

NEW WOMAN Struggle

WAND'S Bi-monthly News Bulletin

Volume I: No. 4 - September, 1990.

STRUGGLE SALUTES GROOTS

This issue of New Woman Struggle features an article by Annie Paul entitled Grassroots Women of the World Unite.

A network representing grassroots women, from every continent, including both underdeveloped and developed countries, is seeking to involve grassroots women in meaningful participation in development planning.

WAND believes that until women's needs and opinions become a crucial part of the structural aspects of development, and people's welfare and happiness replace material goals as the main priority in the plans for progress, peace and well-being will continue to evade the world. Poor people will continue to be poor and powerless. Crimes that promote greed and undermine fundamental good will increase. Consequently, WAND salutes GROOTS - Grassroots Women Organising Ourselves Together, through this publication.

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GRASSROOTS WOMEN OF THE WORLD UNITE

by Annie Paul

Kingston, March 29 (WFS/IPS) - Mary is an African woman whose husband is unemployed. She ekes out a living by selling vegetables in a market which lacks even sanitary conveniences.

Leela is an Asian woman who chops mangoes at a pickle factory ten hours a day, and then comes home with barely enough to feed her family.

Yvonne who is from the Caribbean, makes pillows which her five children sell on the streets for her.

Jane has different problems: she is a single woman from North America who yearns to own a house. But her salary as a waitress makes this an impossible dream.

What do these women have in common? They all earn low incomes and lead precarious lives and none of them subscribe to any feminist magazines. They are "grassroots" women.

When the United Nations Decade for Women conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985, grassroots women were conspicuously under-represented. Some of the women activists who participated in this conference, pressed for the establishment of a network that would focus mainly on the development of grassroots women worldwide.

Four years later, Grassroots Women Organising Ourselves Together (GROOTS), has just completed its first planning meeting here.

Some of the women who participated in the meeting, were nominated to a committee by an international task force, facilitated by a US group called "Neighbourhood Women".

Some of the committee members are grassroots women, while others are involved in organising and training grassroots women, in their own countries. The task force felt that it was essential to represent

both the developed and the developing world on the committee, in order to get an overview of the working women's movements at various stages of development.

A major aim of the Kingston meeting was to create a framework for GROOTS, within which to achieve its threefold purpose: of enabling women to solve their own problems and participate in community development, of making global cross-fertilisation of ideas possible by providing a medium for sharing experiences and successes, and of focussing international attention on the capabilities and needs of low-income women.

Caroline Pezzullo, the Chairwoman of the task force, explained, "GROOTS was conceived as a network with everybody participating equally, sharing each other's experiences and learning from them". She felt that in creating the framework, it was important to avoid male hierarchical structures.

The meeting also acted as a forum for an exchange of experiences in the field of development. Honoree Mouyema, a representative of Cameroon, described one of the projects of her organisation, the Cameroon Women's Network Association (CAWNA). Rural women who sell their produce in the capital city of Yaounde are often left with a large unsold stock at the end of the day. They are unable to return to their homes in the countryside, and end up spending the night at the market place which has neither sleeping quarters nor toilets.

CAWNA is trying to establish a cooperative which will not only buy the unsold stock, but also will process and resell it to the city's working women who cannot shop earlier in the day.

In India, there is the problem of moneylenders and middlemen supply women with credit for

business and raw materials at exorbitant interest rates. An Indian representative at the meeting, Jaya Arunachalam, recounted the efforts of her organisation, the Working Women's Forum (WWF), to find a way out of this exploitative system.

Initially the WWF acted as an intermediary between women and nationalised Indian banks which offer low interest rates. Soon, however, the number of borrowers grew large and unwieldy. In 1981, the WWF established its own cooperatives society and an informal banking process with its own credit system.

Apart from building and operating pilot communities with an infrastructure that will provide the grassroots women with basic facilities like housing, child care and education, the GROOTS women also want to pressurise governments into incorporating women's real needs into their development planning.

The other aims of GROOTS include education of grassroots women to enable them to speak up for themselves, help in discovering new means of generating incomes, and information on the various sources for this that are available to them.

Generally grassroots women know all about middle and upper class women because they work for them. But the reverse is not true. Recognising the mutual need between these two sections, GROOTS hopes to change this.

In order to support and exchange local strategies, GROOTS aims to include representatives from the socialist bloc countries, Arab countries, Israel and South Africa. This will amply demonstrate that women can work together despite political, religious and economic differences.

• From: *Women's Feature Service* March-April 1989, WFS c/o Interpress Service, Rome, Italy.

SISTER VISION

by Stephanie Martin

Sister Vision Press is a Canadian feminist publisher whose priority is publishing books by black women and women of colour in Canada and the Caribbean. Sister Vision was created in the summer of 1984, by Makeda Silvera and myself, because white Canadian feminists and progressive presses did not think black women and women of colour had anything to say or, that anyone was interested in hearing/reading what we had to say. White publishers were uninterested in even considering any work by black women. For example, in the first 15 years of their existence the Women's Press did not publish one black woman or woman of colour.

We wanted to develop a Press that would speak to this; that would dare to take risks, a press that would work with and develop writers in Canada who felt they had nothing to say, but whose very lives spoke volumes. We knew we did not want to separate activism from writing and publishing.

We chose to focus on women's oral history, creative writing and books for children and young people. We also

challenge the absence of our voices in Canadian feminist theory and research. We provide a forum for theoretical works which would speak to and analyse the political and social lives of black and Third World women from a feminist perspective.

Many of us come from the Caribbean or have a direct connection through our parents. We wish to maintain those links with our sisters there, to learn from them about the current political and cultural movements and give support to their voice.

We have three published titles to our credit and one currently at press. Among these, *Lionheart Gal* was our first Caribbean book and *Blaze A Fire* is our second.

We are currently working on *Creation Fire*, an anthology of Caribbean women's poetry in collaboration with the Caribbean Association for Feminists Research and Action (CAFRA).

Excerpt from a presentation delivered at the MATCH Words of Women consultation held in December 1988, in Toronto.

Coming soon...

CREATION FIRE:
An Anthology of
Caribbean Women Poets.

Ed. Ramabai Espinet, CAFRA.



WOMEN - THE 'INVISIBLE' AGENTS OF CHANGE

According to Perdita Huston of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in London, "If sustainable development is the latest challenge to the international development community, then women, more than ever before, should be at the front and centre of all action strategies.

This is not a matter of social justice, nor a feminist issue; it is simple common sense. Sustainable development, according to the Brundtland Commission, "is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

In examining the complexities of sustainability there seem to be three essential components: *wise use of natural resources and eco-systems + equitable development strategies + population policies and family planning service = sustainability of natural systems and socio-economic productivity.* But if one of the three is eliminated, the chances of achieving sustainability are threatened."

In most societies women's involvement in the three components is essential to success.

The extent of women's contribution is difficult to assess because a large part of it is non-salaried and has remained undervalued, if not totally invisible. However it is slowly becoming a subject of research.

The interaction of women with the natural resources upon which family

livelihood depends (soil, water, forests) and their role in sanitation and waste disposal, their contribution to natural resource management, far exceeds that of men in the non-commercial sector.

Women play a critical part in national energy policy and planning. The implications for agricultural policy are evidenced by the estimate that 80% of family food in Africa is produced by women.

With regard to "the third component of the equation - population policies and family planning" Huston claims that without control over their health and fertility women will not be able to participate fully in development efforts. An interval of two years in the births of children in developing countries would reduce infant deaths by one in every five. The World Bank estimates that largely because of unavailability of family planning services, unwanted children are born to 500 million couples. At individual and national levels family planning is essential "to development, social justice and the health of human and natural resources", Huston says. She notes that "Women, as productive change agents, must be empowered as equal partners." In other words the value of women's work and their right to, and need for, family planning services must be recognised.

GET MORE WOMEN INTO POLITICS

Senator Blanca Esponda of Mexico and Billie Miller a former Senator of Barbados were recently interviewed by the Inter American Population News who sought to discover if gender aspects are important in attitudes by and to parliamentarians.

Senator Esponda is a founder and Chairperson of the new Mexican Parliamentary Group on Population and Development. Billie Miller was an elected official in Barbados for 10 years and was recently nominated to run again for the House of Assembly.

Ms Miller expressed the view that women bring their own special dimension to the development process, which she disclosed "is robbed when women are not allowed to be part of it at all levels especially at the policy making level." She did not, however, agree with Ms Esponda that women are more concerned with humanitarian aspects. She cited Mrs Gandhi's and Mrs Thatcher's "excesses" in support of her view. She agreed, however, that "women don't have the added problem of male chauvinism - macho - to complicate the issues."

Ms Esponda acquiesced to Miller's "good point" and noted that she would not want to "idealize the presence of women in any field." But she stressed the greater commitment of women to specific tasks, their hard work to prove themselves to their communities and their leaders and the fact that when a woman reaches a high level, it is because she is the best in that field.

Both the Senators felt that, because of their family responsibilities, it was more difficult for women since they were almost invariably called upon to do two jobs.

Ms Miller conceded that women seem to command the respect of their male colleagues. They "bring integrity to public life and are seen to be less financially driven or corrupt." Perhaps either because they are young in politics or above it. Miller said that on economic issues men accept and respect women's opinion, because of their reputation for integrity.

In reply to a question regarding the possibility of equality in the number of male and female parliamentarians, Ms Esponda said that the first goal should be a minimum of women in government offices and working in the community in medium level jobs. She said that some European countries already have political sexual equality in numbers. But in Mexico, women made up 15% of the Congress. There were more in the Senate than in the House. A struggle was on to get 30%. She said, "If we don't seek the goal, we would not get over 10 per cent."

In answer to the final question, "How can women become more involved in politics?" Ms Miller noted that women like them had to work hard to encourage people on a personal level. "I have a protégé because I know we have to put more women in the pipeline." she said.

A NEW ERA FOR WOMEN:

Look Who's Changing Traditional Japan

"We're angry because the government hasn't heard what we've been saying," Japan Socialist Party leader Takako Doi told thousands of cheering women on the campaign trail last July. Her remarks obviously found an echo in large sectors of a staunchly traditionalist society in which the place of women in public has been several deferential paces behind men. The presence of Doi, 60, at the helm of the country's largest opposition party and the record 22 successful female candidates in the July elections for the Diet's Upper House suggest that Japanese women are making appreciable strides out of the household and into positions of authority. Onna no Jidai, the era of women, has become a catchphrase implying that it is women, not men, who have become dynamic and fulfilled members of society.

However, the movement of large numbers of women into the workplace has created a host of additional problems for women - largely connected with the lagging acceptance of their new roles. Nearly 50% of Japanese women work outside the home, but sexual stereotyping and unofficial discrimination hold most of them back. The average monthly salary for a woman is 60% that of a man.

According to a 1987 government survey, more than a third of Japanese women and a half of the men feel that "a man's place is at work while a woman's is at home."

Not many women achieve top jobs. Of 750 career diplomats only 20

are women. Less than 1% of management level bureaucrats are women. Of 497 seats in the lower house women hold 1.4%. Some 25 million women (40% of the labour force) work, but women make up only 10% of students graduating in law and economics.

Discrimination against women in hiring and working conditions was banned by the District (Parliament) in 1985; but the response of women has been lukewarm.

Who, then, are the women cheering on Takako Doi at political rallies? Most are middle-class housewives who enjoy considerable independence because they control all household affairs, including the purse strings. High-technology gadgets have reduced the time needed for housework, and younger women are having fewer children, usually one or two.

One-fourth of working Japanese women have part-time jobs to increase their disposable income. Others attend school, pursue hobbies or work in the community. Says home-economics professor Keiko Higuchi of Tokyo's Kasei University: "Women took their unfavorable circumstances and turned them around to their advantage."

The female activism has contributed to the political agenda moving beyond economics to include issues like care of the elderly, consumer rights and nuclear safety.



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