

Women: organizing to end oppression

by Paul Harrison

The women on Hatia island in Bangladesh face a difficult situation. They are haggled over for dowries. They are often subject to violence. Purdah (Muslim law) is strict, limiting them to the bari or household area.

As sheer survival gets harder, many husbands who are unable to feed their families may abandon them. Divorce is all too easy and divorced women rarely remarry. In a status like that of widows, they are forced to become breadwinners. Then they have to face what for them is the shame of working outside the bari (if they're lucky enough to find work, and at pay rates half those that men get), or they must beg. Often their must children work or beg with them.

But the women of Hatia island have begun to change all this. Since 1985 a grassroots organization, Dwp Unnayam Sangstha (Island Development Society), financed mainly by Oxfam, has been working to form groups among the landless. DUS has created more than 550 groups on the island, one-third of them women's groups.

The groups start off as savings clubs but soon blossom into all purpose self-help and development groups that help finance small business ventures such as paddy husking, hiring fishing boats, aquaculture and legal rights advising.

But the DUS work in women's development is its most startling achievement.

In the north, for example, is the Kormojibi Muhila Unnayam group.



After a DUS worker persuaded them to form a group, they began asking their husbands' permission. The men refused, but the women went ahead and formed the groups secretly. They saved two taka each per week--about 6 cents.

Within a year they got their first loan for 1,000 taka from DUS, and started buying paddy, husking and boiling it, and reselling it for a profit. They paved the muddy clay road that links them to the bazaar and the well. Working together with other groups they managed to force a pay raise of 10 to 12 taka a day for domestic work.

"When our husbands saw all this, they were amazed," says Sabia Katun, the 60-year-old widow who leads the groups. "Then they started up their own men's group."

The savings and small businesses help improve women's economic status and give them more independence in the home. But DUS has attacked more fundamental matters. It encourages groups--male and female alike--to oppose violence of men against women.

"One of our members was a widow," says Sabia Katun. "The neighbor's children were stealing her fruit. When she complained the neighbor beat her with a stick and left a scar on her arm. We sent her to the district chairman, who did nothing. Then we all went to see the chairman, and threatened to go to the police if he didn't take action. After a lot of pressure, he finally sent a council member to judge the matter and the neighbor had to pay a fine of 500 taka to the woman."

Divorce is another target. One couple, after 15 years of marriage, had only one child. The man blamed the woman. One day he locked her out of the house and she slept the night on the verandah. The next day the Kormojibi Muhila Unnayam women's group found out. "We asked why he wouldn't let her in," said Sabia Katun. "He said she can't get pregnant, I don't like her, I divorce her, I divorce her, I divorce her. We said, please don't divorce her, it is a social curse. If you had a checkup you might find that the defect may be

in you or in her. After this he took his wife back."

"In our area now, men don't dare divorce their wives," says Sabia Katun. "If there is trouble in the family, we go to the house, we listen to the man and the woman, we say this is your fault, and this is your fault, and usually we sort the problem out."

Even more surprisingly, men's groups have been active in opposing violence, divorce and the payment of dowry. "We hate dowry," growled Taleb Ali, leader of a fishermen's group in the south. "If you can't afford to eat, how can you afford to pay dowry? And we hate divorce, because our daughters can't remarry." To avoid dowry payments, group members seeking to marry a daughter ask around their own and other groups for suitable bridegrooms.

DUS is also attacking the way in which girls and women get second best in diet and education opportunities.

"Women and female children usually eat after all the males have had their fill," explains DUS leader Rafiq Alam. "So they get less to eat. We are trying to encourage them to eat together so that the food is fairly shared and the family can talk over problems together."

Such radical changes in social attitudes about women are rare. In a sense DUS is bringing about a total transformation of poor people's sense of their own power; their ability to control their own lives rather than being simply the victims of the rich and the powerful.

It is this feeling of control over one's own destiny which helps explain another spin-off of the DUS approach. The group activity has had a powerful effect on women's family planning attitudes. Every woman of the group's 15 members now uses a modern method of contraception which they obtain from a government health center set up on the island. Not one had used modern contraceptives before the groups were formed.

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Organizing women in Asia

by Kamla Bhasin

There are a large number of examples in Asia of women's power, their militancy, their unity. Very often peasant women, tribal women or urban working class women are in the frontline of struggles against deforestation, mining, usurpation of tribal lands, exploitation of landlords, corruption of bureaucrats, sexual abuse and violence. They are in the forefronts of peace movements everywhere; in Japan it is the housewives who are getting organized to say "NO!" to nuclear power plants. In Pakistan, it was the women who challenged the religious laws imposed on them in the name of Islam. In the Philippines, in Thailand and Sri Lanka it is the women who are organizing against sex tourism and the exportation of housemaids.

In Bangladesh, Nijera Kori (In Bengali, this means "we'll do it ourselves.") is an organization that has helped thousands of rural women workers to get organized to fight for their

rights to be respected and to attack oppressive structures. As a result they have managed to acquire common lands for collective farming, to raise wages, to obtain loans, to create health services, to get rapists punished, to preserve popular theatre traditions from pornographic intrusions. These women have also used songs and drama to mobilize people and stimulate debate. One of the Nijera Kori workers, when asked why women were always in the forefront in confrontations with the police or thugs answered: "We women have been beaten so often. We are not afraid anymore. Once we decide to fight, we fight till the bitter end."

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Friends of Ideas and Action Foundation. P.O. Box 10.133, 2130 CC Hoofddorp, Holland.

What empowerment means to a struggling woman

During these four years I got a lot of experience. We women in the tobacco factories have become courageous. We are not afraid of either husbands, factory-owners or the police. We talk back to them, we are not scared of the jails or courts. If our husbands fight with us we tell them that we do not need them. All this has happened because of the union. Now we walk with our heads high. We speak with courage. I suffered like Sita. But I have come out of it. Though we had eyes we were blind, though we had ears we were deaf and though we could speak we were silent, we changed all this. This has been the story of my life.

Source: *PRIA's Newsletter on Women and Empowerment* No. 1 - Nov. 1991, Address: 42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area New Delhi - 110062 India.