

SPARC

35

**EVENTS THAT MAKE
CHANGE HAPPEN**

**FROM THE SOCIETY FOR
PROMOTION OF AREA
RESOURCE
CENTRES**

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Diary of a Pathbeater

**Ensuring women's leadership in
community educational
processes.**

OUR IMAGERIES OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Designing a training process is like beating a pathway in a place where there are no tracks. Different people take different directions to reach their destination. Gradually more and more people tread the same ground and they create a pathway. Those who beat the path are often unaware of their historic contribution and see their roles as path breakers emerging out of a series of coincidences. When path beaters share their knowledge of this path's existence with others, over a period of time, more and more people use the path.

Training like path breaking is a mechanism or a process which transports people from one level of understanding, knowledge, capacities and skills to another level. People undergo training because they believe there will be an improvement in their levels of functioning due to this training. When the path is beaten, how many use it, where it takes them and how they survive the journey determines the popularity of the path and determines its utilizations.

However great its utilization, the path, like training is a means to achieve an end...no more. Its character and value is only in relationship to where it goes and how. Training processes like paths have a history. The time and location of that training process like the path emerges out of the situational process. They are designed to provide knowledge, values, skills which then lead the participants to some end. What the contents of this path(training) are...like the directions that a path takes, depends on the situation at that moment.

Those who are creators of training or pathways have a choice in how to use this knowledge. They can use it to derive a sense of power, accomplishment and confidence out of this achievement. Depending on their motives, they may want a variety of things in return for sharing this knowledge. Those who share this knowledge out of their own experience are the best teachers. Especially when the path is new and the destinations unclear. Those participating in its design, reproduction and utilisation provide it with its scope, usage and replicability - and so, the analogy continues.

In our roles as path beaters, our choices have become clear. We want to beat many wide and secure paths which take huge numbers of people to various destinations as and when they can go and they are ready to go. We want those who travel to be concerned about all the members of their group. We want the journey to be safer and more secure so more can travel. We want to assist all pioneers to beat new paths - to complete journeys, to live to talk about it so others also feel confident to travel - and once the paths are clear and safe, to see everyone has the confidence to take the journey.

In a world of quick fixes, such processes stand out as vague, fuzzy, untidy and are often discounted. Neat training packages designed on conceptual clarity by those who never experience the reality of those who will use these processes are the designers of training processes today.....with a premium of quick reproduction, with focus of how to reproduce a skill rather than examination of whether it serves the purpose of those whose lives are to be affected by it. Those who live in a world of order, systems and affluence rarely see any value in these processes. They rarely sit back and ponder on

where and how their own perspectives accommodate the aspirations and strategies of those who do not have, who are impoverished, who have no power, no history of control.

All training processes which are designed for the poor must be designed to ensure that people not only develop confidence to undertake training but participate in its creation, execution and monitoring. The content of the training must not only provide new values, knowledge and skills BUT also include the organisational ability to ensure that the impact of training improves the quality of their lives and that the output of training is not used by individuals to "hijack" resources for communities.

Carefully researched single point solutions and training modules designed to achieve them look good on paper - they are neat and efficiently conducted. They bear no connection with the lives of the poor let alone women. Instead, those processes which seek to weave a complex tapestry of multiple alternatives and which ensures capacity building bear fruit. Change which is sustainable must work for all - for large numbers whose lives change as a result. All training, all investments in that direction must first prepare the poor to deal with change, to make that change accountable to their needs and feel confident of contributing to that change. Is that too large a scope to cover for training ?

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INTRODUCTION:

The central role that poor women play in the survival strategies of their family and community has always been very obvious to those who have worked with poor settlements. Paradoxically welfare agencies have always treated women as "beneficiaries" or consumers of welfare, who have to be motivated, trained and changed. The dignity of these women and their resourcefulness is perpetually trampled upon, both by their men folk, the communities they live in, as also by service providing agencies. Everyone constantly reminding women of what they have not been able to do or cannot do, ignoring what they have done and achieved despite the odds.

Many of my colleagues in SPARC worked along with me for 10 years between 1974-84 in an urban community service centre in the inner city of Bombay, India. We tried to change the way in which the service delivery programmes related to the women. When we found it was not possible for us to change the existing institutional practice beyond superficial changes, many of my colleagues and I resigned and set up an organisation called SPARC. SPARC (Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres) is many things to many people. But for those who founded it, it is an ongoing and dynamism exploration of designing and fine tuning an institutional arrangement which uses its resources, human and financial to design ways by which poor and impoverished communities (and especially the women of these communities) begin to undertake activities which lead to their transformation. *NGO LINES: Urbanisation and development, IIED: 1989. This transformation has both an educational and an organisational dimension.

Each component - educational and organisational is distinct and yet inter related and SPARC sees its role in strengthening the capacity and ability of the urban poor to create and sustain an educational process - sharpening and redefining its content, direction and use, so that the capacities of the poor in organising themselves is further enhanced. SPARC's role in the organisational mobilisation is one of

supporting and assisting - except in a few early instances (in the case of pavement dwellers) where it worked in partnership with communities to chart out a process of community organisation itself.

Processes are dynamic. Our goals for processes of Community organisation are firstly to ensure gender sensitiveness in general in the long run, but to ensure women's central participation right from the start. To ensure that the process is inclusive, that it includes everyone, ensures that the aspirations within micro communities and also many micro communities is included in the process. That the process is democratic, and seeks to ensure action through consensus building, and finally that it is elastic and flexible to ensure durability and stamina on its long marathon route to achieving needs of its members. All these and many more such considerations have to also be designed in a manner that they lead to building institutional arrangements owned and managed by the poor.

When SPARC began its work in 1984, those of us who founded it had a few guidelines which we clung to - allowing everything else to emerge from our relationship with communities. These or initial guidelines were.

1. Developing a relationship of partnership with communities which questioned existing arrangements: We were not going to be a service delivery organisation. Instead we sought a relationship of partnership with the urban poor whose concerns and priorities would set our own organisational agenda for action. To locate initial partners, we would begin with the poorest of the poor urban communities and amongst them, focus on women in those settlements.
2. Focus on ensuring women's central participation in that process. We would do this because we do not believe in anything trickling down. We have seen that often solutions are designed and executed among settlements of the better off among the poor, when these strategies are replicated they seldom replicate effectively. If (our logic told us) we began with the worst off - we may take longer to formulate a solution, but when it worked for the worst off, its adaptability for better off groups was assured to a greater degree than the other way around.

The focus on women was both a means and an end. Women in survival situations use resources judiciously, whenever they control distribution it is equitable and their ability to operate as a collective ensures democratic organisation. Strengthening this function and increasing its acknowledgement both within the community and outside affects many sets of relationships. It challenges traditional community organisation practice which inevitably locates single male leader as a conduit of resource/information flow from outside. It formalises and acknowledges what women do anyway, so that their abilities are better used for all in the community. After all, if women cook food, handle demolition, manage water and sanitation - they would know best what ingredients are essential for the solution and if the solution is viable.

When women accept mantle of leadership for the "good of family and community", then they also feel less self conscious of their role transformation and communities/men don't harass them while they are still vulnerable. Gradually as women develop confidence, this confidence creates the basis of re-negotiating relationships in the home and in the community. This in turn changes roles in the home and in the community between husband and wife - men and women and gradually these changes allow women and entire communities to examine their lives and aspire for a alternative vision of tolerance, equity, nurturance. This creates the foundation for changes in their roles and relationships to achieve these goals.

In SPARC's earlier writing these issues did not come so succinctly, but these beliefs and commitments were always there and its articulation has improved and will keep getting better overtime we repeat it.

3. Investing in processes which strengthen community through an internal reorganisation which is the sustained by the community process itself. We did not believe that we from the "outside" could organise the poor. "Community organisation" as presently understood is a mechanism to mobilise communities to fulfil goals and objectives considered by the catalyst as "good for the community". That kind of community organisation we define as "agenda specific" i.e. you want to improve health, or education of children, or give employment. Such a process motivates poor to use a resource allocated by the state or the NGO. The process rarely seeks to address priorities as developed by the community.

In such a situation the external interventionists rarely question the present form of community organisation: i.e. who does what in the community. As long as the community nominates a leader who acts as a conduit between the outside and the community, there is no questioning of the internal processes which occur in the community. We believe that communities presently mirror all the inequities that exist in the social system of which they are a part of. And one of the main lapses of the present organisational processes is the absence of women in the process.

Therefore there is need for Community Reorganisation so that human resources within the community are brought to the surface and reorganised to be democratic and equitable. This we believe will sustain and strengthen their struggle to change status quo initially and to ensure equitable distribution of resources when, through its struggle the community gets access to resources. Both these elements are essential and need to be undertaken simultaneously as part of this reorganisation.

4.Reproduction of insights, knowledge and learning should be done by communities, and not the catalysts. Finally, catalysts (SPARC) to facilitate the crystallisation of this process should not be the reproducers of this process. i.e. communities and their leadership should take on responsibility of training and creating and reproducing knowledge if this alternative has to snowball into a movement. This requires the creation of a cadre of leaders who will energise and sustain this process.

The women residing on the pavements of the inner city of Bombay were SPARC's partners in beating this path which allowed us to :

- Transform ourselves : Each one of us, middle class or poor, changed individually and alienated to reorganise communities.
- Transform a crisis spelling doom into an opportunity of learning.
- Transform a specific issue based learning into a universal learning tool which today forms the nucleus of an urban slum dweller's movement in India.

- Transform the relationships between men and women struggling against poverty into a leadership with a vision for transformation in which men and women would relate to each other differently.

And it all began in 1983-84 when we began to work with women residing on the pavements.

MAKING CHOICES AND SEEING WHERE THEY LEAD:

If we look at the path which we have created, we now see that there were many points at which we had to make choices. Each of these choices although located in the situational reality of that particular moment, had an historical impact on the roles and relationships of all participating in the process today. We share this in a story telling form, in much the same manner this process is narrated by us when we share our experiences verbally.

THE FIRST CHOICE: PARTNERS NOT PATRONS:

Linkages between professional middle class women and poor women residing on pavements. How this changed each one, and how they collectively initiated a change in how communities (especially men) viewed women's participation.

Pavement dwellings (to those readers who have not heard this term) are tentative structures set up on pavements or sidewalks of streets, in several parts of the city. These are as deep as the width of the pavement and as high as wall behind permits. Most such settlements are in locations of the city which provide jobs to unskilled migrants such as whole sale commodity markets, recycling centres and - These dwellings begin by people sleeping on the sidewalk and gradually setting up structures of bamboo matting, tin and wood slats to form a dwelling.

Women who reside in the pavement dwellings in the areas were SPARC first began to work are predominantly migrant women who came to Bombay with their husband and children in the 1960s - 1970s due to a wide range of problems which can be easily linked the failure of the country's development planning. For instance in the early 1970s.

Box:

Handloom and Khadi (Hand spun) Co-operatives in Bihar in the north supplying thread to weavers collapsed making the thread more expensive than the woven cloth. Muslim weavers - landless - with no other employment began to migrate to different cities. Bombay with its history of textile industry attracted these weavers who first tried to get a job in mills, and subsequently took any job they got.

When SPARCies (as those of us who work in SPARC refer to themselves) began to work in these settlements, they went into this process with some clear ideas of what they were and were not going to do. First of all, they were going to understand how the pavement dwellers survived - why did they choose to live there, how they provided for their needs and what their problems and aspirations were. To understand this, we were clear about WHO was going to give us this information. It was the women. Why? Because our earlier work experience clearly indicated that all survival strategies were developed managed and maintained by women. It was not as though this information could not have been sought in any other form. But by engaging in a relationship with women, this was (we knew intuitively) to serve many other functions.

We will first describe the process, then analyse it. Everyday 2-3 Sparcies walked around the 43 settlements in various parts of E Ward (1 district of 29 district/ward of Bombay Municipal Corporation - which has one of the highest concentrations of pavement dwellings). The men would hover around to "represent" their settlements to these "social workers" until they realised these women were not behaving like social workers. No advise was given, no food, clothes, soap etc. was distributed and no forms were filled. Following their men folk the women too initially ignored the Sparcies. (*See Annual Report 1986)

Persistent pressure and non acceptance of rejecting gestures got individual women intrigued enough to ask "Why do you keep coming"? At which point the dialogue was initiated. Each of us shared our history of working as community workers who had tried traditional and conventional methods to solve problems of poor people and found we had not achieved a great deal. We now wanted to try another way - get to know and understand the problems of poor people as they see it and work with them. But most important we needed to understand them.

This lead to several fall outs - all of which occurred simultaneously and were interlinked - only for the sake of description we separate them. We began to ask and answer questions about each others - who are you, how old, married, where were you born, where did you live before you came here, how did you come and the questions went on. The women's stories can be a book in itself - but the collective picture it represents is of a childhood of fun and frolic despite poverty, until puberty at which point - based on a marriage arranged by families, the young girl went to live with her husband. Children were born and by 19-20 years of age the young couple was pressured to find work. The man left first in some cases, in others the whole family moved together without food, often without a ticket their destination - the city of Bombay.

Choices of where to stay were by circumstances. Many women squatted near a place of work, or near another family from the village and gradually settlements grew. Women then discussed how they located sources of water, jobs, toilets in nearby middle class homes - often their working in these houses for were pittances was a choice women made to ensure access to basic facilities and informal protection, flexible work hours, food (leftovers) for children and small crisis loans.

While these question answer sessions occurred several critical transformations occurred simultaneously -

- We in SPARC found our language, attitudes and insights developing. On the one hand we began to understand their lives better and also the logic behind the choices women made. It was also a lesson in self discipline not to behave like a "do-gooder". Often this response of quickly trying to give money, food or whatever was needed by the woman whose life was now so closely inter twined with ours, was a knee jerk response to the feelings of guilt it invoked in us. We realised that was a very short lived process which would not serve many people, and would lead to a relationship of patronage with a few women only. We also learnt to provide feedback to women individually and collectively, and use language and phrases which facilitated a relationship of equality rather than intellectual superiority.

Box: As middle class educated persons, we saw that we had an innate tendency to constantly intellectualise the situation, and through analysis come to a conclusion and locate some solution. While this was possible in many of the situations which we had to deal with, in the case of the poor, this was not possible. Further our way of dealing and articulating these issues, intimidated the women who then became passive bystanders to a monologue. We moved to more emotive and descriptive language, to allowing one issue to be linked to many even at the cost of seemingly confused discussion. That was how

women spoke and felt...everything was linked to everything.

For the women - this was a fascinating journey as each woman retrospect on her own life and the cross roads at which either she made choices and dealt with choices which were thrust on her. By listening to their neighbours women drew a verbal picture of their settlement profile. Women painted a picture of women's roles in poor settlements which otherwise never emerges to the surface because neither women themselves nor their menfolk think its important.

For instance the delicate negotiations of the pavement dwellers with police and building residence in the first place facilitated the settlement formation. In almost all instances individual women in most settlements and their neighbours could recollect the incidences which actually lead to the first woman setting up the house. In one settlement Samina Khatoon a recent widow lived on the street next to her place of work. That street was a dangerous one as drug dealers operated there at night. Every night she sat upright and closed - never allowing herself to sleep for fear of any man coming to accost her or her two daughters. A policeman who patrolled the area observed this and he suggested she put her saree like a tent around and he would patrol. In return she sometimes made a cup of tea for him. When three villagers met her and came to live next to her, the policeman felt this would be good for her and also for pushing peddlers out - which it did.

Commonalties in experiences, dealing with similar experiences and using each others solutions to cope with a strange new world of the city. Women laughed at their first encounters as maids when they were asked to wash utensils with soap under a tap. The slipperiness leading to breakage of glass cups - they had never used. Mopping floors instead of using cowdung to re-surface floors.

The fun and enjoyment in these discussions often lead to several men coming into the process and curiosity quickly turning into sharing of their own stories. Here the fact that women's stories were already accepted, shared and valued, created the first major change in the sequences of the dialogue between men and women. Usually men's stories are dominant and women's stories are squeezed in. Here it was reversed - and yet, especially in pavement settlements men began to acknowledge women's roles and contributions.

Discussions about immediate settlement problems came up. A child was sick, a woman had to have a baby, someone was at the police station locked up for no reason, why can't we have a ration card (a ration card is a booklet to provide subsidised food and fuel to all. In the absence of identity cards it becomes the main proof of identity. Most poor people have no identity/ration cards) The usual response expected/and delivered on communities making such a demand is the social worker arranges with available resources to make this problem solving through her/his intervention. In fact most service delivery is designed to serve this purpose. SPARC choose another route. For every demand the people/women made, the solution was clearly not possible because they did not know how to get access to resources which they city and government had to provide. Rather than go alone and seek information ourselves we took 10-15 women interested in this process.

In the case of ration cards for instance - Communities (through our discussions between women and SPARC) first identified why ration cards were important. The most obvious and overt purpose was subsidised us as well. The card gave everyone an identity and city based status. It was a requirement for anyone who want to give bail at the police station. It was a commodity which could be mortgaged for funds. And it was also the requirement to be on voters lists, getting of other city benefits, and even to get a passport.

Most pavement dwellers believed their "address" debarred them from getting a ration card. Those rare individuals whose families had ration cards were clear it was a favour for which they paid in cash and kind and many had paid cash but had not received a card - bad luck! When we discussed this issue the initial expectation (despite many clarifications) was that SPARC will get us ration cards. No was our answer. If you want ration cards, you will have to accompany us as we explore this problem. Who would come - women of course! Will families accept ration cards in the name of women? Why not men? they asked. The person who manages this process and learns how to get it, and purchases grain with it will have to be the person in whose name the card

should be. OK said most men, some in a huff forced wives not to go, and no issue was made of that.

At the ration controllers office there was panic when 15-20 women entered and began to make inquiries. The general response was - we don't give cards to pavement dwellers. So we went to the State Government Department and examined the rules in which it was clear that even a foreigner living in India for 15 days could get a temporary ration card. We went back to the office and negotiations began. Although a person from SPARC handled the discussions initially everyone knew the general plan of action before hand. We were creating a precedent whereby cards would be allocated to women on pavements. The first 10 cards took the longest. We got our way not only because we were right, but because 15 women in a already crowded office was creating an uproar. Once the cards were made - they created a sensation. Everyone including those men who asked wives not to go asked the women to go. Each time, with each set, the women were able to take over more and more of the procedure and soon none of us were needed. Even if there was a problem they went to the senior officer and got a clarification.

Men began to feel more at ease with this process as women did not make much of cards on women's name. No one treated this as a competition between men and women. Those men who had taken money from families to make ration cards felt very threatened. But apart from neutralising their hold over the community nothing else was said.

In this way dealing with other issues of health, children's education, police etc. was dealt with. In each instance collectives of women interested and with time to spare formed a team with SPARC to make the first exploration and once a precedent was set, began to teach others to deal with this situation. No one called them leaders nor did they refer to themselves as such. But there was increasing and overt acknowledgement of women's abilities to address problems.

In this period of interaction we had all completed our first transition - we did not take any word, concept or idea for granted everything was assessed, analysed and re-interpreted to serve

our ends. In doing this there was no self consciousness, no reactive behaviour. We each accepted our different starting points and accepted that some were educated and better off, others were poor. Everyone contributed their insights, knowledge and ideas to evolve new knowledge which was then tested for its ability to solve problems. Each one who solved a problem had to share this with others who needed it.

We did not call this training - instead we called it sharing. WE never made issue of changing roles of women because women themselves were still coping with this new awareness of themselves and they had made choices to use new knowledge to help families and not themselves. We accepted that because they wanted it to be so.

THE SECOND CHOICE:

RATHER THAN COPING WITH A CRISIS, TURNING THE PROCESS ON ITS HEAD TO BECOME AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE:

A crisis of major proportion and dimensions... evictions and demolition of pavement dwellings instead of frightening everyone, became the foundation for imagining the inconceivable, secure shelter for the homeless.

Upto the period in July 1985, this process of interaction continued, a clearer picture of life of pavement dwellers began to get consolidate both in our minds and the women's. The threat of impending demolition, the hostility of other sections of the city and the Municipality kept them perpetually in fear, and the demolition like a sword on their heads. In 1981 the Chief Minister of Maharashtra and the Bombay Municipal Corporation had plans to rid city of pavement dwellers and hundreds were crammed into buses and sent out side the city centre. This was stopped when civil liberties' groups in the city brought in a stay order in the High Court to stop this form of displacement. The case went on to the Supreme Court where it was awaiting a judgement. This judgement was delivered on 11th July 1985 and the BMC won the case. It had the right to clear pavements of the city in order to do its job. The judgement gave the pavement dwellers upto 30th October 1985 to clear the pavements.

Chaos and panic fuelled by rumours had both pavement dwellers and voluntary agencies in the city in a state of panic. The women and their communities with whom SPARC interacted again demanded an instant solution. The panic eroding all newly developed changes. We in SPARC were also scared and firstly attended many NGO arranged meetings to discuss this issue. Many of these meetings were attended by community leaders who were men working with other agencies. They all seemed to promote confrontation.

When we spoke to women - they refused. They felt they could not fight without destroying themselves as they had no where to go. These discussions along with all the

information about them began to strike each one of us. With no past experience of dealing with such an issue we used the same strategy we had used in the past. Ask questions. So groups of us visited various government departments to see what it was they were planning to do. And we found to our amazement - there was no plan. No one knew how many pavement dwellers resided in the city. Institutes and researchers claimed such enumeration were not possible, and their stereotypes of who is a pavement dweller (a floating population of single men) and why they came to the city (bright lights and movies) and what they did here (pick pocketing, begging and drug peddling) had nothing to do with the reality. Of victims of development coming to city for survival.

In the discussions with pavement communities the collective realisation was that the pavement dwellers were an invisible population. Neither the rich nor other groups of poor (unions/slum dwellers) had ever included them in any organisation and their isolation was clearly evident. By mid August 1985, SPARC decided to do a study of pavement dwellers in E Ward and 4 arterial roads (Batiwala and Patel 1986 Sociology Paper) to demonstrate that enumeration was possible. In 2 months over 6000 households were canvassed and a report "We the Invisible" November 1985 was published and widely circulated nationally. Simultaneously demonstration rather of all parties NGO and unions were attended by communities and SPARC - as much to learn and participate as to experience new avenues.

November came and went, no massive demolition occurred. No one was under any illusion that it was due to our efforts alone. But there was a great sense of relief. But there was also a realisation that this crisis had generated information - some which we had produced ourselves - There were over 1.5 million pavement dwellers in the city. Our study alone indicated that 6000 and families resided in one part and families came from the poorest and most backward district of the country and people lived there for between 10-30 years. So the feeling of not being alone, of many facing this problem emerged.

SPARC found its own role more clearly and women's collectives evolving in the earlier phase more gradually along with SPARC found this 6 months period to move them closer together, able to collaborate, to hold each others hand through uncertainty and actually developing confident to assure communities that they would handle the unexpected even if they had no solutions. Not panicking, not rushing around helplessly in those circumstances was remarkable.

The documentation now challenged everyone especially the state to recognise pavement dwellers, demanded use of similar methods to enumerate all pavement slums and to treat pavement dwellers as victims of development that the Central Government must rehabilitate. This stand drew the attention of many other groups NGOs and communities who found the core leadership (women), the collective form of functioning, the strategy of information gathering strange yet fascinating. These watchers observed us through our next phase, before seeking to participate in the program.

In the aftermath of the census, the intensity of interactions now demanded we explore the next logical step. The demolition brought us face to face with the real priority of pavement dwellers - insecure shelter. This had to be addressed. The crisis instead of promoting only fear fuelled the women to seek a long term solution. This spun us off into the real deep end? On to a new phase of learning!

THE THIRD CHOICE:

Learning to Learn--Plunging into processes of learning without a final solution. A specific training/learning exploration provided the basis for mobilisation of larger numbers as it was situated within the struggle of urban poor.

The crisis brought to the surface, the most critical of all issues affecting pavement dwellers: Insecurity from shelter. They all seemed to accept the initial difficulties it created because even that terrible condition was better than what the situation was back home. And every adult - man and woman in the discussions which followed - felt mentally prepared, even resigned to dealing with the present situation - but the question which haunted them was, will this situation remain this way for their grandchildren? Will they too be born on the pavements like their children.

Those women's collectives SPARC worked with raised these issues in a way which actually demanded a choice from SPARC. We had already clarified we were not giving things to them. We had passed through the crisis in which we all had come closer to each other and because there were no mass demolition, we have no idea how that would have affected our relationship and our capabilities. So in a sense the women, through these discussion were now placing choices to us. Were we really serious, when we said that we would work along with their priorities? Although they knew, and we knew these were with no clear or possible solution on the near or foreseeable future? Because the poor rarely reject assistance in whatever form it comes - and their optimism and survival mechanism seek to use this resource we know even then, that we could have evaded this issue and continued with civics resource utilisation as we had before we got into the crises of facing demolition.

However we decided to plunge into the unknown. No one working in SPARC at that time had even the remotest of experience about shelter or housing. We were also clear that we had no model or process to follow and most training strategies which were available had a clear focus on what the "end" result was. The training process was a means to achieve this objective. It presumed

we had knowledge and skills which the training would reproduce. Since we had nothing but a set of seemingly impossible changes, that is what we placed before ourselves. The most tangible and immediate one was a secure shelter for all. And we began from there.

We had by then 8 out of the 43 settlements we were relating to ready to push through on this subject. We began with meetings of entire settlements - men and women - to resolve that we would pursue an education which would help us put to gather a strategy which will ensure shelter for pavement dwellers. At that point everyone was very clear that SPARC was not going to bring out of a hat like a rabbit. That SPARC too knew nothing about shelter. But based on our belief in all our capacities create this new knowledge and through it an education, we said it would be our priority.

Setting up the ground rules:

As these discussions developed, the question arose of who would learn what. Immediately the response was to chose one person (man) from each settlement and before it could reach a vote for consensus it was shot down. SPARC's demand was that certain basis aspects about what we were learning had to be learnt by all. The choices which we would make when we understood certain issues had to be made by all. That "leadership" in this process and in all our future work would emerge from an informed community which would delegate to a collective of individuals who sought those positions because they desired to play those roles and were ready to be accountable to the larger community.

This new learning and the goals it had to achieve has be transformatory. The communities had to look for a solution which had universality. We would test this solution and call it effective only if would facilitate shelter for pavement dweller in city. Secure shelter was essential to achieve better lives for their children implied many other changes. So we would have to examine all present practices we undertake and analyse how these fit in our vision of the future. Thus linking secure shelter to our larger vision of a better future. Everything we learnt had to be like two sides of the coin. Each one would learn something which improves them individually, but learning had to strengthen the collective learning and problem solving process.

It is very difficult even now to combine the vivid description of events which followed (in the period between end of 1985 and the beginning of 1987) with an analysis of their dynamics (ie the transformative content of how it affected individuals, men, women, groups and all of us. And then link this to the evolution of an educational process which we use now in all our mobilization process. The evolution of a cadre of women leaders who form and continue today to lead this process.

Describing this process remains a difficulty. In a sense this is because the process has remained dynamic. That experience of eviction threat to pavement dwellers started the ball rolling. Everyone involved feels the process is still refining itself and so while values are clear, there is no defined contents which is rigid or sacrosanct.

Every situation every concern and every feeling was a focus of splitting hair to find issues and ideas for learning - so the focus was not so much on what events were "selected" but rather what events occurred and how they were used to serve our ends. We have written many papers which describe the details in one form or the other of that first training process. (See Women and Housing: SPARC 1987, Housing training and women pavement dwellers HSMI 1989) What we will attempt here is to describe how and why a cadre of women leaders emerged and how they developed individually and collectively and the kinds of roles they play today.

Some of the questions we posed to ourselves and the manner in which the answer emerged. Having posed the question, there was an assessment of : .for this what was the available.... within communities.... in the immediate environment....what knowledge had to be created or where could we look for new insights since we did not have it already. What were the issues which needed social, economical, technical and political changes. Understanding each and examining what issues raised which question. What changes did it demand in the individual/community functioning

We all developed a capacity to imagine a transformation. This was very important. How we would manage and sustain that transformation. What values, skills and strategies

would we need at that point had to be identified, and these be began to nurture and strengthened today side by side with the skills to get secure shelter.

To explain what a slice of the training process looked like we will look at some instances which highlight how these dimensions were dealt with. How women were acknowledged as the leadership which resolved these and why. Some of the issues which brought this up started with demolitions, and then moved on to house design, house allocations, money matters, dealing with intra community/family conflicts.

Demolitions - Every couple of months some settlement or the other had a demolition. The police vans accompanying the municipal demolition squad would come and break the houses, destroy all belongings, often take it away. It was a rape of communities and families - a desecration of their meagre resources put together against all odds.

The analysis of demolitions emerging from knowledge which people themselves had was that demolition was a routine - the state broke the houses, people rebuilt it. No one had ever left their places so no evictions occurred. Families often had formal/informal warnings and sought anyone of the following.

- sought intervention of politicians, administrators
- paid protection money to BMC demolition squad leader
- put away belongings which were valuable
- dismantled houses at times.

But most important life went on.

Women faced demolitions because they were in and around homes while men were away. Also, there were fewer arrests them. Whenever communities were cohesive and behaved collectively there was less violence, less loss and fear was major factor. By visiting the police we found that police presence was to maintain law and order - not just for protection of the BMC squads. Further the community could file complaints about the police too!

The Ward office and BMC had a 'routine' of demolitions - everyone knew this was a superficial exercise but it was to show the pavement dwellers they should not get too secure. And the city was antagonistic to pavement dwellers who it considered 'outsiders'. Demolition usually got violent when a 'state' was involved - someone particularly demanded a clean up.

The law/lawyers After the Supreme Court judgement, a stay order was hard to get. The law was not very effective. However, if personal possessions were destroyed or confiscated without due documentation, that was clearly against the law. Also, because India has signed a UN Covenant of Social, Economical, Political Rights. Within which shelter is a basic right. Destruction of shelter of poor without an alternative was a violation of this agreement. So while the Indian Government was seeking to officially stop demolitions/evictions, the city continues to violate this commitment.

We were unhappy about the present state of insecurity - were we always going to have a knew jerk response to it? Did we have an alternative in mind. We were unable to even think of what proactive behaviour was possible at that time because our minds were blocked because we did not have land. So we asked ourselves a question. What if we had the land, then did we know what we would do? we did not have any answers. What was stopping us from dreaming up what we would want. After all, if we were to fight for land, we had to have a dream which sustained us... And we began to draw upon our imageries of another alternative way of life in which the foundation was a secure house, and gradually, we started to look at how these homes and settlements looked like. What the kind of houses we would like to live in. How would our settlements look like? What work we would we be doing there? Would we need to learn new skills? Would house and settlement designs have to be different to accommodate the different home and outside work we did? What changes would it bring in our lives.

Where would the resources come for this transformation. Which part and what share could and should the poor contribute. How were the poor going to get those resources saved? What were the resources we want from the state? What was the rationale for this demand? When were we ready to give our share? How would we decide on what our share was. How would we work out norms to serve these objectives. How would those who are the poorest contribute? Would the settlement support them? How? What if the state refuses? What if some of us refuse? Was this an impossible dream could pavement dwellers ever get land? Were we capable to designing all these wonderful things. Would people believe in us? Will they laugh at us?

The issue of land, however kept bogging us down. Women asked where were we going to build houses - on air? The state has always said there is no land. Groups upon group walked all over the city and looked for land because we believed that there was no vacant land. What we found that there was more than enough vacant land, it was not allocated for residential use in general and not at all for poor.

10-15 groups of these 600 odd households walked to every piece of vacant land in the city. They would sit in or around it and explore in their minds eye how useful it was for work, for travel, for children's education - out of this exercise an entire criteria of possibility emerged. Women thrived on such discussions seeing how it liberated their thought processes. They would collect pebbles from each site and groups would compare memories each pebble had given them and learn from shared experiences. The men in some instances began to feel cynical - they felt this was a waste of time. Many would drop off such exercises. Women however, persisted. Often for totally unrelated pay off. Many had never travelled to so many parts of the city despite living there for so many years. The visits offered women and their children an unusual outing. Children too enjoyed these weekend outings - usually meals were packed and eaten during the day on sites.

Therefore complex issues moved from abstract to tangible form. Women saw land - knew that demanding secure tenure was a long political battle, but they also knew the resources inside themselves to make these demands could be mobilised. Most valuable it gave them an opportunity to think ahead and plan - something poor people especially. Women never get a chance to look way ahead ion the future. In most circumstances, (as their stories proved) women at best had to take life as it came and cope with it. Rarely was their creativity and ingenuity used to think ahead and plan.

SPARCIES trudged along everywhere learning, asking questions, weighing answers and demanding sustained rigor in the process. They had to make sure all groups had opportunities and the timings and style of exploration suited women. Meetings were long story telling sessions - lots of arguments, debates often noisy and repetitive so everyone was with the process. Men who were used to political leaders styles would get up to make pompous long winded speeches were gently made to sit and chat or gradually as the group grew close - teased in to saying things simply.

We also began to look at the few instances where the state had provided the shelter to poor. We looked at the physical structures, and chatted with women living in those settlements. In most instances these were not people the houses were originally allotted to. We tried to see why this happened and why families has sold their homes. This helped develop useful monitoring and evaluation tools to asses on the one hand schemes... whether our own or those of the state, and a list of things to avoid.

eg. In many settlements there were individual toilets inside a 180 sq.ft. house. These were often sealed off and used as store rooms as there was no running water available and the toilet were often located next to the cooking area. Women decided they would prefer to have shared toilets if they had small homes and inadequate drinking water.

And so it went on - houses and settlements were designed - issues of who within settlements got the house - in whose name it should be, and how disputes/sales be dealt with - the list continued. Finally by the end of 1986, the house models - 4 of them costing different amounts were short listed and the groups began to consider what to do next.

This was time to choose leaders. Everyone had taken part in counting their huts, numbering them, choosing designs and selecting patterns. They had even begun to save money in banks towards their house. Their attitude was - let the battle with the state continue - we should be prepared on our side. It was time to delegate the tasks to smaller groups and so one woman from every 15

houses was chosen. It as not than men had been neglected - they by and large acknowledged that women did these things better.

These leaders had to continue educating themselves and teaching others but most important they had to start dialogue with the outside world for getting land. The first such plan to share this process with other pavement dwellers and with state was the housing exhibition in March 1987.

The housing exhibition was a fantastic success. For pavement dwellers (who came in hordes) it was amazing to see 4 options in life size proportion in which women had laid out furniture, were cooking food and chatting with guests. For other slum dwellers who lived in houses of this size - the reduced costs, several elements of design thought-out by the women were exciting and worth picking up. For middle class teachers, professional journalists, architects, planners, government officials there was a change in their perceptions about poor people.

Also, we had done this momentum thing right in the beginning of the year of shelter (1987 IYSH) we got for more publicity than we had ever dreamed of, and we seemed to have fit a slot which was hard to fill - women working with women pavement dwellers in shelter - very symbolic! We absorbed all the adulation, the praises and exclamations like camels storing water for a lean season. We have just started and we had a long way to go -

THE FOURTH CHOICE:

Choosing ownership -- Institutional arrangements to sustain learning, which in turn allowed a framework to emerge within which men and women reorganise and re-examine their roles and relationships.

The skeleton concept of strategy was in place and they required refining. The pavement dwellers need to evolve and sharpen their skills. The workers of SPARC and the women pavement dwellers had a choice. Having worked hard and together for one and a half year, we could have continued to further develop our skills and initiate demands for land with the state in the isolation in which we had worked so far. However neither the women pavement dwellers do that, nor did SPARC.

They called themselves Mahila Milan (women together) and their future Co-operatives would be called Milan Nagar "settlement of Togetherness". The pavement dwellers collectives began in earnest to set up systems to strengthen their new learning. They began a crisis credit scheme (See From an seed to a tree: SPARC : 1990) to assist each other to save and borrow for crisis and avoid encashing savings put into banks for housing. They nominated various such groups to visit brick kilns, wood depots, and learn masonry and visiting areas where innovations in building materials was used.

They also began to have many visitors and invitations to attend meetings of community leaders. The national Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) a slum dwellers organisation with a predominantly male membership had begun to show interest in the work that women and SPARC were doing, and they began to invite the women from Mahila Milan to attend their meetings.

At these meetings they amazed more seasoned and articulate leadership with their knowledge and ideas, and soon the men, who had so far never seen any value in including women in their organisation work began to show interest in exploring this possibility. Even at these meetings, women often located the basis of their leadership to being better

equipped to do what all women in poor settlements had to do...rather than as a right or as a demand. Gradually, as they received invitations to visit many settlements, women from these settlements also began to call themselves Mahila Milan, and before long, Mahila Milan was not just an organisation of women pavement dwellers, but of collectives of women from slum and pavements who networked with each other to learn and share.

SPARC in the meanwhile struggled with all its new found knowledge and insights. In NGO forums, we struggled to articulate ourselves but felt the term training was not really applicable as understood by our peers. Often we received comments such as - 'may be you are training for organisation' - also, we were unable to accept invitations for training others. We simply did not know what to do, how to compress a 15 month full time preoccupation into a capsule. Even talking about it seemed to reduce its power and scope leaving it to look like a list of things to do.

Within SPARC, when new pavement settlements sought assistance, we felt we should assist our younger colleagues who had joined recently to learn and partner other groups. Most of these processes were disasters. They picked up the superficial symbolic activities and went through a process and on competition had settlements demanding housing! At this point SPARC abandoned any aspirations of reproducing the training and handed over the process to NSDF and Mahila Milan.

NSDF and Mahila Milan in the meanwhile moved way ahead. Using all opportunities to share experiences, women pavement dwellers were treated as "jhinda misals" (live examples) of setting agendas for transformation despite all odds. They shared their stories and allowed all those who were with them to pick whatever they found useful. What became increasing clear was that resources never fell into the laps of the poor, and those who believed this would ever happen were foolish. Instead communities could assess what they needed, what they would have to do to get them and how they would use these resources. Without question, women in poor settlements were best equipped to identify needs, assess resources needed and manage the solutions....this discussion often suggested.

The three organisations soon realised the power of alignment. SPARC never wanted to undertake direct organisational work, feeling that the poor and their leadership were the best catalysts for this in their own environment. NSDF saw its role as a mobiliser of urban poor towards a large and country based demand for better equity in resource distribution in cities. Mahila Milan was seen as a backdrop to women's collectives in settlements who would be the inheritors, the managers and maintainers of resources their joint struggle for resources would get them. Together the three organisations would assist communities and within communities, men and women to examine their roles and relationships to sustain a relationship of nurturance and equality which would benefit all.

To this day, the women from the original group of pavement dwellers continue their own pursuit for land and refine their strategies. Theirs is the hardest of all struggles for land. However in the meanwhile, they also assist other groups of men and women to improve their shelter situation, using the house and settlement models developed by them. They see this as an opportunity to further explore the feasibility of their formulations, and each time the ideas are used, new possibilities emerge and these get incorporated into the dream plan.

Women have gradually begun to examine their relationships and status within the home and community as women have become stronger, and as their relationships within the community and within federations improved. These issues were never open for discussions even informally before. Even today, these are never discussed in formal meetings. Women prefer to just deal with issues among themselves, using the organisation as a back up rather than as a shield. A striking example is that women never confront a man who beats a wife. Instead they would work at many angles to see that it is stopped...using interventions which we as middle class women would never have thought of. Men who treat women well get special attention and assistance from the women's collectives, and husbands who look after children when women travel for meetings are aided by the whole community.

Women who are poor in particular are presently trapped into difficult situations by their own socialization of nurturance and caring. These qualities always ensure that women

never seek for their own individual development when it is at the cost of separation from their families. Strategies of education and organisation which have made women confront communities and families have never really worked with poor women. We have always take cues from poor women on how they wish to chart out their own empowerment and transformation. In our explorations of ourselves collectively we all believed that nurturance, sharing and caring were not weaknesses, but the foundations of an alternative vision of the future towards which we were working. We therefore needed to deal with those aspects of our lives which made these qualities into weaknesses. And equally important we need to re educate ourselves and all those who wish to share this vision.