

Men Reconstructing Man

Interview by tan beng hui

There is a mini-revolution happening in the credit cooperative movement in Malaysia. Over the last thirty years, a group of men and women has been quietly at work, addressing the unequal relations between the sexes. What is more striking, however, is the persistence of some of these male leaders in sharing, informing and educating other men in their communities about such matters. These efforts, which have gained momentum in recent times, represent a first in the country in showing that men too can and do have a role to play in challenging patriarchy. Women in Action managed to catch up with the affable Paul Sinappan, a prime mover and shaker in this field, to find out more about the quest to encourage a new "breed" of gender-sensitive men in society.

WIA: Tell us first about the credit cooperative movement in Malaysia.

PS: We started in the early 1970s with the primary objective of helping to alleviate poverty. Several target groups were initially identified but tensions resulting from the 1969 racial riots forced us to focus our attentions solely on the Indian community. So we went to plantation and squatter areas, and using a series of education and training programmes, organised the men and women into groups that were able to collectively take charge of their own credit schemes. This meant being entrusted not only with collecting money from amongst themselves, but also with disbursing loans for emergency, provident or productive purposes. Through this, members have been able to pay off debts, purchase homes, start up businesses, send their children to school,



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buy computers and so on. Today, the movement has 420 credit unions involving around 40,000 households nation-wide. Its two main bodies are the Workers Credit Cooperative and the People's Credit Cooperative. While there are national and regional offices with paid staff to coordinate activities, the bulk of the work is done by trained volunteers.

WIA: You mentioned before about the gender programme. How did this develop?

PS: In the beginning we didn't actually have a gender programme. Our preoccupation was with the poor and any interest we had in women was in relation to them being part of this community. We wanted to address the "woman question," which some of us had been made aware of through our association with different schools of thought, within the framework of

development. Some of us came from Marxist-Leninist backgrounds, while others were influenced by the teachings of E.V.R. Perier and the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, India. There were also those who were trained in the church. All had in common, an idea to “promote” women within the cooperative movement and show greater sensitivity to their needs. We concentrated on taking in more women members and a small number attained status as leaders. Our methods were simple because while we were concerned about including women, we really didn’t know the issues. All we knew was that for women to be “promoted,” they needed to be educated and become leaders. We were committed to this but didn’t know the “specifics.”

WIA: When then did you become aware of the “specifics”?

PS: This came to us only later on in the mid-1980s. Local women activists were among our earliest channels of information. Through them, male and female credit cooperative leaders gained knowledge on various issues such as violence against women, the status of women in society, and women’s rights. We also participated in the anti-rape and domestic violence campaigns. In fact, till today we have maintained these networking ties. However, at the time, we still didn’t know HOW to integrate what we had learnt into our programmes. Because we had a mixed audience, we couldn’t follow the approach of women’s NGOs, which promoted the idea of women-only activities. Moreover, some men felt threatened by certain very strong feminist positions. The fact that they were not always invited to [the women-only] discussions fuelled their fears further.

Nevertheless, following the World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya,

and events around the UN Decade for Women, there were more institutions that took on the role of promoting gender issues and many of these had a mixed membership like ours. That meant we had more options to learn from. This was a time when there were many gender-sensitising training workshops and we benefited from several organised by the Canadian Cooperative Association, as well as the Asian Confederation of Credit Unions and the International Cooperative Alliance.

Actually, both the approaches of women’s groups and mixed groups have their advantages. It’s just that in our case, we needed a programme that could bring men and women together to look at gender issues. But even then, things were STILL not clear. It was like we knew the terminology, we knew the issues, we even knew what our gender-sensitising programme could look like. Yet we remained unable to incorporate such a component into our work.

WIA: What was the turning point?

PS: For me, I think things only became clearer after I attended a workshop organised by the Asian Women in Cooperative Development Forum (AWCF) in Cebu, the Philippines, in 1990. It was then when I was able to better understand the concepts; what was meant by all this talk about “mainstreaming gender.” More importantly, I learnt about self-reflection and the importance of internalising gender issues. But first let me backtrack to explain the process behind the formation of the AWCF because that itself was a learning experience for me.

Having been exposed to gender issues over the years, there was a period between 1987 and 1989 where there was some conflict between male and female cooperative leaders.

Both found that we had difficulty in understanding each other when it came to gender concerns. The women decided to do something about this by organising a workshop in Thailand in 1989. First they met separately to discuss women's empowerment within the cooperative structure. Men were then invited to join the last two days of the meeting.

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When we met, the women informed us that they wanted to raise certain issues with us since we (men) were policy-makers in our respective cooperatives. So we had a situation where men and women were sitting in the same room, trying to enter into dialogue. Except that this never took place because we men were reacting and fighting every issue that was being raised. We felt like "Hey, what is this... here we are doing so much good for women and now they are criticising us." We didn't appreciate being told that this was not right, that was not good, etc. However, while it was very difficult for us men at the time, this meeting opened my eyes a little. I thought, ok, maybe there is a point that the women are raising here. And that is how I ended up in Cebu for the gender-sensitising training workshop.

WIA: How exactly did that workshop influence you?

PS: I acquired a lot of new knowledge but I think the most significant outcome was how it inspired me to implement what I had learnt in my own home. So, when I returned I started doing housework like sweeping the floor and

washing clothes. I still remember the first time I picked up the broom; I was in the middle of sweeping when I suddenly remembered something urgent I had to do at the office. But because I had promised my wife that I would clean the house, I didn't want her to come home to finish what I had started. So I took the short cut and swept all the dust and dirt under the cupboard or left them piled up in corners. When she discovered what I had done, she was not amused! Even using the washing machine was a learning experience. Having little idea how these things worked, I hadn't thought about the speed of the cycle and just threw everything into the wash. In the end, all the bras and underwear came out stretched in various shapes and sizes...

WIA: Would you say that these early days of doing housework were a struggle?

PS: Yes, it was quite difficult. I found that it wasn't an automatic thing for me to think about household matters, it wasn't in my consciousness like say it would be for women. It was much easier for me to think about my work outside. For example, if it started to rain in the middle of the day, I did not hesitate to call my office and remind them to shut the windows. But I didn't give the same thought to bringing in clothes that were hanging out on the line to dry.

One day, having seen me struggling, my wife said to me, "Paul, if you don't put your heart into this, don't do it... If you just want to please your gender advocates, don't do it." That was my wake-up call. I knew that as a man, I had many privileges in the home. Doing housework meant reverting from the traditional male role of being served—why would a man give up these benefits to work? But because that training in Cebu was still in my head, I said to myself, "If I am unable to prac-

tice in my own home what I preach outside, then there is no point in becoming a gender trainer.” It’s not good enough having all the right ideas in your head, you need to implement them in your everyday life.

Though it took about five years for me to feel very comfortable around housework, today it is no problem at all. Except when it comes to cooking. I can do things like cook rice and prepare basic dishes but I leave the main meals to my wife. That requires skills which I don’t have and also, I have to be mindful that other people have to be able to eat the food that is put on the table!

WIA: Today the credit cooperative training programme has a gender-sensitising component firmly in place. What does this involve?

PS: Our gender-sensitising training seeks to build awareness on gender issues. Some sessions are run separately, i.e., men-only or women-only, and some are run for them together. In the men’s training, we first give a theoretical overview on women and development issues. We also include exercises that aim at changing the male mindset, the ways in which they negatively view and treat women in society. For instance, one such activity demonstrates how men are stumbling blocks to women’s liberation. Another makes them see how they use culture and religion to oppress women and why this needs to change. After introducing the idea that women must be treated as equals, we go on to the concepts e.g., sex and gender, sex-role stereotyping, portrayal of women, etc. In these sessions, the audience is mixed and the discussion moves into the sphere of justice and rights. We get them, for example, to think about wife-battering. Why is it that men who use the excuse of being stressed beat their wives but don’t take it out on their male bosses? On the

whole, we want to educate the men at the same time empowering the women. This way we hope that eventually they can meet somewhere in the middle.

WIA: What kinds of successes have you had in gender-sensitising the credit cooperative movement?

PS: There has been progress on two accounts. One relates to institutional or structural changes, and the other at the level of the individual.

In the first instance, we now acknowledge the equal participation of women in the cooperatives. It is policy for all leaders to include a gender perspective in whatever input that they make, irrespective of whether this is for a small meeting, an annual general meeting or a written-report. All our data is sex-disaggregated so that they no longer invisibilise the presence and contributions of women. Likewise, the cooperative’s rules and regulations have been rewritten in nonsexist language, and our notes on the history of the movement not only mention women but also contain photos of them. Other measures include ensuring that the organisation is gender-responsive, right from the level of our education and loan policies, down to application forms and member passbooks. Any man who is known as a wife-batterer is forbidden to sit on the Board of Directors. As well, each time decisions have to be made about trainers, budget allocations, or overseas trips, it is “automatic” for us to think of this in terms of both women and men. We have also instituted the provision of child-care and preschool facilities which are nontraditional cooperative activities.

At the individual level, I won’t say that all the men who have undergone our training

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have changed 100 percent because it is really hard for them to understand women. I see this instead as an important learning process for them. Nevertheless, on the whole, a lot more listening to women is taking place in the homes and cooperatives. There is greater respect shown for women. Also, more men are getting involved in housework and male-female relationships in the household are improving. There is greater joint decision-making taking place as well. For instance, families plan household budgets together and this has led to increased savings. Some will even organise for food to be served and cleaning up to be done at training sessions that women attend.

There are also men who have taken up the challenge of showing by example. In one incident, this man, after attending the gender-sensitising training, washed and hung out the clothes to dry. Several people who saw this ridiculed him and asked why he was doing women's work. Wasn't he afraid of society criticising him? He responded, "This is not women's work, this is housework. If society wants to criticise me, let them." In reality no one else criticised him. Instead six other men in his community subsequently followed his example. All the men who have started to

show more concern for their families, by doing housework and making decisions collectively with their wives and children, are showing a new leadership style in the cooperatives and their communities, a style which is gender-responsive and transformative.

WIA: You have, besides the gender-sensitising training, "men's clubs." Tell us a bit more about this.

PS: After a certain point, we realised that women were coming together as a group and meeting every month to empower themselves. Men, on the other hand, were not doing this. As leaders they already participated in the gender-sensitising training but we wanted their involvement to be more proactive. Instead of merely "plugging" them into a training workshop, we wanted the men to sit down and talk about themselves, to freely express what they think and feel about certain issues. We hoped that having male-only meetings would encourage them to open up. This is also why we emphasise confidentiality and see that all the groups comprise people who know and trust each other. These are our "men's clubs." They have been going on for two years and have been a tremendous help in gender-sensitising the men.

As a result, I have seen and heard a lot of things that men never share with anybody. Their love stories. Their feelings about their wives and families. Their understanding about sex, male impotence and menopause, and their fears around these. In our sessions we help men to see how they can behave differently. For example, we show that culture and religion have imposed certain beliefs on us which in turn leave men unnecessarily burdened. Traditionally, the male role is to "carry" everything and when he cannot cope he turns to drinking, womanising... But none of these

are solutions. Instead, we teach them how to talk with their wives, and discuss how their burdens can be shared.

We also teach how sex is not a right, that it must be on mutual grounds with their wives. Once we even showed a man how his helping in the housework could improve his sexual relationship with his wife. He had said that she had no sexual desire. Later we discovered that this was because she was always tired at the end of the day from doing too much work. After he started to help out with the household chores, she didn't feel as tired and things became better for them. As well, in some sessions the men have really gone into tears. They have discovered how to show appreciation to their wives. They have learnt about holding, hugging and showing love to their children.

WIA: What are your future challenges?

PS: Multiplying our experiences. For this we need more trainers with the "right" mindset. We have a handful of them already but the difficult part is getting more. Unlike math or geography where you can just go to class to learn, this is a gender-sensitising training. This means the trainer has to have certain skills and ways of thinking. Apart from knowing the issues, they need to understand a bit of psychology and must be able to communicate well. Conflict will happen during these sessions so we need trainers who know how to handle this, how to avoid a sex war from erupt-

ing. We also want to put a support system in place because once you start dealing with family matters, there needs to be a mechanism



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Paul Sinappan: addressing poverty and transforming gender relations in credit cooperatives need not be two separate struggles.

for resolving issues that arise. To expand we need better resources to work with too. Because society has been so gender-biased, a lot of the materials we use are inappropriate and this makes our work more difficult. Money is also a consideration. We will need more of this to allow us to train more extensively. ☺

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