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**THE WOMEN'S CENTRE: KINDLING HOPE, RELEASING HUMANESS**

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In January 1982, the National Council of Churches:India decided to co-sponsor a programme for the advancement of women in the cluster of villages around Sevagram, District Wardha, in Maharashtra, with the Institute of Cultural Affairs:India, a private, volunteer group working and living there. Following is a report of this work at the end of one year.

"We, the women of Sevagram Cluster, are ready to take responsibility for our villages. The future of our children, our families, our villages is in our hands. We can decide the role we will play. We will have difficulties. We will need help, but we have made the decision to stand on our own two feet." This is a short excerpt from a report given by Indu Kakade, Gogi Village, at a Cluster Women' Meeting held at the Sevagram Women's Centre on December 9, 1982. Mrs. Kakade has decided to take responsibility not only for her own village, but for the ten villages in the Sevagram Cluster. With her decision other women are seeing a new possibility to participate in the development of their own villages.

The situation of women in the villages near Wardha in Eastern Maharashtra is not unusual, but an experiment in women's advancement is noteworthy. In these villages the illiteracy rate is much higher among women than men. Pay for economic activity is lower and the exposure to the larger culture is less. In Sevagram Cluster, this year, the stigma of divorce and an illegitimate child was enough to drive two women to suicide. The beating of one woman by her husband caused her death. One little girl was fed so little that she died at two years without ever being able to walk. This reveals the common cultural tradition which judges men and women by different standards, while often requiring women to carry a greater burden of the work.

Yet, in spite of the cultural isolation, women in most of these villages are ready to take a more active role in the life of the village. This has been seen in the participation of women in meetings, educational events, village planning, excursions and training programmes. The programme adopted by the NCC:I and the ICA:I took advantage of this readiness. Its emphasis was to develop employable skills, offer training in health and hygiene and provide basic education.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs is a research, training and demonstration group concerned with the human factor in world development. It has worked for 28 years to devise and demonstrate practical methods which enable local residents to plan and implement lasting socio-economic development in their own communities, using available resources to generate local

self-sufficiency, self-reliance and self-confidence. Work is being carried on in 32 countries. In India there are 13 centres, 10 of which are located in Maharashtra. 11 of these centres are now working with a cluster of 10 or more villages.

The Institute is a private agency registered under the Societies Act of 1860 in the Union Territory of New Delhi. The staff are volunteer workers, committing themselves to two or more years of village service in return for a small stipend, housing and food. The primary support for the Institute's work in India - both funding and expertise - has come from Indian businesses, voluntary organizations, as well as directly and indirectly from the government.

The ICA:India began initiating women's advancement activities in Sevagram with a Women's Advancement Module in April 1980. 30 women participated regularly for the one-week programme which included workshops on health, nutrition, sanitation, child development and the social roles of women. The women worked together to create a one-year timeline for their work in village development. After the module, the Sevagram Mahila Mandal (women's association) was reorganized. At first, the traditional caste divisions in the village threatened to prevent it from being formed, but finally the spirit of new possibility of women dominated and the organization was formed in July 1980, with women collecting money for the registration fee. One village woman later led a similar module in a village near Nasik, Maharashtra.

Under the current project co-sponsored by the NCC:I, a Women's Centre was inaugurated on February 23, 1982, by the director of the Wardha Mahila Ashram, Rama Bhen Ruhea, and the daughter-in-law of Mahatma Gandhi, Nirmalla Gandhi. This event was attended by 100 village women. The Women's Centre is located in the new Sevagram Community Center. It was painted and decorated with photographs taken of women in the Cluster. It soon became a room the women were proud of.

#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In the months since the opening of the Sevagram Women's Center, both economic and social development activities have been well received, and a daily sewing class has involved up to 20 women to sew for themselves and for their families. Though sewing classes have been held in the village before, classes are now being held for the poorer women for the first time. A Rs.100 stipend is provided for the teacher of this program until such time that a sewing industry is established. At that time the profits from the industry could pay this amount.

Establishing ambar charkha (hand spinning machines) units is a second major economic effort. These units have been initiated in four villages. Sevagram and one other cluster village already had units. This program has been made possible through the cooperation of the Khadi Village Industries Commission which is providing the charkhas and the Sevagram Ashram Pratishtan which has provided the training and coordination of the supplies and market. The role of the ICA:India has been to find and

motivate at least four people from each village to do the training, to locate a person in each village to be trained to maintain the machines, to locate a room in the village to house the charkhas and to work out an agreement with the Gram Panchayat (village council). At present, 60 people are employed, each earning Rs.5.50 per day.

The response has varied from village to village. In Pujai, the charkhas were used all day while in Barbadi they were not being used. This was partly due to the fact that the maintenance man quit his work in lieu of higher payment. In light of the situation, the decision was made by the monitoring team (including members from the Sevagram Ashram and the ICA:I) to move the charkhas from Barbadi to Pujai. In Nandora 10 more machines are being provided upon request. The flexibility of the project increases its effectiveness by responding to the actual need and readiness of women for such an activity. The actual situation is often different from the surveyed situation and makes active follow-up and modification essential.

Economic training has been offered in a number of areas. In 1980, the Small Industries Service Institute provided two months of training on how to set up and manage cottage industries. Three Sevagram women participated full time. Another 10 participated part-time. Papad training, ladu training and chile grinding training have also been offered. A group of women did provide ladu for the Sevagram Hospital until the hospital changed its menu. Currently a woman from Nagpur is providing training in making small bamboo boxes. These boxes are used to package a herbal cosmetic soap. After the training, she will guarantee a market for as many boxes as can be produced - up to 10,000 per month.

#### SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

While economic opportunity is most immediately and visibly rewarding, social advancement develops self-confidence, a sense of personal value and information and communication skills required in even the simplest cottage industries. This enables women through their own organisations to begin to exercise a major role in all aspects of village affairs. The result will eventually be one of the greatest signs of village resurgence, that is, village women taking their rightful place in the mainstream of village and social life.

An important function of the Women's Center is to provide nightly literacy classes. An average of 20 women of all ages attend the class from 8 to 10 PM for six evenings a week. The teacher is a woman from the village who has passed her metric examinations. She receives a monthly stipend of only Rs.50, but is very regular in her responsibility. A black board, student slates and letter charts are currently the only materials in use, but magazines and other educational materials are being requested from businesses and people in the area.

A second educational program for illiterate women was held in the Women's Center in August. Called a Basic Education Module, its goal was to provide a formal, two year education in reading, writing and arithmetic in an intensive three week residential school. Eighteen women, aged 16 to 24,

participated. Only one had ever attended public school and she had attended for only two years. There were three teachers who worked with the group, one had graduated from a university, one had attended a university and one had finished 7th class. The format consisted of 6 one-hour class periods. Standard text and work books in the Marathi language medium were used. One hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon was scheduled for individual study with the assistance of a teacher when needed. In addition to the foundational curriculum, morning talks and conversations presented Indian history, global current events, sanitation and nutrition and family and child development. At the end of three weeks, four women had completed the full two years, eleven others had completed between one and two years and three were still working on the first year. In evaluation, a series of schools is recommended - each for two weeks, each targeting one school year.

In April, 1982, a Mahila Mandal Training Institute was held for the leadership of the eight registered Mahila Mandals in the Cluster. This programme was in response to the felt need among women for training in leadership methods, record keeping and procedures for registered societies. Each organization was invited to send their officers or selected members. It was hoped that out of the three day programme, a core group of women who would work together to plan and execute plans for village development would emerge. It was also hoped that these women would gain confidence to become community leaders. The focus of the curriculum was the Mahila Mandal with instruction given in accounting and record keeping procedures, methods for leading meetings and program planning methods. Also included was a series of talks and conversations on current events in the world, the changing society, family planning and industry set up. A workshop was held each evening, the first on preschools and the second, a demonstration on the use of the pressure cookers. One result of the module was the strategic decision to operate out of the Sevagram Women's Center. A second decision was to establish three additional sub centers, each serving three to four villages. Another result was the relationship that developed between the women of Wardha who participated in the workshops and the women of the villages. Since the module, meetings have been held in each of the eight villages to study the memorandum. An average of 30 women were present in each village meeting. In all, a total of 240 women have been exposed to the workings of a Mahila Mandal.

In addition to these classes and institutes, special events have been held monthly. There have been cultural excursions to Nagpur to expose women to the world outside their villages. The Nagpur itinerary included All India Radio, a plastic industry, the airport, an urban home for tea and a Chinese restaurant. Other trips have been taken to temples in the Wardha and Nagpur Districts. Workshops have been held at the Center in child development, food preparation and nutrition planning. Visits to the Center twice a month by a team of nurses from the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Science educate the women on family health and monitor the immunization schedule for village children.

## PROGRAM METHODS

For those interested in sponsoring a similar project, some underlying methodological presuppositions may be helpful. First and most important is the **involvement of village women** in the planning of activities and in the leadership of public events. It may seem like meetings are held more than are justified by the amount of work that gets accomplished on a week to week basis, yet with these meetings comes trust and self-reliance of the local women. Involvement communicates a respect for the person and it communicates that unless they are interested in the project, it will not happen. This provides a check on the project, requiring that it respond to a felt need among the women for whom it is intended. This is not to imply an autocratic polity governed by isolated women in the village without outside perspectives, but it does presume that the motivation and ability to solve local problems comes from those who experience them.

Secondly, a **corporate effort is more effective**, on target, more long lasting and more far reaching than individual development efforts. This requires formal and informal gatherings, conversations, plans and celebrations to build the meeting. This is not an easy process and it needs strong local women as well as women from outside the village who have objectivity. The organisation of the Sevagram Mahila Mandal is a case in point. There was an agreement in the village that a Mahila Mandal would be helpful to all. However, when it came to organising it, electing officers and setting meeting times and places, the old village social divisions raised their heads. The poorer women who worked in the fields all day wanted to meet at night while those who did not need to work wanted to meet during the day. Where does the group meet? In the Buddhist or Hindu Temple? (The inauguration of the Women's Center helped to solve this question.) Finally, through patient relationships, the officers were elected representing both segments and the time was fixed in the evenings when all women could attend.

Thirdly, **regular and quality events build momentum** and a self-generating movement among women. Besides on-going programmes like literacy training which have long lasting results, monthly events, visits, excursions, cultural programs, etc., keep interest alive and expand imaginations and creativity. Having napkins with the tea at the meetings gives the feeling of being honored. Including women in village luncheons and receptions for visiting government and business persons adds to the sense of importance of women in community affairs. It also helps to educate men in the new reality of women today.

And fourthly, a **formal or informal relationship between the village women and the city and town women builds the foundation for advancement** through exchange of experience. In Wardha, visits by government officers who are women, wives of government officers, business women, and professional women in teaching, broadcasting, social work and health have made suggestions and have offered their time, expertise and resources to link up with the local efforts. This relationship now is informal, but could develop into a powerful force or guild that would guide the continuing advancement of

women in the block. The local village women's organizations are a vital part of this group.

#### FUTURE

In the future, additional and varied training is needed to enable the women to have the skills to work in, and especially to manage cottage industries. A regular rhythm of events is necessary to provide the support for women to break out of traditional patterns of living. A coordinating centre and group is necessary to give women a sense of dignity and keep them motivated. Currently there are four centers. In the next two years the plan is to open 20 centers in the 100 villages of the Whadha Block. To make these centers effective will require the combined efforts of groups like the National Council of Churches:India, the Institute of Cultural Affairs:India as well as other voluntary organisations, businesses and governmental agencies.

This first year has shown that women are interested in taking an active role in their villages; they can be trained in any number of arenas. Indian women make up half of the Indian population. Enabling them to pick up new responsibility cannot but help to enable the country to move more positively into the future.