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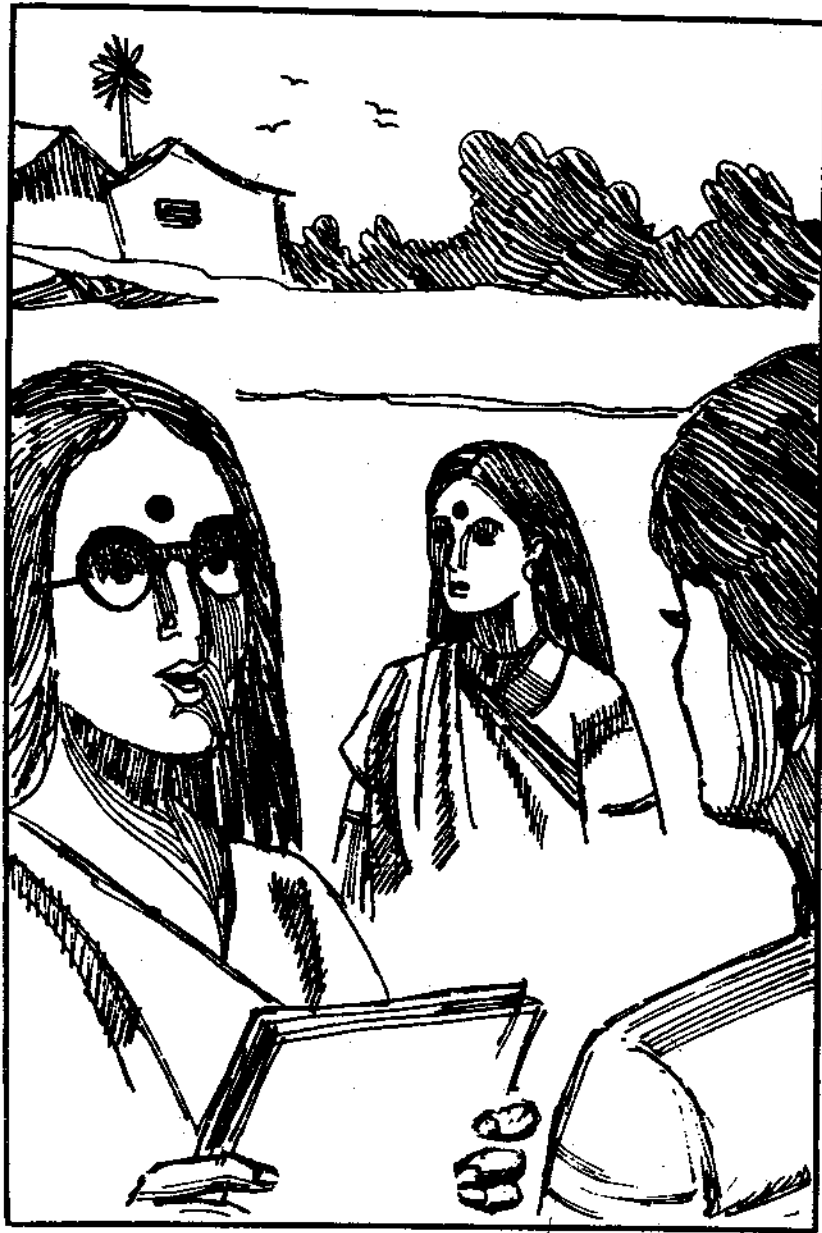
# **How To Conduct Participatory Research Among Women**

by  
**Rajesh Tandon, Vijay Kanhere,  
Sujata Gothoskar & Orlando Lugo**

**The case studies mentioned here are  
real field experiences, though real  
names have been withheld to maintain  
confidentiality.**



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## INTRODUCTION

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As a field worker, what do you think when you read the title of this bulletin? Do you think: "What have I got to do with research? I am a simple field worker. I have to work according to my job. The work of helping poor women to improve their situation **does**, for sure, entail research. And though it does, I am certainly not competent to do any research. Other experts can be invited to tell us what they learn from their research."

Well, if you did think something similar to the reaction given above, it is not surprising. Most of us have been conditioned to believe that research is something that is done by experts, in universities and colleges and laboratories. It is something that produces big books and learned speeches. This belief makes us afraid of research and anything associated with it. This is the mystification of research.

If you ask yourself why research is carried out, you will perhaps say that research is necessary for knowledge. And knowledge is needed by all of us, specially by those of us who are poor and weak, so that we can improve our situation.

So it follows that all of us, even the poor and the weak, need research, in some way or the other. We believe that ordinary people, including poor women, already do some research, and can be encouraged to do more research in order to survive and improve their lot. **This is Participatory Research.**



The purpose of this bulletin is to help you understand more about Participatory Research and how you can utilise it in the course of your work.



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## WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

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1. Participatory Research is a systematic process which involves people in the analysis of their own situation. Every individual carries out some research every day.
2. Participatory Research gives women the skills and confidence to understand their own situation. Surveys made by experts make women dependent and prevent them from improving their present condition.
3. Most women's programmes are based on the analysis made by outside experts who have a different perception of poor women. Frequently, they create programmes on the basis of their analysis, which do not fulfil women's real needs.
4. The main limitation of this type of programme is that once it fails, the experts blame the poor women instead of their wrong perceptions.



## DON'T ASSUME, CONSULT WOMEN

In a certain district, an agency wanted to implement a rural development programme for tribals, in particular focusing on the needs of women and children. To plan the programme, the agency sent a team of experts to do the initial survey.

One of the major findings of the survey was that most women were not employed in any productive economic activity. One potentially good area for such activity appeared to be dairying.

The agency felt that breeding of good cows and production of milk would not only give extra nutrition to the children and other members of the family, but also produce additional income.

A dairy farm was set up and extension workers went to the villages to talk to women to convince them about the need for dairying. In most cases, the extension workers were able to persuade two or three women to attend training camps for dairying organised at the farm. Then the agency worked out an arrangement with the local lead bank to provide subsidised loans to tribal women who wanted to buy good cows for dairying. When this scheme was announced, hardly any women came forward to buy the cows.

When this situation continued for about a year, the agency became very concerned about the failure of its programme. So it made great efforts to find out why the women did not come forward to buy cows with subsidised loans.

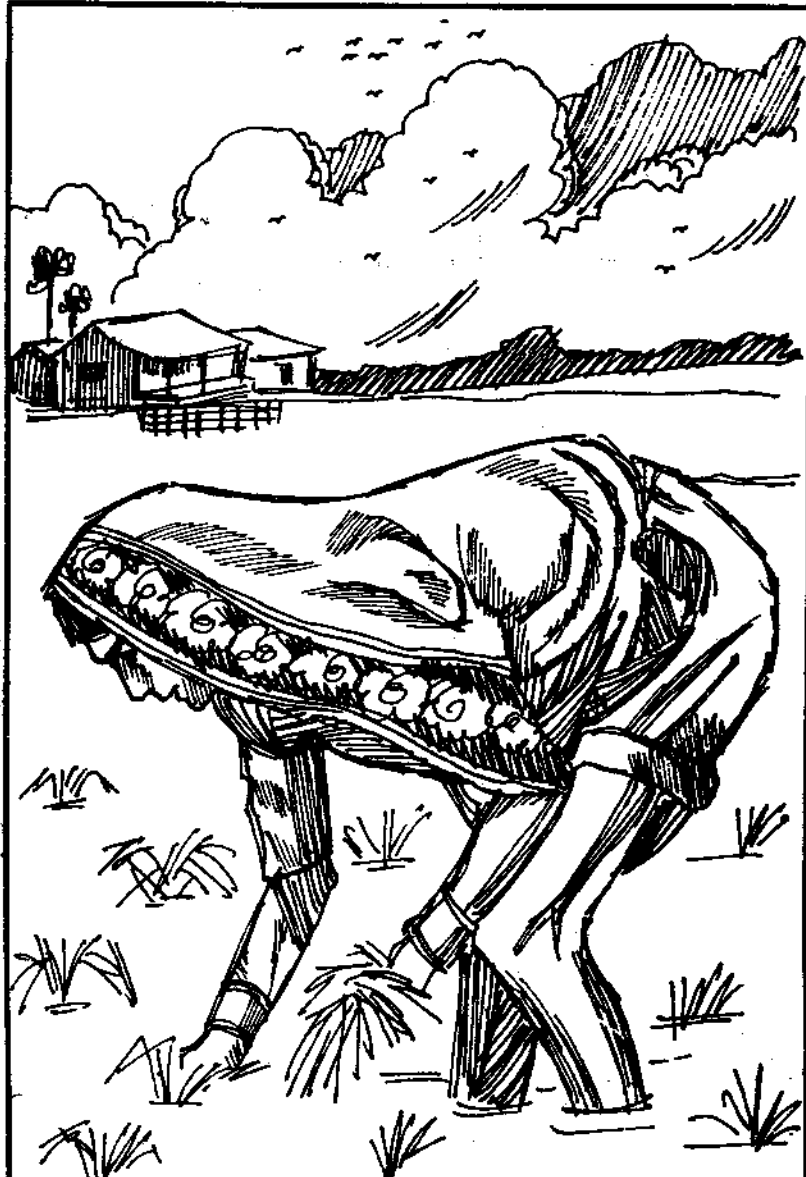
After great difficulty, they learnt that milk was considered some form of pus (bad secretion) among tribals and they preferred to keep away.



from it. The agency also learnt gradually that the tribal women were productively engaged, though not in cash economy, in a variety of activities: household work, bringing firewood, fetching drinking water, etc.

- \* Why did this programme fail?
- \* What could you have done differently?





## CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

### BREAKING THE ROUTINE

In a certain tribal area, women had been working as agricultural labourers with very low wages. Over a period of time, a local organisation had developed which fought for minimum wages for men and women. In the course of their getting together, it was decided to hold a 'shivar' (camp) for women.

In the camp, about 25 women came together from six different villages. The first activity in the camp was self-introduction. Each woman stood up and gave her name, the name of her village and spoke about her family, etc. This act of introduction, a very small act in itself, had a tremendous effect on their confidence. It also helped them to see the similarities in their situations.

As introductions ended, women started talking about their problems of poverty, wife-beating, alcoholism, etc. At the end of a two-hour discussion on wife-beating, it became apparent to the women that the main cause of this was the incidence of alcoholism among their men. They began to understand that non-tribals were making money by brewing and selling liquor in their villages. And alcoholism also drained their otherwise meagre family incomes.



Having reached this understanding, some women asked in the camp: "What are we going to do about it?" Several ideas were generated, many were discarded after evaluating their workability. Then all the women agreed that the direct method of confronting the brewer in the village where the camp was being held, should be tried out.

So they all went as a group to the brewer and threatened to expose his illicit brewing if he did not stop forthwith. Sensing a collective action, the brewer promised to stop.

In the course of this action, the women met the local Police Patel and started interrogating him. They asked him why he had not reported and stopped the illicit brewing earlier. They questioned him about his duties, source of his income, the basis of his salary from the government, etc. The questioning led them to understand how the government got money through indirect (and direct) taxes (for example, taxes on cloth, match boxes etc.) which were paid by ordinary people like them.



Thus, one can see that this camp became a research event. Women came together, analysed their situation collectively, developed an understanding of connections between wife-beating, illicit brewing of liquor and continued deprivation, and took concrete action to change that situation. The process of collective and systematic analysis and reflection was set in motion through the camp. **Participatory Research was characterised by the following:**

- An activity carried out by a group of women to understand their own situation. It was carried out for **their own** benefit. It arose because some women felt the need to understand some aspects of their situation.

- A **collective** effort to solve a problem. It was carried out to understand a certain aspect of their own reality in a collective manner. The group of women had ownership over the investigation process and the knowledge so generated.

- An analysis that led to **action** by the group of women. It was not carried out just to enhance understanding, but also to take some concrete actions. This process of analysis and reflection helped them to make decisions collectively and to take action towards changing an aspect of their situation.



- A group of poor rural women beginning to understand the nature of their poverty and its underlying causes. This allowed them to make **connections** between their personal reality and the larger social reality. It facilitated awareness-raising about the connections between micro aspects of their life and the larger macro reality.



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## PROCESS OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

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A series of simple steps are taken in conducting Participatory Research. They are as follows:

### 1. What is the problem?

A group of women first agree on a common statement of a problem. Some common problems, for example, are wifebeating, low income, indebtedness, sickness of children, etc. The problem should be stated clearly and concretely.

### 2. Do we need a solution?

The group of women should express interest in solving the problem. Sometimes, problems are identified merely because someone asked them about their problems. This step should ensure that there is a willingness to understand the problem in its entirety and its underlying causes, as well as an attempt to solve it. Questions like: "Why do we want to solve the problem?", "How will we benefit if the problem is solved?", may help in clarifying this.



### 3. What do we know about the problem?

The group of women record all that they already know about the problem. For example, if the problem is sickness of children, then they can each describe the sickness, its type, intensity and duration in the case of their own children. This helps in focusing on the problem in a concrete way.

### 4. What else do we need to know about the problem?

Having articulated and recorded what they already know about the problem, they can then begin to identify what else

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they need to know about the problem. For example, how widespread is the problem? Why does it occur in this form? Continuing with the example of sickness of children, the group may need to know how many children in the hamlet (or the village) are affected by those diseases, why the sickness occurs, what are the ways to prevent and cure the sickness, etc.

#### **5. How are we going to collect additional information?**

This is the step of data-collection. The group needs to decide how to get the information, whose assistance is needed, when they will get the information, and who in the group will do what.

#### **6. What do we learn from this information?**

Having obtained the information, the group collectively analyzes that information. It is important that analysis and reflection is undertaken as a collective process, not to be done by one person alone. This will help the group understand the causes of the problem and provide clues for possible solutions.

#### **7. What solutions are possible? What actions are needed?**

Various solutions to the problem are generated, their workability is assessed and the choice of solution is made. Then, in order to solve the problem, what actions are to be taken by whom, when, where, and how, are also discussed and decided. Then these actions are taken.

#### **8. What do we learn from these actions?**

In this step, the impact of the actions taken is systematically assessed to see if the problem is fully or partially solved. The actions taken may sometimes create new



problems. So, this step is once again the beginning of another process of Participatory Research. Thus, Participatory Research becomes an ongoing process in the group, as part of its normal activity and not something separate.





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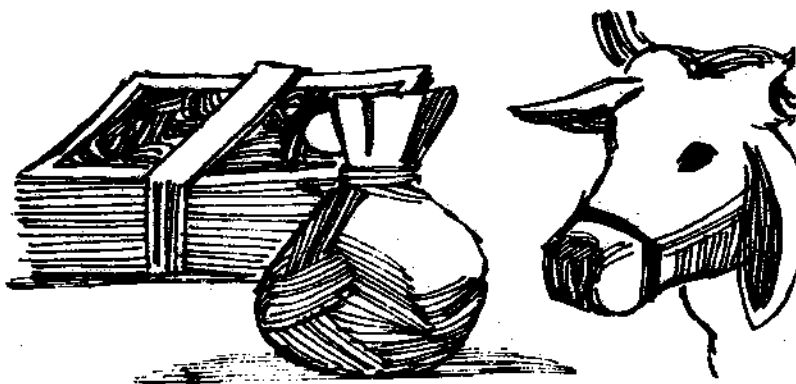
## METHODS IN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

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A variety of methods can be used to carry out Participatory Research among women. Some of those methods are as follows :

### 1. Self-Survey

A common method of data-collection is to carry out a small survey. A group of women can investigate a particular problem by using a questionnaire to know the opinions of a large number of women. The questionnaire should be simple and should have only a few (8-10) questions. Each question should also be simple and straightforward. Care should be taken to keep the questions short and clear. A good questionnaire should seem like an easy conversation. The information thus obtained can then be analysed by aggregating the responses.



## EXPLODING THE MYTH

In a tribal, hilly area, several families had become indebted to outside moneylenders and liquor-merchants. Over the years, they had mortgaged their land, trees and cattle to the moneylenders. A group of tribal men and women from a few villages decided to redeem their mortgages following the government's announcement to abolish rural indebtedness.

In order to do so, they needed concrete information about the extent of their mortgages. So this group of tribals decided to conduct a survey. Over a two-month period, they collected detailed information from all the families in 97 villages of the area. They obtained information about the amount of loan taken, repayments made, if any, the type of mortgage (land, trees, cattle), to whom this was mortgaged, etc.

Then they analysed, for each case, whether the mortgagee had fully or partially repaid the initial loans. They then organised this analysis for each moneylender separately. Having done so, they invited the moneylender and the concerned families to a public meeting and settled the matter. Though there was resistance from the moneylenders, all property was redeemed through collective action. The group which took initiative in the survey comprised of only one literate person.



## 2. Group Discussions

A small number of women (8-25) come together to share experiences and decide on action through group discussion. It is one of the most popular and easy methods and has the advantage of combining data-collection and analysis, and action-planning. In a group discussion contradictory opinions and points of view of different women can be openly discussed and analysed. This facilitates a deeper analysis of the problem as well.

This method can be easily used in combination with other methods. However, the important thing is to ensure a comfortable atmosphere in the group so that all can participate actively and listen to each other. If women perceive that they are not listened to, they may feel that their problems are not important. If there are a large number of women in the group, they can be easily divided into smaller sub-groups to facilitate free and easy discussion.



### 3. Camp

A camp or shivir or workshop or training programme can be used as an intensive event to carry out Participatory Research. It is generally organised over a day or two, with common living and eating arrangements. Generally women from different villages, over long distances, come together.

Organised in an informal and free atmosphere, camps serve an educational purpose as well. These camps also provide an opportunity for reflection by the participants away from their daily pressures, and facilitate development of a feeling of solidarity among them. Depending upon the facilities available, 50 to 100 women can participate in one camp.

### 4. Research Team

Sometimes the problem that the group chooses to study may involve some technical expertise. In these situations, members of the group join hands with outside experts in studying the problem and finding appropriate solutions. The experts bring in their expertise in the service of the group's needs.



## CONTROLLING EXPERTISE

A group of marginal farmer families in two villages had been considering ways to solve the problem of excessive deforestation and drying up of ponds and wells in their area. They needed to understand this problem in its various dimensions. So they approached a local voluntary agency for assistance. The agency requested assistance from Drought Prone Area Programme staff (a programme of the government to alleviate conditions of drought).

A two-person expert team was sent to the village. The team discussed the problem with a small group of villagers and agreed to carry out one survey of ground water resources and another of deforestation. In the latter, old villagers significantly contributed their knowledge of trees and forests from their experiences over the years.

After the surveys were conducted, the experts presented their analysis and a range of solutions to the villagers. These solutions consisted of building several small dams and storage places to solve the ground water problem, and a choice of tree varieties for reforestation. The villagers then made a choice based on their preferences and resources.



## 5. Fact-Finding Visit

Sometimes it is useful for a group interested in solving a problem to visit another area where a similar problem has been solved. The tour to another village can become an investigative visit to find out how other similar women went about solving a similar problem. It helps the group to feel confident as well.

Sometimes, visits can be organised to government offices to find out about various programmes and their implementation. The visit, however, needs to be carefully planned to make best use of the time spent there. The group should be willing to engage in continuous reflection, both during and after the visit. After the visit, these findings and reflections can be shared with others.

## 6. Audio-Visual Production

Sometimes the group wanting to engage in Participatory Research may find itself uncomfortable with written methods. This is particularly true with poor women, most of whom are illiterate. In such circumstances, simple audio-visual methods can be used to facilitate analysis and reflection. A group discussion or individual interview can be taped and then replayed for analysis.



Women can be encouraged to draw their perceptions of the problem on a black board, paper or cloth. Black and white photographs have been effectively used to promote reflection and analysis. Cuttings from old magazines and other materials can be used to prepare a collage to express their perceptions of a problem.

These methods can be effectively used to stimulate analysis and reflection and can be easily combined with other methods.

## 7. Popular Theatre

As an extension of audio-visual production, other folk media can also be used. Songs, dances and puppetry are examples of the same. In some places, simply produced dramas have been used as an effective method of Participatory Research.

The group members identify a problem and enact a skit or play on it in the presence of others. It is then discussed with the audience to stimulate further analysis, reflection and action.



## ENACTING LIFE

Four scheduled caste women in an urban slum were interested in solving the problems of women like themselves. Two of them enjoyed acting. So they decided to analyse women's problems through drama. They first shared their own experiences as women. Through this they identified several problems: wife-beating, extramarital relationship, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law fights, etc.

On the basis of their personal experiences, they prepared short (20/30-minutes) scripts. They each took a role and put up the play in the presence of a few (initially 5, later 20) slum women. After the play was over, a discussion among actors and audience occurred where similar and different experiences were shared. This led to a revision and enriching of the script which was again enacted.

The plays provided dynamic analysis of a specific women's problem and also contributed to mobilising slum women to take action to solve the problem. An interesting aspect was that the plays generated sensitive, personal information about such difficult issues as extra-marital relations, etc. (which could not have been analysed through a formal method, like a survey).

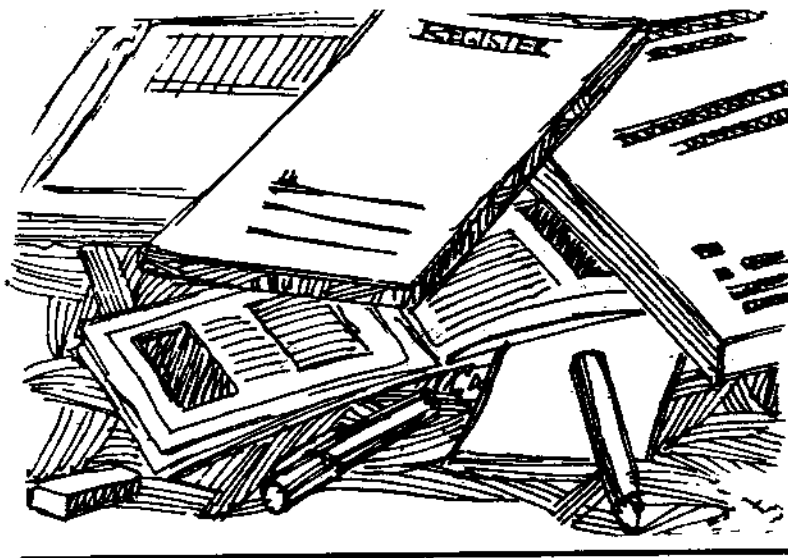


## 8. Documents

Analysis of existing documents is another method that can be used. Many reports, papers, documents, registers, diaries and books may contain useful information about a particular problem.

One limitation is that it is sometimes difficult to locate and obtain the documents. But they do have factual information that can be used. Another limitation with documents is that they require literacy skills to analyse them. However, they can be used along with other methods.

It is important to recognise that these methods represent the range of ways in which Participatory Research can be conducted. They can also be used in combination, and new methods can also be invented based on a given situation.



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## ROLE OF THE FIELD WORKER

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It may appear that an outside field worker has no role in Participatory Research that is being conducted by a group of women themselves. This is not correct. The field worker has the following roles:

1. The field worker should see Participatory Research as a contribution to her efforts to organise and strengthen women's groups. Viewed in this way, she is also a participant in the process of Participatory Research carried out by a group of women.

2. The field worker can utilise Participatory Research as a methodology to understand women's point of view. This way she can continuously assess her own assumptions vis-a-vis that of the women.

3. An important role of the field worker is to initially ensure that the group of women follow the steps of Participatory Research systematically. Her role will be critical in step two where the group needs to make sure that it is genuinely interested.



4. The field worker, as an outsider, brings a fresh perspective to the group. She should share her own perspective and analysis with the group without imposing it on them. This will help the group get an alternative perspective and thus deepen their analysis.

5. Posing critical questions is another role for the field worker. Sometimes when poor women are asked why they are poor, they give a simplistic answer that they are poor

because they are illiterate, stupid and ignorant. She should not accept such superficial answers but question them further to develop a deeper understanding of their poverty.

6. The field worker's knowledge and skills will be useful to the group in the process of Participatory Research. However, she should consciously attempt to transfer this knowledge and skills to the group members over a period of time.

7. In the course of Participatory Research, when the group needs the expertise not available within the group, the field worker can help the group in identifying and obtaining that expertise from outside. She should carefully mediate between the group and external experts so that the latter do not dominate the group.

8. Finally, the field worker needs to play a promotional role in encouraging the group to use systematic reflection and analysis as an ongoing part of its activities.



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## **ABOUT US**

**Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), New Delhi is an educational support organisation, which works with activists, individuals, grass root groups and organisations so as to strengthen their capacities in the areas of participatory research, participatory training and evaluation, and organisation building and help them deepen their understanding of the issues they are working on.**

**In the last ten years of its existence, PRIA has focussed on wide-ranging issues such as adult non-formal education, problems of deforestation, land alienation and large dams, women and work, women and sanitation, occupational health hazards and management issues of NGOs. In the coming years PRIA'S focus would be on looking at issues of women's empowerment, people's access to control over natural resources, occupational safety, workers' education and enhancing competencies of activists and groups in individual and organisational areas.**

**Series: Women's Participation in Development**



# **How to Communicate Effectively With Grass-Roots Women**



**DIDACTIC BULLETIN NO. 2**

# **How to Communicate Effectively With Grass-Roots Women**

**by  
Rajesh Tandon, Ginny Shrivastava,  
Vijay Kanhere, Orlando Lugo &  
Rajesh Pandey**

**The case studies mentioned here are  
real field experiences, though real  
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## INTRODUCTION

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We are continuously communicating with others throughout our life. We communicate by writing, talking, acting.... We communicate by a touch, smile, or frown.... We communicate through silence too. We are all experts in communication.

Even though we are experts, we sometimes fail to communicate our ideas effectively and most of the time we are *not* even aware of the failure to communicate with other people.

This bulletin does *not* attempt to teach the A B C of communication to you. The purpose is to summarise what is already known from our collective experiences of working with women and men. This bulletin is like a reference book. We refer to it when we feel the need.

Since the field of communication covers many aspects of human life, we have attempted to limit the scope of this bulletin to face-to-face communication only. Though most of the material pertains to interpersonal communication, some aspects of communication in a group are also included. The major effort has been to record the experiences of several people who have worked in the field. You may be able to use this bulletin in your work.





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## WHY DO WE COMMUNICATE?

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1. When you communicate with some other person, you assume that person is understanding what you are saying. It is not enough that you have said it. It is also important that the other person understands you. **Are you sure that people understand what you are saying?**

So, you must be aware that more than words you communicate **meanings**. Words do not have meaning of themselves, the meaning is given by the people. **Are you sure people understand the meaning of what you say?**

2. We also want the other person to understand what we are saying in the same way as we understand it. If I describe a new programme to a rural woman, I want to make sure she understands it the same way as I do. It is not enough that she repeats the words I have spoken, but that she also understands the meaning of those words.



3. You communicate with another person in order to gain something. If there is no advantage in communicating, why should we communicate? It is important to remember that **both** persons gain in a communication. If I describe a new programme to a rural woman, she gains the additional knowledge through which she can use the programme for her benefit. But I also gain in this communication because I have done my job, and doing my job is important to me.



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## HOW COMMUNICATION TAKES PLACE

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1. At least two persons are involved in a communication.  
Let us say, Nina and Chandra.

Nina → Chandra



2. If Nina starts the communication, then Chandra receives it. If Chandra also starts another communication, Nina receives it.

Nina ↔ Chandra



3. As you can see, both Nina and Chandra are important for good communication. For **effective** communication, you have to remember that if you want to communicate with a rural woman, she has to pay **attention** to what you are saying. Then, if she is going to do something about it, she has to **retain** the information. But before retaining, she screens the information through a process of selective perception. This means that she keeps for herself only that part of the information which she feels is relevant to her needs or is to her benefit.



## TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is of several types:

### I. 'One-way' and 'Two-way'

(a) You must have noticed **'one-way'** communication if you have attended a lecture: only the lecturer talks, others listen. Sometimes field workers talk to poor women while they listen.

(b) **'Two-way'** communication is when two people talk to each other, as in the case of Nina and Chandra talking to one another. This is a better way than one-way communication because:

(i) it helps both persons to talk and listen to each other;

(ii) it helps in making sure for example that both Nina and Chandra understand each other, because both can ask questions to clarify what the other means;

(iii) it creates conditions for equality between both Nina and Chandra;

(iv) neither gets bored, as might happen when you sit through a long lecture.



But two-way communication takes more time and effort than one-way communication.

## II. 'Up' and 'Down'

(a) Sometimes we talk 'down' to others. Some of us feel we know more about things than the poor women we are talking to, so we tend to talk to her as if she knows nothing and we know all. It makes her feel as if we are superior to her. You may have felt the same way when some senior official talks to you like that. It becomes our habit, in a way, because we do not necessarily want to talk down to her.

(b) In our enthusiasm to create a sense of self-confidence in a poor woman, we sometimes talk 'up' to her. We pretend as if we know nothing and she knows all. We praise her unduly and treat her like a VIP. It is just showing-off.

***Neither talking 'up' nor talking 'down' to another person is helpful in communication. Our effort should be to communicate with people, women or men as equals.***



### III. 'Verbal' and 'Non-verbal'

(a) We communicate to another person through our words (verbal) and also through our gestures, facial expressions and the tone of our voice (non-verbal).

***Non-verbal aspects of communication are as important as verbal.***

(b) The way people sit or stand, look at you or away from you, are all methods of non-verbal communication.

(c) What we say is important, but it is also important how we say it. You might have come across situations where someone asks you 'How are you?' in a tone that convinces you that she is not really interested in knowing about you.

(d) You have to ensure that your non-verbal communication matches your verbal communication. So if you tell a poor woman that she is intelligent, then through your expression you should not be conveying that she is really dumb.



(e) In communicating with others, it is also useful to be sensitive to their non-verbal expressions in order to understand whether you are being understood by them or not.



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## OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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Sometimes we are able to communicate effectively with another person; sometimes we are not. Some things act as obstacles to effective communication.

1. Our attitudes and values can sometimes act as an obstacle to communication. If you believe that poor women are intelligent, then this will affect what you communicate and how you communicate with a poor woman. Similarly, when a poor woman is telling you something, you will hear her in a way that confirms your belief that she is intelligent.

So, we filter what we say and hear through our values and attitudes. Thus, we talk and listen selectively. Our values and attitudes act like sunglasses in the communication process.

2. So, when Nina and Chandra are communicating, both are wearing sunglasses of their respective values and attitudes. And if Nina and Chandra are different from each other, as is mostly the case, it is possible that they wear different sunglasses and hence talk and listen to each other selectively because of their different values and attitudes.



3. Communication is also affected by the moods of Nina and Chandra. If Nina is giving information to Chandra about a meeting planned for the next day, and if Chandra has just received news about the illness of her daughter, it is likely that Chandra will not fully understand what Nina is saying.

Pressures of work, the atmosphere in the family, what

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happened recently, one's own physical well-being, all affect our moods and consequently our communication.

4. We should, therefore, be alert and sensitive to the values, attitudes, and moods of the poor women we are communicating with.

5. Since people are different, these differences show in their concepts. For example, if an urban, educated person wants to meet you, you will specify a time, say 6.00 p.m. If you ask a rural woman when you can meet her, she will perhaps say 'after work.' Poor, rural women have different (than our's) concepts of time, space, dignity, etc. If we do not understand their concepts, we will not be able to communicate effectively with them.

6. People have different meanings for the same word or expression. If we want to communicate effectively with a poor woman we may need to be sensitive to this.

**A field worker went to a tribal village to make a list of all unemployed women. She asked them to tell her the names of all 'bekar' women in the village. The women were surprised at first, and then started laughing. The field worker did not know what had happened. It so turned out, to her surprise, that 'bekar' had the connotations of bad, thief, quarrelsome, etc.**



7. Language can be another obstacle to effective communication. Even when we speak Hindi, we realise that

there are so many dialects. We may not understand the local dialect of the area we are working in. It is, therefore, important to learn the dialect. But it does not imply that we stop all communication till we have learnt the dialect fully.

Our own language can also be an obstacle. We are used to a certain jargon ourselves. Poor women may not understand that. If we say DRDA or DWCRA, poor women will not understand us. There are many words, phrases, etc. that we use, out of habit, which a poor woman may not understand at all.

8. Poor, rural women in many parts of the country perhaps use stories, proverbs, analogies and fables to communicate. They have an indirect method of saying things. If we ask a poor, rural woman her name and occupation, she may begin by describing her husband, father or children. Their method of communication is very illustrative and grounded in experiences. We may fail to communicate our abstract ideas to them.





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## **AIDS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

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Several things can help in effectively communicating with poor women.

1. Being with the woman, doing things with her and understanding her life are most beneficial for effective communication. If a field worker goes to visit a poor, rural woman in her house, talks with her at the well or on the field, spends the night in the village, it will facilitate communication.

Other examples are singing with them when they are happy, and sympathising with them when they are crying and sad. To join them in their happiness and sorrow may be an easy way to communicate effectively.

By physically being with them, you can establish a closeness, a rapport, an understanding that helps in overcoming earlier mentioned obstacles to effective communication.

2. If poor women trust you, they will listen to you sincerely. They will also talk to you openly, if they trust you. Establishing interpersonal trust is critical for effective communication.



How can they trust you? If they find you honest, genuine, sincere, interested in their well-being, open about yourself, they will perhaps trust you. And developing trust takes time and effort. It does not happen automatically.

In fact, they have seen too many outsiders, be they

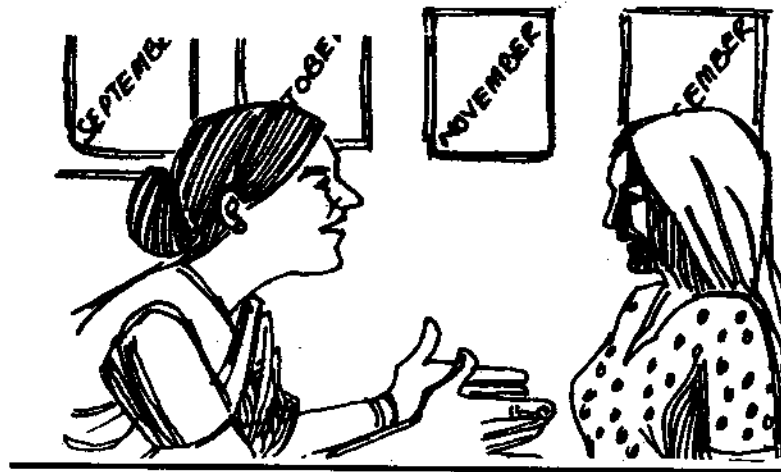
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moneylenders or development workers, who have cheated them, disappointed them, neglected them. You, as another outsider, have to overcome his hurdle if you want to communicate with them effectively.

3. Sometimes we find it difficult to communicate a concept to a poor woman. Use of an analogy, a proverb, or an example related to her life can make the point easily comprehensible. For example: "Ten sticks tied together are more difficult to break than one stick at a time."

For example, a field worker was trying to explain how it rains to tribal women. She had brought a small distillation model from the nearby high school. She tried her best but could not explain the distillation process. A tribal boy gave the example of distilling liquor, and immediately the women understood.

4. Saying the same thing in two or three different ways helps in communicating an idea. Repetition also helps in understanding.



5. Patience helps in effective communication. In order to understand, the woman may ask questions. You should be patient with her. If you ask her opinion, she may not know how to answer quickly and directly.

It takes three or four months to establish effective two-way communication with very poor rural women. You need patience till then, at least.

6. You may come across a situation where when you ask a poor woman why she is poor, she keeps silent. Your repeated queries yield no response. Sometimes she may even say, 'please tell me'. And then, you give a long answer yourself.

She keeps silent or asks for your opinion because she feels inadequate, not confident of herself, not sure if you would listen to her or respect her opinion, etc.

If you want her to communicate, you need to feel comfortable in her silence and with your silence. Some of us feel so uncomfortable in silence that we talk all the time.

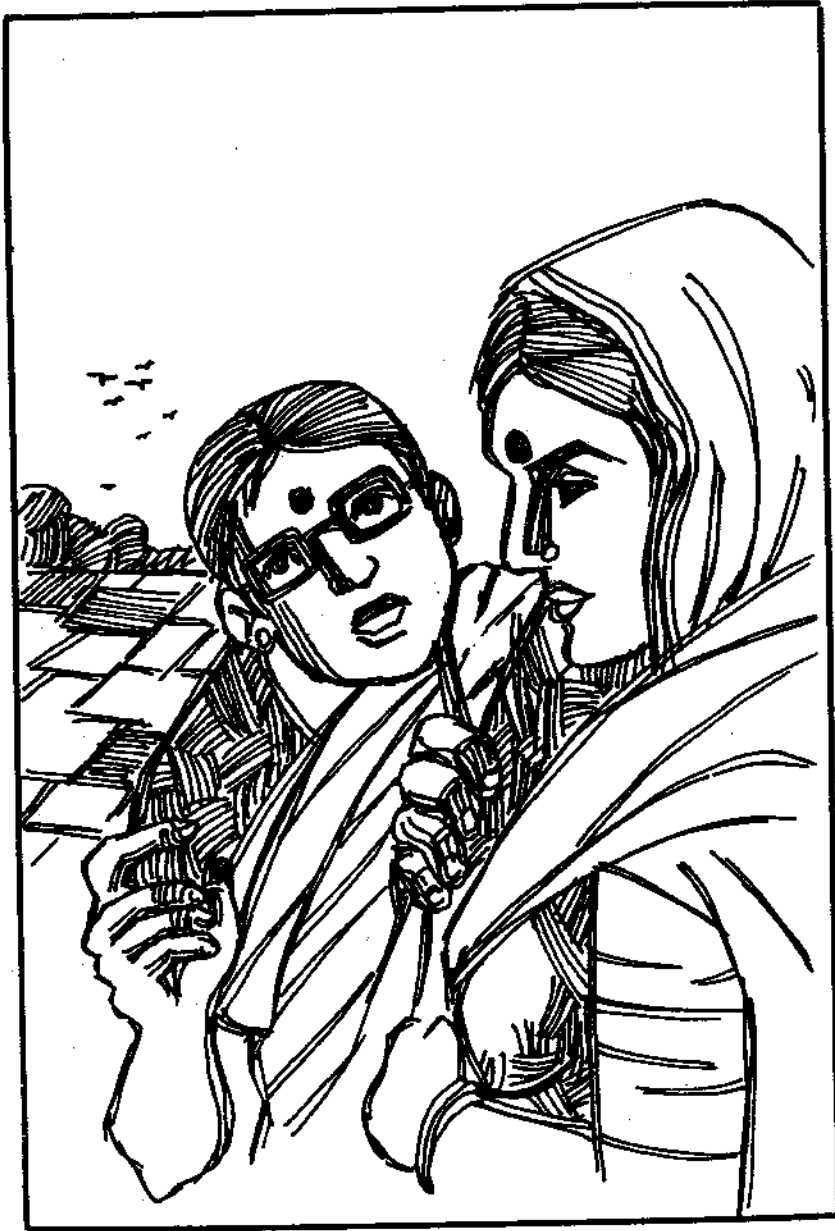


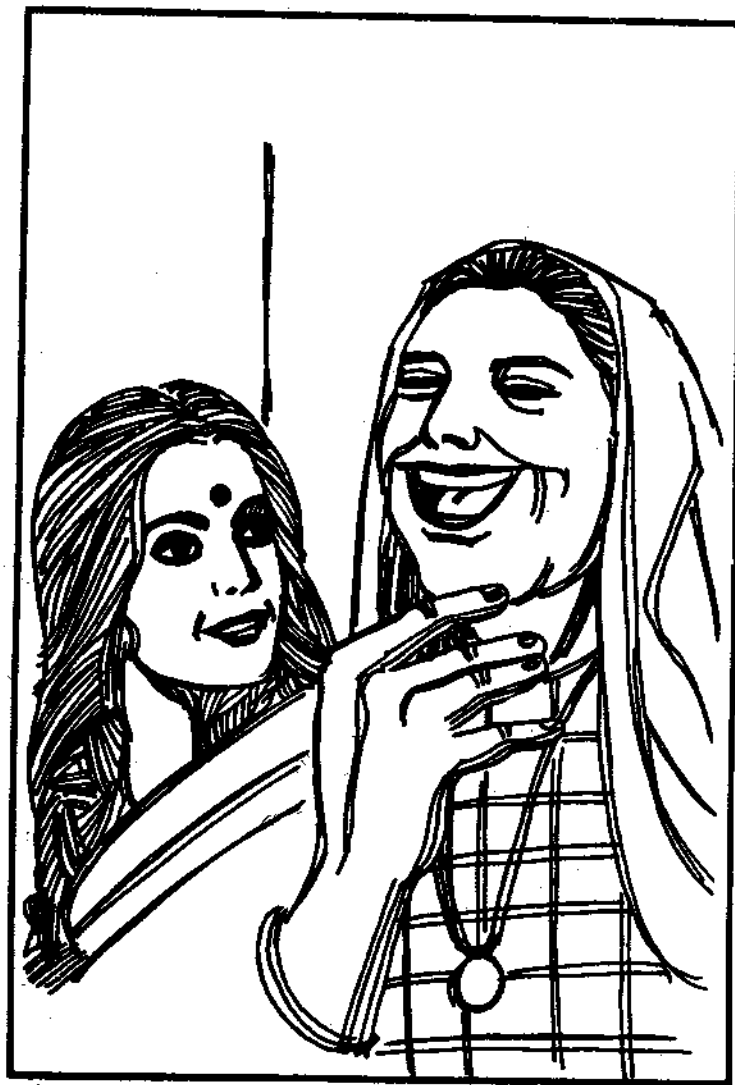
7. Even when she begins to talk, she may fumble, utter incomplete sentences, make mistakes. You should learn to be tolerant of this, otherwise she will never communicate effectively with you.

8. Humour has an important place in effective communication. Telling a joke makes the atmosphere light, reduces tension and creates a friendly feeling. Some of us can use humour effectively in our communication.

9. Finally, your own example, through your actions, communicates effectively. If you want a poor woman to describe her real feelings to you, you can set the example by doing the same. If there is a gap between what we say and what we do, it makes effective communication difficult.







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## LISTENING

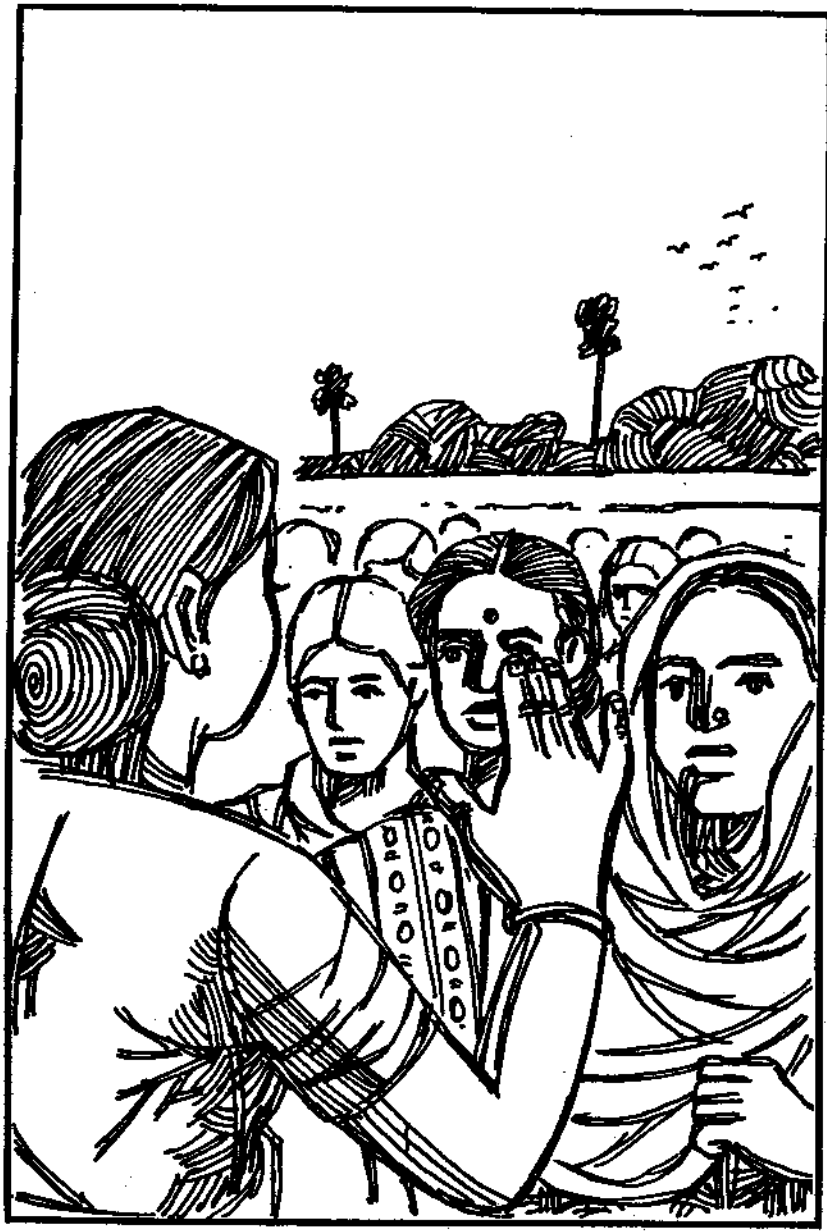
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**A very important element in effective communication is to listen to what the other is saying.** Through listening you can also know what women are thinking about you. Your presence may affect them. They may not necessarily trust you even if they listen to you. Listening is an active process and it can be facilitated by:

- (i) paying attention to the person who is speaking;
- (ii) hearing the speaker's point of view with an open mind;
- (iii) understanding the feelings behind what is being said (e.g. "I do not want to continue this communication" with the feelings of being hurt or rejected);
- (iv) hearing what is **not** being said or what is implied but not uttered (e.g. "I am not well", and implying you should escort her home);
- (v) asking questions to clarify what the speaker means to say;
- (vi) re-wording and repeating what you have heard and checking with the speaker if you understood correctly;
- (vii) summarising main points or principles in the communication.



Many a time we are in a great hurry to say something or react to what we have heard. It is helpful to check yourself before you speak again, and ensure that you have really understood what was being communicated.



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## COMMUNICATION IN A GROUP

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Besides talking to one or two women, you may also be communicating with them in a group. Some things that are useful to watch in a group communication are outlined here:

1. Sitting arrangement in a group affects its communication process. If you are sitting at one end and poor women at the other, like in a classroom, communication will be mostly one-way, with you doing most of the talking. If you all sit in a circle, such that every woman can see all others, two-way communication among them is more likely.

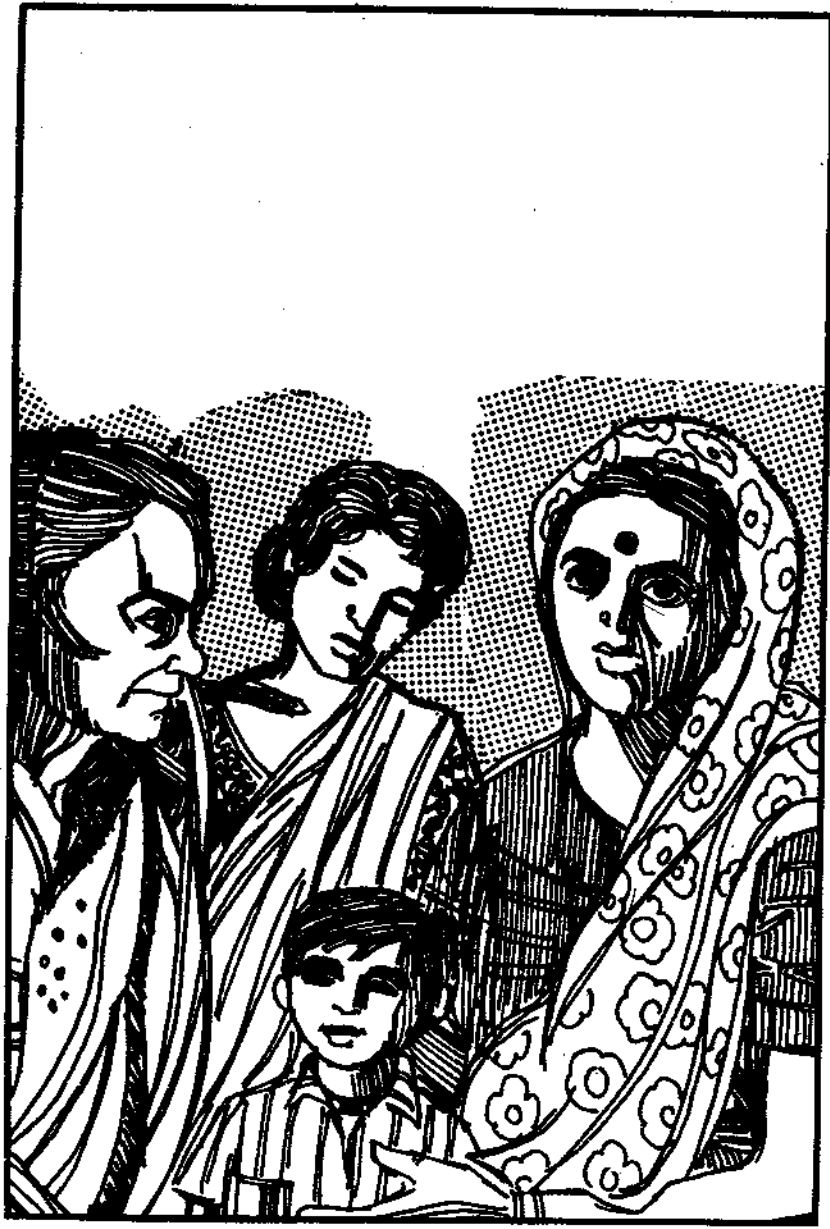
2. It is useful to ensure that we all speak one at a time in a group. If two or more women talk simultaneously, no one can understand anything.

3. Sometimes there is side talk in a group where two or three subgroups of women whisper among themselves. This should be discouraged, particularly when one woman is speaking and two other women are whispering to each other.



4. As a field worker, you should encourage all women in the group to talk. Some speak without effort; others need support. Effective communication in a group occurs when all feel comfortable and active in communicating.

5. Sometimes talking individually with women before group discussion helps in preparing them for communication.



6. Sometimes the presence of a particular woman shuts up some other women. It is, therefore, useful to understand how women of the group relate to each other, outside the group.

7. When someone gives an opinion or an idea, other women (including you) may immediately evaluate it and reject it as unrealistic. If that happens, the woman who gave the opinion or idea, may shut up later and not speak. It is, therefore, critical that ideas and opinions communicated by all women in the group are listened to carefully and respected.



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## ABOUT US

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**Series: Women's Participation in Development**



# How to Organise Women's Groups

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**DIDACTIC BULLETIN NO. 3**

# How to Organise Women's Groups

by  
**Seemantinee Khot, Shantaben, Ginny  
Shrivastava, Anita Mathur, Rajesh  
Tandon & Orlando Lugo.**

**The case studies mentioned here are  
real field experiences, though real  
names have been withheld to maintain  
confidentiality.**



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# INTRODUCTION

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One of the ongoing realities of all our lives is that we are members of various groups—family, work, social, etc. Hence, we all have many experiences of groups. The purpose of this bulletin is to present, in a simple manner, various aspects of a group, in particular women's groups. The main focus is on how to organise a poor women's group with the specific objective of improving their socio-economic condition through their collective and sustained action over a period of time. The text of this bulletin is based on the experiences of a wide variety of development workers engaged in organising poor women in rural and urban areas. Yet, the ideas presented here are not exhaustive, but merely indicative of things that work or do not work.

The contents of this bulletin are: What is a group? Why form a group? What is the process of group formation? How to be an effective group organiser? When can you say a group is formed? Which different roles does a group organiser play? What are the main phases of group organisation? The principles given under these topics are illustrated by examples.

It is hoped that this bulletin will help you in the field in organising women's groups.



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## WHY FORM A GROUP

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When more than two individuals come together, establish a relationship among themselves and share a common objective, they are called a group. Homogeneous groups comprise of persons belonging to similar socio-economic status.

In many situations, individual action cannot yield results. This is particularly true for weaker sections of the population as they lack, individually, resources, skills and strength to accomplish their own development. **A group is much more effective than an individual.**



## RESULT OF COLLECTIVE EFFORTS

In a certain village several families were suffering due to alcoholism among the men. With increased supply of liquor from outside, men overlooked their responsibility as breadwinners of the family. Health and education of children was neglected. Agriculture was the only source of income in the village. Like all other families, Radha's family was also going through bad days. No crop grew on her field due to lack of money to buy seeds etc. Radha therefore decided to take charge of planting the crop (which was not a practice in the village). Radha approached a bank manager who sympathised with her but told her that he could not help her to get a loan because the land was not in her name. When Seeta heard of Radha's decision, she thought that she would also do the same to save her family. She approached a rural community development centre in a nearby village to get some help. There she was told to form a group of women like herself, who wanted financial aid from the bank for agricultural crops. If they formed a cooperative society, the agency would help them to talk to the bank.

Seeta approached Radha and they subsequently organised other women in the village. And the bank, with the agency's guarantee, sanctioned loans to these women for a period of six months. As the money was obtained through collective effort, the women helped each other to make the best



**use of it. The crop was better than previous years. By returning the loan in fixed instalments, the group established its credibility with the bank and the agency, and a strong sense of solidarity among themselves. This enabled the group to take up some more activities like health and hygiene programmes, non-formal education, etc. They also became active in the village panchayat, and today women are in a majority in the panchayat, with a woman as Sarpanch.**

Thus, one can see that women in this village were able to improve their situation collectively, though individually it would have been an impossible task. In recent years, various development programmes for women have been implemented. But adequate advantage is not taken by women, particularly poor women. It is important to realise that until the beneficiaries are well-organised and well-equipped to make use of the programmes, they will never be effective.

**The potentiality to get women organised must be realised. It is very important to recognise that women are capable of organised and collective action for improving their lot.**



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## WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF GROUP FORMATION

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Group formation is a dynamic process. Though there may be some natural settings in existence to form a group, some conscious efforts also have to be made for forming and developing a group. The creation of a group does not occur in a vacuum. The need to form a group may be felt by only one woman. The initiative from at least one local woman to try to face a specific problem becomes the starting point of group formation. The formation of a group can also be stimulated by an outsider if local women can be guided to reach an awareness of a specific local problem. In this case, the outside organiser becomes the first woman.

### THE FIRST WOMAN

The motivation of the first woman, local or outsider, significantly influences the stability, continuity and growth of a group.

If the group is formed around the personal needs of the first woman only, it does not last too long.



#### SELFISH MOTIVE, SHORT-LIVED GROUP

**Kala's husband betrayed her by marrying another woman without her knowledge. He started neglecting her economic needs and her children were suffering due to this. Since Kala was a very dynamic woman, she started**

talking to other women about her problems in order to obtain some support. These women took pity on her and were ready to support her. But the group's activity ended with shouting at Kala's husband and his second wife. The group lasted only for a short period of time because the other women did not see any reason to continue it. Kala realised that collective action alone could have helped in her case but she had looked at the group only for her personal need. Evidently she had organisational skills with which she managed to mobilise women, form a group and take action. After this the group could not exist as a support system for other women, because others did not see it as a part of their problem.

Sometimes, the initial organiser forms a group to meet her job requirements alone. Under such circumstances also, a women's group will not last long.

#### UNSUCCESSFUL EXTERNAL DEMANDS

An institute for non-formal education had a target of 50 women's centres for the year. They appointed a couple of local women in each area as coordinators. The coordinators were promised an honorarium of Rs. 100/- a month. These coordinators were also trained to organise such groups. When they repeatedly approached the women, a few centres were started. Because there was so much



**emphasis on teaching of the institute's objectives, women felt alienated and the groups did not last long. If the organisation of women's groups was based on the realisation of women's need for non-formal education rather than helping the institute in completing its target, the group had better chances of survival. It was later realised that one of the most important objectives of these organisers was to start the centre rather than cater to the needs of the women in the area.**

This short story shows that the importance of group formation lies in the response to the interests of all the women who become part of it, and not to the needs of the organiser or external agency. When the need to be organised is felt and recognised by all members, a strong group is formed. If the organiser realises the importance of each woman joining the group and believes in their strength to become an effective group, rather than looking at them as subordinates, she has a better chance of success. Otherwise such groups do not last long.



## ORGANISER'S BACKGROUND

The background of the organiser is an important factor. The more similar the background of the organiser to that of the women she wants to organise, the greater the possibility of having a cohesive and durable group.

### YOUR PROBLEM IS MY PROBLEM TOO

A middle class, educated social worker tried to organise the women of a slum to deal with the problem of wife-beating by alcoholic husbands. All her efforts remained fruitless. Slum women did not want to share their problems and feelings with the social worker, as they were not sure whether she would be able to understand them. The social worker was very keen that these women do something about this problem. But she often got reactions implying that she was different from them and would never be able to understand them.

The social worker then decided to work closely and intensively with Rajamma, one of the women in the area, who was going through this problem. When Rajamma was convinced that women like her should do something about it together, she talked to the other women. Rajamma's words, though similar to those of the social worker, had more impact on the other women as she talked about her feelings related to beating. Other women then shared their experiences openly and soon they got organised to do something about it.



If an outside organiser is not perceived as having had similar experiences as the women she is trying to organise, the women do not feel secure and assured that they will be understood. Any outside organiser must realise this difference and make more efforts to understand their background. Even a woman who comes from a similar background, and takes initiative in organising, is still somewhat different from the others, as she takes the initiative. She too must study the difference and on that basis understand other women whom she wants to organise into a group. For this she should prepare herself consciously.



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## HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE ORGANISER

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An effective organiser must bear in mind that:

- each woman in the group is equally important;
- the participation of others in the organisation is as important as her own;
- those who hesitate or do not want to join the group might have logical reasons which have to be understood;
- if the women have no previous experience of being organised, it is the organiser's responsibility to make them aware of its importance;
- it takes time for women to make up their minds to join the group, they have to be repeatedly approached and the organiser has to be patient;
- she should establish her credibility and gain their confidence by helping them with their difficulties, wherever possible;
- she should not organise them in 'her' interests or in someone else's but in 'their' own interest;
- she should not take decisions for them but help them to take those decisions themselves;
- as an organiser, she should know how to effectively communicate with women, particularly in the initial stages. The way she talks to them, what she says, her attitude and behaviour, all influence the group's formation;
- group members have to be disciplined and learn how to relate to each other as group members, how to express themselves and to help other members express themselves, and how to share responsibilities, etc.





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## HOW TO FORM A GROUP

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Different examples of organising women. These approaches are:

- (a) The organiser may enter the process of group formation with an already prepared programme activity and first form a beneficiary group which later develops into a more stable women's group.

### LITERACY CLASS: BEGINNING OF AN EFFECTIVE GROUP

Rama, through her own experiences as a daughter-in-law, wife and mother, had faced many problems and she could see that other women too were going through similar problems. In her mind, she had planned to organise them but was finding it difficult to approach the women to form a group, mainly because she was a daughter-in-law in the village.

When she met an adult educator of a rural development agency, she thought she could start an adult literacy class for women in her village. That would be a good way to get the women together. Rama took training in adult education and started the literacy class. First, she got only young girls. Later, older women began to come. She talked to them before, after and during the class, and conveyed to them the idea of forming a group. The literacy class was over after a year but the women continued to meet and have now formed an effective group.





(b) The organiser may form a women's group around a common issue or problem (like alcoholism, wife-beating, child nutrition, recreation, etc.) and then introduce a programme already available or develop a new one. The choice of entry point depends on the particular situation and the organiser should be receptive and be able to perceive the women's urgent needs.

#### **SIMILAR FAMILY PROBLEMS BROUGHT THEM CLOSER**

**Kamla had to bear several hardships as a daughter-in-law. Her days started early and were full of heavy household work. Nobody helped her. She often got tired with her life, which was full of hard work without any appreciation. She was quite depressed. She knew that all other daughters-in-law in the village were also in the same predicament. But nobody would share their feelings.**

**Kamla started talking to others about these problems, when she went to fetch water, wash clothes or collect firewood. She also analysed why daughters-in-law lead such lives. When other women heard her, they also started recounting their experiences, which were similar. To the women who still did not open up, Kamla would talk about her own and others experiences. It became apparent to her and the others that they had similar problems, and that the same causes were affecting them in the same manner physically and psychologically. The women gradually formed an emotional bond between themselves, and soon realised that they were already a group.**



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## **STEPS IN GROUP FORMATION**

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Consider the following steps in the process of organising women :

1. First reflect on your own experiences as a woman.
2. Share those experiences with other women, in natural encounters and settings, to open them up.
3. Discuss explicitly the similarity between your experiences and those of other women.
4. Repeat such discussions often and let them take place either in your presence or in your absence.
5. Get these women together to talk about the same subject in an informal atmosphere. They should not feel they have been brought together but that they have come together. Prepare them individually for this first meeting. The first meeting of the group might consist of as small a number as three or four women. By this time the individuals in this meeting will have talked about their problems and experiences with you.



6. Facilitate their understanding of the commonalities in their experiences; develop a psychological climate of safety in which freedom of expression and reduction of defensiveness gradually takes place. This helps in the expression of feelings of each member towards herself and others.

After such an experience the women will talk more freely with

each other outside the group also. You can help such communication on an interpersonal level and bring it to the group level. It will help to bring the women closer.

7. Women who were part of the first meeting will talk about it to those who were not there. You should ask them to do so if you think that only you are propagating the idea of a group. This will spread the idea and more members will join the group and the earlier members will feel that they are organising it. Thus the role of the organiser will be shared by the women themselves right from the beginning.



8. Very often, women express their difficulty in attending a group meeting in the initial stage. At this stage, this issue should be dealt with effectively otherwise the group will not be formed. One method is to have a discussion on each woman's daily routine, including that of the organiser. This helps them to recognise that all have equally tight schedules. Those who can find some free time can volunteer their services for responsibilities like informing others of forthcoming meetings, making preparations for the meetings etc. This initial resistance needs to be overcome.

Another way of attempting it is as following. In one of the meetings, each one, including the organiser, talks about what she does throughout the day: different tasks, time spent on each task, points of exhaustion, etc. From that the organiser should help the group to conclude that everyone is very busy. Then interview those women in the group who manage to come for group meetings in spite of a very busy schedule; why they come, how they manage their responsibilities, etc. Such an interview, in the presence of those who find it difficult to come, helps.

This kind of interview also helps to clarify the problems of attending the meetings and those who realise this will make a special effort to come. But there may still be some who will refuse to come and pretend to have difficulty in attending meetings. This could be because the woman genuinely believes that her participation in the group will not be important and that she will be neglected. In this situation, with the help of other women, the organiser should try to convince the woman that her presence is equally important. It may be that being women, many others in the group will also have the same feeling. And its analysis will help to build up self-respect and solidarity.



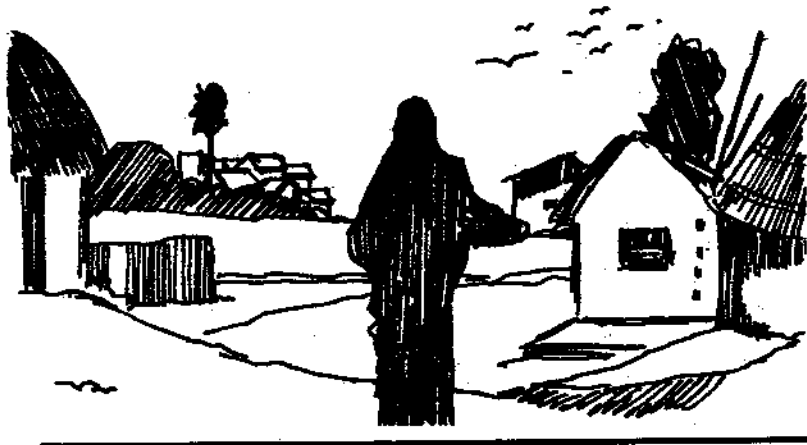
In some cases, a woman will have genuine problems of finding time. In such a case the organiser, along with other women, should help her solve it practically: by sharing the work, talking to her family members, or by imparting skills so that she finishes her work faster.

In some cases, resistance to join the group might also come due to prejudices against certain individuals who have already joined the group. The organiser must never miss this point to explicitly discuss the issue in the group, for it implies values and attitudes towards women, womanhood, different roles woman play, etc.



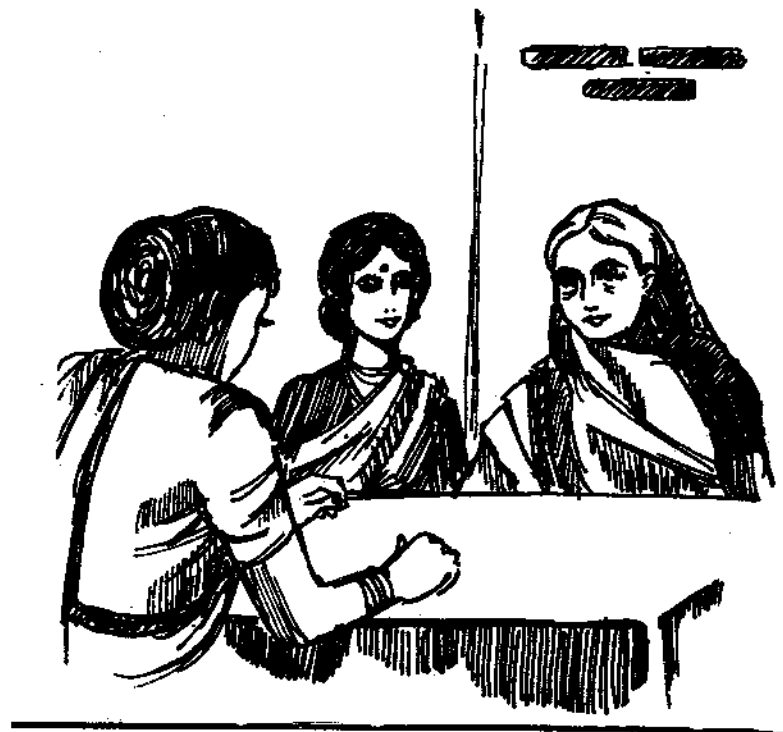
9. An important initial step in the formation of women's groups is to involve the men of the area, particularly husbands. The organiser should discuss the need for women's groups with the men at an early stage so that men, particularly husbands, do not resist women's participation in group meetings and activities. It is possible to make some men support their wives involvement in the group, though most of them are indifferent. Keeping the men informed, primarily through the women themselves, is tactically very critical in forming women's groups.

10. The group will soon need to structure its objectives, time, place and frequency of meetings, division of responsibilities, etc. After a few meetings, the organiser will be in a position to know the topics that attract women. She should share her inferences with them and encourage them to evolve the objectives of the group. She should also assist them in planning further meetings and structuring the group's activities with the participation of all.



11. It helps to strengthen the group, initially, if small and practical problems are successfully solved by group members. This successful experience of working together gives strength and confidence to the group to take on bigger issues in the future. Hence, the organiser assists the group to take on small and manageable problems initially.

12. The organiser can introduce external developmental programmes at any stage after this. The important thing to bear in mind is that the issues discussed and taken up in the group include a woman's role as a beneficiary as well as her other roles as a woman.



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## WHEN CAN YOU SAY A GROUP IS FORMED

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*In order to monitor the formation of a group, the organiser can keep several indicators in view. Some of these indicators are:*

- (a) a constant membership of not less than 10 women,
- (b) common understanding among members about why they have come together,
- (c) common understanding about who are the members,
- (d) initiative in regularly attending meetings,
- (e) high and shared participation in the meetings,
- (f) free and open communication and feedback among members,
- (g) consensus in decision-making,
- (h) realisation for a structure of the group,
- (i) action on group decisions,
- (j) ongoing activity in the group,
- (k) shared leadership in the group.



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## **ROLES OF A GROUP ORGANISER**

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From the foregoing presentaiton several roles of a group organiser emerge. They are as follows:

1. **Motivator:** encouraging women to recognise the need to come together and act collectively.
2. **Friend:** establishing personal relationships with women and becoming a friend.
3. **Educator:** giving non-formal education to women in the course of individual contacts and group meetings.
4. **Learner :** being a humble and sincere student.
5. **Informer :** providing relevant information to women individually and as a group.
6. **Facilitator:** encouraging women to express themselves, communicate with each other and take decisions.
7. **Interpreter:** analysing information and experiences; helping women reflect.
8. **Confronter:** asking difficult questions, challenging opinions and prejudices, and helping them confront reality.
9. **Enabler :** supporting the women to become an independent group.



**10. Trainer : imparting skills to women in the group.**

In all these roles, the organiser acts as a model. It is her personal example and behaviour that is most critical. However, different phases in the formation of a group may entail different roles for the organiser.



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## Main Phases in Group Organisation

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The organisation of a group has at least three phases:

**1. Preparatory Phase:** The group organiser prepares herself, approaches members individually and helps them to understand the need for organisation. The initial meetings take place, in which the members and the organiser find ways to relate with each other as group members, talk about frequency and timing of the meetings, starting activity, etc. Much of the effort goes in breaking the initial resistance of women to become part of a group and evolve a focus for themselves.

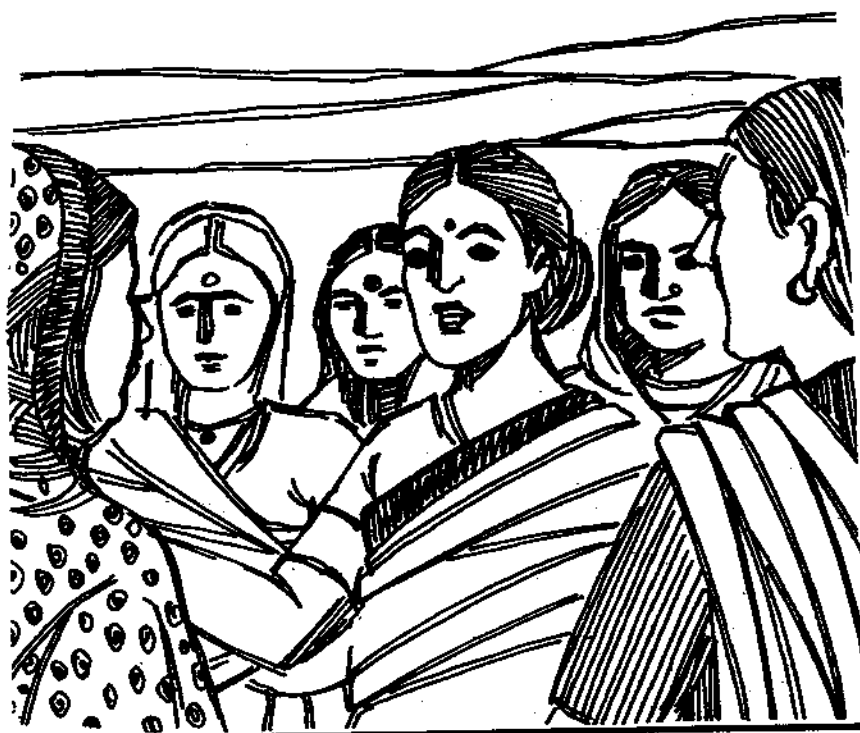
The organiser plays primarily the roles of a **friend, motivator and learner.**

**2. Settling-Down Phase:** This phase depends on the success of the first phase. Many clues from the first phase need to be used in this phase, such as, which areas women would like to work on, in which ways they need to be prepared for that, what supports are needed, etc. The group takes smaller activities first and tries to learn from its experience. Evaluation by the organiser and members of the group will be helpful in this phase.



New activities for the group are planned, skills and information needed for the same are obtained and resources identified and acquired. Sustaining the women's interest in the group and developing interpersonal relationships between members become important. The main roles of the organiser are **informer, facilitator, interpreter and confronter.**

**3. Stabilisation Phase :** In this phase, there is more solidarity and confidence among the group members. The organiser prepares shared leadership to support her and the group. Along with ongoing activities, the group develops its own distinctive identity and a vision of its present and future work. The group has a structure, and the pattern of work and responsibilities are stabilised. The organiser's roles are **educator, trainer and enabler.**



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