

"SPARC" OF HOPE FOR INDIA'S SLUM DWELLERS



Women squatters in a Bombay street — "E ward" was the first initiative of "SPARC" in its efforts to help impoverished women help themselves.



"Home" for the more than 100,000 pavement dwellers of Bombay, India, is a leaky shelter haphazardly located on busy city streets. Women here live in two kinds of poverty — the economic impoverishment of marginal incomes and the equally oppressive social neglect of municipal authorities.

But an IDRC-sponsored project is actively involved in changing this situation. "Women and Urban Poverty" is a project by a group called SPARC — Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres. It is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that works directly with the urban poor in cities like Bombay. SPARC's dynamism lies in its ability to act not merely as an advisory body but as a tool for the empowerment of local women.

"Before our organization was set up, when a woman saw a policeman her hand went into her pocket to see how much she had to bribe him," SPARC director Sheela Patel says. "Now she goes to a police station and is offered a cup of tea."

Teaching pavement and slum dwellers about their rights in the face of authority is one of the key objectives of this SPARC project. Indeed, it was the arbitrary removal of pavement dwellers' property by the Bombay Municipal Corporation that led to the creation of SPARC.

In 1981, the municipality decided that pavement dwellings were illegal and started demolition and eviction drives. Civil liberties groups took the matter to court and were able to secure a stay on demolitions. In 1985, however, the Supreme Court withdrew the stay and gave the state the right to remove the dwellings.

It was during this period that a group of people from such diverse backgrounds as counselling, community health, child welfare, and biomedical science decided to form SPARC. "Most of us had worked with other institutions in the area and found the welfare approach did not work," Patel says. "The attitude of the government welfare agencies is one of hesitation in taking up the issue of pavement dwellers." But SPARC took on the task and the results have been impressive.

The SPARC team covered 6000 households and nearly 27,000 individual slum and pavement dwellers, asking questions about background, income, family structures, and other things that no one had bothered to find out before. They formed an information base to chart out the requirements of pavement dwellers.

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They quickly realized that women needed knowledge about access to certain necessities. Most women, they found, were unskilled migrants from rural areas of India. They were unable to tackle day-to-day problems like admitting a sick child to hospital or talking to municipal authorities.

SPARC workers taught pavement dwellers how to fill out ration cards (which provide access to subsidized foodgrain) and bank loan and electricity forms. In addition to giving families cheaper food, ration cards also establish identity and a place of residence. This is critical for those squatting on government land hoping to get legal ownership of a small plot.

In the wake of slum demolitions, women have begun to become increasingly aware of, and militant about, their legal entitlements.

In 1989, a group of women pavement dwellers in the "E ward" slum took the municipality of Bombay to court over demolition of a number of street shelters. Trained by SPARC, the women had noted the number of the municipality van that took their belongings away and made a detailed list of goods taken from each dwelling. The women won their case and were given back their property. "Nobody believed we could organize slum dwellers on such a large scale," Patel says.

SPARC was also instrumental in creating Mahila Milan, an organization designed to create a stronger lobby force for women pavement dwellers. It began in the "E ward" slum and moved to other impoverished areas of Bombay like Dharavi, Wadala, Goregaon, Mankhurd, and Chembur.

"Nobody listens to us when we are alone but now we are organized and strong," says Laxmi Naidu, a resident of the "E ward" slum in Bombay and Mahila Milan member. "Singly, we were thin sticks which could easily be broken — together we are like a thick, unbreakable bundle."

One aspect of this unity is the encouragement by Mahila Milan of savings for housing — the largest single problem of pavement dwellers. Representatives like Leela Naidu collect small savings from the members each month and deposit them in a common housing fund.

"No matter how small the amount, the collective savings add up over a period of time," Naidu says. "In 4 years we have saved up RS450,000 (US\$25,000) for housing."

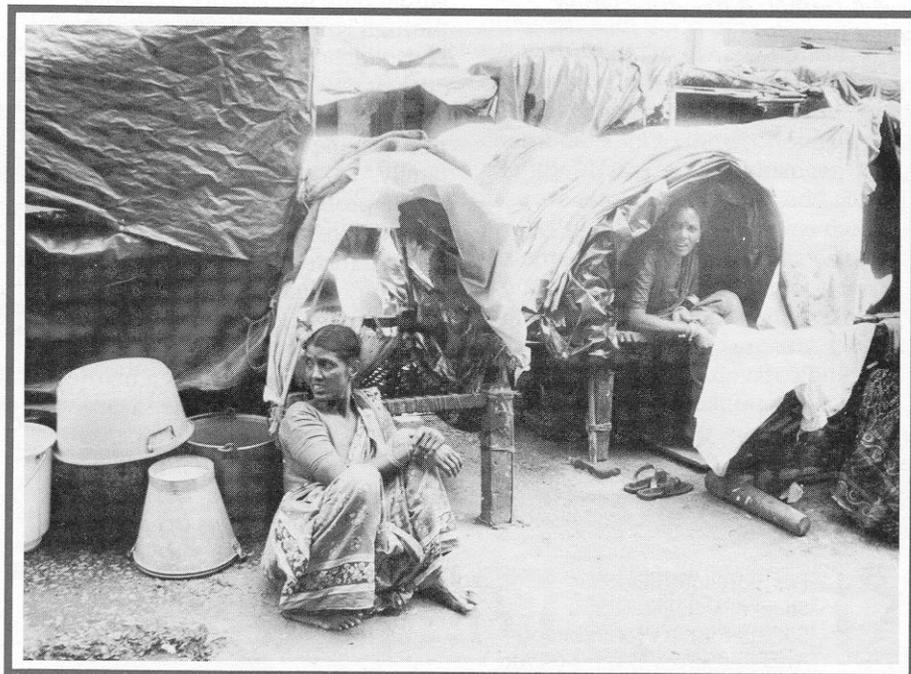
The women also put together about RS40,000 (US\$2,222) for daily emergencies. Whenever a member needs money for medicine, goods to sell, or children's schoolbooks or clothes they can borrow it from the account at a nominal interest rate.

The loan scheme is useful because many of the women in the pavement dwellings survive on extremely limited incomes. According to SPARC surveys, 74% of the slum dwellers earn less than the minimum wage of RS18 per hour (US\$1). Women make up 27% of the workforce but more than 90% earn less than the minimum wage.

With SPARC's help, Mahila Milan has started income-generation projects for women, teaching them to stitch and to make files, folders, and decorative items. Adult education classes are also offered.

But the economic barriers confronting women slum dwellers are just one part of the overall problem in urban planning, according to SPARC coordinator Mithu Gupta. "Whenever resettlement plans are made, the houses are designed according to middle class perceptions of urban living," she says. The leader of the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF), A. Jockin echoes this thought. "Urban planners decide arbitrarily what is good for the poor, based on global patterns. But this macrolevel planning often does not synchronize with the needs of the urban poor."

The NSDF works with SPARC in research, negotiation, and other activities. Jockin believes that the way to fight municipal and urban planning ignorance is to help slum dwellers participate in decisions regarding policy and implementation. "The groups among the pavement dwellers have certain resource limitations," he says. "So we take over."



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GAINING GROUND

Jockin recounts one example where the NSDF and SPARC participated in meetings related to a World Bank project for adequate housing for the poor. "Our coordination with SPARC allowed 10,000 people to apply for housing in the project," he says. "On their own, local people would not have known how to complete the formalities."

Jockin also notes how collaboration has given NSDF new perspectives. "Until recently organizations like ours were male dominated," he says. We only used women for demonstrations. But now we want them to take leadership roles."

Women's assumption of leadership roles in negotiation with authority is one of the key benefits of this SPARC project. Patel says government and municipal authorities are grudgingly but increasingly supportive of the plight of pavement dwellers. "The whole idea of SPARC and this project is to get women on the negotiation table and to create relationships in which we can argue our position extensively," she says.

"We see our role as one of education on both sides. The officials are learning to negotiate with the poor and vice versa."

Deepa Gablot, a freelance writer based in India



Zipporah Mutanga Musembi lives in the Machakos district of Kenya where she worked with her husband on their 4.4 hectare farm for 6 years. When he secretly decided to sell the farm and move away, she was left with nothing. The new "owners" of the land came and demolished her home, forcing the older children to leave the only house they knew. Musembi had to move in with her older married sister.

Musembi's example, according to IDRC project researcher Elizabeth Nzioki, is not exceptional. It is the story of many rural women around the world who are constrained in their ability to own and control land.

Nzioki began the project, called "Access to Land Ownership in Kenya," in 1987. Nzioki conducted research in the Mumbuni area of the Machakos district of Kenya, where she interviewed rural women in the context of land tenure reform.

The project has focused specifically on how land tenure reform has affected women's relationship to land and its implication for agricultural work done by women.

Land tenure reform legislation was introduced in Kenya in 1954 and it was designed to transform customary land tenure to statutory free hold through land adjudication, consolidation, and registration.

A key development in Kenyan land tenure reform was the issuing of title deeds in the name of the "head of the family."

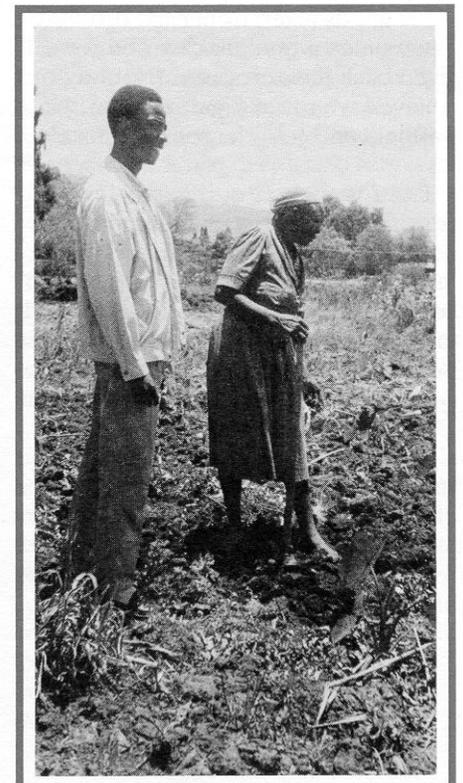
"The problem with the legislation," Nzioki notes, "is that the titled land is being transferred almost exclusively to male individuals." There is no provision for how women's access rights are to be defined or for how the land is to be divided after a married couple has separated, she says.

This has led to an "individualization of land" in which male individuals, through the title deed, now have full power and legal rights over family land. Nzioki says there are a number of implications for women.

The first is that because most land is inherited by the male head of the family and not bought, women rely on men for land. "In this country, women do not inherit land but are almost completely dependent on their husbands, brothers, or in-laws to give them land and to let them farm," Nzioki says.

A case in point is Theresa Wayua, a single mother of six. She was pregnant when she dropped out of secondary school and was sent away for having shamed her family.

"After the death of my parents" she recalls, "one of my brothers gave me a patch of land where I could build a small house. I work on coffee farms as a casual labourer for only 200 Kenyan shillings (US\$10) a month." The brother is now urging her to move as he wants to use her land for another purpose. Wayua, like many other rural Kenyan women, is dependent on a male relation for access to land.



Ngii Musyoki in her "shamba" (farm) with a member of the research team.



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