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Sharing our Problems in the Forum Against Oppression of Women,  
Bombay- its organisational structure and functioning.

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This write-up aims to discuss some of the very important problems that we in the Forum Against Oppression of Women have faced in the course of its existence for nearly 6 years, between January 1980 to December 1985.

The Forum was formed as a response to a Supreme Court judgement. Most of us who came together in the Forum were women politically involved in some group or organisation. We were also 'concerned' about women's issues and many of us were involved in some small women's groups earlier. Most of us came together in the Forum with out different political backgrounds and our continuing political work in other fields - parties, trade unions, slum organisations, civil liberties etc. We had different ideas about feminism, about organisational structures, about radical social change. And this has reflected in the Forum activities at various moments. Our ideas have changed with and due to the activities of the Forum. But some of our 'political' backgrounds and preoccupations have had their reflections in the discussions and perspective of the Forum as well.

From about 4-5 months of its inception, till about 2-3 yrs. ago, we have had sporadic discussions about the structure of the Forum. Earlier, the focus was on whether we should formalise the structure of the Forum or not, whether we should go in for registration. While some felt that formalisation and registration would kill the spontaneity in the Forum, other felt that there were social advantages in registration like recognition by the police and other institutions. Still others felt that the informal nature of a group can result in some vocal, articulate members dominating the Forum, without there being any structural mechanism to rectify the situation. Many women

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also felt that rather than going into the age-old solutions of registration etc., we could through time evolve some newer structure befitting the work we all undertake to do. Most women felt divided on the issue. The result was that though a constitution was prepared and all other preparations for registration were ready, the registration did not take place. In fact, the attendance at most of the registration-discussion meetings had dwindled considerably.

Fears had also been expressed of other more organised parties taking over the Forum. This may be one of the 'remnants' of our political past, where often a fear psychosis of 'the other' taking over or messing up 'our organisation' was an essential element in our adherence to it. But there was also a basis to it - women from the organised political parties were a part of the Forum in the earlier period. This was one of the first experiences that many women from the Forum were having in terms of working with women from the organised left parties. We had heard of their mode of functioning, seen it partially in their participation in the Forum and there was an element of mistrust in terms of their motives in the Forum.

But this fear was not merely in the initial stages of the Forum when it was to some extent understandable as all of us were unsure of the nature and structure of the Forum. Even after 3-4 years of our existence, this did come up once again, this time vis-a-vis a much smaller party women's group. The debate was about the structure and membership of the Forum. This small group felt that the Forum should be a federation of different groups and though any women could come to the meetings, in terms of the decisions made, every group within the Forum would have only one vote. On the other hand, others in the Forum felt that we came to the Forum and related

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to it and to each other as individual feminists and not as members of other groups; that the Forum should be a group in its own right and not a mere federation of other groups. This attempt by the women's group was considered to be an attempt in 'taking over' the Forum. May be it was, from their point of view. May be it was not. And there will be many such grounds for this feeling. But by this time in fact the Forum was much more conscious of itself- that a 'taking over' of the Forum was an impossibility. What is there to take over? The Forum has no office, no structure. It is defined only by its activities and if anyone wants to take up those activities, so far so good! But, we suppose, it takes longer and more confidence to bury the ghosts of the past!

So today the Forum is a loose group of individual mainly middle-class women, who meet every week in a decided place and discuss what we could all take up, what we feel is the most pressing issue affecting women, how we could take it up, by which means. We are mainly an agitational and educational group. It is not the case that all of us unanimously at one go, agreed that the Forum should be an agitational/educational group. There have been heated debates about this issue. Different women had different priorities and ideas about the nature and perspective of the Forum. Some felt that FAOW should work at grass-roots levels, some felt we should work among working class women, some had other ideas. But the structure of the Forum and the nature of its membership put definite limits on sustained and focussed activities of the type any grass-roots organisation would demand. And at the stage the women's movement is today, we felt agitational and educational work, raising issues that affect us as women, is an important task by itself.

We have often said that the Forum is a 'spontaneous' group, and that it does not have hierarchical structures and practices. All this is true to some extent. But we could examine it a little closely. First, about hierarchical 'structures'. We don't have any Secretary or Co-ordinator. We do have a Treasurer, but it's a real task convincing women to become one. We don't even have any 'minutes' of the scores of meetings of the Forum. What does this mean in practice? In practice, the women who worked at writing this particular paper were all old-timers, founder-members of the Forum. Because memory and hence seniority is the only way in which Forum members can know what has happened earlier. There are a few circulars, but these, if they exist at all, are again in the homes of the senior-members. And hence new women who get attracted to the Forum feel at a loss. The history of the Forum exists, in the memories and hence the articulateness of the members. On the one hand is the feeling that very few new women are coming to the Forum and sustaining their interest; on the other hand are practices, however unconscious, of keeping to ourselves what we have learnt and know.

The Forum is 'spontaneous'. So there's no regulating the discussions. This sounds simple. But it means that louder women can talk and quieten the others. Issues and questions that younger and newer women bring to the Forum are somehow not taken seriously. There's been a chairperson in our last four meetings. We all learn, however slowly.

But the nature and the structure of the Forum is such that all these above questions and problems, which are common to many other groups with even less constraints than the Forum, can be and have been raised openly. In fact, the Forum has no 'closed' meetings or discussions or 'for internal circulation only' documents. Any woman can walk into a FAOW

meeting, depending on her interest, she can propose actions or topics of discussions, provided, and that's important, provided she's prepared to see those through and work for them. There is no exclusion of any woman from whichever part of the world, whichever group, she may come from. A genuine lack of caste/class/political/religious bias and a true spirit of cosmopolitanism is something even the most ardent critics of the FAOW have appreciated.

Whatever literature comes to the Forum, whatever the Forum duplicates or prints is given or sent to almost all the groups we know of. Secretiveness or possessiveness about campaigns, issues, documents, research material is quite alien to the culture of FAOW. This is extremely significant in the general social atmosphere of competition and monopolisation. Not seldom have eg. journalists walked into Forum meetings, talked to Forum women, sometimes written articles that we could not identify with. But yet the FAOW doors are never shut. Literally !

But this too has unfortunately created problems. There have been instances, when issues which concern only a few Forum members, have instead of being sorted out in smaller groups elsewhere, have been raised and discussed, meeting after meeting, with only a couple of women participating, as the issue concerned only those few anyway. And other women, especially newer members feel all the more out of place and ultimately drop out. There have also been instances, quite often, when issues have been raised and re-raised, not because all or even most women are interested in them, but only because more vocal women put them forward persuasively or aggressively.

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The 'Spontaneity' of the Forum has serious problems too. Apart from our earliest two actions and one later, where we had seriously tried to involve and get to know the women involved or women from the neighbourhood where we were agitating, most of our later ones have been one-blow actions. Our aim was presumably to express our anger at a woman being killed/harassed, to raise the issue among the neighbourhood women and men, to disgrace the wife-murderer/rapist. In most instances, we would be able to do the first and the third. Both based on anger. The second aim, based on hope and positive feelings, we did not always succeed in. "There isn't enough time for follow-up work". Most of us have jobs, family responsibilities, other political concerns. And the Forum is one, though important - emotionally and politically - of our many concerns.

How do we cope with this situation? Though it is true that the Forum is surviving and sustaining through all these difficulties, isn't it also a question of accountability? We are not 'accountable' to anyone. We can organise a demonstration, raise issues, shout slogans, express our emotions and leave. Nobody can come to us and tell us that we did wrong, that we better get lost. OR that we were helpful and helped to raise issues that were important to them. And this we think, is also telling on our work, on our enthusiasm. There is very little feed-back to our work. Is that one reason why we have not been able to act, react, respond to anything much over the last 18 months? Is this related to the fact that ours is a voluntary, autonomous women's group and that these are the problems all such groups are facing today?

May be there are other problems too. E.g. we did try to respond to the communal-riots last year. What did we do? We went along with other groups, non-feminist ones, and did

nearly the same things they did. We spoke to the women more than they did. But did we try to forge a women's perspective on Communal violence? Most of the discussions we had on the issue concerned our participation or non-participation with other political etc. groups, not our perspective, what we wanted to do. The same is true of Bhopal. There is no necessity of our going to all these places. But other women do go. And such women do want to relate to the Forum, for obvious reasons. Could not we, together with them, evolve an outlook, a plan of action for women or from the point of view of women? What is lacking? Is it again something to do with the nature and structure of our group? Or is it a more general phenomenon of our being a voluntary, autonomous women's group? Is that a price we pay for being independent and for experimenting with structures? Or is there a way out - through sharing with you all and evolving an alternative? Another major problem we have faced, which may relate to the organisational structure again, is the hesitation that almost each of us feels in terms of 'representing the FAOW'. If any issue comes up, no one would ring up the press or write an article on the issue in the name of the Forum. We would do it as individuals or as members of some other group we belong to, but not as representing the Forum. This may relate to our earlier experiences, when some women had felt and expressed their resentment when they felt that the FAOW was 'being used' in the media by particular women. There was also this other experience, when certain attitudes of women were challenged by other members of the FAOW, and together with the challenge to those particular attitudes, there was a tendency of questioning the 'feminism' of the women concerned. Some called this 'feminister-than-thou' attitude. It is necessary to put

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forward this question, because the problem, though not clearly identified, has resulted in inordinate delays in responding to issues and also reflects some basic mistrust which needs to be faced.

There is another aspect of the Forum, which is quite intriguing. Women who have either limited time, or women who cannot identify with the weekly meetings, get quite involved during times of 'activity'-a demonstration is organised, March 8th celebrations, the train-guarding campaign, or this or the earlier conference. Many women get involved anew and participate fully in these phases. There is a great feeling of solidarity, especially among the more active women. But once this period of heightened activity is over, there is a sudden lull again. What has happened at certain times after major actions, is a feeling of hurt on the part of some of the members and the resultant bitterness. But not always has there been open and frank discussions about these hurts and bitteresses. Most of us react to these feelings within us, by dropping out of the Forum for some time. We might talk it over to individual friends from the Forum, know what is going on and come back after a couple of weeks or months. In fact, after major actions, there is usually a phase of lull within the Forum. This we feel is related to the high-pitched activities, where nearly all our energies are geared towards these actions and once they are over, there is a temporary feeling of being 'burnt out'. This happens individually as well as collectively, depending on the action taken up, the issues raised, the debates in that period, etc. What we all have experienced as positive is the recognition and acceptance of this experience within the group. Also the fact that there is space for us to act on it. If one is absent for a couple of days or weeks

or even months, there is no rejection of you, but a resigned acceptance. This is all the more than so, because of the voluntary nature of the Forum. The voluntariness of the Forum also facilitates its efficiency. This may seem paradoxical. But the Forum does tend to take up and complete the work it takes up. This is related to the speed of life in the Bombay metropolis, but also because there is little 'compulsion' for the members, apart from their willingness to take up issues. Of course, voluntary work has been termed a luxury of a small section and this is the section that gravitates towards it and dominates it. Yet it wants to represent the issues of a larger section of women and does attempt to do it, and other groups - women's as well as other political ones - have recognised it and attempted to relate to the Forum, to draw us into their issue-based campaigns.

Within the Forum however there seems to be some apprehension about openly discussing to the end not only the 'inter-personal' issues referred to above, but also other political and organisational issues. This may come out of a desire and commitment to continue together. We have all seen too many groups splitting up because of 'ideological differences', and we don't want to. Though we have all grown together over the last 6 years, some fundamental differences do exist. Despite all this, we want to continue together in the Forum. We want to make it truly non-hierarchical and capable of expressing the spontaneity of not only the more articulate women as it is today but of all the women who come to it. We want to reach out of Forum members and women working in other areas, especially rural areas, though we have not been able to do this very systematically till today and women have felt resentful about this. And

we feel that the FAOW has the capacity to become all this. But we are not sure how. That is why we have refrained from a success story and openly magnified some of our many problems in the Forum.

Out of some of the problems in the Forum, partly as a response to them, some very wonderful things have happened over the years. For example, the emergence of smaller, special-interest groups and grouplets - the Women's Centre, the Nari Sangharsh Samiti, Jagruti Kala Pathak, other women's groups. Women working among slum-women, among women workers. Many of these were formed out of energy from the Forum and as a response to issues the Forum was not taking up or taking up inadequately.

But all of us working elsewhere have converged to the Forum for broader issues, to act, to discuss and sometimes merely to meet friends. One of our concerns have been 'What's happening to the Forum?' 'How can we improve it/put more life into it/sustain it better?'

And we would like to put this very question before the conference, so that all of us can learn from each others' and our own inadequancies, limitations, problems and mistakes. This is also very urgent for us, because this conference has come not after a period of vigorous action within the Forum, but after a lull, though there has been enormous organising and activity elsewhere, and after most of us have felt torn about some of the issues outlined here.

Jointly written by Forum Against Oppression of Women, Bombay in course of six rigorous discussions and five revisions of the draft. And ultimately accepted unanimously by all activists.

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Report of DAWN Delhi Workshop convened  
by Institute of Social Studies Trust

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The Workshop-Introduction

' I look around at them (leaving the factories-Kanpur, India), knowing in my own sore muscles that they have just finished eight hours of being pounded down physically and psychologically, seeing them all rush out now to do the next job at home.... talking and laughing ... young and old.... so beautiful and so strong - if only all of them would look around at each other and see that power.

(Ref: Raka Shoran, 'Factories or concentration camps?'  
Manushi, NO. 2, March-April, 1979)

To recognise that power is not only to respond to urgent current issues but also to create and anticipate the future. ICST convened a three-day workshop primarily aimed at gathering the strengths of women and women's groups involved in women and development in order to look critically at the role of NGOs and at the DAWN document, to suggest ways forward and attempt to develop informal, supportive solidarity links among women and women's groups.

The very specific focus was to get the DAWN group project membership to see whether DAWN does have "ffet to walk into grassroot activists work." Therefore, women representing different languages from the country had to meet at Delhi to view DAWN in the right perspective. They were invited to consider whether they would use it in a translated version of the existing book or pick up whatever points and ideas they found useful in the context of their work, and translate them into any form of communication that they felt was useful. It was also to observe how other people, particularly from outside Delhi, saw the continuation of Dawn at the level of intellectuals, policy makers, the literate community and the workers' community.

Women from 14 groups linked to 7 languages came to the meeting, thereby expressing a sense of empowerment. Nairobi was one expression of it. Delhi was another. It was also to respond to urgent issues of the present and to envisage and surmise a future of quality, justice and peace. The meeting concentrated on concrete matters ranging from Bhopal to dowry, injectible contraceptives to technological drugery, militarization to violence against women and attempted to envision the possibilities of women's involvement for the future.

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Each issue invited us to go deeper into the need to analyse and get involved in an active manner and see the relatedness of the women's movement to other social movements and issues.

The idea of holding the meeting was precisely this - to discover ways to link up the women's Issue with the 'Larger Phenomena' whose specific limbs needed identifying. The idea was to define and perhaps examine the twin issues of how the lives of women affect the larger phenomena and how the larger phenomena affect women's lives.

Women's bid for unity has so far revolved around gender based issues, biological issues-rape and discrimination DAWN is an attempt for the first time to present development as an issue to gender activists for humanity as a whole and women in particular. The Delhi meeting was an attempt in continuing the process of arriving at the content of this perspective. It is generally felt that development will over-run the Indian scene in the near future and attempts have to be made to integrate into the fold those who are really the prime components in developmental schemes, namely women DAWN offers one focal point in this direction. Presently there is no unified women's stand on developmental policies, their feasibility, their need, their efficacy and the modalities of their execution.

Dawn India's focal attempt is to discover a cross section of gender activists' interaction to policies covering area like employment displacement, health and education. The Delhi meeting was an effort to table questions like 'Is it possible' and 'Shall we hunt for it?' The women to a person found it was worthwhile to look at these queries.

The women, who participated came as individuals, activists involved in women's issues, professional women, academics from women's groups, research institutions, Government Representative women's trade unions and service organisations.

Initially Dawn was perceived as an academic exercise with the view to finding a framework and analysing the experience of development in the third world with special reference to poor women. Then Dawn used a different kind of information to design the framework. Apart from usual reports, books in libraries were action programmes and what they taught and revealed and a fund material in the third world which are really the voices of women', providing a valuable information mix.

This process revealed that the content could add a new dimension to the policies of the women's movement - namely the development dimension women's political movements exist but development as such has not yet received enough attention of the political policies. The analysis was largely troubling but with a typical feminist streak it was felt that it should not end with trouble but effort should be on to create an alternative vision and reveal methodologies by which to construct a better society for all.

This was the broad beginning for DAWN. To seek micro-macro linkages, find them, elaborate them and then make them available to all. Whatever is done at the big global level has actually a very significant link with the life of the last women in the last rural village and in the last third world country.

The project, Development Alternatives with women for a New Era - DAWN - started with a very small meeting of women from five continents organised by ISST in August 1984, at Bangalore. Like a flash in three-four days in Bangalore the 10 women not only felt the need for searching for a framework but also identified a framework.

Then an outline giving this framework was circulated in many ways through post and by introducing it in every meeting that anybody known women activists attended. Later Latin American women used it in the Havana meeting, many others in Asian researchers' meetings, Indian meetings ICCSR meetings, Evening in meetings in New York. Following this a number of people sent in important contributions and responses. These were received and a draft was prepared. The draft was then circulated again to the same friends. It was again revised and the book in its present form is at the end of that process. Confirmation was sought in Nairobi to see whether it performed as a useful exercise and who could be the end audience of this exercise. Nairobi affirmed the need for third world women to look at their own analytical framework and define their own policies and relationship to development.

Now the real affirmation will be to see and test it in the Indian context particularly at the grassroot level. The Delhi meeting was also a catalyst in this direction. It is part of the global dimensions in their lives.



As the document points out, that as part of process, individuals and groups from all regions of the world are to hold meetings, contribute ideas comments and suggestions and come together for discussions so as to shape the project to their needs. This exchange is the most vital part of the entire process, one by which the Dawn document itself took shape. This collective process reflects the true ethos and potential of the women's movement- a disposition that respects diversity, breaks down hierarchies and competition, fosters sharing and reciprocity.

The Dawn Delhi meeting was the first national continuum after the Nairobi panel of this collective process and the catalyst for more meetings. The next national meet is scheduled for January 1986 at SEWA, Ahmedabad, both to continue the development debate examined at Delhi and to render the DAWN process and the document more relevant nationally.

The meeting provided a forum for analysing how to make the effort to read the book out of the experience of the women for whom the book and all of us speak. The purpose was to enable a heterogeneous group with different language activists to actually assess which part of it would be useful, to identify it and decide how to use it. This purpose was achieved and definite work schedules for specific language groups emerged by the end of meeting. The work planned aims at testing out choices and policies and get a understanding of the vision and analysis of the poor women through grassroot activists, academics, intermediaries for the "upper" policy makers.

It would culminate in a national meeting to share this and outline a much better development political guideline or referential work for areas identified by the groups, or on even one concrete area say adult education. A book on adult education then could be brought out with illustrations, advice, information etc, which would facilitate a rural group to understand the decisions taken at the village level which will wise them up as to choice of crops, time for sinking pumps, irrigation patterns and timetables etc. Dawn's vision could make sense in the Indian context only when trans-created with all these inputs. The meeting had envisaged for the other task too namely mere translation of the document so that the book should be available in a range of Indian languages for intellectuals, academics and policy makers at the state level.

However the highlight of the whole process has been the Dawn process itself. The process has been the most useful mode of

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interaction . The task of having a short brain-storming session, finding a framework, sharing it through letters, receiving feedback, then redoing it to repeat the same exercise several times has called for a lot of self-effacement. But the response received has proved that the process is no idle dream but really works.

Devaki Jain's experience at three different meetings in three different parts of the world - Helsinki, Rome and Geneva - has gone to prove just that. When she talked of this consultative process, other women felt that was the process they would like to use. For instance at the International agencies and donor group meeting in Helsinki in October 85, many women rejected the old concept of putting up a project and looking at checklists and guidelines to find ways to intergrate women. They were not however, aware that consultive processes pay off though they may look slow and difficult. But when Devaki Jain described how DAWN emerged and grew and also since many had heard favourably about Dawn, had attended Nairobi and participated in the excitement about the Dawn panels, they promptly passed a kind of resolution at the end of the workshop banning the use of checklists and guidelines in future. They felt the creation of a project should be done consulting those who are a part of the project. So the donor agency promptly put aside money for consultations before design, before implementation, evaluation and possibly bringing out a book, since the consultative process is not endless and can terminate in a report or book. A similar experience ensued at Geneva where a paper on "International Economic Relations and women" written by a young woman and was analysed and commented upon by 10 women. The whole purpose of meeting and critically evaluating the 120 page document seemed to be getting lost when the writer took it as a personal stab every time something critical was mentioned. However when Devaki described how the Dawn document had undergone similar and repeated examinations, how it was revised, redone and how the process worked, the writer was also convinced that she was not merely being made to look foolish by a group of women invited to comment on her paper.

So this particular process does deliver. Therefore the process assumes a greater importance than the output even at the ensuing SEWA Ahmedabad Dawn meeting.

Lastly the Dawn process was envisaged with two focal. One was for reaching down and getting to poor women for consultations on the development issue and the politics of development using Dawn as the catalyst. The other was for vertical interaction among middle class groups for a possible consensus on issues and perspectives.

The Development Debate:

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The development debate at Delhi through eager, articulate, spontaneous responses arrived at the core of the matter - should not move beyond "women and welfare"? When we speak of a Development "women and development" do we want an intergration, a co-option into the existing model? A model that lauds the efficacy of revolution "which in the final analysis makes the rich farmer strategies like the green, marginalises the majority. Then when we question the very paradigms of this development model. The discussions revolved round such loaded questions.

Women ought not to be a 'component' of 'developmental' projects which underline the stereotyped roles of women - pappad and pickle makers, sweeter and clothes makers, such stereotypes make them believe their economic alternatives can be related to only their domestic scene. These development models entrenched in sexual economics are responsible for women's roles to continue as 'objects'. Women are thus only envisaged at the receiving end of welfare schemes. This is the ambit decided by planners as proper for women's development. As a result women are shut out of policy planning, decision making and actual concretising of developmental projects. Do we then accept male-centred, eurocentric models?

The meeting also contended the need to examine at the present point of development in megascience, the ways in which science and technological choices affected women. Technology is an area that has registered and rocentric growth. Growing automation meant to reduce drudgery has been no boon to women particularly poor women. Their drudgery continues and has perhaps increased. worse, poor women's employment and income-earning has been severely eroded by mechanization. This is particularly true in agro-related activities.

How should women react to multinational corporations that can cause tragedies the magnitude of Bhopal? Multinational do require drastic curbing, particularly in the third world.

So while this whole aspect of the development model stresses growth and progress in quantitative terms, quantitatively it has little positive effect on workers' lives and more negative effects on women's lives. Should women seek intergration into such an autonomous development model or should they opt for an alternative?

Amidst growing local inequalities, technological choices are made by developed countries and developing countries are catapulted into accepting the same development model, making the same technological choices and choosing the same nuclear option.

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Should this entire model be wholly overturned? Is there not a need to search for new departures even to the development model?

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Questions were raised to ascertain whether on its part the Dawn book brings out alternatives. Is there a feminist perspective and does the book bring this out sufficiently? It was largely felt that answers to these far-reaching questions could not be prescriptive or arrived at without plenty of debates and discussions. The DAWN process would enable them to emerge among women and within the women's movement.

The women's movement in the country needed contextualising—a task to be attempted under the DAWN rubric. As yet, no single unified women's movement has emerged. Islands exist in the form of scattered women's organisations groups involved in large NGOs for instance in rural areas, in trade unions for example working with agricultural labourers and the urban middle class, research organisations, publishing organisations and individual women.

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It is also vitally necessary to determine the place of the Indian women's movement in the Indian social, economic, political and cultural milieu. The meeting averred that the need was not for women's solidarity on women's issues but for a feminist perspective on all issues, while never wavering from the focus on women's issues. Equally important was the question of the relatedness of the women's movement with other movements. Do we seek justification for this relatedness from what exists and within the status quo? Should the point of reference still be "outside"?

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'Perspectives for the Autonomous Women's Movement in India' - Dec. 85

Participation of women's organisations  
in mass and other organisations.

Two aspects of women's oppression

Individual as in a family,  
religion, caste etc.

Mass Socio-political economic  
oppression of women.  
National Cultural oppression.

Need of the hour to have mass  
women's organisation.

to make ourselves more participative,  
more conscious, more politicised.

Starting with general  
basic issues like a  
consumer issue, demand  
for child care centres  
etc.

Larger issues of exploitation  
of women -

- \* working class issue of wage difference
- \* discrimination of white collar women.
- \* girl students' issues of eve teasing, sexual harrasment.

Trade Unions

Civil Liberties'  
Organisation.

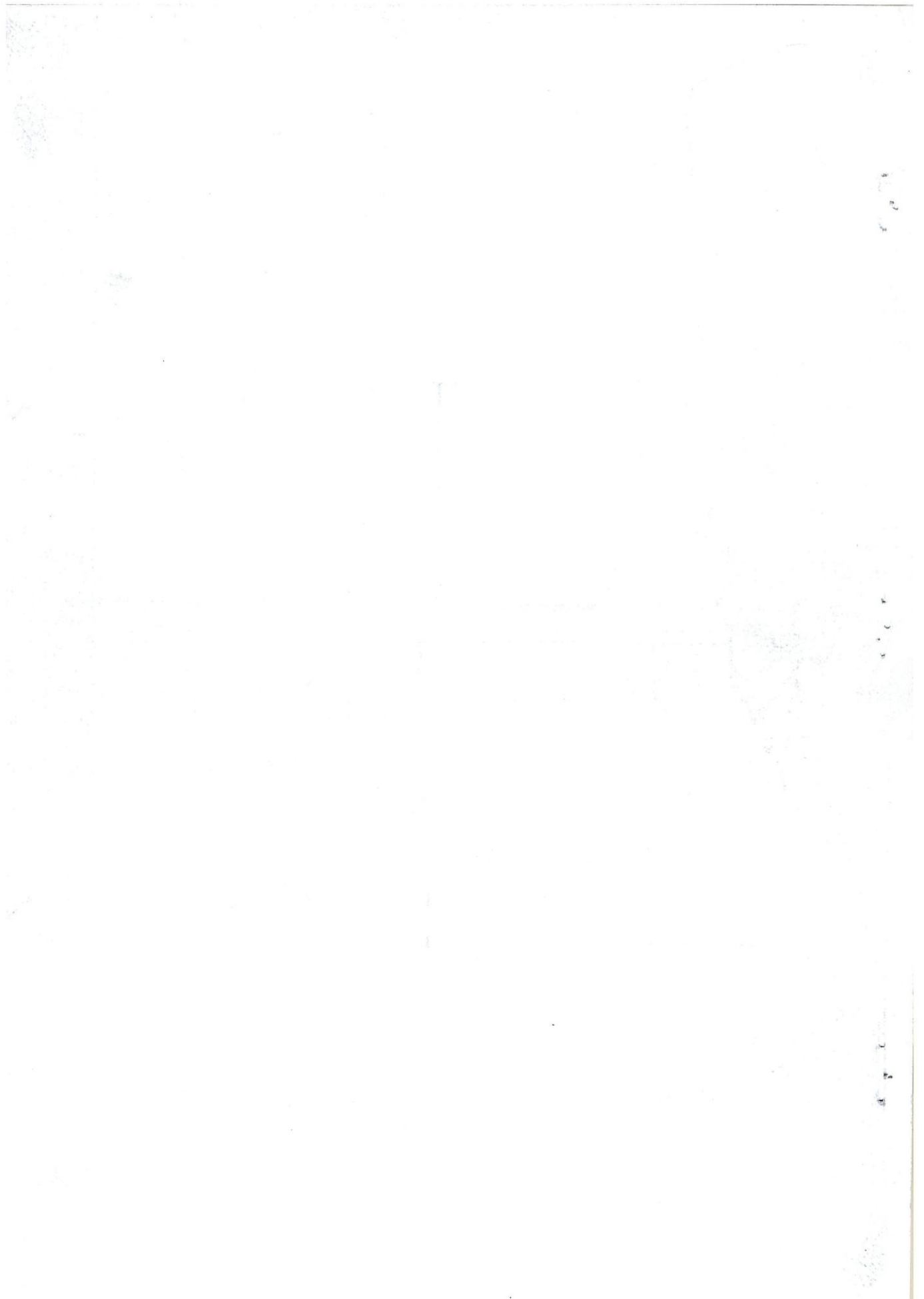
Cultural groups

existing predominant values towards  
women and women's issues.

Trade union's priority  
is wage issue. All else  
like women's issues,  
safety issues secondary

Sometimes sympathetic  
but never take up  
women's issues as a  
major issue.

- \* To have pop. appeal at women's expense.
- \* Secondly form becomes more imp. than content.
- \* often groups maynot have a goal in mind otherthan do "good theatre".



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One invited the women's movement to critically assess why NGO's should support the Govt. It would seem if while the Government sought NGO's cooperation in its development and education programmes, this could in fact be understood as a way of co-opting NGO's. They could get absorbed as channels of the government to implement its plans and programmes. The NGO's own commitment and personnel could be used for concretising government programmes. Also this seeming openness to the NGO's would be acceptable if the government was 'comfortable' with the issues and strategies used by the NGOs. At some crisis moments however NGO's could become in the interests of 'national security' 'law and order' 'security risks, even terrorists. It was felt this seeming space to the NGO's might very well get constricted judging by the growing control on civil liberties organisations, human rights groups, trade unions etc and the increasing repressive legislation-The terrorist Affected Areas (Special Courts) Act, 1984, the amendments to the National security Act, recent legislation on the pavement and basti dwellers etc.

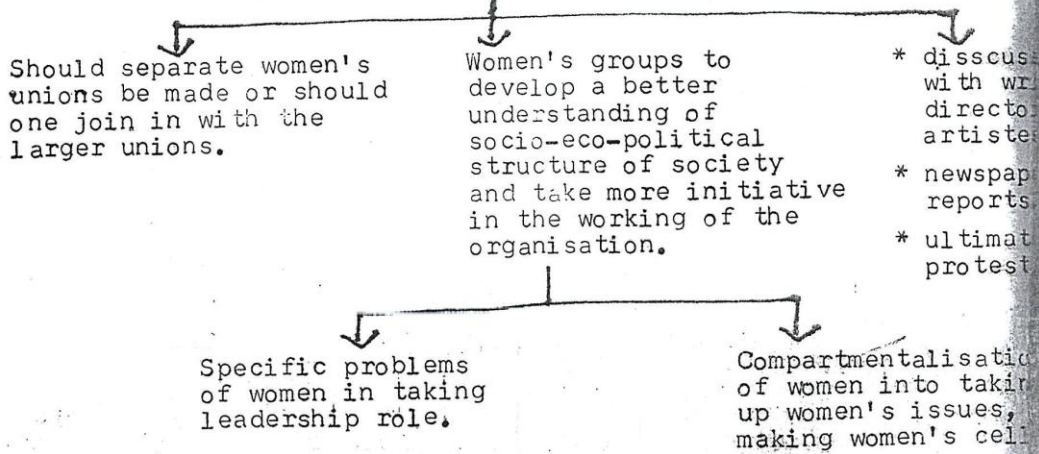
The other view pointed out that collaboration with the government would be beneficial. Demands could be made of the government vis-a-vis funds and resources. It was underscored that the funds of the Government were after all public funds and voluntary organisations should ensure that they be utilized for the programmes they were earmarked for. Further, the large generalising projects and larger schemes for women's development required 'big money' and the government was the best source. Another point was sometimes collaboration with the government could help in struggles against 'vested interests' at the local level. Overall different points of the establishment existed which needed to be struggled against. For instance difficulties in working with the government took forms like lack of coordination, the red tape and tedious procedures. The pro-government NGO faction hoped suggestions on administrative reforms to the government would be possible through this meeting of women. DAWN could be seen as an ongoing attempt to critically examine both NGO stand points.

The discussions bore out the fact that there was need for far more dialoguing within the NGOs. There were sharp differences in this context. Women NGOs were not ready or had no wherewithal to make alliances with class based organisations was one view. They were not internally clear on their own legitimacy to speak for other. Small women's groups actively grappling with particular local problems found both their energies and time fully occupied by them. One speaker from Hyderabad requested that some kind of networking and policy directions from the women's perspective drawn up to enable such small groups to reach with larger issues. She requested arriving at women's clear stand or position about political issues, larger general issues. The only way such organisations could react to general issues presently was by tagging along with other organisations and joining and following their programmes. The other view felt that women's groups has no time for such self indulgences. They were already a movement. It was felt that women should relate to movements as they exist but not accept their perspective. The relating, whether to movements or issues should be from a clearly feminist, women-centred perspective. For instance in trade unions, women should decide how to support trade unions and it should be a critical participation. The thrust would be not just to support trade unions in their demands largely economic, for workers but in their preference to women's demands and issues like retrenchment, casual labour, creches and leave facilities. It would be a blind acceptance of trade Unions just because they exist but view them from the feminist perspective and seek in them feminist stances. Thus in Bhopal for instance, it would have to be ensured that the effect of the MIC gas on pregnant women and its genetic offshoots are not ignored, that the effect on women and employment are also examined and that men perhaps do not get more compensation. Clearly it is essential to establish a feminist alternative model and perspective.

It was with the role of NGOs vis-a-vis the Government, which the meeting examined at length, that two divergent views emerged.

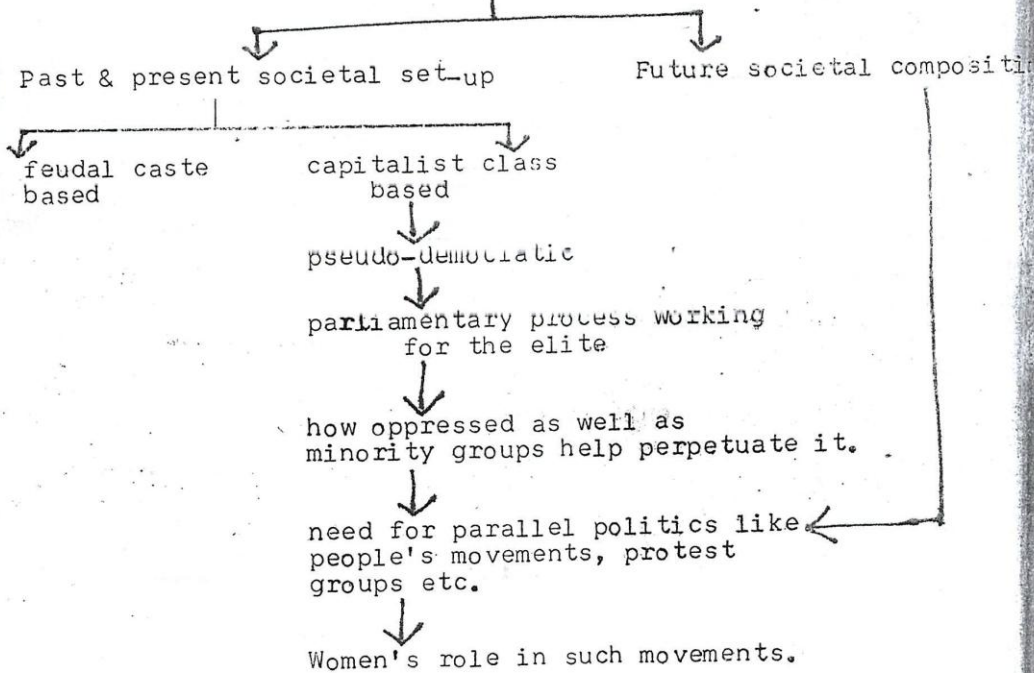


HOW DO WOMEN'S GROUPS HANDLE THESE PHASES AND TRY TO OVERCOME OR CHANGE THEM ?



WOMEN'S GROUPS

Analysis of why women's oppression exists in Society



Prepared by : CHINGARI NARI SANGATHAN  
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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING,  
AND HELPING INDIVIDUAL WOMEN.

What do we mean by consciousness raising? When can we consider a woman to be conscious? To become conscious may mean different things to different women :

Sonia was having problems at her work place and came to us for help. She works as a cleaning woman and lives near Saheli office. She continued to come to Saheli more or less everyday, and one day as we were chatting she said, "You must help me to find a good school for my daughter. I want to educate and train her in some skill so that when her husband deserts her, she can be on her own."

Shanti, a basti level health activist, who has worked as a construction worker earlier, said one day, "If I had a choice, I would train my daughters to become skilled workers (mason, carpenter) so that they do not have to work under a man."

At one level, we may become aware of the injustice done to us and learn to be conscious of our personal rights. At another level, we may become aware that our suffering is not an isolated instance, and learn to connect our situation with that of other women and see the commonality. At yet another level, we may realise that our oppression and exploitation is linked to the exploitation of a vast majority in our country and that change means liberation of all oppressed people. To many of us, consciousness also means that we actively assist other women to start questioning their lives, to understand the forces that are working against us, and to form alternate support structures.

Often consciousness raising as a process is posed as if it is in opposition to providing individual help to women in distress. Our experience in Saheli indicates this to be a false dichotomy. The two processes often go hand in hand and influence each other.

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105-108, Shopping Complex  
Under Defence Colony Flyover  
(South Side)  
NEW DELHI-110 024.

- \* discuss with writer director artistes
- \* newspaper reports.
- \* ultimate protest.

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OUR EXPERIENCE IN DELHI

Since the late 1970s we have been agitating against dowry deaths. The agitation has been in the form of consciousness raising through street plays, dharnas, and taking up legal cases with a specific purpose. Our main objective was to focus attention on the deteriorating situation of women in our society and to highlight the need for change. These first attempts were aimed at an amorphous "public". While individual cases were focussed on, it was not our intention to help individual women. For example, many dowry victims were already dead when women's groups started action.

In 1979, we used street plays as a form of protest against dowry deaths. The main message of the play "On Swand" was that women do not have to become dowry victims. While there are no clear cut answers, a woman could struggle to live a dignified life. The play also focussed on commercialisation and its impact on women, the objectification of women and the lack of familial and other support structures.

Following this, the demand to re-open the Mathura Rape Case became a focus of discussion and all of us were confronted with a question. Small groups of women could highlight problems, but if an individual woman wanted to seek an alternative, to live a life of dignity and independence could we provide her with necessary help? It became clear that we would have to provide support to each other in a number of ways. This act of support was not provided in the nature of social work or charity, but with the understanding that mutual help is the only way of moving forward towards building an alternative society.

Our experience shows that when women make radical personal choices e.g. leaving a husband who batters, they are most in need of help from other women. At the same time, these women in the long term tend to join the movement, provided they are not overwhelmed by the efforts to survive. Other women who cannot radically alter their lives still bring a changed perception to their lives and derive strength from understanding that their situation is shared by many. As such, providing support to individual women is an integral

part of consciousness raising.

However any changes in women's consciousness depends largely on the material conditions which shape their environment and the options which they perceive as being realistic for themselves. In this context, whether they are consciously engaged in consciousness raising or not, women's groups are in a position and do bring about a change in several ways.

First, the very existence of a women's group, which views women's problems in a different light, presents other women with an option to think and act differently.

In Jahangirpuri, which is a basti in North Delhi, some of us have been working with basti women who have formed a Sabla Mahila Sangh. Reshma, a young unmarried woman, is a member of this group. Initially, she used to be very quiet and was forced to give in to her family's wishes in every respect. Now with the confidence she has acquired over the years and with the knowledge that she is not alone, she has become a vocal member and has been able to resist marriage. Though she was engaged, she has refused to marry since she came to know that the man was involved with another woman. In Reshma's words, "Yeh ladai meri hi nahai hai, Sabla Sangh ki hai". She is aware that she could not have put up the fight alone and is able to do so only because other women will help her.

It is not just Reshma. The very women who never stepped out of their houses even if they knew that a neighbour was being beaten, today intervene and help other women in the basti in several ways.

Secondly, the experience of seeing and talking to women who have altered/changed/dealt with their lives in creative ways is another source of inspiration for women struggling to seek options.

Thirdly, a host of processes such as helping women to register police complaints, meet lawyers, participate in group dis-

cussions, collective decision making, propel women into areas of thought and action which they never perceived as their "domain" and never dreamt of having control over.

Fourthly, any income generating activity, if conducted on less exploitative lines, and which gives women the space to be creative has the potential to make women realise that things need not be the way they are and that alternatives are possible.

The Saheli Sanraksha Kendra is a rehabilitation project which was set up to help the victims of the 1984 communal carnage. Some of us had reservations about getting involved in an economic programme. Still, we decided to go ahead. Our experience in helping women in crisis situations to find employment tells us that they are often unable to hold a job. They are unable to be efficient and follow work disciplines even when they need an income to survive. Also, the work place, the kinds of jobs available to women, the unremunerative wages, are all most dissatisfying and unrewarding for women.

Our intention was to try and help these widows become self-supporting in a rewarding way. We started a work shed with a creche and a health centre. The initial phase was rather demoralising and full of tension for us. The women kept fighting with each other, there was no trust, their work response was not satisfactory and attendance was not too good either. We had meeting after meeting with them to resolve conflicts and to create a work ethic. As the women began acquiring skills, and started working in an atmosphere of collective decision making, the whole atmosphere changed. With an opportunity to be creative, the place started humming with activity and a joy/seemed highly infectious.

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Making changes in the patterns of our lives is a difficult and slow process. Often, it takes a long time for results to show.

In Jahangirpuri, we had been discussing "a women's control

her body" for one year and felt we had been successful in bringing "awareness" about their health to women. The response from the women was great and they were articulate in expressing their needs for a small family. So much so that we felt here was a group of "gut level Feminists"!

A few months later we found two of the more vociferous women pregnant with their fourth and sixth babies! We were dejected and demoralised.....what was the point in persevering when social circumstances and decision making structures in the family had not changed?

However, Kalsum, after her sixth baby, decided to use a Copper T secretly and Suresh had a tubectomy. At what point the seed is sown and when consciousness turns into action depends on objective conditions.

At a broader level, one could say that it is the effort of the last several years which is bringing in results today. More and more women seem to be rejecting situations that were an accepted part of life before. Changes have occurred in the law too. The introduction of Section 498 A can be seen as a result of campaigning around attempts to help individual women. However, to identify and prioritise issues remains an important task.

One of the constant problems facing women's groups is the lack of activist women to put into practice the many ideas we have for creating a broad based movement. We in Saheli feel we have to make choices regarding the group of women we are going to concentrate on.....housewives(housebound, married), domestic workers, women in the unorganised sector, women health workers such as nurses, aanganwadi workers, or women in the organised sector, college students, etc. Originally Saheli made a conscious choice of concentrating on the problems of housewives since they are one of the most exploited, voiceless segment of the female population and much more isolated than those women who are engaged in some work outside the home.

However, again and again, inspite of the pressures of supporting

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individual women, we feel the need to reach out to women in other segments as well. Some of us have been working with health activists in bastis; we have initiated the process of organising workshops and discussion groups with college students. Some of us have been participating in meetings, training programmes and other events organised by rural women's groups; some of us feel the need to work with existing unions such as of aanganwadi workers. Many of us also get involved with the issues taken up by civil liberties and other democratic organisations.

As our contacts broaden, the pressure to help individual women increases. When and how to decentralise remains an issue. If local groups are formed they can take on the task of helping individual women as well as become centres for consciousness raising.

In a way the process is cyclical. Consciousness raising activity generates the need for helping individual women, and helping individual women raises general issues. An example of the latter is the issue of domestic violence. Helping a large number of individual women has brought about some clarity around the issue. At the same time we feel the need to research the subject further and are planning a door-to-door survey and campaign against domestic violence. Yet we have not been able to take up our survey, because irrespective of our priorities individual women come for help and we have to listen to them!

Any discussion on the relationship between helping individual women and consciousness raising throws up a number of issues:

Very often there seems a vast gap between what we have come to understand theoretically and what we <sup>are</sup> actually able to put in action.

How do we go about creating a broad based movement? What issues should we give priority to? Which groups of women should we concentrate on?

Working with any segment requires ongoing programmes/activities. What should be the nature of these activities?

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Since material conditions often dictate the options available to women, how do we go about creating more and better opportunities for women?

Even when a woman in her work situation is very militant and radical, she continues to live and accept very exploitative and subjugated position within the family.

How do we help to set up local groups so that we can reach out to more women.

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How do we generate enough resources to take on several issues or to work at several levels at the same time? For example taking up individual cases and lobbying for changes in the law.

So far, a great deal of our efforts and energy has gone into reacting against something. How do we create the space and time for women to develop a vision of a changed future?

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THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

The difficulty we have encountered in preparing this article is that though, it is by nature polemical, we have failed to get hold of any single article on which to base ours. This article examines the ideas, conceptions and presuppositions prevalent in the established women's movement, underlying its actions and pronouncements, influencing it both covertly and overtly. The women's movement abounds in well written books and articles which, while brilliantly depicting the lot of the vast number of women and successfully highlighting many individual aspects of the women's problem as a whole, is concerned, for example, Sheila Rowbotham, apparently both a Marxist and a feminist, writes a pocket-history of feminism from what appears to be a Marxist view point, and at the end confesses that she is unable to successfully reconcile the two modes of thinking. The book which is a moving and lyrical account of women's struggle from the European middle ages to the Vietnamese war, with keen commentaries and subtle observations falls when it comes to comprehending the exact nature of women's problem. This is a typical feature of feminist literature.

Our effort is directed to help to clear the confusion and achieve clarity. what follows is the attempt to justify this bit of impertinence.

Two ideas we have found to be fundamentally erroneous I) The concept of feminism and, II) that of "women's oppression", which is the other side of the coin.

Feminism presupposes a coherent group called women, having to face as a social group, a common social problem which provides the common basis for unity and action. Such an idea is, however, entirely unfounded "There is no more a coherent group called women, than there is one called men, except on the biological level". Women of different classes and nations have often very different problems and entirely antagonistic interests. For example, the toils and hardships of a working woman are the source of profit for the capitalist's wife.

Similarly, the concept of women's oppression presupposes the male as the universally oppressive sex. This we hold to be erroneous to the point of absurdity. It is the slave owner and capitalist (both men and women) rather than the male slave or proletarian who profits from the exploitation of the slave and working women respectively. To imagine the male proletarian as the oppressor of the female worker, while the latter is attached to the bourgeois woman by bonds of sister hood is unrealistic, fantastic and reactionary. The women's movement has still to find any single social problem which oppresses women irrespective of nation, class or creed, or a single social privilege which men enjoy but is denied to women all over this planet. (example of women's franchise) Viewed from this angle, feminism is seen to have no other basis than the brains of individual feminists.

THE CONCEPT OF WOMANHOOD

There is no denying that there prevails in different degrees in society a concept of womanhood embracing the ideas of virginity, chastity and motherhood. It's a man's world, the woman's place is at home, was the trite formula which neatly summed up the position of women in the minds of both the sexes.

Contd....P/2.

I thought I saw two persons coming, but it was only a man and his wife, goes a Russian saying. A woman was not quite a person, she was something less than that.

In societies where physical strength and courage are of great importance, it is natural that the concepts of maturity and personality would be intimately linked to strength and manliness. Male chauvinism or the women's acceptance of an inferior status had their rational basis in the importance which society was bound to ascribe to physical strength and mobility. Sex chauvinism is not an inherent psychological attribute of the male, it is a historical product, conditioned by practical necessity. The fact that these age old concepts are daily being eroded is basically due to the fact that the scientific, technological revolution has immensely reduced the importance of physical strength, both in productive labour and warfare, leading to woman's participation in the social production on a mass scale. Women go to academic institutions, acquire technical and commercial skill, earn for themselves and their families. Families dependent on daughters and wives are no more isolated in modern industrial societies they are becoming common instances. In a society based on private property, economic independence except for the proletariat classes is not just given, but is a product of personal endeavour. A self made woman by earning for herself a livelihood establishes the basis of her individuality, shatters through the mystic cobweb of imaginary womanhood.

facts

On proceeding to examine the nature of women's problem, it would be interesting to take up cases where in individual women are being oppressed. There are numerous instances, especially in a backward nation like India, where women workers receive less wages vis-a-vis male worker in the same industry and occupational grade. It is quite evident however, that this can in no way be categorised in general as women's oppression. First, not all women workers suffer from this discrimination. If they did, even then, it would not be women's problem but a working women's problem, i.e. a class problem. Secondly, it is by no means the working man who gains from this discrimination but the company's shareholders which include both the sexes. It is quite in the interests of the capitalists wife to perpetuate this discrimination, which goes on to reveal the unfoundedness of feminism.

Feminists often (and very correctly) point out that in large number of cases the working woman has to bear a double burden, because she has to do her domestic duties along side her work at the office or factory. The husband, they complain, hardly shares the domestic duties. This example is indeed an <sup>one</sup> showing how people still tend to consider domestic work as typically woman's job, to be undertaken by women. Feminism correctly points out that such an outlook provides the bulwark of male chauvinism, but it should nonetheless be noted that the outlook itself springs from the age old division of labour between men and women. Such values ~~no~~ doubt help to perpetuate the old division of labour, but give way to new values and conceptions arising from structural changes in society. Though somewhat few and far between, working couples sharing the housework between themselves are by no means unknown. When such examples are cited, it is customary to class them as exceptions, (which it is implied, prove the rule). This, however is only dilletantism and not serious scientific investigation.

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When exceptions arise and increase in number, it is necessary to find out the circumstances leading to these exceptions. In the above case, the explanation is, simple. There is no law in modern society prohibiting women to take up jobs in offices and factories or confining them to domestic service. Women are increasingly forced to take up jobs outside their homes, and are becoming active earning members of the family alongside their brothers and husbands. The changing role of women are being recognised by society. The new values which are emerging are often lost sight of but they all represent an absolutely new tendency, pregnant with new prospects and possibilities, new models of thinking and living. When few couples show that the household job can be shared between the man and the woman, there is no reason why the same should not apply to the other couples as well.

Women workers often put forward the demand for creche facilities. This again is not a purely women's demand (though for several reasons, it has come to be put forward by the woman worker.) for the creche is a relief to both the wife and the husband. Besides, the demand itself can be realised by trade union action by the joint struggle of women and men revealing the typically ~~xx~~ class nature of the demand.

PROSTITUTION : Often this phenomena is indicated as an example of women's oppression. What is exactly so objectionable in prostitution? Is it the fact that the prostitute is being forced by necessity to sell herself? What is then there so exceptional in prostitution? Does not capitalism force the immense majority of human population to sell themselves? In a society where everything becomes a commodity, even the essentially human qualities like wit, intelligence, conscience and honor acquire an exchange value, is it unnatural that sexual pleasure should become a commodity?

Though almost everywhere prostitution can be legalised; the general opinion goes against prostitution and the prostitutes have to lead lives of outcasts. In a society which holds the bond of marriage to be sacred, going to the brothel is naturally sin, and the prostitute is considered the very embodiment of immorality.

Prostitution is a glaring example of how the present society degrades and oppresses individual women. But the prostitutes are themselves divided into two sections (i) the common prostitute living a life haunted by poverty, syphilis, exploitation by the brothel keeper, all kinds of harassment by the antisocials and the police (ii) The rich aristocratic prostitutes or hetairas who face almost none of the problems of her poor sister, lives a more or less leisured life. She has rich and influential customers, though an outcast of official society, through then she herself enjoys a certain degree of power and position. However, as is evident, it would be absurd to classify prostitution as women's oppression in general. This is also borne out by the existence of lesbian and homosexual prostitutes.

WIFE BEATING AND RAPE

To categorise wife beating and rape as women's oppression is to categorise all men as rapists and (or potential rapists) and wife beaters. The very absurdity of this poses a logical bar in categorising the above mentioned evils as resulting from women's oppression (though the incidents themselves involve humiliation and harassment of individual women).

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Society does not sanction wife beating or rape and both of them are criminal offences punishable under law.

DOWRY AND BRIDE BURNING

Marriage in backward societies like India, where free mixing of men and women is not socially acceptable, is marked by the degrading phenomena — exchange of dowry. It has to be kept in mind that this phenomena does not cut across nations. Moreover marriage here plays the role of a business transaction where the capital is transferred from one family to another. The bride is expected to handover the amount of money to her husband which is worth his social position and prestige. Thus this social system is not only turning the bride into a commodity but the groom as well. In most of the cases the dowry given is a burden on the entire family of the bride. So here again the dowry system fails to become an oppressive machinery for the woman alone.

Nowadays one often hears of bride burning and the brutal mental and physical torture of the bride failing the proper payment of dowry, most often the greatest responsibility is borne by the mother-in-law and the sister-in-law. How the lead taken by a woman in oppressing another woman again goes to prove that oppression is not applicable to the women community as a whole. In this case one might call dowry an oppressive machinery for only a section of women.

USE OF WOMEN AS SEX SYMBOLS

Feminists point out to the use of women's physique in advertisement as an example of women's oppression. Once again certain important points are being conveniently ignored. From the point of view of commercial interest the capitalist is exploiting the saleability of a woman's body. It may be noted that advertisements cater to consumers of both the sexes. Moreover an entrepreneur will use any means to sell his goods, be it male masculinity or the female body. Thus in this case the question of women's oppression does not arise.

THE NATURE OF WOMEN'S PROBLEM

The examination of particular cases reveals that it would be incorrect to say that women as a sex face oppression (i.e. by men). There was a time when women were deprived of the right to vote and denied equal legal status.

But today, except perhaps in some countries where theocracy dominates the men in general possess no material means by which to carry out the oppression of women. It is indeed true that in every nation, class and profession the men are well ahead of the women. Most property holders, most workers, technicians, doctors, engineers and scientists are men. The disproportion tends to be greater in the nations which are industrially more backward. However, the disproportion tends to become less as time goes on, as more and more women take up active work outside their homes. It is interesting to note that the change in women's roles overtime is less in the so called third world nations which suffer from chronic economic stagnation and where the pace of industrialization is slow.

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It cannot be denied that all sorts of problems exist for a large number of individual women and on the whole men seem to enjoy greater status and more facilities. First, the very womanhood of the woman poses a problem, it is she who has to bear the drudgery of the menstrual cycle, burdens of pregnancy and the pangs of childbirth. Nature has adapted a great part of her physiology for the possibilities of perrenial coition, a long period of pregnancy, childbirth and prolonged lactation. In the case of the woman the individual has been sacrificed to the needs of the species.

It has already been mentioned that male chauvinism is not simply an eternal characteristic of male psychology, but a reflex conditioned by material necessity. If nature has bound the woman she has absolutely freed the man from any burden of reproduction besides the act of coition (which can hardly be called a burden). On the other hand, the male is larger, stronger and more mobile. In all pre-industrial societies there attributes naturally possessed great importance accounting for the elevated status of the male in society and his guardianship over the female. It appeared that nature had meant maternity to be the goal of the female. If her physical characteristics led to the woman's confinement, it was her domestic confinement which bound her up in these characteristics making it appear she was fit for nothing else. The woman caught up in the vicious cycle of history, thus always remained in the back ground. So while the man was busy changing the world for himself, the woman was busy tending him and his home. And so, if history appears to be a triumphant march of the male sex, it is because neither of the sexes could help it.

We have argued already that in pre-industrial societies, the concepts of maturity and personality were closely linked up with those of strength and toughness. It is interesting to trace through linguistics now this concept profoundly influenced, the value structure of our ancestors. 'Vertue' has its origin in 'Vir' which means man, and 'Arete' which also means virtue is derived from ares which is Mars, the God of War. Given this value structure, it was perhaps natural that the woman would come to be considered something less than a person, dependent on the man.

Given these premises, it is evident that women's liberation is closely bound up with the mechanisation of the production process, i.e. the reduction in the importance of physical strength of society. Scientific and technological progress by giving human beings control over the process of reproduction, free women from the burdens of unwanted child births and immensely reduce the difficulties of childbirth. Hither to sexual freedom was meaningful only to the man, to the woman it implied unwanted pregnancies. Effective birth control, by freeing the woman sexually lays down the basis for asserting her individuality. Thus, the control of human beings over nature provides the basis of woman's liberation.

IN THE SPHERE OF VALUES

If industry and technology created the basis of women's emancipation, all it's issues are still far from being settled. If it is our mode of living which determines our value structure, the latter does not mechanically respond to changes in the former. Changes in the economic basis of society take place categorically, and can be measured with scientific precision. Such does not apply to the value complex whose changes are

complicated and hap-hazard and values tend to linger on even after the material basis has been removed. We have been arguing the unfoundedness of feminism, but that as a mode of thinking it continues to influence and inspire intellectuals ranging from the extreme left to the right has its basis in the wide prevalence of male chauvinistic values in society, specially in the backward ones.

Capitalist development proceeds along the line of uneven and combined development, resulting in the uneven growth of various nation and within the same nation localities at various stages of industrial advancement. Capitalism finds nations at various stages of social progress draws them into its fold, moulds them to suit its end, and in a word tries to fashion the world in its own image. However, the changes which it introduces are by no means uniform, leading to the formation of the most bizarre forms, intertwining of different modes of production, sharply differentiated value structures entering into a symbiotic relation. This has resulted in a most peculiar variety in society and culture. Superabundance and poverty, ultra modernity and backwardness clash and co-exist.

The resulting variety is perhaps most strikingly reflected in the lot being as they are in various stages of their process of emancipation. Many feminists who recount in gory details the problems of a wife in rural India hardly face any of her problems. Indeed, even in our backward country, many women enjoy status and privileges which place them in an all round equal position to the men of the same class and social position. Feminists hardly appreciate the necessity of explaining such phenomena and conveniently pass them off as exceptions (which they go to establish the general rule of women's oppression.) Indeed, we agree with them that exceptions by themselves prove nothing. It is necessary to comprehend the social mechanism which lead to such exceptions. But this is precisely what the feminists fail to do.

FAMILY given the promise of the right to divorce and economic independence for the woman, the basis for free union is present. On this basis the monogamous nuclear family no longer retains its woman oppressive character, i.e. structurally.

Capitalism thrives on unemployment, unemployment is the condition sine qua non of capitalist economy. Economic independence for the large majority of women cannot be realised within the folds of privatised economy. Hence, socialism is the necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the emancipation of all women. Besides, as a more humane society where people themselves have a say in the shaping of their lives, society will also take over most of the domestic and other services (including child care) which unnecessarily hinder development of the individual. Antiquated values of course, will continue to persist. But having lost for themselves an earthly basis will wither away in course of time. Men and women freed from the fetters of material and spiritual slavery will be able to stand their feet firmly on the ground and their heads in the skies, build for themselves and their children a new destiny



ORGANISATION

We have discussed above the different premises of the women's question & our examination leads us to deny any basis of feminism. Naturally there remains no ground for a separate women's organisation in the sense of being an organisation for the women, as well as by the women. Since of course a large number of women as wives daughters & workers face a number of problems alongside women who are denied rights & are insulted & mutilated, it is quite feasible to build an organisation which fight on these issues.

Some emphasize that the membership of such an organisation should be restricted only to women. The logic for such a sex exclusiveness is of course that men will be naturally unable to realize the full import of the problems which women face. Such an approach again presupposes a common problem for all women. If women do not have a single common social problem, sex eligibility for the organisation becomes meaningless. If an unmarried girl can understand the problems of a burdened abused wife so can her boy friend.

SOCIALISM & ORGANISATION BASED ON WOMEN'S ISSUES -

Having confessed that socialism is a necessary condition for the solution of the women's question, the examination of this question & the relevant actions regarding it forms part & parcel of the struggle for socialism. This is not to deny the relative autonomy of the question but to emphasize on the socialist nature of the solution. When one says that the national question can not be solved under capitalism, he does not equate national oppression with capitalism but simply emphasizes the necessity of socialism to solve this question.

The women's problem did not begin with capitalism & in a sense may continue to haunt us after its abolition but within it the problems must remain.

Socialism concerns human freedom & socialists are duty bound to fight against any ~~and~~ curtailment of human rights of any group or section in society. Hence socialists can & should take interest & work in organisation based on women's issues. It may even be necessary to form women cells in the socialist party i.e. a cell which specializes on this question.

GLIMPSES FROM HISTORY

In the article it has been argued that woman kind does not form a socially coherent group. The history of women's movements best exhibits this proposition.

1) France - The French revolution by breaking the traditional hierarchy of the power relations stirred the bourgeois women & bourgeois feminism flourished. The petition entitled 'grievances & complaints of women in bad marriages' criticized the marriage laws then in vogue, demanded the legislation of divorce, challenged the legal tyranny of the husbands, protested against the law which permitted only the husbands to appear as plaintiffs in litigations concerning conjugal infidelity etc.

On the other hand these demands hardly formed part of the political programme of the working class women. They did not oppose divorce laws .... legal & political equality for themselves, but recognised that for women of the property less class, the winning of feminine rights was contingent upon the acquisition of workers rights generally. To women of the working class the problems of inflation, unemployment & hunger were of much greater urgency than the question of divorce, education & legal status. In fact the antagonism in the interests of the bourgeois feminists with the lowest class of their fellow women is well reflected in the role played by OlympedeGouges, one of the leading bourgeois feminists. In order to protect honest women & their daughters from the horror of seeing such wildness in Paris streets DeGouges wanted to sweep prostitutes off the public thoroughfares & shut them up in separate quarters belonging to the state under police protection.

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2) AMERICA - American feminism was born out of the movement for the abolition of slavery. The convention that was held under the presidentship of Elizabeth Cady Stanton resolved that every woman should be given the sacred right to the elective franchise. It is evident from the number of men who came forward to sign this resolution that they supported the women in their struggle.

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The end of the century saw the transformation of the progressive bourgeois feminists to reactionary, racist & xenophobic. All through this period the black women had been excluded from the feminist organisations. From then onwards the middle class white feminist groups of the south overtly showed racism.

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From the dark world of poverty, pain, hardship the American working class women came forward to join strikes & form women armies. In no way did their interests coincide with those of the bourgeois feminists. To quote one of the pioneering figures of the working class movement, Mother Jones addressed to the suffragettes - 'You don't need a vote to raise hell! You need convictions & a voice! ..... The women of Colorado have had the vote for two generations & the working men & women are in slavery!'

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GERMANY - Germany became the centre of international labour movement after the fall of Paris Commune. By 1892 a number of women became organised in trade unions. The name Clara Zetkin is closely associated with the socialist women's movement in Germany. The need for trade union unity between men & women was central to Clara Zetkin's thinking & action. By then Germany had also become quite familiar with the liberation struggle of the bourgeois feminists. To quote Zetkin - "The liberation struggle of the working class woman cannot be - as it is for the bourgeois woman - a struggle against the men of her own class ..... The end goal of her struggle is not free competition against men, but bringing about the political rule of the working class."

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In the years that followed the socialist & the bourgeois women's movements battled with each other & finally during the years of depression following the 1st. World War the bourgeois women's movement shifted to extreme right to join the Nazis.

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R U S S I A The bourgeois & the socialist women's movement in Russia though had a shorter life span, but showed sharper conflicts. The year 1905 saw the emergence of a number of bourgeois women's organisations Maria Pokrovskaja who founded the Progressive women's party openly objected to working class militancy. The proportion of women in socialist revolutionary party steadily grew. One of the writings of Kollontai read.

"The movement of women workers by its very nature an indivisible part of the general worker's movement .... The April Rebellion of 1895 at Yaroslav factory was carried out with help & under the influence of women weavers ..... At a time of unrest & strike actions the proletarian woman downtrodden & without rights, suddenly grows & learns to stand tall & straight".

In the 1st. all Russian women's Conference, One member of the worker's group stated. "Working women are fighting for their full rights" Bourgeois women were content merely to throw off their legal shackles. Kollontai while discussing the women's question stated - "The woman question, say the feminists, is a question of rights & justice. The woman question, answer the proletarian woman, is a question of a piece of bread."

The entire story of Russian revolution demonstrates the sharpening antagonism of the women's struggle which polarised them into two camps - working class & bourgeois.

However, we have seen that when the women did happen to possess a common grievance or demand, such as the demand for enfranchisement or equal status before the law, they have tried to fight together irrespective of caste class & religious barrier. But it was generally seen that in spite of a common demand the class division did create a major problem in the coming together of the bourgeois & the proletarian woman. *The efficacy of* a common platform requires much more than just a common demand. A great deal depends on how the demand is viewed by different persons who rally behind it. Working together requires a community of feeling, mutual understanding & a community of experience. It was precisely here that a vast gulf separated the proletarian from the bourgeois woman. Whatever bond there was a bond of distrust.

It should be noted however, that demand for constitutional equality was actually a demand on a bourgeois plane. It was possible for the working women to support it & indeed it was very much in their interest to do so. The same however could not (& still can not) be said of the specific demands raised by the working class women. The very class nature of their demand would arouse opposition among their bourgeois sisters.

Feminists cite examples to prove the fact of male antagonism towards women's rights. Indeed men have often come up against awarding such rights to women. But on the other hand there are many brilliant examples of men's solidarity with women's movement. It appears that ignoring such examples is purposeful & biased in order to strengthen the case *for* in favour of feminism.

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NOTE 3 : 1) Sheila Rowbotham - Women : Resistance & Revolution

BOOKS CONSULTED

- 1) Sheila Rowbotham - Women : Resistance & Revolution.
- 2) Simone deBeauvoir - Second Sex.
- 3) Tony Cliff - Class Struggle & Women's Liberation.
- 4) Certain pamphlets & articles of Clara Zetkin & Alexandra Kollontai.

For the last few months we have been raising the questions regarding women's oppression & the concept of feminism in our organisation. Discussions are going on & the debates are yet to be solved. We have elaborately discussed our view in our article we hope that it will be of mutual benefit if you read our article & send us your reply.

Thanking you,

Ishani Duttagupta

Simonti Sen

12/A, Salimpur Byelane, Calcutta-31.

PIN CODE : 700031

Paper presented by Shackles And Women at All India Women's Conference "Perspective of Autonomous Women Movement In India" held at Bombay from 23rd Dec. to 26th December, 1985.

By:-Dr. Jiwan Jot Kaur.

SAW-ABRIEF INTRODUCTION:- Full abbreviation of SAW is 'Shackles And Women.' It is an English bi-monthly which has credit of being the first seedling of the Northern India (State of Punjab) in the growing tree of Women-movement in India. It started two years ago with the objectives:-

1. Analyse women's problems and discovering the real sources of their oppression and exploitation.
2. To spread the awareness that : : : untill the Shackles of Women, Men cannot be free.
3. To evolve appropriate forms and techniques of compaigns launched, sound various issues from the most intensely personal to large economic political social and cultural ones.
4. To endeavour for organizational forms and structures which would transform small groups, grass root level collectives and organisations into well knit networks which would mirror and co-ordinate the diverse experiences of different groups into a collective experience accumulated over decades.

S.A.W. is unable to imagine a feminist evolution leading to a radical change in the private/political realm of gender that is not rooted in the conviction that all women's lives are important, that ~~the lives of men cannot be understood by burying the lives of women; and that to make visible the full meaning of woman's experience, to interpret knowledge in terms of that experience is now the most important task of thinking ( and Practise).~~

(SHACKLES AND WOMEN VIEW POINT ON)

Ideological Spectrum of Women)- Movement To-day.

✓ From Matriarchy to Patriarchy.

Women oppression is woven into the very texture of the society. It is worked through economic dependance on man, taboos set by religious-law-givers through traditions and conventions which have been changing according to needs of male-oriented society.

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In the earlier stages of civilization woman enjoyed a superior status. The matriarchal system of society placed control in hands of women. Women because of their role in production i.e., being inventor of primitive agriculture and doing animal husbandry enjoyed superior status. She was also respected for her reproductive role. But with further economic development, property which uptill now was in hands of commune came into private hands. With the advent of private property important changes in superstructure influenced position of women negatively. Pairing marriage in commune house hold where on mutual basis one women was temporarily/permanently attached with one man, was now replaced by monogamy in which women lost right of independent decision. With advent of private property men wanted their authentic heir. So mother's fidelity was main case of father. Sexual division of labour came in existence confining her role exclusively to home giving rise to patriarchy with this mother's right was over thrown. Along with this important change was the division of society into the classes of Rulers and the <sup>Ruled</sup> Former enjoying the control over means of production to the exclusion of the later. Evidently the class oppression and women oppression surfaced simultaneously with the advent of private property. Then followed a long history of class oppression in slave society, feudal society, capitalist society which has further proliferated to class/caste/sex oppression keeping in course of patriarchy intact.

Indian Women At Present.

In India neo-colonial pattern of economic development is the root cause of inequalities denying the majority of population, their share in production resources. India is a multinational country and most of its present states represent separate nationalities. Economic development of these nationalities is not at par with each other due to unequal and distorted development of neo-colonial Indian economy and same is true ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ about development of their cultural aspect. Culture is main ideological weapon through which women are kept subordinate. So we will have to deal women oppression according to level of economic development and cultural notions of particular nationality. But cultural front would require two fold ideological struggle. One is to combat with the negative values of patriarchy as well as feudal remanants in culture and the other is to check the

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neo-colonial degenerated culture being trusted on us. Due to the obnoxious neo-colonial culture the development of positive aspects of the cultures of various nationalities is also inhibited. Further an attempt to counter this adverse effect of the neo-colonial culture large section of the people is led astray unconsciously to uphold and confirm the feudal values allivating them to the level of 'sacred Indian Culture'. There is no such Indian Culture but in different nationalities prevails different cultures ranging from matriarchal values, (e. g. in Bheels & other tribalbeets) feudal and then to neo-colonial capitalist culture.

Even culture of urban and rural strata of some nationality differ under effect of more wide propoganda of neo-colonial culture in urban areas. The deviations like Indian-nation, Indian culture, uniform Civil Code (conservatively defined) for India cannot lead us towards path of liberation and are all alien to the present concrete reality.

#### Where to Strike?

Private property and class society being at the lease of Patriarchy should remain our target for attack in order to extirpate the entire evil of oppression and exploitation. But it should not be taken to mean that untill the achievement of this goal, we should postpone our efforts to change our lot to whatever extent possible. Also the social change is must for our emancipation therefore women's struggle should be part and parcel of struggle for social change in the main direction. But it cannot be materialized till we liberate ourselves first from neo-colonial exploitation hence immediate and foremost task is to join our hands in struggle against neo-colonial exploitation.

#### Our Allies In Struggle.

Task of social change cannot be done single handedly. We should gather all the forces whose interests also demand social change in this direction. Proletarians, Minorities, Dalits and various nationality struggles, all are fighting for such change. therefore we should join our hands with them. Out of all these forces proletariat will be our firm ally till final struggle in so far as the private property and the classes are their chief enemies responsible for their poor plight. Having the common enemy the proletariat will shoulder with women's in their struggle till victory.

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We are not to counter pose our struggle with men or with political parties. Regarding men we should make them aware that you cannot liberate yourself keeping women in chains. Though all men will not support in fact majority will oppose to begin with, but enlightened men will become our staunch supporters.

Similarly political parties cannot do without raising voice for cause of women. To maintain our independence from political parties does not mean autonomy from politics. Women working in parties should fight ideologically for correct perspective rather than alienating women movement from political main stream. Question is not of men bosses in political parties but of ideology. If at present some left parties have sealed their minds and following patriarchal values, it does not mean that left ideology is wrong. Ultimately no left party can succeed in revolution without participation of women. So question is of fighting for correct and concrete analysis of present reality from Marxist-Leninist view point which only can lead us to correct direction.

If we will also seal minds from main stream of politics how to decide course for social change? We can only know and support any movement if we are aware of correct politics corresponding to our perspective.

Our Enemies.

All those who strongly defend status quo are our enemies. State the biggest savior of status Quo. We must differentiate those who are adhering to old values under the effect of long standing cultural values but are themselves oppressed and exploited under this social set up. Such persons must be dealt by making them understand the exploitative nature of the social set-up. But the exploiters and exponents of status quo (including State), must be dealt as our stark enemies.

Question of Women Liberation in Socialist Society

Some quote the experience of Socialist Societies, women's lot has not improved. Hence Marxism have failed. Theoretically analysis of Marxism clearly depicts women oppression with private property and classes. In socialist society neither classes nor private property end, though endeavour to continue. It is only transition phase from capitalism to communism, as compared to capitalism women role is better but emancipation is not possible till communism. One more important aspect is that as socialist society is transitional phase so it can regress and degenerate conforming back to old values under new veil. So question is not so simple to draw simplistic conclusions of negating Marxism.

Some Deviations And Critic.

1. One view visualize men as sole oppressor of women. they do not pinpoint social structure from which patriarchal values flow.

First cannot or this cannot s human develop in society.  
2. Second hierarchy and social system they contend t try to evade only. Their co nying ideologi ver we break revolution in Revolu ideologically a favour of prole ts material be 3. Third vie reforms only we social setup. T all developmen freedom previous s they are means vision which we 4. Fourth View like to indulge if individual fr ore than sex fr alternative w crucial for libe 5. Fifth View: s well as in pa claims that, f ill be upheld Though they a: ategorically kee oppression from s oppressor of wome present confer ally think ques



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First and foremost it is against laws of nature. Society in Gen  
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2. Second view is other extreme of first view. It visualises patri-  
archy and social oppression but contend that a patriarchy is due to  
social system as nothing can be done before we change this social system.  
They contend that when system is at fault what poor man can do, thereby  
try to evade man's responsibility by shifting whole burdon on society  
only. Their concepts of revolution is also defective. It is in fact de-  
laying ideologically that we are always at war with Bourgeoise and when-  
ever we break old norms and establish new, create a base for change----  
revolution in real sense.

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Revolution is not only change of state of power but fighting  
ideologically at all planes. We struggle to turn over state power in  
favour of proletarian to pave the way for ideological change by changing  
its material basis.

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3. Third view: has whole of the focus on reforms thinking that by  
reforms only we can change the lot of women within present frame work of  
social setup. This outlook does not visualise question of liberation as  
full development of personalities but become contend with some changes  
from previous situation. Though reforms play ~~extensive~~ some role but  
they are means not the end. Visulizing these as an end indicates myopic  
vision which we cannot/should not afford.

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4. Fourth View: of those who want freedom on Western Patron they donot  
like to indulge in questions like social setup etc. but raise the thesis  
of individual freedom as paramount. This type of approach is nothing  
more than sex freedom this freedom is Pseudo Freedom-----fettering in  
an alternative way by cramping down the ~~sex~~ personality development,  
crucial for liberation.

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5. Fifth View: which consider source of oppression in social system  
as well as in patriarchal values, blaming the men too with social setup.  
It claims that foremost women problem will be dealt and women rights  
will be upheld. No other consideration will block the way.

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Though they are taking social structure in account but when they  
categorically keep first issue at priority, defecto delink women  
oppression from social setup and open way for deviation i.e. men as role  
oppressor of women. It finds its manifestation even in the arrangements  
of present conference where it has debarred male participation. If we

not pinpoint

really think question of social change is foremost necessary to change the

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lot of women then no general rule or priorities can be fixed. Concretely we will have to decide needs of social change and women movement ; if viewed properly these donot come in clash. We will also determine protagonists of women moment on basis of ideology and not on basis of sexes.

6. Sixth view: which claims that Marxism has failed to incorporate in it Feminism and so some changes in Marxism are : needed to bring about its accommodation of Feminism in it ----labelling it as Marxist Feminist view point.

Marxism is a Philosophy which incorporate in it analysis of each field of society including women oppression. If so called Marxist fail to analyse it properly and conclude that in Western countries capitalism is no more source of oppression but only patriarchy ; thereby delinking class society as source of patriarchy; Marxism cannot be blamed.

Concept of Feminism has been defined in many ways so far. Most common and popular understanding of this, 'ism' is ideology of women liberation as counter posed with men. It is much wrong to build a new 'ism' (Feminism) versus Marxism and try to incorporate one in other. Correct solution is to apply Marxist principle on concrete reality of today attacking wrong notions and evolving a correct strategy rather than abstract formulations which in essence delink women oppression from social setup. Now some other groups are explaining concept of Feminism in different way but will it be possible to give it another import vis a vis present interpretation. This problem must be pondered by conference.

How To Evolve a United Strategy.

Practical question posed before us are similar while analysis differs . So to build a common practical and ideological movement at all India level we must built a Forum . Forum should have following task:- 1. To provide a Platform for evolving ideological unity after discussions among different trends.

2. To bring out an English paper to co-ordinate these trends and practical analytical experiences by way of representation to all.

3. To Co-ordinate practical activities of wide import at country level.

4. To encourage and support initiative of peripheral local groups and help them run papers in regional languages.

We should work at every possible place in women group, in mass struggle, in trade union and political parties. Only joint struggle of all social pursuits with other oppressed and exploited sections, practically and ideologically can help to develop women leadership of independent and developed personalities. Such participation is crucial for our intellectual development which in ultimate paves way for accepting challenges in forming our way for social change.

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# "औरतों की है फुकार संपत्ति में है अधिकार!" chetna.

(Brook Bazar, Bihar)

## मठकी गतिविधि एवं आंदोलनकी शुरुवात

"जो जमीनको जोते बोये, वो जमीन का मालिक होये।" इस नारे के साथ बोधगया भूमि संघर्ष की शुरुवात हुई। बोधगया मठ बिहार के खूंखार जमीनदारों में से हैं। सरकार द्वारा नियोजित सर्वेना जाप कमिटी के मुताबिक बोधगया मठ के पास १२००० एकड़ फरजी जमीन है। गाँव के गरिबों की जमीन हथिया के शंकराचार्य मठ का साम्राज्य पूरे गया में फैला हुआ है। बोधगया मठ शंकराचार्य के रूप में जाना जाता है। बौद्ध मठ हिन्दू मठ बन गया हैं। मठ की पूरे गया जिले में जगह जगह पर अपनी कचहरियां है जहाँ से पूरे जमीनका काम संचालित होता है। गया जिले में गाँव के लिये कानून भी बोधगया मठ ही बनाता है और सजा भी वही देता है। निष्ठा के पक्षों में ही ऐसे उदाहरण है कि सजा के रूपमें दण्डित जागी के व्यपिता पर हाथी चलाया गया। मठ के पूजारी अपने विलास के लिये दलित भूँईयों महिलाओं को रखते थे [भूँईया जाती बिहारमें सबसे पीछड़ी जाती मूशहर जाती के नाम से भी जानी जाती है ] खेत में औरतों की छेड़खानी आम बात थी। मठ की गाँव गाँव में तांडी के अड्डे चलाने के पीछे भूमिका रही ताकि मजदूर नशेमें पड़ा रहे। १९५८ में छात्र युवा संघर्ष वाहिनी ने मठके सामंति साम्राज्यको चुनौती दी और गया के मजदूर मजदूर किसान समिती नांगक वर्ग संगठन के तहत संगठित हुअे। संघर्ष वाहिनी के प्रतिनिधि एवं मजदूर किसान समिति के प्रतिनिधि द्वारा गठित "बोध गया आंदोलन संचालन समिति" द्वारा बोधगया भूमि आंदोलन संचालित है। आज करिबन १७५ गाँवो में संगठन है। आज ८००० एकड़ जमीन पर मजदूरों का कब्जा है। १५०० एकड़ जमीन आंदोलन द्वारा कानूनन रूपसे आज़ाद हुई है। इसमें करिबन १५० एकड़ जमीन औरतों के नाम हासिल हुई हैं। आज मठ का मजबूत सामंति केन्द्र कचहरि के रूपमें काम करता वह खतम कर दिया है, तीन ब्लॉक में कचहरिया ढहा दी गयी हैं। संघर्ष के दौरान औरतों के सवाल पर समझदारी बनने। स्पष्ट हुआ कि औरतों की मात्र सामाजिक सांस्कृतिक नहीं है। बोधगया आंदोलन में महिलाओ में हुअे काम और आयी कुछ समस्याओं का यह जिज्ञ है।

## औरतों के सवाल के पीछे का भूमि

आप उत्पादन के साधनों पर पुरुष का समाप्तित्व और यौन के आधार पर श्रमत्रिभाजन में पूरी तरह से अर्सेबधा है और ये एक दूसरे को मजबूती प्रदान करते है। आज का श्रमत्रिभाजन औरतों को उत्पादन के समाप्तित्व में कोई हिस्सा नहीं देता। श्रमत्रिभाजन के आधार पर हमारी सामाजिक व्यवस्था और मान्यतायें टिकी है। पौनिक श्रमत्रिभाजन इस तरह से शोषण का एक औजार बन

गया है। इस लिये उत्पादन प्रक्रिया भी बदलनी होगी और उत्पादन की वह प्रक्रिया खोजनी होगी जिससे उत्पादन के साधनों पर सिर्फ पुरुष का नहीं औरतों का भी हक बने। हम मानते हैं कि, व्यक्तिगत सम्पत्ति और पितृसत्तात्मक समाज व्यवस्था आज के स्त्री शोषण के जड में है। इसके खिलाफ लड़ाई और एक वैकल्पिक व्यवस्था के निर्माण के लिये समाज में बुनियादी बदलाव लाना होगा। संपूर्ण व्यवस्था परिवर्तन के बगैर स्त्रियुक्ती सम्भव नहीं है। और स्त्रियुक्ती की लड़ाई कमजोर तबके की औरतोंको केन्द्र में रखकर औरतों द्वारा ही लड़ी जायेगी। आर्थिक हितों के लड़ाई में महिलाओं के अधिक भागिदारी के दो कारण हैं एक उच्च मध्य वर्ग की जड़ता से मुक्ती होती है, और दूसरे उत्पादन की प्रक्रिया में प्रत्यक्षता सामिल रहने के कारण आर्थिक हितोंसे वे सिधी जुडी होती है। इसके साथ आर्थिक हितोंको सिर्फ पतिके हित में नहीं बल्की अपने हितों में ले जाने की बात समझना भी आसान होता है। जैसे जमीन पर स्त्रियों को भी कानूनी पचा मिले या पुरुष के बराबर औरतों की मजदूरी हो। इस तरीकेसे बुनियादी सवालों पर बड़े आंदोलनों में उनकी भागिदारी भी जादा सम्भव है और उसके द्वारा पुरुष प्रधान व्यवस्था पर वोट भी जादा स्पष्ट तरीके से की जा सकती है। इससे स्त्रियोंकी अपने स्वतंत्र अस्तित्व की लड़ाई के लिये वातावरण तयार होता है। किसी क्षेत्र के सभी अंतरविरोधो को उभार कर और हल करते हुये हमे अपनी व्यवस्था परिवर्तन की लड़ाई क्लानी होगी। जैसे आर्थिक अंतर्विरोध, जाती का अंतर्विरोध, और स्त्री पुरुष के बीच के अंतर्विरोध अलग अलग स्थितियोंमें अलग अलग अन्तर्विरोध केंद्र में हो सकते हैं जैसे आन्दोलनके किसी दौर में जमीन का सवाल केन्द्र में होगा तो कभी बलात्कार या जमीन औरतों के नाम से हो इसे भी केन्द्र में लाना पड़ेगा और इन सारे संघर्ष को एक साथ इस तरीकेसे क्लाना होगा कि, हम अपनी लड़ाई अधिक तेज और पैनी बना सके।

औरत की पीटाई मात्र हिंसा ही नहीं, औरत को कमजोर मानने की प्रवृत्ति है।

स्त्री पुरुष के अन्तर्विरोध को स्पष्ट करने के लिये दाहू और औरतों की पीटाई के सवाल को शुरुआत में लिया गया। दाहू पुरुष की हिंसक प्रवृत्ति को बढाता है जिसे औरत की भेलती है। औरत की पीटाई का विरोध उनकी अपनी अस्मिता की लड़ाई है। गांव - गांव में औरतों की अलग अलग बैठके की गई जिसो ये दाहू औ पीटाई के खिलाफ संगठित हो सके। घरों में दाहू शराब से बनाया जाता था औरतों में घर घर घुम घुम कर, धरना देकर मटके फोड़ शराब बंदी की। अलग से इसके लिये औरतों के दस्ते बने जो शराब गांव में न बने इसपर नजर रखते थे। औरत की पीटाई का माफ्ला नहीं है बल्की इसके पिछे

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औरत की हीन कमजोर और गुलामियानने की प्रवृत्ति है और इसी लिये औरत की पिटाई विषय व्यक्तिगत मामला नहीं है बल्कि औरत जाति का अपमान है। इसके खिलाफ भी औरते संगठित है।

माँजूदा विवाह संस्था, पितृसत्ताक व्यवस्था का प्रतिक है।

आज दहेज प्रथा व विवाह की रीतीया औरतोंको दामेय पक्षा मानकर ला की गई है। विकल्प से रूप में क्षेत्र में जयमाला पर विवाह आन्दोलन के कार्यक्रम के ऋ में जसे। यह विकल्प १ विवाह प्रथा १ औरतों के दामेय दर्जे को नाकारते हुये पूरी पितृसत्तात्मक व्यवस्था पर वोट है। जयमाला विवाह के प्रति दायित्व भी पैदा हुआ है। शेखवारा गाँव में जब जयमाला द्वारा विवाहित लडकेने पैसे की मांग लेकर लडकी को छोड दिया तो उसी गाँव में गाँव सभी स्त्री पुरूष के साथ क्षेत्र के कार्यकर्ता बैठे तर्क तय हुआ की इस तरह के अलग गाँव में लडकी अहमती भी आवश्यक है। बल्कि सभी की सामाजिक स्थिती में निर्णय का अधिकार लडकी का ही होगा। वह अलग रहना रिक्कार करती है तो ठिक करना लडके वालों को लडकी के निर्णय को रिक्कार करना होगा अन्यथा उनका सामाजिक बहिष्कार होगा।

औरतों के सहभाग के हुये प्रयत्न:

पर्वों १ आन्दोलन द्वारा प्रसारित १ में, सम्मेलनो में, क्षेत्र में औरतों को लडाई में भी और हक में भी लगावर का माना जाता रहा। वाहिनी और मजदूर किसान समिती के कार्यकर्ताओं से यह अपेक्षा की जाती है कि, औरतों की बराबरी के विचार को वे अपने जीवन में उतारे। गाँव गाँव में इन कार्यकर्ताओ ने अपनी झुठी थाली खुद धोकर, औरतों का काम हीन नहीं है और घरेलू काम के प्रति पुरूष की भी जिम्मेदारी है -- यह बहस कलाई है। आर्थिक संघर्ष में दूसरे अन्तर्विरोध को उभारने से वह कमजोर नहीं होता है बल्कि दूसरे अंतर विरोधोको उठानेसे आर्थिक लडाई एक लंबी प्रक्रिया में संपूर्ण बदलाव की गति को और तेज और मजबूत ही बनाता है। रिक्कारों के सवाल आन्दोलन में उठानेसे औरतों को इस लडाई में अपना होने का अहसास हुआ और इस कारण वे पूरी क्षमता से इसमें शामिल हुई। उनकी भागिदारी आंदोलन को और सक्षत ही बनाती रही है। बल्कि कई बार पुरूषों के निर्णय से स्वतंत्र, औरतों ने अपने जिम्मेदारी से आन्दोलन को जिन्दा रखा है। औरतों की बराबरी के सवाल पर बैठकों में उनके एक साथ बैठने, मदों के सामने बोलने उन्को अलग राय रखनेका पुरूषों के बीच विरोध हुआ। नये गाँवोंमें शुरू में औरतों की भूमिका को सिमित करने का प्रयास भी हुआ।

अपनी ईच्छा से पुरूष के विरोध के बाक्जुद आंदोलन में शामिल हुई। ऐसा क्यों कर हुआ? पुरूषों को खुद की ईच्छा नहीं रहते हुये भी आन्दोलन के दबाव में आकर इसे स्विकार करना पडा। इससे यह स्पष्ट है कि आर्थिक परिवर्तन की लडाई के साथ सामाजिक परिवर्तन को गती भी तेज होती है। स्त्रियुक्ति को लडाई के लिये भी आवश्यक वातावरण व दबाव तयार होता है। ठिक इसी के साथ की स्त्रीयुक्ति की लडाई सम्पूर्ण बदलाव की लडाई को और सशक्त और गतीपिबल ही बनाती। बोधगया आन्दोलन में औरतों की भागिदारी इसी लिये महत्वपूर्ण है, औरतों को भी सामाजिक जिवन में हिस्सा लेने का हक्क है और समाज को बदलने का उन पर भी है। औरते सिर्फ अपने सवालों पर नहीं बल्कि पूरी आर्थिक, सामाजिक व्यवस्था के बदलाव की लडाई लडेगी, ताकि वह नई व्यवस्था बराबरी की व्यवस्था हो औरते के हक में हो। पहले औरते बैठको में शामिल नहीं होती थी। पुरूषों के सामने अपनी बात बुलन्दी से नहीं रख पाती थी। इसकी लिये महिला कार्यकर्ताएं अलग बैठकर शुरू की जहां वे खुल सके। ताकि हर जगह की औरते स्थानिय भाषा आसानीसे समझते पाती है उसी में खुद को व्यक्त कर पाती है इसलिये कार्यकर्ता अपनी बातों को स्थानिय भाषा मागिह में रखने लगे। स्त्रियोंको जोडने की जिम्मेदारी में महिला कार्यकर्ता भी यहा सक्रिय हुई। बोध-गया के प्रदर्शनों में, सम्मेलनों में, कार्यकर्ता बैठको में औरते हमेशा 30, 40% की संख्या में रही। पसरा गांव में महिलाओं ने मठ द्वारा जबरन फसल कटाई का संगठित विरोध किया और स्थिति यहां तब बनी की गुंडी, पहलवानो को गांव छोड़ कर भाग जाना पडा। 8 अगस्त 1979 को मस्तीपर में " हल छोडो जल्दी भागो " १ नारों के बीच मठ को फसल नहीं लगाने देंगे के कार्यक्रम तरह प्रदर्शन हुआ जिसपर बम्ब बंदूको द्वारा मठ के गुंडी द्वारा हमला किया गया था। उस प्रदर्शन में बडी संख्या में औरते भी शामिल थी। साथ ही नेतृत्व में भीदो महिला कार्यकर्ता वहा मौजूद थी। मस्तीपर गौली काण्ड के बाद का आतंक का दौर, 1980 में फसल लगाने का उत्साह का दौर फिर फसल कटाई के समय पुलिस के साथ आमने सामने के संघर्ष का दौर सभ में औरते पूरी क्षमता से शामिल रही बल्कि हमेशा आगे रही।

बाराघट्टी ब्लॉक में 20 औरतों ने 30 अगस्त 1979 को निषेध आज्ञा भंग करते हुये यह गिरफ्तारी दी। 30 अगस्त 1980 को वाहिनी के दो कार्यकर्ताओं की गिरफ्तारी का विरोध करती हुई शैकडों औरते इकठ्ठा हो गयी। पुलिस के लाठी चार्ज से कईयों की सख्त चोट आई। शैरघाटी ब्लॉक में पुलिस द्वारा जबरन फसल कटाईका विरोध करते हुये 47 औरतों ने अपनी गिरफ्तारी ली। पसरा ग्राम के विरोध प्रदर्शन में वे आधे से अधिक और वहां भी दो महिला कार्यकर्ताओं ने गिरफ्तारी दी। नवम्बर 1981 में वृत्त...

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औरतोने गिरफ्तारी दी। 8 नवम्बर 1981 को कटारवा में मठ के गुंडो द्वारा फसल लूटे जाने का विरोध करते हुये जो प्रदर्शन हुआ उसमें महिलाये आधे सेअधिक थी। इस पर लाठी चार्ज में खिलाफ नेतृत्व कर रही, गांव की एक महिला के हाथ टूट गये। इस प्रदर्शनपर गोली भी चलायी गयी। मोहनपुर ब्लॉक लगातार सूखे की चपेट में रहा है वहा रोज गोर, पेय जल की सुविधा, राहात कार्यों में 1983 मे दोसो महिलाओं ने पुरूषों के साथ ब्लॉक ऑफीस पर गिरफ्तारी दी। 1984 में भी इन्ही मांगो को लेकर तीन दिनो तक अंवल कार्यालय का घिराव किया गया। इस तरह से जब सुखा पडने पर गांव के पुरूष बाहर निकल जाते है औरतो ने अपने नेतृत्व में राहत कार्यों के लिये लडाई की और रोज गार हासिल किया। इन सब कार्यक्रमो में औरतों की संख्या और भूमिका प्रभावी थी। क्षेत्र में जो भी प्रशिक्षण शिबिर हुये है, सम्मेलन हुये है, उसमें औरते पूरे उत्साहसे शामिल हुई। संवाहन समितियों और कार्यकर्ताओं बैठको में उनको जोडकर उनको निष्पथ निर्धारण और नेतृत्व से जोडा गया। औरतों के बीच अपनी समझदारी विकसित हो -- इस दृष्टीसे औरतो के अलगसे शिबिर, सम्मेलन भी किये गये है। 14, 15 और 16 नवम्बर 1979 को शेखवारा गांव में औरतो के शिबिर सम्मेलन में औरतों की पिटाई, दाह, बाल-घियाह इन सवालो के विरोध में तथा औरतो की बराबरी को स्विकार करते हुये प्रस्ताव पारित किया गया। इसी सम्मेलन में जमीन पर औरतों का भी हक है। यह प्रस्ताव भी पारित हुआ। कजियार गांव में 1982 में हुये शिबिर सम्मेलन में महिला कार्यकर्ता कैसे बने औरते भाग की समान नही है। इन सवालो पर चर्चा हुई, बाद में छेड खानी, अभद्र व्यवहार के खिलाफ निकाफ ले जाी जाती है गांवो तक जहा के नौजवान छेडखानी में शामिल रहते है, प्रदर्शन भी किया गया।

औरत ने हल जोता :

पूजा या अन्य धार्मिक कार्यों से पुरूष का महत्त्व पुष्ट होता है और ऐसे हर आयोजन में औरतों का या तो स्थान नही होता या दूसरे दर्जे का होता है। क्षेत्र में 1980 के मठ से आजाद की गयी जमीन पर फसल लगाने के दौर में फसल की पूजा नही की गयी। समाज के हर केन्द्र और संचालित कर सकनेवाले काम पर पुरूष अपना कब्जा रखता है। खेती की शुरुआत औरतो ने की। जब खेती जीवन का आधार बन गया तो हल छुना औरतो के लिये निषेध हो गया। हम यौन आधार पर बटे श्रम विभाजन को नये समाज की संरचना में अस्विकार करते है। फसल लगाने के दौर में बीजा गांव में वरिहनी की स्त्री कार्यकर्ता ने लोगो के विरोध के बावजूद हल पकडा जिसमें कई ग्रामीण औरते भी शामिल थी। अंतर राष्ट्रीय महिलादिन 8 गांव के अक्षर पर बोध-गया में औरतों के कार्यक्रम के लिये जाते रहे है।

औरत भी जिन्दा इन्सान, नहीं भोग का सामान :

" औरतें भी इन्सान है नही भोग की वस्तु " ----- क्षेत्र में यह समझदारी भी बनी हुई है। छेड़खानी, जबरदस्ती, अभद्र बातें, स्त्रियोंको जोकर गाली की भक्तृति, इन सत्ता दमो प्रतिगार किया। गठ के गुणिमा प्यारा पूजा री रैल रखे जाने का निरोध शुरू से ही होता रहा। वहां जंगल के अधिकारीयों प्यारा जंगल जानेवाली औरतों के साथ हमेशा छेड़खानी, जबरदस्ती होती थी जिसके खिलाफ महिलाओं में आक्रामक विरोधी संगठित किया। कजियार गांव की दो लडकियों की छेड़खानी का जबाब दोषी को सजा मिले इसलिये खाने पर घेराव व प्रदर्शन किया गया। एक बार वाहिनी की स्त्री कार्यकर्ताको गृह गुंडोने छेड़ा और उसके विरोध करने व शोर मचाने पे आस पास के गांवोंसे काफी संख्या में लोग इकठ्ठे हो गये और महिलाओंने गृहद्वारे में आ किये गुंडोको बाहर निकाला और घसिट कर थाने में ले गयी। इस तरह हाल ही में शाहपुर गांव एक मजदूर लडकी की उच्च जाती के किसान ने जबरदस्ती पकड़ लिया। इस सवाल को स्थानिय संगठन द्वाारा उठाया गया। महिला साथी संगठन के साथी पंच के साथ बैठे और निर्णय हुआ कि, उसको छेड़खानी की सजा मिलनी चाहिये। पहले तो आर्थिक सजा की बात आयी और किसानो के लडके भी आर्थिक दण्ड देने के लिये आ गये। लेकिन फिर यह बात महिला कार्यकर्ताने उठाई गयी की, अगर पैसे का दण्ड होगा तो उसका मतलब हुआ कि, पैसे के बल पर वह छेड़खानी का अधिकार ले सकता है। मिटिंग में निर्णय हुआ कि, उसे सामाजिक सजा मिलेगी और वह लडकी तय करेगी। इस घटना से यह बात निकली है कि, उच्च जाती का होनेसे छेड़खानी का अधिकार नही दिया जा सकता। छेड़खानी की सजा भी मिलनी चाहिये और यह सजा लडकी खूद तय करेगी। 1979 में गया के सलूजा होटल में हुये बलात्कार के खिलाफ प्रदर्शन किया गया, जिसमें शहर के औरतों के साथ गांव की शैकडो औरते दूर दूर से आकर शामिल हुई। बागपत काण्ड के खिलाफ भी हजारों औरतोंने विरोध प्रदर्शन किया। पुरुष की भाग वाली प्रवृत्ति के प्रतिक अशिल्ल साहित्य को सार्व-जनिक रूपसे जलाकर उन्होंने इस बलात्कारी भोगवादी संस्कृतिको भी जला डालने का संकल्प किया। 8 मार्च महिला दिन को अपना दिन मानकर, स्त्री शोषण के खिलाफ, विरोध प्रदर्शित कर दांगपत तथा अन्य बलात्कारो काण्ड के खिलाफ इकठ्ठा होकर उन्होंने स्त्रियुक्ति की आन्तरराष्ट्रीय लड़ाई से अपनी एकता प्रदर्शित की है। यह साफ है कि, व्यवस्था परिवर्तन की लड़ाई में भागिदार औरते स्त्री मुक्ती की लड़ाई के प्रति जिम्मेदारी को पूरी गंभीरता से महसूस कर पाती है, यह आवश्यक नही कि, स्त्रियुक्ती और तातकाला परिवर्तन की लड़ाई अलग अलग योगेगोम अगर नजरिया स्पष्ट हो तो सम्पूर्ण बदलाव की लड़ाई में शामिल औरते



बुद्ध औरतों के सवालों पर अधिक गंभीर और जुझारू साबित होगी। हमने शुरू में ही स्पष्ट किया है कि, उत्पादन की प्रक्रिया में भागीदार औरते उत्पादन पर उनका याने की स्त्री का हक हो -- यह आनानी से समझ पाती है।

8 मार्च को हुये महिला सभाओं में यह बात सलाई गयी कि, जमीन पर औरतों का भी हक होगा। पेशवा गाँव में जब जमीन का पचा जो गाँव वालों ने खूद तयार किया था, पुरुषों के नाम में विधवा औरतों सहित में मिला तो उस क्षेत्र में खूली बहस की शुरुआत हुई। इसने बाद सवालन समिति ने स्विचकार किया कि, जमीन के लिये औरतों के नाम की सूची अधिकारियों को भेजी जायेगी। बीजा गाँव में इस तरीकेसे औरतों के नाम जमीन का पचा मिला। पचा देने से पहले अंचल अधिकारियों ने कई सवाल किये जिसका जबाब उन्होंने पूरी बुलन्दी से दिया। अंचल अधिकारियों के यह कहने पर कि क्या भरोसा कि आप पती को छोड़ नहीं देगी, औरतों ने साधे सीधे सवाल किया--- यही बात तो पहले पुरुषोंसे पुछनी चाहिये। उन्हो तो ऐसा पुछकर जमीन नहीं दिया जाता है। हम औरते तो मुहाग का चिन्ह धारण करती है। ज्यादा बन्धन में है और पुरुष बन्धन मुक्त, उसे द्वारा हमें छोड़ देने की सम्भावना ज्यादा है। परिवार का मुखिया केवल पुरुष नहीं, औरत भी है।

सम्पत्ती का हक औरतों को भी है, परिवारका मुखिया केवल पुरुष नहीं है, औरत भी है।--- यह पितृसत्तात्मक व्यवस्था पर एक वोट है। आज कुछ औरतों के नाम सम्पत्ती हो जाना तत्काल स्थिति में महत्वपूर्ण परिवर्तन नहीं लाती जब कि, खासकर जब वे औरते कमजोर व अशिक्षित तब के की हो। जब तक की अभी की पितृसत्तात्मक व्यवस्था और मानस चलेगा और सम्पत्ती भी अपने बेटे को देगी। बेटे या बहू को नहीं। जो लडकीया ससूराल जायेगी अगर उन्हें जमीन मिलती है तो या तो वे उस पर खेती नहीं करेगी या बेव देगी। और उस धन का हकदार उसका पतिही होगा। किन्तु जब हम इस व्यवस्था पर वोट करते हुये औरतों को अपनी मज्जीसे विवाह पति बनेने की मजबूरी न हो उनकी स्वतंत्रता है नियत हो इन सवालो को उठाती है तो सम्पत्ती हक स्त्रियुक्ती की दशा में एक कदम होता है। पिपर घटी गाँव में भी औरतों की बनाई गई सूचि को इस आधार पर अधिकारी ने रोक दिया कि कानूनी तौर पर परिवार का मुखिया पुरुष होता है और जमीन उसीके नाम में मिलेगी। कुछ लोगोंने औरतों का इस बात के लिये कोना कि उनके कारण ही उन्हें जमीन नहीं मिल रही है। इस सवाल पर व्यापक बहस की शुरुआत हो सकती है। अगर इसे गाँव में बाहर लाया जाता है तो उपरोक्त मुद्दोंपर मौजूदा पुरुष आधारित व्यवस्था और अधिक साफ दोती और कई सवाल

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मामला बनकर रह गया है।

निष्कर्षित: अगर हम सिध गणित में देखे तो परिवर्तन का परिणाम अधिक नहीं है न पूरी तरह औरतों की पिटाई बन्द हुई है और न जमीन पर बटे सभी पैसे औरतों के नाम वंटे है। इस तरह शादी की परंपरागत रीती भी अभी चल रही है। पर इन सब के बीच स्पष्टता गीन नहीत किगे जा सकने तायेक शुरुआत हर क्षेत्र में हुई है। औरतों को भी जमीन पर समान हक है, यह बात लौटाई नहीं जा सकती। पुरुष प्रधानता की संस्कृति के खिलाफ की आवाज के प्रति ग्राहपत बढी है। यहा के समुदाय में इन सवालोपर बहस तेज हुई है।

छात्र युवा संघष वाहिनी,  
शांता श्रम, 299 ताडदेव रोड,  
नाना चौक, मुंबई- 400007.

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# Women's Problem

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A few groups in Calcutta felt the need for an issue-based forum for action. When the discussions started, there arose a conflict of opinions. Ahalya said that it was necessary first to gauge the level of consciousness of the average woman - were they aware of their actual status and role in society, the nature and cause of oppression? Unless an awareness was created, it was not possible to prevent the various atrocities perpetuated on women. But other 5 groups - Sachetana, Women's Research Centre, Pragatishil Mahila Samity, Mahila Pathachakra and Womens Library came to a consensus about creating this action-based forum and it was formed in December 1983. Everybody hoped to find out the answers through actual experiences.

The prevailing image of a women's organisation is that of providing help guidance regarding a variety of problems affecting women. Naturally with the creation of the forum women in distress started coming with individual problems. These had to be taken up because it was necessary to create minimum credibility.

But the inevitable problems cropped up the main being shortage of woman power. Several cases come from remote rural areas. Time and distance were two important factors. Another was the question of funds.

Due to these problems it was not always possible for the forum to systematically follow up the cases that had been taken up. This resulted in a loss of credibility.

Then the important question came up about fixing few criteria for screening cases.

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1. It was decided to fix geographical limits because mobilisation had become a difficult problem.
2. To take up cases only in areas where there was a well-organised local base. This was important because local support was necessary to protect the woman who continued the fight from her-in-laws home after making a complaint. It was also necessary for the security of the forum members in the cases where out of fear or proper orientation the women retracted their complaints.

Unfortunately our experience has shown that it was not always possible to stick to the above criteria. We were compelled to take up cases that were without any local base and not within a reasonable distance. The reasons were that when a constituent organisation made a request it was accepted out of a sense of obligation. The other was the immediacy of a case on humanitarian grounds. Thirdly it was difficult to refuse victims who came directly.

For smooth functioning we decided to fix a definite criterion for local base i.e. the nature of the women's organisation, its credibility in the locality and the strength. It was also necessary to decide what types of cases should be taken up. We decided to take up individual cases where the women were putting up a fight and these which come under women's oppression.

Regarding the definition of oppression we have a diversity in opinion. There are some among us who do not believe in a separate classification for women's oppression. The vital question raised is how much of the oppression is a necessary

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con-committant of the capitalist system. If there is no women's oppression perse what is the need for a separate women's organizations ? Why not have mixed groups ?

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The other debate was over the classification of rape. Was it especially a manifestation of women's oppression or violation of human rights ? Did Depriving women from inheritance come under women's oppression ?

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We have not been able to resolve these questions and are continuing our efforts infinding a workable solution. Further, we always felt a crisis that an attempt at clarification of these issues might cause a rift which we cannot afford as we desparately needed this Mancha to go on functioning.

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One compromise solution is to find a method of converting individual cases into a movement like the Mathura rape case, Shohnaz Sheikh and Shah Dano cases. Two individual cases that have generated movements are these of illegal detention of Maya Barui in prison in the name of safe custody and the gavesome murder of Devjani Banik by her husband and in-laws.

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We have tried to use them as foil to generate a movement through posters, demonstrations, street corner meetings, processions, leaflets etc. The concept of consciousness raising has to be pegged on to such concrete examples we feel. Otherwise, it becomes an abstract concept. The very process of street street corner meetings would inevitably

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Finally, we need some clarifications over the agenda to be discussed. The ~~time~~ feminism itself needs clarification. Do you accept that sexual bondage is a stronger one than the class bondage ? Is it possible bring all women on the same platform ? Or should there be separate demands for separate classes to be organized from different directions ? What is meant by reformism ? - the acts of counselling itself ?

[ Presented by Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha.  
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Calcutta-700 019 ]

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BUILDING ALTERNATE SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR WOMEN -  
A PROCESS OF PERSONAL GROWTH AND CONSCIOUSNESS  
RAISING - THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN'S CENTRE, BOMBAY

This paper hopes to contribute to two different workshops: 'Relationship between Consciousness Raising and Helping Individual Women' and 'Politics of Personal Growth'.

Consciousness raising and individual help are two important aspects of the women's movement. Around '80's many groups started off with broad consciousness raising activities like agitations, campaigns and publications. These were directed at the society at large. But at the same time many of us felt the need to support individual women as well. In this paper we would like to examine whether and to what extent 'individual help' is consciousness raising activity.

All of us who came together to start the Centre were active members of the Forum Against Oppression of Women - FAOW and continue to be so. Many new Centre members also attend Forum meetings. When agitations and campaigns are organised this work is done through the Forum. So we see our work at the Centre complementing the work of the Forum and not an alternative to it. But some of us have made a choice working in the area of building alternate support structures for women. So long as the activities of the Centre support and strengthen the Forum-type of activities, we consider the work we do as 'political' and not 'reformative' although apparently they seem like 'welfare' type of activities.

While the term consciousness raising is appropriate, when we are focussing the attention of the general public, would the term be appropriate when we are talking about building support structures for women. The term was used in the context of groups of women in every area coming together and talk about their personal problems, in Western countries. It was a social phenomena. These discussions among small groups of women led to actions like setting up shelter homes for battered women. This did not happen, here in India. The Centres, very few of them - just one or two in some major cities were set up by women who had been active in the movement. It was not an extension of the 'consciousness raising' activity by women in local areas. The aim of the Centres was to provide an atmosphere, where women could talk about their personal problems, share their experience, and collectively fight against their 'personal problems'. But here we doing 'consciousness raising' subtly implies that there is a person whose consciousness is being raised and the 'consciousness raiser' 'the victim and

the roscuer' type of relationship in a more traditional social work sense, as against the feminist concepts of 'collectively fighting against our individual oppression at a personal level' 'building a sisterhood across class, caste and religious barriers' 'sharing experiences and building support networks for women'.

'Consciousness raising' to many of us at the Centre has been a two way process. Our theoretically sound (we hope!) but abstract concepts that we started off with, had to be tested against the harsh realities of life through our interaction with the women who approached us for help, before they could become strategies for actions. We have learnt a lot through this process of trial and error. And if and when there was an error the price was paid by both - the Centre and the women whom we were helping - because it was a collective responsibility, but perhaps their share was greater, because after all it was their responsibility.

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But even beyond this, the work at the Centre has been a process of personal growth, interaction with volunteers, with women whom we supported and with each other, has given us strength to fight our personal struggles better, it has given us space to pursue our education, it has given inspiration for creative expressions, helped to break down the divide between the 'personal' and 'political' and to place our individual problems in a broader perspective of the women's movement.

Working together collectively has thought us to voice our differences in a mature way, have been able to build a certain amount of minimum trust, so that differences of opinion can be expressed without reducing them to the level of personal 'ego hassels' and in cases where differences of opinion could not be sorted out to work with these differences, when it was not possible to work together, to withdraw for a time, and yet not lose perspective of the overall objectives and goals of the Centre and the movement. The growth at this level was a painful process, has resulted in sleepless nights, ill health, and various traumas. The fight against 'patriarchy' the external enemy was easier, the battle within ourselves, against our own weaknesses and drawbacks which were obstacles for our own growth have been more of a torture. Perhaps today one doesn't experience the 'spontaneous' and 'intense' warmth one did five years ago, but today's reaching out is more deep and mature. We ourselves, and those we work with, know our strength and our weakness and there is a quiet confidence that we can build on our strength and overcome our weaknesses.

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Those who work at the Centre have made a conscious decision to do so. What does this mean to us? It means that there is no alienation but a total involvement with the work we are doing. What does it mean in actual terms? It has many times meant that we are left with no private space, not physically not even mentally. It has resulted in extreme exhaustion, it has meant a lot of mind-boggling 'trivial' work day after day, week after week. We have not had times to do much reading, have discussions, to do more 'serious' research. We have felt frustrated when a woman whom we had shared our own with for a period of two months, decides to go back to the husband on his own terms, without even discussing it with us. We have felt let down and betrayed that when these decisions are made they are not even discussed with us. We have felt 'used' when she didn't want to keep in touch, would not even give us her address. We had to fight against the sense of cynicism that was growing in us. But the Centre also provided the space where these feelings could be discussed, where they could be respected.

Many new women from outside the women's movement have become Centre volunteers. Some have come to fill a certain vacuum in their lives. Some have come because they felt we were doing some 'good' work. We have tried to share our perspective of the Centre with them. We might not have always paid attention to their special needs but we have tried to most of the time. Sometimes women have felt frustrated, when had come looking for certain 'work' and we had just spent time 'talking'. But to us, this 'talking' to the new volunteers is an important aspect of our work. It would have been simpler to allot 'work' like cutting and pasting or filing and mailing. This is our viewpoint, but Centre volunteers who are present here themselves can discuss their experience at the Centre. There have been times when we have been impatient, abrupt, or even rude. But through it all we have tried to share our work, our experience, our limitations and our frustrations.

With the women who approached us for help the work has been even more challenging. We had to constantly fight against the demands of a 'service agency' and 'welfare type' activity. Many a times, after a woman spoke to us about her problems, which were really grave there was a look of challenge in her eyes, 'now I have told you my problem and you give me the answer' when a ready made answer was not forthcoming she has felt betrayed. Many a times we had to cope with the demand, 'I want to stay with my husband', but he should not beat me, he should respect

respect me...he should provide me with enough money....his mother should not interfere with our marriage....' Well, in these moments all we could say was, 'we have not succeeded in changing our husbands, how can we change yours?' Sharing our own experiences and the experiences of other women who approach the Centre was the only way we could convey the message that the situation will change only when they change their own outlook to marriage, to their husband and to themselves.

Again coming back to the term 'consciousness raising' at the Centre it poses a problem when we talk about our work. The women who approach us may have internalised the values of the society, but all of them are very conscious that they are oppressed and they are oppressed because they are women. They have suffered ~~and the change~~ of patriarchy. Many of them derive no benefits from this system. It is only because they were conscious that they were oppressed had they approached us in the first place. It comes out in very simple gestures For instance the use of surname. Women who have been separated from their husbands find the use of husband's surname quite absurd, even when they continue to use it. We don't have to point of these little symbols to them. They have already questioned them. The problem has been to link it up with other women's oppression and to the oppression of the other oppressed groups.

While the woman is aware that she is oppressed there may be a difference of opinion between and her regarding the solution to the problem. But here again 'us' at the Centre do not always have a single, uniform opinion on the matter either. We have had discussions, arguments, <sup>even</sup> ill feelings, and frustrations during these discussions. and over the years have evolved certain broad guidelines. We can only share the insights we have gained ~~over~~ the years and leave it to her to make the choice ~~taking~~ taking into consideration her situation and her strength. And respect ~~this~~ choice, even when we feel that it is a mistake. This position, this attitude is not easy to take, and it tends to get expressed, if not in our words, at least in gestures. We recognise this and try to overcome it.

Eventhough we have tried to evolve certain guidelines, these can at best, provide a very broad framework, because each situation is different. And the answer to the question, 'What should have been the best way to deal with the situation' taking into all the factors, sitting in the home of a Centre member with a cup of tea in hand, is different from responding to the desperate plea of a woman who is frightened to death at

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is not a judgement or a condemnation but just a process of gaining insights, though during the discussions it is not always easy to be so clear.

Have the women we have interacted with have developed a feminist consciousness? Well, this is a difficult answer. There are two aspects to it. First, what do we mean by a 'feminist' consciousness and second, have we ourselves always made very clear 'feminist' choices in our own lives? For all of us it has been a process of several years, in fact an on-going process all the time. It has been slow, painful, time consuming and seldom linear. We have had our setbacks, had to make compromises. When we had the courage, we lacked the strength and when we had both perhaps we lacked the support. And today, when there aren't any real alternatives, when the Centre with all its limitations cannot really provide the answer, we cannot even expect women to make such definite and clear cut choices, at best we can only hope!

Apart from individual support has this interaction resulted in changes in attitudes regarding husband, children, parents' in-laws' other women' in their husbands' lives, and other women in distress? Let's take each of them individually. Where children are concerned, women experience a sense of relief that the Centre does not subscribe to theory of a 'perfect' superhuman mother. This is because they might have been trying to suppress their ambivalent feelings towards their children because of societal norms. And a woman who is a single parent can never be a 'perfect' mother in this society. The Centre only helped the women to come to terms with these feelings that they were trying to suppress. There was varying degrees of change in attitudes regarding parents and in-laws. For instance if a woman blamed her mother for all her woes within marriage, over a period of time she became less critical. But where the 'other' woman is concerned women find it very difficult to overcome their feelings of hatred and vengeance. The wounds are deep and the healing process slow. It is easier to have a scapegoat be it a mother-in-law, sister-in-law, step daughter or even one's own daughter and of course the 'other' woman. Women always make excuses for all the lapses on their husband's part, more ready to forgive and start all over again. The age old conditioning is difficult to overcome.

During our talks, the one aspect of a woman's life we ourselves have been reluctant to approach has been sexuality. The women who come to the Centre belong to the 20-45 age group, the period of pen

'sexually active' years. Perhaps it is our own conditioning, the culture that we come from where sexuality is not discussed frankly and openly unless it is in the context of 'marital problems'. But we have been confronted with the problems it has caused. When a woman has gone back or when she is relating to another man, the emotional and the sexual aspects have been the deciding factors. But we could rarely discuss these with the women. Women were also afraid to talk about it for fear of being judged from a 'moral' viewpoint. Here our hassels have been mostly legal, especially when the case is in court and the woman is having an affair. It might affect her claim for child custody and maintenance. But it has been difficult to convey the message that it is not a question of morality, but practicality. Our approach has been rather going in for lengthy discussions, to wish away the problem to hope that the lover would just disappear from the court at least till the matter has been settled in court, and of course we have felt guilty for wishing so, because we really do not have the right to feel that way. The relationship might give the woman a much needed emotional support.

The support and sharing of experience with other women has been slow to develop. Women feel more secure when they relate to the Centre members rather than to each other because they feel that we have the answers to their problems. There is a tendency to develop dependency. Also there is a suspicion and sometimes a sense of competition for attention especially when they come from the same area or know each other before they approached the Centre. Our monthly get-togethers are a means of providing an atmosphere where such interaction can take place and friendship will grow. Women have expressed a desire for more picnics and outings, rather than meetings at the Centre to facilitate this process.

The delicate balance between 'providing sisterhood but not mothering' has been difficult to maintain. Have we always supported the women's choices? Yes most of the time. The only time we didn't was when one woman's choice went against another woman, a step daughter or the second wife. Have we always given in to all the demands made on us? No, not always. It has been difficult to support the choice and not to indulge in, to give in to demands which sounded like that of a 'spoilt child' or what we considered to be strategical not right at that precise moment. So there has been certain contradiction. At one level we maintain that 'we support women's choices' at the other we could not always do so. The decision not to give in to these demands has not been easy and we have had long discussions about it, at times felt guilty but realised that it is essential. Sometimes when we have given in to the demands it has resulted in time-consuming and frustrating actions which in end didn't yield any result.

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Sometimes the resulting frustrations have led to a 'burn-out'. This has meant a mental withdrawal, the incapacity to tune in when a woman is talking, the exhaustion which has resulted in the inability to reach out, to wipe a tear to give the friendly squeeze which would have eased the tension, or a humorous remark which would have lit up the eyes. And then we realised that we need to take a break, a distance to come back with revived energy rather than stay on and break oneself and the woman you are reaching out to. And the Centre has provided the atmosphere for this,

During the last five years, we have changed we have grown, we have not been able to follow up all the activities that we had planned out, but instead taken new ones, as the occasion demanded. And through the constant interaction of Centre members, volunteers and the women who dropped in the Centre has progressed. It has been a process of personal growth and consciousness raising for all of us.

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