

## Chapter 23

### Beating a Path: Towards Defining Women's Participation

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This paper is based on the experience of community organization work that SPARC (the Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centers) has been involved with since its formation in 1984.

Starting with the most vulnerable, isolated, and deprived among the urban poor, SPARC has developed a popular education program that attempts to reorganize marginalized communities. It instills women's central participation and collective leadership as central features and addresses not only the question of women's subordination but also of the marginalized position of the communities. The approach develops from needs and aspirations of such groups, especially women, leading to the self-discovery of their capacity to analyze, challenge, and transform their reality. It is concerned with developing critical consciousness among these groups and with building their skills which lead to assertive and confident practices and formulating strategies that contribute to changing their marginalized position.

In the case of pavement dwellers with whom SPARC began to work in 1984, the popular education program began with the lack of secure shelter, regarded by the pavement dwellers as their most pressing and crucial problem. A shelter training program evolved as a result. The communities endorsed women as main participants to spearhead the training and subsequent action. The paper documents, as an illustration, the first cycle of the training program as it evolved. It records the way in which this training is utilized, first to secure women's central participation and then to sustain it by developing their skills to gather, analyze, and systematize information and use it for collective decision-making. The last section illustrates how the strategy devised by SPARC attempts to integrate women's empowerment with fulfillment of urgent needs of their families and communities, and how it is harnessed to resolve immediate problems and address long-term goals.

#### The Context

SPARC is a voluntary organization (or a non-government organization—NGO) based in Bombay in western India (the metropolis had a population of more than 12 million in 1991). SPARC's founders are professionals in social work, social activism, social sciences, and related research. To work toward equity and social justice, they felt a need to set up an organization which aligned as a partner rather than as a patron of marginalized communities and organizations of the poor. To fulfill its aspirations, SPARC has set up resource centers in areas geographically accessible to the

groups that need them. In such centers, people find information, interact with their neighbors and others in similar situations as themselves, develop skills, and learn to represent themselves. In such resource centers, management is gradually transferred to the communities that use them.

SPARC has two partner organizations: Mahila Milan (MM) and the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF). Mahila Milan (MM) was formed in 1987 initially as an organization of women who live on pavements and who trained themselves with the help of SPARC to lobby for their rights, among which is access to secure shelter. The organization has developed strategies to ensure that the women are supported by the entire community of which they are a part. Women are encouraged to work not only within their own community but also with women from other communities to help them to take on similar initiatives. In the process, they gather strength as the membership of their collective grows.

The National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) had been in existence for several years prior to becoming a partner of SPARC and had worked sporadically on issues concerning slum dwellers. After SPARC conducted an enumeration of pavement dwellers in 1985, NSDF, attracted to the use of an information base to mobilize people, began to interact with SPARC. NSDF has member federations in Bombay and in other cities in India.<sup>1</sup>

SPARC began its work with women from families living in hovels on pavements in Bombay. It saw pavement dwellers as the most deprived and isolated among the urban poor and those who have fewest organizational and political skills. Women among them, as compared to women from poor households, are greater sufferers in the struggle for survival because of their added vulnerability arising from the ever-present threat of demolition of their dwellings. By starting with the most vulnerable, SPARC believes it is developing an alternative generally relevant to the problems it wishes to address: if it proves relevant to the most marginalized, it can be adapted to the less deprived because of its built-in flexibility.

When SPARC began its work, the organization had a philosophy of work but did not have a set course of action or a methodology. As its involvement in its work grew, it formulated its approach almost intuitively. So far this work has little to show in concrete results or gains, but the process it has set in motion, we believe, is

a contribution toward changing the marginalized position of disadvantaged groups and, in particular, of women.

## **Reviewing Approaches to Women's Development**

This experience needs to be viewed against the background of approaches used for achieving women's development and strategies adopted for countering their subordination, especially since 1975 when the United Nations' Decade for Women began.<sup>2</sup> "The almost uniform conclusion of the International Women's Decade research is that, with a few exceptions, relative access to economic resources, incomes, and employment has worsened, their burdens of work have increased, and their relative and even absolute health, nutritional and educational status has declined!"<sup>3</sup> What is significant is that this decline in women's situations has taken place in spite of all the information, publicity, and pressures surrounding women in the last two decades or so.

Policy approaches that have been successively adopted in an attempt to change women's status have been described as welfare, equity, anti-poverty, efficiency, and empowerment.<sup>4</sup> Each approach was born out of an understanding of its time of women's roles in development. These approaches have been operationalized not singly but in combination. Most of these approaches, however, have failed to address the fundamental problems that women suffer from.

To analyze why women's status has altered little, a distinction needs to be made between the "condition" and "position" of women.<sup>5</sup> A woman's condition means the material state that she finds herself in (e.g., poverty, lack of education, burden of work, lack of access to credit or technology, etc.). Her "position" means her social and economic standing relative to men.

The condition of women is the subject of much of development literature on women and a major part of development concerns centers on finding ways of improving women's condition by targeting ameliorative resources to them rather than by radically changing underlying structures. The emphasis on women's condition has two consequences. Firstly, there has been a tendency to emphasize women's practical and day-to-day needs—giving greater access to credit, special training schemes, etc. Secondly, the approach makes it difficult for structural issues concerning women's position to be raised. It inhibits posing the question of whether women's condition is related to their structural position and/or whether any serious and sustainable improvement in their condition is possible

without structural changes. As a result, while women's needs as mothers, producers, etc., are highlighted, their interests as women are not.<sup>6</sup>

When discussing women's needs, it is essential to differentiate between "the needs of women as occupiers of particular social roles and interests of women as a social category with unequal access to socially-valued resources (both economic and social) and political power."<sup>7</sup> This differentiation has been further developed as practical needs and strategic interests.<sup>8</sup> "Examples of practical gender needs derive from the necessity of fulfilling particular roles allocated to them by the division of labor; e.g., care of children, maintenance of the house, care of the elderly, servicing of family and community.... Strategic gender interests arise from women's growing recognition that the age-old structures of male dominance and privileges are not sacrosanct, but social impositions [and] are, as such, amenable to change."<sup>9</sup>

The approach to the development of women that is concerned centrally with the position of women and their strategic interests is the "empowerment" approach. Strategic interests are defined on the basis of an analysis of gender subordination and a formulation of a vision of alternative gender relations. It is clear that if women are to attain justice in society, it will be necessary to transform the structures of subordination: i.e., changes are required in laws, civil codes, property rights, labor codes, and social and legal institutions that underwrite male control and privileges. The empowerment approach, however, recognizes the limitations of top-down government efforts to meet strategic gender interests. Even when these strategies are adopted, to implement them, sustained efforts in the form of political mobilization, consciousness raising, and popular education are required. The empowerment approach uses practical gender needs on which to build a secure support base and as means through which more strategic interests may be reached.

Popular education is regarded by adherents of the empowerment approach as an important component of a strategy that challenges gender subordination. Popular education "is concerned with developing critical consciousness amongst the marginalized groups, with strengthening behaviors and attitudes which lead to more confident and assertive practices and to formulating strategies to contribute to the changing of their marginalized position."<sup>10</sup>

The approach develops from the needs and aspirations of the marginalized groups and leads to the self-discovery among the people of their own capacities to analyze, challenge, and transform their own reality.

### Why Focus on Women Pavement Dwellers?

In the work done by SPARC, as now seen with hindsight, the element of popular education which attempts to address the situation of women's subordination evolved as a critical component. The group arrived at its methodology of work not from studying any manuals or handbooks on the subject but from their commitment to take, as the starting point, needs and aspirations of marginalized groups as defined by the groups themselves. The workers in SPARC were acutely conscious of not imposing their own values, attitudes, and ideas on the people and communities they worked with.

The focus on women pavement dwellers arose from the experience of some of the individual members of SPARC of earlier work with such committees.<sup>11</sup> It had shown them clearly that these women, on the one hand, have to face extremely hostile and difficult situations, but on the other, are a key to the survival of their families and communities. They not only nurture and create the physical and psychological space for fulfilling family needs but also create the community's survival system based on mutual support which is so essential for getting by in a highly competitive and alienating environment of the city. They manage resources in such a way as to ensure their conservation and equitable distribution. And yet, their contribution to the building, consolidation, and development of their settlements remains unacknowledged. Women do not give any credit to themselves for their own contribution either. They are never consulted in formulating interventions (by NGOs or government agencies). To address the needs and aspirations of marginalized groups, however, those who face crises and devise survival strategies (i.e., women) must play a central role in decision making, in designing strategies, and in implementing them. Hence, SPARC focuses on women. This is a means of acknowledging existing processes and building upon them.

Therefore, right from the start in SPARC's work, central participation of women is a critical component of a gender-sensitive community organization. It attempts to achieve this by facilitating the renegotiating of men-and-women relationships within their families, communities, and federations to achieve the goal of equity.

## Reorganization of Communities and Gender Sensitivity

### A Changing Self-Image of Women

The reorganization of groups to be gender-sensitive must occur in large enough numbers of communities to provide the environment in which new relationships can not only sustain themselves but also get reproduced. Popular education becomes a critical tool to create the new environment. Popular education programs with women ensure that both women themselves and communities constantly acknowledge women's central role in the process of change. In the popular education programs, as the first step toward self-discovery by women, SPARC initiates individual introspection by women into their past. Women are encouraged to share their experiences, starting from childhood. This narration includes events, views, feelings, opinions, and much reflection. The listener (catalyst) is not passive but demands accountability from the speaker to ensure that socially and self-promoted myths do not intervene.

It is not that the women do not talk about their lives or know about each other's histories. What is different in this new narration is the value that is ascribed to that experience. It no longer remains an isolated, individual experience; instead, it is linked to critical milestones in the settlement's history. This ensures that, in the future, women's role and contribution to making decisions on issues that affect the settlement/community can no longer be marginalized. This introspection enables women to see themselves as agents of change. It reveals to them that this experience is a process of their own creation and worthy of becoming a reference point in discussions.

The next step in the process of self-discovery is to move from individual stories to group histories. Small groups of women are assisted to discuss, collectively, their experiences and issues related to themselves. When women know about each other's life histories, it is easier to refer to individual incidents in group meetings and discussions. In such discussions, the role of the catalyst is to help women form a collective experience and then build on it.

In subsequent discussions, men as well as women participate. At this point, the catalyst supports men to narrate their life history as they perceive it, and then to integrate it with women's experience to build the entire community's history. From this point onward, any discussion on the past experience refers to what women

and men have contributed to the settlement/community history. This is one of the most difficult stages and marks a watershed in the process. In this process of reorganizing the community's history, the question of who in the community is to spearhead desired changes is debated continuously. There is an agreement that it should be those who build and consolidate the settlement, face crises, and solve problems. Invariably, on these criteria women are endorsed to work as agents of change.

The process is difficult and drawn out because it challenges existing leadership patterns and upsets existing power equations within the community. Women generally avoid confrontations over this matter. They cajole, connive, and even maneuver situations to gradually develop a working relationship with men in the community. The catalyst helps by providing the women space to use their newly found knowledge to facilitate changes in their community in a manner and at a pace that they can cope with and make use of. In such an environment, the women that SPARC has worked with have clearly displayed their desire to play crucial roles in decision-making. They have demonstrated that it is possible to develop strategies to set in motion a process leading to the transformation of their situation of subordination within their families and communities.

This experience is significant in itself, especially in light of the recognition by the international women's movement that there has been little success in effectively challenging gender subordination. An important reason identified for this is the perceived lack of acceptable alternatives which do not entail intolerably high costs.<sup>12</sup> The experience of oppression and subordination that women may suffer is mediated by experiences which may lead many women to conclude that their situation cannot be changed or that attempting to change it will worsen their existing situation which they have learned to cope with. This belief may not only deter women from taking action to change their situation but may even lead certain categories of women to support the structures and institutions of male domination. In SPARC's work, the transformation of women's situation of subordination is linked to improved life for the entire community and, therefore, is accepted by men and the community as a whole.

The scope provided in the approach devised by SPARC to transcend women's anxiety about the cost of challenging their existing situation has proved to be a crucial feature. After the alliance with Mahila Milan was initiated, men and women whose roles were reorganized



through this process began to participate as partners with SPARC. Mahila Milan and NSDF are more effective in this process since they demonstrate to the communities benefits of this rearrangement; and when men discuss this transformation, it is even more effective. This is the point after which SPARC no longer plays the role of a catalyst, but hands that responsibility over to members of MM and NSDF. They reproduce the process that they have been through with other communities that join the federation.

### **Establishing Collective Leadership**

A critical part of the popular education strategy devised by SPARC is the upgrading of information levels of all members of communities. This is essential for facilitating their participation in the process of mobilization and for establishing collective decision-making. It is also crucial for enabling the communities to demand accountability from the collective leadership. Building people's capabilities to examine and systematize their knowledge, and to use it to advance their collective cause, is central to community organization initiated by SPARC. This is contrary to the traditional pattern of community structures in poorer settlements in which leaders are often brokers of (political) patronage. They prop up their own position as leaders by exploiting their access to information or knowledge (of the working of government agencies, banks, welfare schemes, etc.). They thrive in a situation where people in the community are not exposed to the working of such institutions and, therefore, lack the confidence to seek information themselves. The community leaders use this situation for obtaining gains for themselves. They are, therefore, not interested in changing this situation by building people's capabilities to take on such tasks. In the popular education and community organization strategy devised by SPARC, these traditional leaders usually get sidelined and replaced by a responsive collective leadership.

### **Popular Education Using Question of Shelter**

Women living on pavements express as their first priority the need for secure shelter, mainly for the sake of their children. Owing to this consideration, SPARC evolved its popular education program around the question of shelter.

Shelter is the most critical question for pavement dwellers. Their lives are fraught with an acute sense of insecurity arising from repeated demolitions by authori-

ties of their shelter and consequent loss of belongings. Demolitions rarely achieve the objective of clearing pavements, for their residents almost always manage to return to the same location and erect their shelter all over again. Demolitions, however, not only deplete the meager asset base of these families but also torment and terrorize them. They are made to feel powerless and begin to regard their situation as hopeless. Apathy sets in as a result. The trauma, anguish, and rage felt on account of demolitions give way to passive acceptance of the situation. The psychological damage caused by demolitions is severe and difficult to remedy. Apathy and the feeling of powerlessness incapacitate people and make them incapable of participating in a process leading to a change in their situation. This is even more true for women in such groups. This poses a big challenge for devising strategies that will change this situation of inaction. In this environment, identifying shelters as a focal point of intervention and women as agents of change is a strategic choice made by SPARC.

In mid-1985, SPARC conducted an enumeration of pavement dwellers (a people's census).<sup>13</sup> It revealed that nearly 6,000 families (27,000 people) lived on pavements in just one district (ward) and four arterial roads in Bombay. The enumeration was conducted as much as a strategy to mobilize the people as to generate information about them (which was scanty), to create public opinion against mass demolition, and to deter the local authority from taking such a drastic action.<sup>14</sup> The objective was to bring into focus the reality that a problem of such a magnitude and complexity could not be solved by demolishing huts and evicting the people.

Tension and anxiety mounted as the day after which demolitions were expected to begin drew closer. To the relief of pavement dwellers and their supporters, however, mass demolitions did not occur (this was as much due to intensive mobilizing of pavement dwellers by various organizations as to a play of diverse forces in local politics). But the event brought the extent of their vulnerability home to pavement dwellers. Women began to ask how long they would go on accepting such a precarious existence and whether their children's children too would be born on pavements. Not only was their situation desperate—the poverty, hand-to-mouth existence, isolation, and hopelessness—but difficulties seemed insurmountable and no solution was in sight.

The threat of imminent demolition after the Supreme Court judgment provided the critical historical moment for building an alliance between SPARC and pavement

dwellers. SPARC felt that the apathy of pavement dwellers could be turned into a positive force, galvanizing the people into action, provided they:

1. Developed a vision of an alternative: the people needed to develop an alternative, working toward which would provide the motivation to shed apathy and take action.
2. Conducted organized action: a large enough number of people needed to believe that change was possible.
3. Built stamina and capacity for sustained action: they needed to develop stamina and capacity for a long, drawn-out process of negotiations and lobbying to legitimize and institutionalize the change they desired and demanded.

The impending threat of mass demolitions and anxiety caused by it provided the impetus to focus on the question of shelter. The enumeration of pavement dwellers and subsequent discussions of its findings with the people had created the background for conducting a training program which explored possible ways of changing the prevailing situation.<sup>15</sup>

Essential features of this training can be described as:

1. a. With the community concerned and its leadership, organization of existing knowledge, information, and practices that the people have used in working out their shelter strategies.  
b. Examination of this information to understand the circumstances in which the strategies have evolved and to analyze their advantages and drawbacks.
2. a. Identification of areas where changes are needed and articulation of why these changes are essential.  
b. Identification of the various actors involved, other than the community itself, to identify the required skills and resources and who can contribute to them.  
c. Development of the required skills within the community to undertake the process leading to the desired change.
3. Having developed this understanding, development of skills to articulate the alternative to people within the community, to other communities in a similar situation, and to outsiders (professionals, citizenry, and government officials).

Integral to this training must be sustained community mobilization essential for carrying on the action through a drawn-out process before the alternative can be achieved. Therefore, this training process ensures as outcomes (1) a clear understanding of aspirations; (2) a statement of how the community proposes to achieve them; (3) development of insights into internal and external factors that will lead to achieving the alterna-

tive; and (4) recognition that structural changes are needed to resolve most critical problems of the poor. The outcome of this training program becomes the foundation for community action.

The decision to treat this training process as an educational component of community mobilization was somewhat intuitive. On hindsight, its rationale can be described thus: to enable poor communities, especially women among them, to work with SPARC as partners in building an alternative; a reorganization of the communities' way of functioning must form an essential feature of this process. A sustainable change is not possible without such a reorganization.

A critical part of the training is to upgrade the information level of the entire community, for without this all its members are not in a position to participate in the mobilization process. Community members (not SPARC) then develop criteria for selecting leaders. This ensures that the leaders are accountable to the community. Members of SPARC discuss, argue, and negotiate with the people regarding each other's ideas on leadership and the final concept emerges out of a consensus. Creating processes which allow negotiations to occur in order to arrive at a consensus are as much a part of the training as building actual skills.<sup>16</sup> Group discussions are a mechanism used for arriving at a consensus. The entire community (i.e., men and women) participates in these discussions.

In the process of transformation, the twin factors of women's central participation and collective decision-making, once endorsed by the community, become the most important aspects of the organization process. Some groups and individuals in the community (e.g., the traditional male leaders) may continue to deride these features. Rather than exclude the traditional leaders for their derogatory behavior, the process of debate and discussion challenges their views until an internal consensus is reached. Once women's participation in creating alternative shelter emerges, the basis for a collective leadership has been established.

### Shelter Training Program

To explain the shelter training program in practice, it is useful to describe the first cycle of the training that SPARC and women pavement dwellers developed in 1986-87. In the specific case of pavement dwellers, public meetings were arranged to discuss impending demolitions and to work out strategies to avert or deal with them. Women's participation, in case such an

eventuality occurred, was linked to the "NEED" rather than to a "RIGHT" by emphasizing that the question of shelter concerned women the most, since it was they who made a pavement dwelling (or any dwelling) a home. Further, a crisis such as a demolition was faced generally by women since men were at work when it occurred. After a series of meetings, men accepted that women would be the spearheads of the training program. This position was publicly ratified. The key role given to women put them in a position of responsibility which they were willing to shoulder. Any fears, anxieties, and doubts that this responsibility created among women were openly discussed so that they did not act as deterrents to their participation. The group took the responsibility of coping with the work collectively.

The first training program was conducted for 600 women participants. Men also participated sporadically. It was undertaken in an atmosphere conducive and congenial to participation by women and the community. Days, timing, and the agenda of the meetings were flexible and organized by women. Members of SPARC made sure that all critical issues were discussed, however difficult some of them were. They were dealt with by the community in a manner and at a pace that they could handle. The informal atmosphere in which the training took place made women feel at ease. The training used language, form, and manner that made sure that the participants were not intimidated. They were, in fact, put in a position of advantage because the discussion began from a narration of their experiences.

Several questions were discussed in the training program. For example, since the demolition of dwellings was a major concern for pavement dwellers, a detailed discussion of this problem was included in the training. During these discussions, women made analytical observations on a number of issues related to demolitions (e.g., which settlements had to face demolition squads more frequently than others, why it was necessary to build huts using materials that could be dismantled quickly, costs involved in maintaining such structures, the loss of belongings, including food and stored grains confiscated during demolitions and consequent hardships suffered, violence during demolitions). Attention of the participants was drawn to the distinction between demolition (i.e., destruction of dwellings) and eviction (i.e., preventing people from occupying the pavement). This distinction helped them to differentiate between their inability to save their homes and their strength in resisting being evicted altogether from the pavement. The group then listed all the actors involved in the drama. This led to an explora-

tion of possible alternative responses to impending demolitions.

It became clear in these discussions that these families did not wish to reside on pavements. They were willing to move to alternative sites in the city to attain secure shelter. Until this alternative could be realized, which the participants recognized would be a very long process, it was essential to devise ways of minimizing the psychological and economic damage caused by demolition of shelter. Several steps were planned to deal with such an eventuality (and were subsequently executed). Women delegates visited the municipal ward office and the local police station and demanded and obtained clear information about the stipulated procedure to be followed during demolitions. It became clear to them, for example, that the presence of the police was as much to protect the people as to effect violence-free demolitions. This information was passed on to all members of the community to be made use of when required.

A "battle plan" was drawn up to face demolitions collectively, with residents of neighboring settlements coming to assist (e.g., in dismantling huts to prevent the ignominy and indignity of hacking of dwellings by the demolition squad, providing food to the affected families on the day their homes are demolished). This plan is now routinely practiced when facing demolitions. This has helped break the feeling of isolation and to create a feeling of solidarity among pavement dwellers.

The next stage was to develop alternative shelters. The crucial issue here related to the availability of land. Pavement and slum dwellers have repeatedly been told by local and housing authorities that no land is available in Bombay where they can be accommodated. This is not true, and to demonstrate this, vacant stretches of land were located (on the Development Plan of the city, from information received from slum dwellers living in other areas, from professionals in the relevant departments of the state government). Visits were arranged to inspect these sites. The training program included the gathering of information, checking its validity, and arranging visits so that each member of the community saw the vacant land. For many, especially women, this was their first visit to another area of the city using public transport. The site visits provided an opportunity for the people to interact with other communities and this strengthened networking. Having established that vacant land exists in Bombay, the next complex question that needed to be thrashed out was why it was not officially available to the poor. This discussion illustrated how people began



to grasp that their deprivation was a result of a number of external forces. It made them aware of the magnitude of change required to fulfill their aspirations for secure shelter.

By now, people felt comfortable as members of large groups. But for everyone to try to participate in everything would have been unwieldy and unrealistic. Not everyone had the time or the capability for doing various concrete tasks that needed to be done. By this time, a stage had been reached at which some of the participants had shown the qualities of prime movers and leaders. The group, in turn, was by now seeking representatives for doing future work, and a process of identifying collective leadership began. Essentially, leaders were to be those who could share, nurture, support, and assist those who sought to do the work rather than to wield power—those who wished to contribute their efforts and found time to do what needed to be done.

One woman was chosen from every 15 houses to assume the responsibility of carrying out concrete tasks. Such representatives together formed Area Committees. They had to conduct regular meetings with members of the 15 houses and be a link for communication between them and between this group and the rest of the community. This mechanism is used even today to keep every person in the community informed, ensuring that the communication chain is maintained. The women chosen to be members of Area Committees had to acquire various skills and play specific roles. They were required to learn to involve everyone and also to facilitate collective decision-making. They received support and feedback on their work from SPARC and members of the community. These women representatives, because of their communication skills, became trainers in other communities.

To collect basic information necessary for planning their alternative settlement, each cluster had to do a simple exercise of counting the exact number of families that lived there. Since they had never been involved in such a task before, the exercise was important for undertaking the gathering of statistical information about themselves and using it with confidence in discussions to support their arguments. Besides, SPARC's experience had showed that an enumeration can be used as a powerful tool for mobilizing people. For these reasons, it was decided that Area Committee members would perform this task for their individual groups of 15 houses (although information about each cluster existed in the census of pavement dwellers conducted earlier by SPARC).

This exercise was a watershed in the training program. An anomaly surfaced: the number of structures (huts) did not match the number of families living in the cluster—because of renting out of part of the huts, huts being used for income-earning activities, vested interests attempting to claim more space, stronger families trying to outdo weaker ones, and so on. There was tension that had to be resolved. Enumeration was conducted in each cluster several times until the findings satisfied a majority and a consensus was reached. The whole process contributed significantly to group building.

For women, the enumeration exercise was the first major concrete task that they did collectively. This gave them a sense of accomplishment and boosted their confidence. They got insights into the community dynamics and began to understand processes by which Area Committee members could be coopted by outsiders or community members. The process made them aware of the need to set norms carefully for space allocation so that the needs of every community member could be fulfilled. They developed a team spirit which formed a basis for a collective leadership in place of traditional leaders.

The next step in the training was to design the dwelling and settlement. While women dreamt of the kind of houses they would want to live in, they were realistic about their means and resources and needs of the community. They analyzed the existing allocation of space for various functions in their dwellings. This helped to identify family space against collective/community space. The importance of sharing space and amenities was discussed. On the basis of this analysis, requirements of individual dwellings were worked out. They were discussed with professionals. Women defended their choices/decisions.<sup>17</sup> Architects/engineers explained the importance of natural light and proper ventilation and space management. They discussed the importance of developing a prototype. The presence of SPARC at these meetings ensured that the professionals were informed and sympathetic, that they were neither overbearing nor romantic about people's participation, and that there was frank dialogue. After a series of meetings, designs of dwellings and settlement evolved.

The training program included a discussion of existing public housing schemes for the poor. Officials from the housing authority were invited to make presentations before groups of women. Visits to public housing projects by a core group of women were arranged in Bombay and other cities. Pamphlets giving information about various housing schemes were obtained and



translated by SPARC staff members into appropriate languages. Women compared their dwelling and settlement designs with those in official schemes and assessed public housing designs for suitability for their own needs. During visits to housing projects, they asked their residents those questions that they had asked themselves when they planned their dwellings. They explained their design choices to these residents. In this process, a critique of public housing projects emerged.

The whole exercise involved:

1. An analysis of their own life styles and their means and resources to arrive at a relevant dwelling/settlement design.
2. Articulating their design choices to professionals and defending their decisions.
3. Developing prototypes with the help of professionals.
4. Collecting information on public housing schemes and assessing them for suitability.

Subsequently, full-scale dwelling models were built by women (using timber, cloth, and paper in the first training program; in subsequent programs, other materials such as brick and concrete were also used). An exhibition was organized which was visited by slum dwellers, professionals, and government officials. Women showed and discussed the dwelling models with the visitors who had diverse interests in the exhibition. To slum dwellers, it demonstrated ways of upgrading their houses and settlements; to government officials and professionals, it was not only a clear expression of people's ability to plan shelter meticulously but also broke stereotyped images of the poor as incapable of working out suitable alternatives.

Starting from an analysis of their existing situation to working out a concrete structure for shelter took a period of nearly 18 months. Having conceptualized dwelling and settlement designs, the next phase in the training program was to discuss the "hardware" of housing (i.e., the three major components of building materials, finance, and land).

1. Building materials: Women visited building material depots to determine which of them were appropriate for their use and inquired about prices. They also learnt actual construction, estimating cost of construction, delivery systems, and later supervising construction work.
2. Finance: Pavement dwellers are fully aware that alternative shelter would not be given free of cost. They started putting aside small amounts of money regularly in a bank

for paying for shelter. In addition, they made inquiries about loan facilities for housing from established credit sources.

Each household has an account in a bank in the name of the woman. Community leaders assist each family to open a bank against the target set on the basis of estimates of dwelling cost. Women who once regarded entering a bank intimidating and operating bank accounts formidable now do this work with ease and confidence. Regular saving of money has inculcated discipline among the people and awareness regarding planning for the future—both values alien to those leading a hand-to-mouth existence.

Discussion with housing finance institutions have now been initiated and are going on. Considerable amounts put aside as housing savings so far by pavement dwellers as a group show the level of preparedness of the people to participate in housing projects. This is contrary to a normally held view by government authorities that pavement dwellers are neither willing to pay toward housing nor capable of saving money regularly.

3. Land: In the case of pavement dwellers, acquiring land is the most difficult proposition. They have had to start with a struggle for recognition of their legitimacy. Even this has been achieved only marginally. Establishing a right to land to live on is a distant goal. Negotiating with government authorities for land has been initiated but constitutes a drawn-out and painful process.<sup>18</sup>

Urban land is a highly valuable resource. To tilt its allocation in favor of the urban poor (i.e., those who are incapable of competing in the land or housing market) is a major political battle.<sup>19</sup>

The complexity of and enormous difficulties in the task of obtaining secure shelter have not so far deterred pavement dwellers from refining their training program or assisting other groups of urban poor in developing their shelter alternatives. It is continuing evidence of solidarity among marginalized groups that pavement dwellers have assisted those groups of slum dwellers who have been allotted land to design and construct their homes, although their own quest for land remains unfulfilled. Because the struggle for shelter is a part of the larger struggle for social change, every small step forward in either the specific shelter situation or in the context of urban poverty and deprivation is also a step forward in the other.

### **Illustrating the Outcome of Popular Education**

In conclusion, this section illustrates various elements described in the paper. There are:

1. The challenge of ensuring women's participation in the process of change and, specifically, in the shelter situation.
2. Strategies of popular education which not only create the means for people to participate in formulating these strategies but in reproducing them in a manner which ensures women's central participation and community control over the adaptation and reproduction of these processes.

Most existing shelter training material for women exhibits a top-down approach.<sup>20</sup> It embodies an approach which refers to the "condition" of women and not to their "position." Such an approach has severe limitations for improving the status of women. In the shelter training program devised by SPARC, the focus is on empowering women. It has, firstly, created a positive self-image of women and, secondly, has created mechanisms to sustain it. This has transformed their perception of themselves from individuals who are not worthy of associating with the better-off and professionals and who are incapable of making any contribution to individuals who can act as catalysts in the process of change. Their increased self-esteem has changed their role within their families and the community. Thirdly, by locating the process of reproduction of this training within women's collectives, it has ensured that women's participation is sustained in all decision-making both in their communities and in federations of which these communities are members. For example:

- A. This empowerment process acknowledges women's need to integrate their own empowerment with the fulfillment of needs of their families and communities. This has always remained a challenge to educators working with poor women. In SPARC's approach, women's self-esteem is enhanced by taking up issues in those priority areas which have helped resolve crises faced by such communities. For example:
  1. Obtaining ration cards which have entitled the families to buy food grains, cooking oil, and fuel at subsidized rates.
  2. Dealing with harassment by the police—changing humiliating treatment by officials to due respect for women's opinions.
  3. Transforming the feeling of intimidation by and a lack of access to institutions like banks into a situation where bank staff welcome poor women to open bank accounts and invite women's collectives to advise them on loan applications by members of their communities.
  4. Dealing with municipal officials at the local wrd level—transforming the fear and the feeling of helplessness caused by repeated demolitions into ensuring accountability from public servants.

**Table 1: Mahila Milan Housing Unit Bank Saving Analysis**

	A/C Holders	Amount in Bank of Baroda Rs. Started 1986	Amount in HDFC Rs. Started 1991
APNA	99	71,542	6,450
Water Street	85	75,249	16,100
Tank Pakadi	23	7,101	500
Dimdimkar Road	53	49,516	11,800
Peer Khan	33	36,575	9,560
Sophia Zubair	41	8,158	41,860
Shanti Nagar	41	12,118	57,560
Jula Maidan	45	27,519	18,690
Dockyard Road	19	1,570	38,150
P.D. Mellow Road	117	12,864	47,500
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>556</b>	<b>302,212</b>	<b>248,170</b>

Total Amount: Rs. 503,382

Analysis as of March 3, 1992

**Table 2: Mahila Milan—HDFC\* Deposits**

Date	Amount Rs.
9.15.1990	5,150
4.03.1991	200
4.05.1991	200
4.10.1991	160
5.23.1991	150
7.03.1991	12,990
7.31.1991	110
8.21.1991	8,920
9.09.1991	30
10.16.1991	13,640
10.23.1991	560
11.06.1991	12,320
11.14.1991	14,700
11.27.1991	12,410
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>92,540</b>

\*HDFC: Housing Development Finance Corporation—a private financing agency.

Account Holders: 534

Women's judicious decision-making has established their credibility among not only their community

**Table 3: Dharavi Mahila Milan Savings and Loan**

Area (Society Name)	No. of A/C Holders	Savings Rs.	No. of Loans Disbursed	Amount Disbursed Rs.	Amount Repaid Rs.
Ashirwad Society	17	468			
Bharatiyar Society	169	5,022	3	700	
Chambra Bazar	169	26,791	15	27,672	1,430
Maharashtra Seva	30	1,839			
Rohidas Society	26	2,442			
Ro Vilas		56			
Sakinabai Chawl	30	980			
Tagore Society		453			
Vijay Nagar	5	106			
Virasavarkar Society	24	363			

Analysis as of March 31, 1992.<sup>22</sup>

members but also larger federations and public authorities. This has created an effective spiral in which women's capacity to undertake tasks related to community well-being is supported by the community. This, in turn, creates the space for collective introspection into women's strategic interests.

B. The empowerment approach devised by SPARC uses shelter as a focus because this is regarded as the most pressing and critical problem by pavement dwellers with whom SPARC has chosen to begin its work. However, resolution of the question of shelter is only a means to achieving the alternative vision that women have built collectively. Devising a strategy for action is a complex process, for it must be harnessed both to immediate problems and to long-term goals. In the case of pavement dwellers, their efforts to gain access to secure shelter address their immediate predicament. At the same time, these efforts lay the foundation for the fulfillment of an alternative vision.

This approach acknowledges that, having explored possible alternatives, isolated efforts at achieving them cannot bring much success. Mobilization of increasing numbers of communities is essential. Creating educational strategies to give impetus to larger and larger numbers of people to take action contributes to this end.

A number of federations of slum and pavement dwellers now have educational tools to assist communities.

1. To undertake enumerations—a process by which they create a database required for designing strategies and negotiating with the state.<sup>21</sup>
2. To design mechanisms of savings and credit to fulfill community members' needs for tiding over family crises, needs for loans for small businesses, and saving for shelter (see Tables 1, 2, and 3).
3. To design dwellings, construct houses, and manage basic amenities.
4. To link communities doing any of the above with those who aspire to take action through horizontal exchanges between them.

While the scope of the work that SPARC, MM, and NSDF have embarked on together has expanded, it has so far primarily involved internal reorganization of poor and deprived groups. The challenge of securing adequate shelter has now moved to a larger arena, for it is a struggle for a greater share of resources. This is related to the political economy of urban development. The struggle for secure shelter is even harder in the present context of globalization and liberalization of the Indian economy and proposed privatization of various services, for access to even basic necessities of decent living for the poor cannot be achieved without the intervention by the state in their favor.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Member federations are the Pavement Dwellers Federations, the Railway Slum Dwellers Federation, Dharavi Vikas Samiti, Dharavi Vyavasay Ekta Samiti, the Federation of the Airport Authority Land Dwellers. Taken together, these federations have a membership of nearly 315,000 families.

<sup>2</sup> The following review draws extensively on an overview presented by Shirley Walters, in "Her Words on His Lips: Gender and Popular Education in South Africa," *ASPBAE Courier*, No. 52, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Sen, Gita, and Caren Crown: *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions*. Third World Women's Perspective Monthly Review Press, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Moser, Caroline: "Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Gender Needs," *World Development*, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> This "tool" for analysis has been developed by Kate Young and is cited in Walters, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Walters, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> The differentiation identified by Maxine Molyneux, referred to in Walters, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Developed by Kate Young, referred to in Walters, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Walters, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Walters, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> It is estimated that 35,000 families lived on pavements.

<sup>12</sup> See Kate Young, referred to in Walters, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> SPARC: *We, the Invisible*, Bombay, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> The demolition of pavement dwellings in Bombay was expected to begin any time after 31st October (the end of the monsoon) that year. In a judgment rendered by the Supreme Court, the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) was directed not to remove dwellings on pavements during the monsoon in order to save the residents hardships caused by being made homeless in the rain. In 1981, after the BMC attempted to evict pavement dwellers after demolishing their huts, a writ petition was filed in the Supreme Court challenging this action. The Supreme Court in its judgment given in 1985 ruled that the BMC was empowered by the Bombay Municipal Corporation Act to remove encroachments, including huts from pavements.

<sup>15</sup> What is undertaken under this training program is, no doubt, an exercise in community organization/mobilization. We call it "training" because it is a process which, once developed, can be used by other marginalized and poor groups in their struggle to achieve their goals. It is essentially a systematization of knowledge and information and designing of strategies to develop requisite skills.

<sup>16</sup> By negotiations, we mean a debate between people holding different points of view to arrive at a consensus/agreement. Deprived groups generally do not have any experience of negotiating with authorities who allocate resources. The poor are regarded as beneficiaries for whom decisions are made. The training process provides opportunities for them to build skills to negotiate.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, women opted for shared toilets—one toilet to be shared by four families. This was contrary to the professionals' view that each dwelling should have its independent toilet facility. Women argued that placing a toilet in the confined space of their small dwellings is not hygienic. Further, community toilets would be constructed by the authorities at their cost while internal toilets would increase considerably the dwelling cost to be borne by the occupier. Further, shared toilets would serve as a deterrent to higher-income groups buying out the poor households and dispossessing them of the dwelling.

<sup>18</sup> Even today, no public housing scheme mentions pavement dwellers. However, the Planning Commission, Government of India, has allocated Rs. 750,000/ in 1988 for each of the four metropolitan cities in India toward setting up rehabilitation projects for pavement dwellers. This money to this day remains unutilized in Bombay because the local authority still refuses to acknowledge the presence of slum dwellers in the city, let alone allocate land for rehabilitating them.

<sup>19</sup> Bapat, Meera, "Allocation of Urban Space: Rhetoric and Reality—Evidence from Recent Jurisprudence," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXV, No. 28, 14 July 1990.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Moser, Caroline and Sylvia Chant: *The Role of Women in the Execution of Low-Income Housing Projects Training Module*, DPU Gender and Planning Working Paper No. 6. Development Planning Unit, London, 1985.

<sup>21</sup> See SPARC: *Beyond the Beaten Track: Resettlement Initiatives of People Who Live Along the Railway Tracks in Bombay*, 1988. Nearly 18,000 families (97,000 people) who live along railway tracks in Bombay were enumerated in conjunction with government officials. An enumeration of pavement dwellers in Madras in the state of Tamil Nadu in south India was conducted in 1989–90 to design a rehabilitation scheme for pavement dwellers.

<sup>22</sup> Tables compiled by Meera Bapat and Sheela Patel, SPARC, Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centers, Post Box No. 9389, Bhulabhai Desai Road, Bombay 400 026, INDIA