

# GROOTS

GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS OPERATING TOGETHER IN SISTERHOOD (SOUTH ASIA)

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## Editorial

### BETTER DEAL FOR WORKERS? OR DIVIDED SOLIDARITY?

The recently established **National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector** by the **Government of India** for the **welfare** and **benefit of unorganized workers** has worked out a strategy to present a comprehensive bill on **social security, conditions of work** and **promotion of livelihood**. The Commission has recommended to the government that this bill be passed in the **parliament**. This is a matter of deep concern, particularly to many **civil society initiatives** and **workers' unions** which works with the unorganized sector, as the fate of the bill depends upon various factors ranging from **finances** to the **divided solidarity of trade unions**. The Government must pay full attention to such efforts which impact large segments of the working population. It is far superior to **doling out**



**freebies** during **elections**, as this effort is to enhance the **quality of life productivity** of the working population in the country, 45% of which still languishes in poverty. The following paragraphs underline the imperative for passing such a bill as this would be a comprehensive effort to help the poor working segment of our population.

India's poverty reduction efforts must be geared towards providing a fair deal to the **working poor**, as this increases their quality of life and productivity. It is more than apparent that **globalization** has neither offered men nor women workers any opportunity in the form of **decent work, increased wages** or **other benefits**. If we go back a little in time, we will see that India's deteriorating poverty situation is definitely a phenomenon of the early



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1990s right up to the year 2000, during which period there was an overall increase in poverty from 34.3% to 45%. This was the phase when reforms were intensified. Careful observation indicates that the scenario is similar in all developing countries too.

The **Central Trade Unions in India** have hardly organized 10% of the over 300 million working population in India. This reality is further compounded by globalization/economic liberalization and also due to the fact that many small factories have been closed. Therefore, the membership of Central Trade Union has further reduced. Consequently, the responsibilities of these unions too are shrinking with regard to their facilitation of workers. Barring those 10% of the workers who are affiliated to Central Trade Unions, the rest are termed as unorganized workers, a major component of workforce in India. The Central Trade Unions have failed to organize them.

These unorganized/casual/informal sector of workers who form the bulk of the working population in India definitely need a fair deal in the present scenario. Sometimes they are termed as transitory workers, but where do they transit from? Definitely not from outside the country! Their transition is within India - an inter-state/inter-district transition. Sometimes they are displaced agricultural workers migrating to cities in pursuit of some occupation and sometimes migrate seasonally as **construction workers** to build **dams, roads** or **bridges**.

In fact, we find more and more casual/informal workers opting to pursue an informal economy not only due to **economic liberalization** but also due to **closure of small/medium enterprises** and the large-scale failure in India of small/medium industries taking off. Apart from working as labourers, many of these workers establish informal economies linking organized groups to process outsource inputs and contribute enormously in terms of national output. Many pursue petty livelihood options for bare survival. There is ample evidence to prove that these petty producers and service providers provide goods/services to the poor in their neighbourhoods within their purchasing power.

Independent artisans are one such group who pursue an **informal economy**. In reality, they are totally **dependent on merchant contractors/trade monopolies** who pursue all kinds of **unfair trade practices**. In fact, the degree of dependence is such that these workers have to bear the brunt of **malpractices** in the material supply by the merchant contractors. They have to resort to making compensations by borrowing from moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates in order to avoid **severe cut in their wages**. The rural workers suffer equally unfavourable conditions as the fear of **dispossession of their assets** by the landed gentry along with the **irregular nature of agricultural work** render them unable to negotiate or alter the harsh terms and conditions of the employers/landowners who exploit them for low wages.

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These workers are also large-scale victims of exploitation in the hands of **middlemen** and **moneylenders**. Often these workers enter the overcrowded urban markets for petty trades and service occupations, and pursue the same for mere survival. It is these groups that get enmeshed in the exploitative contract/piece rate wage conditions that prevail to a large degree here. This low visibility, low capital and poor investment have made this sector invisible to policy options and even in statistical terms in the planning process. Even the existing social **legislations** are not effective and do not benefit these poor at the grassroots. Their working conditions are harsh, wages low and caste and class discrimination undervalue their valuable economic roles, making them totally invisible in the current market economy.

This issue is serious and calls for greater attention of the Government and others concerned, since the sector has witnessed a burgeoning number of **female entrants** who have outnumbered male workers. Being women and also poor besides, these workers suffer a number of social discriminations both at home and in the workplace. They are denied even basic health care, maternity benefits, insurance and other benefits.

Despite the implementation of several social legislations, nothing has worked for the workers who are mostly from **fishing families, handicraft/**

**handloom producers, beedi/agarbathi rollers** and **landless agricultural labourers**. Caste-wise, they belong to **backward, schedule caste/schedule tribe and also minorities**. Their **economic role is valuable** as many of them produce for the world market and contribute to the **national economy**. As workers, they too require **protective measures, occupational safety, micro-insurance** and **old age/disability** coverage. No such initiatives have been made for them, despite India having completed 60 years of political independence. Therefore, the onus is on the government to ensure early passage of a bill that unequivocally assures social security, conditions of work and promotion of livelihood. ■

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## PRESIDENT WWF PARTICIPATES AT THE NATIONAL BACKWARD CLASS COMMISSION'S CONFERENCE, NEW DELHI



Dr. Jaya Arunachalam at National Backward Class Commission Meeting

Keeping in view the vast experience in the field of microfinance and development activities of the poor, the **National Backward Class Commission's** Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment Madam Meira Kumar and Secretary Smt. Veena Chhotray invited Dr. Jaya Arunachalam on 22 January at Mirza Galib Hall to address the officials of the Backward Class Commission from various states and Delhi. This was to sensitize the officials on the need to develop microfinance activities among them. Mrs. Arunachalam delivered the special address on microfinance activities provided to the members of WWF where nearly 600,000 women benefited from micro-credit towards entrepreneurship and training in financial literacy, skill, leadership and empowerment. The other dignitaries who participated were Madam Subbulakshmi Jagadeesan, Minister of State, Social Justice and Empowerment and Mr. Arbind Prasad, Joint Secretary, National Backward Commission, etc.

Later to observe the work of WWF/ICNW and to get an indepth knowledge of the micro-credit transaction process, Dr. Arbind Prasad, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment along with Managing Director, National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation, Mr. D. Kohli visited WWF on 1 February 2007. During the meeting at the Pattalam market they were briefed on group formation, process of their work, wages received and the time period required to get back the money for their products sold. They also glanced at the products manufactured by the cobblers' families in their residence. Later, they interacted with the scavengers in the Triplicane area and with the cobblers in Rotary Nagar to get to know their livelihood options and the mode of rehabilitation process. Pleased with the activities of the Forum, they departed with a hope that the Forum would facilitate them in their future endeavours.



Mr. D. Kohli and Mr. Arbind Prasad inspecting the cobblers at work

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## PROF. BISH SANYAL MIT US VISITS WWF



Prof. Bish Sanyal interacting with ICNW staff

Prof. Bish Sanyal from MIT Chair-Elect, Prof of Urban Development/Regional Planning, Department of Urban Studies, USA along with two researchers from Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR) visited WWF on 31 January 2007. Area of his interest being in housing, Prof Sanyal suggested various measures with regard to their housing and infrastructure. The members of the 14 branches of WWF who had gathered at the

auditorium narrated their experiences, progress, development in housing, asset creation through micro-credit etc. Later he had a glimpse of the houses constructed as part of tsunami rehabilitation programme of WWF and visited the tsunami-affected victims in the area of Pattinapakkam at Marina coast. He was not only impressed with the work of WWF but also appreciated the services provided to the members of WWF in helping them to come out of poverty even during the time of crisis. He was moved by the affection and respect of the members and they informed him that it is WWF that had helped them to stand up in life with dignity. He was surprised to see the strong bond between the President WWF and the members. To quote Prof. Sanyal “what an welcoming event the members had organized!! Many times when the members spoke, I was on the verge of tears, having lived a privileged life and being away from the heart of real India. In a way, visiting you and WWF was a humbling and learning experience I will not forget for a while”.

## VISIT OF MR. PETER ROSE AND FAMILY

Mr. Peter Rose (Managing Director of Goldman Sachs & Company, New York) Mrs. Peter Rose (President, the Fund for Women in Asia) and family visited WWF on 17 March 2007. The family evinced keen interest in understanding the fundamentals of micro-credit, group formation, type of occupation, average loan size, leadership training, origin and motive behind the initiation of WWF, etc. Impressed with the activities of the Forum they departed with a hope to visit the Forum again.



Mr. Peter Rose and family in discussion with staff

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## CITIGROUP OFFICIALS VISIT WWF



Citigroup officials with Dr. Jaya Arunachalam

Ms. Paula, Director Corporate Citizenship, Ms. Leslie, Programme Officer, Ms. Madhulika, Director Corporate Affairs and Ms. Aloka Citigroup visited WWF on 23 June 2007. Meeting the President WWF they were given an overview of the Forum's work/activities. To get acquainted with the latest details on the banking operations they visited ICNW. Queries on the transaction process, donor details, membership enrolment and mode of banking operations were also raised during their visit to the co-operative bank. During the training session, they glanced at the training charts displayed and interacted with the members. To the queries raised on what the members learned from the training and what they had followed in their life, the members stated that they had stopped following traditional superstitions; some of the members stated that they had supported widow re-marriages for their relatives and the impact of the programme was much greater as they gained in self-confidence and courage. They moreover added that earlier they were hesitant to travel alone even to nearby places but now they

travelled to branches in other states independently and even participated in the major decision-making of their family matters. As a result, their work had gained recognition among their family members, relatives and in their neighbourhood, thereby enhancing their status and self-esteem. Later the team participated in the alternative employment training programme. Processing of food and chemical products (juice, vegetable pickles and phenyl) was demonstrated to the team and members tasted the food products too. Further the team interacted with the trainees to know more about their production process and marketing strategies with regard to the purchase of raw materials, profit, packaging details, etc. The team was also eager to know whether there would be stagnation of the products in the market if many members produced similar products. To this query, the members stated that the groups will not produce same products at the same time. They would discuss among themselves in the group and produce different products and sell them in the market. Having learned about the entire activities of the Forum, the officials not only appreciated the accomplishments of the Forum but also stated that they were fascinated and amazed by the organized work among the members.

Earlier Ms. Madhulika Gupta, Vice President and Director, Corporate Affairs, Citibank visited WWF on 11 May 2007 to get acquainted with the training programmes of the Forum. The President WWF briefed on the forthcoming material development workshop to be organized in Chennai

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and the alternate skill employment training programmes where nearly 14,000 members benefited. Ms. Gupta was not only happy with the progress of the work being carried out but also stated that she was satisfied with the way the staff work and the accomplishment made during these years.

To quote Ms Leslie Meek “this is my second time visit to WWF and I have the same feeling of inspiration – the inspiration that you give to the poor

women you serve and the inspiration you give me to do more to empower women. I was amazed to see things like the computerized system, classrooms that were not here before. I was very impressed with the WWF employees and know that they will help the organization to expand the amazing work”.

To quote Ms. Paula “wonderful and inspiring work. I am very proud that Citigroup has been supporting WWF for so many years...”

## MRS. AND MR. CHARLES RUYS VISIT WWF



Mrs and Mr. Charles Ruys at Marina coast meeting

Mr. Charles Ruys, Former Rabo Bank Manager, a well-wisher and good friend along with his wife visited WWF/ICNW from 5 to 10 July 2007. Having been with Rabo Bank for years, Mr. Charles Ruys was aware of WWF/ICNW and its work with the poorest of the clients. Meeting the members at the training session, the couple interacted with them to know their aspirations. Impressed with the members’ participation he told them that the art of business is not learning from books but from self-practice. Later they met the field organizers/supervisors to know their views and how they would carry forward the movement. The field staff stated that they would

bring in more members from every nook and corner of the village/district and try to support the most backward areas that require the facilitation of the Forum.

On 6 July 2007, they met some fisherwomen at Marina coast on the seashore and had a discussion with them in the area meeting to get the opinion of the fisherwomen on tsunami and their apprehensions after tsunami struck the coast. After the discussion and while addressing the fisherwomen he said that Rabo Bank was started 100 years ago to help farmers, shopkeepers and fishing communities. They worked together, collected small amounts like the ICNW/WWF and today the bank is one of the strongest and biggest banks in the world. Later in the afternoon, he attended the staff meeting to know what development meant for the Forum and co-operative staff and how the requirements of the members are met.

They visited Kanchipuram on July 9, after a brief holiday at Mahabalipuram and was impressed with the organized work being carried out in the Forum and the support rendered by the organization

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to the members and their children. Attending the area meeting in Pillaiyarpalayam, he interacted with the members directly to get to know their progress, family background and their current status. He was amazed to find that the weavers who had once pledged their children redeemed them and put them in school. During his house visit to the weavers' colonies he showed interest in the techniques/designs involved in the weaving process and was more eager about the marketing strategies. Later arriving in Chennai, Mrs. and Mr. Charles Ruys met the staff

from the 14 branches. During the meeting, the President WWF traced the initiation of the Rabo Home in Dindigul assisted by the Rabo Bank and the strong partnership for nearly two decades.

To quote Mr. Charles Ruys “we will try to be as supportive as we can for your future development”. To quote Mrs. Ea Ruys “you showed us what women can do together. I am impressed by the number of women I have seen over here, the work they do, their occupation and how they carry on their life”.

## WWF CO-ORDINATORS/STAFF ATTEND TRAINING WORKSHOPS

To keep abreast with the latest banking procedure, the staff from ICNW/WWF attended the one-week refresher training programme at **Natesan Institute of Cooperative Management**, Chennai from 12 to 16 March 2007. Since the work entails dealing with poor members, the staff were exposed to various aspects on work culture, role of motivation in skill improvement, problem-solving techniques, significance of computers in today's modern world and an exposure visit to a co-operative to understand the nuances of the working set-up.

Similarly, to update the skill of the trainers and organizers, 32 field organizers/supervisors along with an intern from the Netherlands, Ms. Chantal Donkers, participated in the five-day training programme from 19 to 23 March 2007 at **Gandhigram Rural University** in Dindigul. They were exposed to current concepts on **stress management** where a clear distinction was brought out between stress and depression, various types of

stress, its causes, steps to reduce it in day-to-day life, etc.; PRA techniques and the need for social mapping; orientation on group formation, micro-credit management, health and hygiene, cleanliness and symptoms of AIDS, training methods, orientation on diabetes and its symptoms, the pros and cons of the ailments, etc. In a nutshell, the programme as a whole was useful to the trainees who participated with the motive of implementing what they had learned in their work area.



Co-ordinators at training workshop



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## CHANTAL DONKERS INTERN AT WWF



Chantal Donkers with Rabo Home children in Dindigul

To analyse and study the functioning of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), cultural exchanges between India and other countries and to have a glimpse at Indian women and their attitude towards life, family and community Ms. Chantal Donkers visited as an intern to WWF for a short period from 9 February 2007 to 20 April 2007. This provided her an opportunity not only to learn about the functioning of the Forum but also enabled her to make an indepth analysis of the activities undertaken by the Forum in 14 branches of three southern states. During her visit, she participated in various programmes, showed keen interest to find out the reasons for the origin of WWF, the socioeconomic conditions prevailing at that time and their current status, problems and attitudes of the members, etc. She not only observed the various activities of WWF but also visited the banking sector ICNW. She maintained good rapport with the members and interacted with them. She met the

members of *National Union of Working Women* (NUWW), the trade union wing of WWF that handles various socioeconomic issues and was overwhelmed to find the bargaining capacity of the women members and the measures taken to fight for their rights and entitlements. Ms. Chantal evinced keen interest in visiting some of the areas in Chennai pertaining to her study. She had an indepth discussion with President WWF to get an overview of the organizational activities, policy formulation and implementation, the hierarchical cadre (structure of the Forum), its policies and its functional setup. Besides this, she interviewed 30 members of WWF to know their progress and empowerment. Attending the five-day orientation programme at **Gandhigram Rural University in Dindigul** provided her an opportunity to observe women's day-to-day work, attitude, habits, life style, concerns and regards enabling her to compare them across the country. Discussions with the field staff/organizers and trainers supplemented her data.

Field visits undertaken to north Madras and south Madras enabled her to know more about the members and what empowerment meant to them. To put it in a nutshell the interaction with the President, staff of the research department, programme co-ordinators and the visit to various areas gave her an insight into the working of WWF in India.

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## NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

### **French Journalists Visits WWF**

Karin Demorest and Anne Portier, freelance journalists from France, visited WWF on 1 March 2007. They were exposed to the indepth work of the Forum, briefed on the details of group formation, transaction process, role of area leader/leader/organizer, techniques adopted in handling the groups, the number of beneficiaries in each scheme, the number of loans disbursed per month, average loan size, the role of NUWW/ICNW/WWF in formulating need-based programmes, etc. The plight of the Bellary women (Devadasis) was also discussed. Later, an interview with the President broadened their view on the work of WWF and Devadasis in Bellary. The training programme in WWF enabled them to understand the perception of Indian women, their role in decision-making and their courage/confidence in bringing to the forefront their grievances and get them redressed. Impressed with the activities of the Forum, they were convinced that social and financial services clubbed together enabled the members to perform better in their trade, simultaneously paving the way to increase their status. This has been attributed as the reason behind the success of the Forum for nearly three decades. ■

### **Students from Sweden Visit WWF**

To study and analyse the work of women's organisation in India, three students from Sweden, Ellen Alsen, Kristin Arve and Asa Akerlund, visited WWF on 5 March 2007. An overview of the entire activities of the Forum, the transaction processes of the co-operative bank, the various types of services rendered to the members for redressing their grievances, the successful case studies of the members and the gradual progress of the members was briefed to them. They were amazed to see the multifarious activities of the forum and the gradual progress of the members. ■

### **Students from Semester at Sea Visit WWF**

Orientation to students and NGOs from across the country is an on-going process in WWF. In this perspective a team of 24 students from various U.S. Universities along with Prof. Bianca Murphy from Semester at Sea visited WWF on 29 March 2007. Having heard about WWF and its activities/operations in three southern states, the team was eager to know more about the members, their family background/problems, the work of the co-operatives, transaction process, illiteracy, poverty, dowry, female foeticide, infanticide, child labour, problems facing Indian women today, challenges they face and

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Prof. Bianca Murphy with team of students during orientation programme

measures taken to cope up with them. They were also interested to know about the role of men in their community and their support to the programmes of the Forum. Impressed with the hierarchical structure of the Forum, they were curious to know the political action in the level of the structure, the attitude of women officials in higher level towards the women at the grassroot level, cultural set-up, whether loan is disbursed for the trade that is already in existence or for initiation of a new trade. The Grameen model of micro-credit and the monitoring system of WWF also figured during the discussion. They enquired if it was true that in the Grameen model the women get the loan and the men at home spend it. To this statement prompt came the reply from the President WWF that Mr. Yunus Noble Peace Price Winner, would be the apt person to respond and would take care of it. She moreover added that micro-credit is on the map of the world as compared to ordinary banking.

Discussion also centred on Gandhiji's views on women's movement. When a suggestion was sought for U.S. women on women's movement, the President expressed that an exchange information would enable to create and disseminate ideas.

Later, they evinced interest to observe the operations of ICNW and participated in the training programme. They also had a direct interaction with the trainers and trainees to acquaint themselves with the problems faced by women in their families and solutions sought through the Forum. Apart from the dowry problem, the other general problems women face were also discussed. They were very appreciative of the Forum for not only carrying out the task with utmost diligence but also for giving equal priority for **micro-credit** and **social development**. ■

## President participates at Sri. Ramanuja Mission Trust

President WWF delivered a lecture on **Women's Economic Role-Experiment of Working Women's Forum** in the symposium on "contribution of NGOs in construction and development of our society" at the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Day Meeting of Sri. Ramanuja Mission Trust on 20 June 2007. Dr. T. Hanuman Choudhary, Senior Consultant and Advisor TCS and Sathyam Software, Dr. D. Swaminathan, Member National Advisory Council, Government of India participated. ■

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## WE NEED YOUR INPUTS !!!

Letters, Ideas, Comments, Articles or Contributions for our Newsletter?

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*Dr. Jill D. Wright, Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, Institute for Shipboard Education, has forwarded the views of the students who visited WWF. One student commented, "We learned how women organize themselves to overcome poverty and make money to succeed. I enjoyed not only learning about the Forum, but also seeing how individuals go through training". Another student stated "I learned about the women's movement and how poor women are getting out of poverty. The programme was wonderful and was highly informative, and the interaction between the students and the WWF members was enjoyed!"*

## What People Say about GROOTS ....

I read with interest the news article on Kanchipuram weavers. I am sure they will learn a lot and help each others through interaction and opportunity providing by WWF. This is indeed a great service to the weavers of Varanasi...

**Markandey Rai**  
**Special Assignments and Inter-Agency Affairs Officer,**  
**UN-HABITAT, Kenya**

It is a pleasure to go through the contents of GROOTS which make very informative reading about the activities and programmes of WWF with a special reference to micro-finance...

**S.S. Sharma,**  
**Registrar,**  
**Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi**

I am indeed impressed by the range of activities of this Forum. Your catalytic role in the whole gamut of the activities is indeed significant...

**R. Nataraj, I.P.S**  
**Additional Director General of Police/**  
**Director – Investigation Division,**  
**Chennai**