

Workshop on Organising Women in the Informal Economy: Lessons from Practice

20-21st October 2008, New Delhi

What makes it possible for marginalized women workers in the informal sector to take collective action around their needs and interests? What strategies, visions and discourses do they draw on?

These were some of the questions addressed at a recent workshop which brought together academics, activists and practitioners to discuss the experience of organisations of women workers beyond the formal economy. The workshop aimed both to document experience and to tease out strategies that have 'worked' for particular gains in particular circumstances.

The workshop brought together rich contributions from organisations of domestic workers in Karnataka, India and Brazil working for workers' rights and better conditions; women in fisheries in Tamil Nadu working to preserve and enhance their role in the domestic fish trade; sex workers in Maharashtra working for recognition and human rights; rag pickers in Pune finding ways to achieve recognition and to adapt their work to the new economy; tribal women in Jharkhand working on land rights; construction workers in Chennai achieving workers' rights; Burmese migrant women in Thailand using limited available spaces to find voice; women farm workers in South Africa organising in partnership with an NGO; and the experience of Trade Unions reaching out to informal sector workers in Ghana.

These stories confirm that models for organising women in the informal sector are in many ways distinct from conventional models of workers' organisations. Nevertheless, they also show how it is both possible and rewarding to organise here, no matter what peculiarities are required. Issues raised and elaborated include:

- It is often important to distinguish between different kinds of tasks and work within sectors, and to understand the social and material meanings of each. Equally, where employers exist at all, the lines between those who abuse and those who facilitate work are often blurred.
- Building identities as workers who make valuable contributions has often been important, but so has accommodating other identities: as women, as belonging to particular ethnic groups, as constructors of livelihoods.

A second set of key questions probed concerned how organisations of women workers encounter and deal with issues of intersectionality amongst their membership and/or with the wider populations they interact with. How can organisations effectively address internal inequalities? How can organisations with a membership of very low status, marginalised and often stigmatized workers begin to address and challenge their subordination? There appeared to be some common themes:

- Issues of both internal and external difference and inequality were clearly recognized, and were often sites of tension and struggle. Organisations have produced an array of innovative strategies to address them.
- Struggles around issues of stigma and social disrespect are sometimes prioritised over struggles for better working conditions.
- Visions of alternative approaches to running economies, societies and states sometimes, but not always, drive these organisations. Others are concerned to produce sufficient structural change to accommodate both their work and their humanity on better terms.