular has supported the emerging women's movements in Central America in the 1980s.

In her private life, too, the process of education and consciousness, and of searching for more equal ways of relating to others, is continuous. Her parents approve of her work but tend to see it as charitable activity rather than radical. When Carola's children were young they accompanied her to the rural areas and the slums and went to meetings and demonstrations. Carola now lives with her son of 19 and her daughter who returns home at weekends from university. She regards them as her best friends. Carola herself already has a degree in education but is now studying for a second degree in rural development. Her personal ambition is 'to grow old, wise, and young, and to be of help to my people'. She is hopeful that even the small contribution which CIDHAL is making will help other women and men. For her, feminism is about creating a better world for women, men and children:

Feminism is a practical and theoretical way of looking at life... I think feminism is looking for changes, looking for a better world. Feminism is not only to do with women, it integrates. It has to do with everything. We want a more harmonious world, in relation to men, to nature, to everything. In that sense it is a very radical movement because we want changes in every sphere, the private, the political, the public.

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## *Conclusion:*

### *South/North relations*

In February 1992, the eight women whose lives and work are described in this book came to the United Kingdom and Ireland as part of the Oxfam Gender and Development Unit's project to mark the organisation's fiftieth anniversary. The project, called 'Women to Women: Worldwide Linking for Development', which will run for three years, aims to strengthen women's international networking. Its specific objectives are to bring women together from around the world to exchange ideas on development practice, to publicise Oxfam's work with women, and to strategise on gender issues. During their three-week stay, the women visited a wide range of women's organisations, community groups, trade unions, and agencies involved in development to exchange ideas on issues as diverse as urban environment, health, violence, agriculture, and development cooperation. The interviews on which this book is based were carried out during this visit. In 1993-4 there will be an international conference and South-South exchanges on specific themes such as health and reproductive rights, culture and political participation, environment and development.

The Women to Women project is the logical extension of Oxfam's support to women's organisations over many years. In the view of all the women in this book facilitating networks is the single most important role for Northern-based NGOs, like Oxfam. In Vanete Almeida's opinion,

Organisations like Oxfam can assist by helping us to network with women in other countries and to facilitate the exchange of experiences.

Of course, this is not the only role for Oxfam. All eight women also stressed how important it was for Northern NGOs to raise public awareness in their own countries, to increase people's understanding of the international situation and of gender issues. As Mariam Dem says, agencies like Oxfam can:

...create the connection between the people of the North and South, in terms of better knowledge one of the other, in terms of explaining and making people really feel the responsibility of the international environment and the policies carried out in our countries around debt, for example. They could create a climate of opinion in their countries which could have an effect on government policies.



But the spirit in which funding and raising public awareness is carried out is important. All eight women have firm opinions on the kind of relationship that should exist between funding agencies and organisations in the South. Mariam Dem believes that funders 'must work with the philosophy that development is the obligation and responsibility of the people there'. They want a new relationship between South and North, as Aida Seif El Dawla says, based on 'equality rather than generosity'. Carola Carbajal Rios sums up the Women to Women project from her perspective:

The most important thing about this kind of project is the interchange between women. We learn a lot about what other women are doing and we can express our opinions. This kind of first-hand interchange is so helpful to both sides. It is a more democratic way of relating.

### *International solidarity*

It is clear that women's collective action cannot stop at local or national level. To broaden the opportunities for information sharing and to gain greater strength women need to build international networks. The United Nations Decade for Women, 1976-1985, opened up possibilities for women's organisations to grow in numbers and make contact with others regionally and internationally. Gradually it is becoming easier to obtain financial support for representatives of women's organisations to travel; and funds are available for women's South/North or South/South networks.

This South/North exchange of ideas, particularly between women's organisations, has in the last 20 years enabled new approaches to social, economic and political life to emerge — approaches which stressed the importance of addressing the gender-based inequalities women face at every level as a prerequisite to more just societies.

It would be foolish to underestimate the barriers to building strong international alliances between women or to assume an automatic solidarity on the basis of gender. Societies in the North are vastly different from those in the South in terms of access to resources, support services, health and education facilities, and legal rights. The legacy of centuries of systematic exploitation and colonialism cannot be dismissed, nor can the ever-widening gap between South and North. Yet women all over the world share some common problems: discrimination; greater poverty amongst women; the triple burden of family, paid work, and community; the sexual division of labour; male violence; and marginalisation from political decision-making. They also share a concern for the global environment.

The women featured here value international networking but they do not underestimate the diversity of women's perspectives. Despite the obstacles Gigi Francisco is optimistic about international solidarity:

I have a lot of hopefulness in being able to bring women together, recognising first and foremost their diversity. The process of finding and defining our diversities will itself enable us to pinpoint certain unities — unities beneficial not only to a few but to all in varying degrees.