Women and Health

Community Health Workers in Urban Slums

The community health worker (CHW)—a job at our doorstep — is how the women described the work to their families. Salary Rs. 450 p. m. for 6 hours of work, 6 days a week. This is a two year experimental project. During the training period of 6 months, the trainees will receive Rs. 350 p. m.

The CHW's Training Programme is about to commence in the second week of July, 84. Twenty women from the urban slums in and around Delhi have been chosen, not on the basis of their educational qualifications, but their ability to bring together the women in their own neighbourhood.

Before the CHW can begin to talk to the community, they themselves must get equipped with information and knowledge of elementary health care and the existing health services in the city. The women who have been teaching in the Ankur non-formal education programme are familiar with meetings, discussions, and the paraphernalia of reading and writing. But for some of these women it is the first time that they are attempting a job that is not domestic work. The nervous apprehension, the fear of being stupid, making mistakes and the overall mystery of the new concepts that are being showered upon them must be similar to that of the five year old in the first days of nursery school.

But the adult learners have gained confidence in the last one month and are preparing for a two week orientation camp away from home. A big step for a woman to go out on work, leaving her domestic responsibilities to her husband. Little children will go with their mothers of course. The special thing about a programme for women organised by women is that it takes into account a mother's needs. A creche and daycare arrangements will be provided. The older children over 5 years can learn to fend for themselves at home.

A two week experience of living and learning together, away from the day to day drudgery that is the women's lot, is not going to be a holiday. We will start early at 6 a. m. with yoga. eight hours of mental work, thinking, questioning, and understanding a whole new way of looking at health. After all a Doctor gets 19 years of education to diagnose our illnesses and prescribe medicines. The CHW will have to trudge from house to house in rain or shine. What is she going to say to a mother about keeping her child washed and clean, when she herself has stood long hours in the water queue to bring back a pail of water that must suffice the entire family?

The CHW will not get into debates over proteins or calories. She will first find out how things are in the home. Does your husband have a job. Are you earning? Times are hard, everything is so expensive. She also knows the healthy things that grandmother made at home, before our children demanded 25p to eat some fly filled junk food sold on the roadside beside the open drains. The basic needs of life are our primary goal. And how we mobilize the community to achieve this collectively is what this training programme is all about.

The CHW can never be a doctor. The doctor is an outsider, who prescribes wonder drugs and takes money for consultations. Tablets. Injections. Operations. The Doctor does not tell the patient what is wrong with him or her, or a child. Yet people's faith in the injection is rapidly growing because it cures immediately and the poor man or woman's work day is not lost.

The CHW is going to help the people understand why they are ill and how they can prevent it. A good CHW will not make people dependent upon her but enable more and more people to become aware of their health needs and gain greater control of their lives and their surroundings. In the process we shall seek alternatives to the highly exploitative health care system of the western allopathic medicine, which is increasingly building our dependency on the Doctor and destroying the potential of people to deal with their health problems in an autonomous way. Sharing of knowledge helps people become more self-reliant. Health is closely related to people's ability to care for themselves and each other as equals. ●