

GROOTS India Network: Grows in Numbers and Talent

Bangalore, Sept 6-7, 2010

Grassroots Women from Four States Come Together to Collectively Represent Their Priorities and Advance Their Leadership in Local Development and Governance.



The real nexus of development gains and social change is organized groups of grassroots women. This logic was affirmed at the September two-day GROOTS India leadership meeting held in Bangalore which brought together over 30 grassroots women leaders from four of the states represented in the network (Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh). Facilitated and hosted by Swayam Shikshan Prayog and GROOTS International, this meeting provided an opportunity for women to collectively analyze the gains they have made through organized leadership, the challenges that

remain, and learn from one another effective strategies to build resilience.

The meeting brought into sharp relief the creative work grassroots women are leading to improve their lives and solve local development problems. Over two days, groups shared how they were functioning as community mobilizers, information agents and solution takers--establishing a powerful collective image of how Groots India can help channel and catalyze women's growing levels of organization and the social recognition into a movement for social change. Modestly, women talked about how they were redefining power relationships to:

- Improve access and change the terms of trade with regards to finance, capital and markets for fisher women (previously not recognized and marginalized) so they can participate equally in economic benefits,
- Create collective land access and collective farming,
- Secure contracts from governments for toilets and roads, electricity meter readings, and increase access to essential services (health, education and water and sanitation),
- Increase the number of women in local council (Panchayat) and district positions would work together to open up and strengthen political decision-making,
- Take on roles and responsibilities reserved for men (serving on local disaster task forces, planning and monitoring community services, etc.)

Reaffirming how seldom grassroots women's groups have a chance to claim and share the knowledge and skills they have accumulated in trying to help their families and communities, workshop participants were excited to compare how their groups had gone about implementing a new initiative -the Community Disaster Resilience Fund--a mechanism designed by GROOTS and the Huairou Commission to channel untied funds to community based groups to reduce vulnerabilities to climate change, natural disaster, and food insecurity and build their capacity for resilience. (Founded in 2007, the CDRF is active in 8 states in India and 12 countries globally).



Although the local backdrop is different for each of the women's group, (depending on situational risks and vulnerabilities) women gave clear examples of how the CDRF is helping them: take the lead in identifying community hazards, set priorities and plans to redress them, find new ways to protect their livelihoods and productive assets and also improve community health and nutritional patterns and ensure food supplies for longer periods.



Women from Andhra Pradesh, explained how they used the CDRF to support their fisher women's federations to publically register their groups, and to increase their capacity and livelihoods by training 1350 fisher women from 21 villages on post harvesting fish processing, safe water and sanitation techniques. Taking social and community protection seriously, the women established insurance funds, and supported women to sit on disaster task forces of the government (training 200 women to take on these roles). In Tamil Nadu, the CDRF has rotated across

many villages, supporting women's groups to: earn 4 'clean village' awards from the central government, conduct 12 hazard risk mappings in 12 villages, receive government contracts and build 60 toilets in 3 villages, and establish cultivated vegetable gardens in 10 villages. As this exchange session wound up, it was clear that the contribution of the women's groups--their problem solving skills, commitment, and level of organization--were the reason CDRF (relatively small funds) could have the impact of reducing vulnerability and promoting local resilience!

Unpacking how they were able to achieve such gains and mindful that sustaining them is as much work--Groots India leaders devoted several sessions of the workshop program to collectively analyzing the qualities and complexities of effective leadership. Their criteria for effective grassroots leadership included women who: are generous and open, share their knowledge and are also keen to learn from other women. To move beyond local leadership, women must be able to travel outside her village, be comfortable addressing large numbers of women (50 -300 women), and have the skills and talents to mentor and link women's groups through federations and other networks. In Maharashtra to be able to call oneself a leader, one must meet 2-3 times a month and actively expand the network by mentoring 10 new women per year. Leaders understand how these organizing and human development functions build a movement for social change. As C. Kasthuri, a Tamil Nadu federation leader explained: ***leadership is not just about attending meetings, it is about piloting new ideas and identifying groups, practices and innovations to learn from. Being part of this network helps us to learn these skills and capacities. It's the only way we can make change.***

A quality of leadership endorsed by all the workshop participants was the courage to cross boundaries (social and geographical) and propose and model the kinds of changes that can improve women's quality of life and build opportunities for her family and community. Sharifa Sayyed from Maharashtra described the bold action this can require--explaining how she first ran against and defeated her husband in the local council elections, then challenged the effectiveness of other male office holders by getting an all women Panchayati voted into her village. Focused on repairing her community's broken roads, she took on the local and district bureaucrats and officials who failed to fix them by going directly to the State Government in Mumbai to make their plight known. After three back and forth trips, mobilizing 30 villages to support road improvements ***and going on a hunger strike for 4 days***, the Ministry finally acknowledged her request and awarded her council and the community a 40 million rupee road improvement contract and the work was completed.

While women were proud to recount their groups' successes, they were equally clear about their challenges. In the political sphere, a number of trends disturbed them. Some groups were having difficulties registering their groups with village officials (a key requirement for operating) and others were having trouble sustaining themselves when government programs came and went and funds to support women's work dried up. Across the states, leaders were troubled by political parties and government programs forming alternative women's groups and federations to compete with (and replace) their independent ones. Similarly they described how parties would exploit women's groups during election periods to fulfill quotas and the like and then abandon their promises.

An accomplished feminist activist and researcher based in Bangalore--Srilatha Batliwala--addressed the community leaders, gently challenging them to think that they might have to tackle these issues by working on themselves first. Focusing on transformative power, transformative leadership, Batliwala likened leadership to a diamond that can be 'beautiful and precious, but also hard.' She explained how leadership embraces power, principles, practice and purpose. Deconstructing these, she noted that the most important part of leadership is power, yet most women are not comfortable being leaders with open power. Why? Because *"from the time you are small, you are taught not to want power but to serve others and not ask for yourself."*

When women do become leaders their relationship with power and the position they have often becomes more complicated. However, by building collective leadership that combines different strengths, one can make sure that leaders do a better job of using the power, using agreed upon principles and values, learning the correct skills and capacity, and acting as 'watchdogs' to ensure no one leader misuses their power. When women create organizations and movements that operate from these processes and principles, they model new forms of leadership and power. In this context, Batliwala affirmed the importance of GROOTS India as a network, growing out of federations and other self help organizations, that can have different leaders and grow into a powerful movement for advancing equitable community development (an alternative to individuals working for individual or exclusive power).



When the two-day meeting closed, it was clear that the nascent network formed in 2007 by Indian grassroots women's groups, and supported by GROOTS International, Swayam Shikshan Prayog and Covenant Centre of Development (CCD), is fully founded and supported. The increasing leverage that grassroots women have gained as a result of organization and support from one another has allowed them to become further embedded within the fabric of Indian society. GROOTS India clearly illustrates the talent, skills and leadership of Indian women by standing in solidarity with one another to emblematically 'create a diamond mine' that brings their values and vision forward to making their communities safer and more resilient in years to come.

- Huairou Commission, Oct 2010