

We Work At Home

The Training Manual

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A close-up portrait of an elderly woman with dark hair, wearing glasses and a blue shawl over a pink blouse. She has a blue bindi on her forehead and a gold earring. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and what appears to be a banner with text in a South Asian script.

**This manual is
dedicated to
Viji Srinivasan,
HWW Regional
Coordinator,
who worked
tirelessly for
women's
liberation.**

1938–2005



Activity #12 Using the Photo Pack

► Objectives

To develop an understanding of the wide variety of homebased workers, and their presence around the world

To practise identifying dependent and own-account work

and own-account work, establishing which can be observed in each of the photos. (Further points for guidance can be found below.)

- 4] From this activity, a colourful collage of homebased work from around the world is also created. If possible, maintain this as a backdrop to the rest of your training.

► Materials

HomeWorkers Worldwide Photo Pack

► Points to Note

- 1] As introduced in activity 10, there are in principle **two distinct types** of homebased workers:
- a) **dependent workers**, producing goods or sometimes carrying out a service for an intermediary, agent or employer, and according to specifications.
 - b) **own-account workers**, sometimes known as self-employed, producing goods they design and market themselves.

In reality, **the distinction is often more blurred**, since many women take on whatever kind of work is available, whether dependent or own-account. In some cases, although formerly own-account, a worker may have slowly become economically dependent, with no direct access to markets of her own. For example: commercialisation has seen traditional craftwork become more and more dependent, with craftworkers becoming reliant on intermediaries for raw materials, or their products' design and marketing increasingly controlled by others.

► Method

- 1] Each participant receives one or two photographs of a homebased worker. Ask them to observe their photos for a few minutes, and try to identify what type of work is shown. Ask them to guess what countries the workers depicted might be from.
- 2] Each participant places their photos on the wall, explaining to the group in turn what they have decided about each of them. If the speaker remains unsure, ask other members of the group to offer their guesses too.
- 3] After all guesses have been made, inform the group of the origin of the photos, and elaborate on the types of homebased work shown. Clarify further with the team the difference between dependent

► Points to Note [Cont]

The range of employment relationships and dependency is therefore more accurately imagined as a *continuum*, with the dependent worker at one extreme, and the own-account worker at the other. In between the dependent and own-account workers, there are many overlapping types of relationships.

Note that much current analysis of homebased workers treats them as a single undifferentiated category. In order for mapping teams to contribute meaningfully to organising, it is important they understand that this is not the case.

- 2] **Explain to the group why the photos depict only women** (at least 90% of homebased workers worldwide are estimated to be women).
- 3] **Photos are a concrete way of making homebased workers visible.** They help women realise they are not alone in the homebased work that they do. This may help to create a sense of solidarity to workers that often feel isolated in their work. At the same time, it helps to show workers that there are others in the world working in a way that may be very similar, or producing goods that are very similar to their own. Awareness is created of the larger, global markets in operation, and the homebased workers' place within them. In some cases, it may be the first opportunity to understand the

scale of competition at work, and an understanding of why it may be difficult to market certain products when others are also engaged in similar activity.

Adaptation

You may find it useful to produce a pack showing homebased work in your own country.



Activity #19

Homebased Workers: Facts, Fiction and Invisibility

► Objectives

To explore common assumptions made around the notion of a 'worker'

To demonstrate misconceptions about homebased workers

To gain a more accurate understanding of the situation faced by homebased workers

To identify the implications of their 'invisibility' as workers

► Materials

**Flip Chart/Paper/Pens,/Pins/Handout 8/
HWW Photo Pack (also see Method)**

► Method

Preparation — *Before the session, prepare as much information* about homebased workers in your area / country / worldwide as you can. This should be presented in a brief format which mapping teams can understand at a glance, and begin to discuss straight away. This could mean handouts, information written on flip chart paper, or the use of OHP transparencies or PowerPoint, if available. Restrict each information sheet to covering just one or two aspects or issues. Then: prepare a 'mis-information' sheet listing common myths or misconceptions about*

homebased workers. Handout 8 lists examples of these, with challenges to the assumptions underneath. (The handout may be distributed after the exercise is complete, but not before!). You may also use the HWW Photo Pack to illustrate the activity with pictures of homebased workers.

- 1] Distribute the 'mis-information' sheet, in which common misconceptions about homebased workers are listed. Ask a volunteer to read them out to the rest of the group.
- 2] Now present the information sheets one by one to the group. Follow each with a short discussion, before going on to present the next subject.
- 3] After you've presented all the aspects, ask participants, 'What does this tell us about the situation of homebased workers in this area / country / the world'?
- 4] Ask the group to think about how the new information challenges the assumptions laid out in the 'mis-information' sheets. You may also like to use the following questions as starting points for generating discussion:
 - Q: *Why do these misconceptions exist?*
 - Q: *Who might reinforce these misconceptions about homebased workers, and why might they do this?*
 - Q: *What has been the effect of these misconceptions?*

- 5] Explain to the group that organising can help combat the invisibility of homebased workers, and that the next session will look at this in more detail.

► Points to Note

*The invisibility of homebased work means that you may find very little information is available specific to your area. See *Section 9, Further Resources* to help you with this.

(If it is the case that very little information is available in your area, tell your team that their participation in the mapping programme will start to remedy this!).

When examining the issues with your team, the following points may help inform your discussion:

- **The traditional image of a ‘worker’ has never been a reality for the vast majority of people in the world.** Women in particular have had very different patterns of employment. Even where it was true — mainly in the industrialised countries of the North — it is now outdated.
- The image of the traditional worker as being a male in the formal sector has nevertheless had a **broad and lasting impact**. It has framed legislation around employment rights and social security systems, and in the process, excluded the ‘invisible’ workers — women homebased workers.

- Lack of recognition for their work means that women homebased workers across the world face a **familiar story of extreme vulnerability, and lack of protection**. They have difficulty winning recognition from employers, government, and in some cases, trade unions. This means their needs are not addressed in a way that those of more ‘visible’ workers are, whether in the formal or informal economy.
- Lack of recognition means that **employers have one less group to pay adequately, and policy makers have one less group to legislate for**. The increase in subcontracting (and the use of intermediaries and agents) obscures employment relationships, making those at the bottom invisible. This places homeworkers outside of employers’ responsibilities to provide wage and non-wage benefits. When they need healthcare, they have to appeal to charity for help. Pension payments equally are unaffordable.
- Not considered ‘real’ work by others, **homebased work offers little status to those who do it**. This undervaluing of women’s work is often internalised by the women themselves. In previously socialist economies, women gained status from collective activity, working in the state factories, or in agriculture. Today, they may be found holding onto these jobs that no longer pay, in an effort to retain some of this status. Attitudes of family, community and society at large reinforce the failure to recognise the true value of their homebased work.



Handout #8

Homebased Workers: Facts, Fiction and Invisibility

Fiction

A 'real' worker is usually a man, who has worked in one industry from a young age, and has gained skills and qualifications. He might be a miner, an engineer in a large factory, or a car worker.

He generally has basic employment rights, protected through laws and a union, and he retires after a lifetime of service on a pension.

He is the breadwinner of the family, and a woman's role in earning family income is secondary. Her primary role is in doing household work, and childcare.

If a woman does homebased work it is a hobby, or something done in leisure time. It is not real work.

Homebased work is something done for pocket money, or to buy a few luxuries. It is not an important source of income for women, or their families.

Homebased work is low-skilled, and deserves its low pay.

Homebased work is marginal, and old-fashioned, a form of 'cottage industry' employment. It is on the decrease.

Own-account workers are all micro-entrepreneurs.

They are potential small businesses, and may need business support, but they don't need social protection.

Facts

Homebased workers are increasingly the main breadwinners for their families.

The majority of homebased workers are women.

The majority of homebased workers work in isolation in their homes, not in workshops.

The majority of homebased workers have a heavy workload. They may be helped out by family members to cope, including children and the elderly.

The importance of their role as workers is usually hidden. Primacy is given to their traditional roles as mothers, daughters and wives.

Unless women do their homebased work, many families would have no money for basic household expenses. Women usually say they have no alternative but to do their homebased work.

Own-account workers often live on the edge of survival, earning far less than the average wage. They have no savings or profits for investment in their work to turn themselves into 'small businesses'.

Much of homebased work is highly skilled. These skills may be learnt informally, and passed down from mothers to daughters (such as weaving, knitting, and embroidery). The low pay associated with homebased work has nothing to do with the level of skill it requires.

Homebased work is on the increase. As companies and consumers seek greater flexibility, costs are cut by using homebased workers. Homebased workers can be hired temporarily for large orders, and let go with minimal fuss as demand goes down.



Activity #54 Visiting Others and Forming Alliances

► Objectives

To identify the value of sharing experiences with workers both at home and abroad

To emphasise the importance of forming links with trade unions

► Materials

Flip Chart/Paper/Pens/*Handout 33*

► Method

- 1] Conclude your training on vertical mapping for dependent workers by emphasising the importance of sharing experiences with others. Although production chains may take a wide variety of forms, much can be learned by visiting other homebased workers in your own country and abroad. Workers in Chile, Portugal and Thailand, for example, may find they are involved in similar kinds of production chains. The discovery of commonalities inspires them to seek solutions together; a comparison of the differences offers fresh perspectives that spark ideas.
- 2] Remind the team that a key aspect of building alliances during vertical mapping is not just with other homebased workers, but with those

further up the chain. Ask the team to think back to the garment workers in Tamilnadu, South India. They visited factory workers who made garments to understand the processes further up the chain, and to start building links.

The last activity emphasised the importance of trade unions in this respect. More often than not, formal unions may not be active where informal and homebased workers are concerned. This is problematic when companies begin to think about implementing codes of conduct, and the voices of homebased workers go unheard.

- 3] Distribute or read out *Handout 33*. The handout details a case of vertical mapping in Thessaloniki, Northern Greece.

(The case study offers a good summary of the processes of vertical mapping with which to conclude the section, as well as pose important questions about the role of trade unions in homebased worker organising.)

- 4] After the team has had a chance to review the case study, split participants into two groups, and set the groups the following task:

The Task

- (1) Group A represents the group of homebased workers; Group B represents the trade union.
- (2) Each team must draw up a list of their main concerns and priorities.

- (3) After they have done so, the teams must arrange themselves around a table, or in a circle on the floor.
- (4) The teams must now put each of their concerns to each other.
- (5) The goal of the 'meeting' is for both teams to come to a mutually beneficial agreement, in which both parties understand that working together in an alliance will strengthen both of their organising. This kind of solidarity between workers will more effectively bring improvements to both formal and informal workers' conditions. It is crucial that homebased worker organisations build an understanding with the trade unions.
- 5] Conclude the activity by asking how alliances may be built in the absence of trade unions in a chain. Perhaps a chain is quite short, and the subcontracting goes no further than a workshop or two before a product meets the end consumer.

Inform trainees that if a workshop owner wants to take part in the organising, they would encourage the workers to work collectively, share the costs of running the workshop, find orders amongst all the workers, and a way to distribute the profits as well. It is not so difficult a task as it seems; it just requires the will! (If you have the time, you may like to set a second task, in which negotiation takes place with a workshop owner rather than a trade union.)



Handout #33 Forming Alliances

► The Case of Thessaloniki, Greece

“Every vertical mapping project will start from a different position. The starting point for our research on workers in Greece was the fact that many factories had closed down, but the firms continued their production. The work was simply moved from big factories to small workshops and homebased workers. As they started giving work to homebased workers, the costs for the firms dramatically reduced.”

“In northern parts of Greece, many firms are subcontractors receiving orders from German firms. The Greeks receive all the raw materials from Germany. After producing the products and exporting them back to Germany, the Greeks must return any left over material to prove there is no falsification or copies being made with left over labels. The Germans also keep a close eye on the quality of production.”

“We carried out a vertical mapping project in Thessaloniki. We mapped every link in the chain. We looked at:

- ***The homebased workers — what did they do, what did they know about their work, who did they get their work from?***
- ***The smaller subcontractors — who were they, what did they do, who did they work for further up the chain? We managed to produce a detailed map of the city showing all of the subcontractors.***
- ***The larger subcontractors — who were they, who did they give their work out to, who did they receive their work from?***
- ***The companies that placed the orders — who were they, where were they based, what work did they do, where did the products go, what prices were the products sold for?***
- ***The trade unions — who did they represent in the chain, what kind of workers were they, what kind of representation did they give the workers?***
- ***The local authorities — what did they know about homebased work in the area?***

“Our mapping revealed that the authorities were not even aware of the existence of homebased workers, but nor, unfortunately, were the trade unions!”

“Most of the homebased workers mapped were women. They were typically under a great deal of male domination, even in supposedly ‘female’ sectors. The women were more or less immobile, tied to the house and family, carrying out their homebased work at the same time. The intermediaries would play the homebased workers off one against the other, threatening to take the work away if the women asked for higher wages. Where there were no alternatives for the women, and there often weren’t, the women had no choice but to comply. In spite of a law that was passed in 1987 promising homebased workers some security, they had none. Unlike the

factory workers higher up the chain who were unionised, if homebased workers wanted any kind of social security, they had to pay for it themselves. And of course — they could not afford it!”

“During the mapping, the trade unions in Thessaloniki were asked their thoughts about the presence of homebased workers in the same production chains as themselves. The attitude of the trade unions was that they were already too preoccupied with the problems of the workers employed in the factories to spend time thinking about the homebased workers. Yet the women homebased workers often did the same work as the men in the factories, but were less well paid. In addition, there are many campaigns about sweatshop conditions in factories, but very few about homebased workers.”

“The unions did not understand that by working with the homebased workers, the unions would gain added strength in their struggles, and that the homebased workers were their allies! They thought that they did not have the ‘luxury’ of time needed to take on the concerns of another group of people. But they are missing out on the organising strength of the homebased workers that could help their advancement.”

“Our vertical mapping led to a campaign that started within the trade unions. It campaigned for recognition of the homebased workers as dependent workers. The conference of the trade unions finally agreed to establish an office for the homebased workers, run by a woman. The office tried to establish the sectors of the economy that had homebased workers in their production chains. It discovered all kinds of sectors containing homebased workers—shoes and garments, the sports industry, furniture, plastics, food packaging, electronics, toys—so many sectors! They realised that homebased workers were indeed a huge but invisible part of the workforce, and that if the unions really cared for the rights of workers, they should care about the rights of homebased workers too.”

“Furthermore, if care is taken by companies to ensure good employment conditions right from the start of the chain, it is clear that the good conditions will carry on up, and all the workers along the chain will benefit. It takes hard work and lots of negotiating on behalf of homebased worker organisations to get the unions to see this. It is worth it though. The strength gained from the alliances makes the world of difference.”

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7.3.2 From REFLECT Circles to Social Action

“Through this circle, women lose their fear. We are no longer afraid. We get recognition from others now. And we get a place to sit and talk together.”
Sudhama, member of a REFLECT circle

It is not a story that focuses on one single issue – whether this is land rights, agricultural productivity, savings and loans, income-generation, health, education, caste, class or gender. There are many struggles for the women around all of these issues. The main theme is the change that can be achieved in the women themselves. The long-term process of education in the villages brings about a growing confidence and a capacity to act together.

At its core is the committed work of women activists who have set in motion this process of change. By supporting the women through the difficulties and the tragedies, as well as the day to day struggle for dignity, the women’s experience and knowledge is valued and encourages them to take action for change.

Women from the village circles have many stories to tell of such changes, brought about by themselves. Some are stories of simple solidarity. A poor pregnant woman had a husband who had migrated, but she never heard from him, and he sent no money home. The women in her group collected money so she could get medical checks, and went with her to the hospital. Another poor family had no money to pay for the funeral of a woman who died, so the women in the group collected money for that.

Often, however, the women organise to take action and demand their human rights. They make sure the women that are entitled to rice, wheat

and oil under a food security scheme actually receive it. When flood relief rations were not given out, the women went to find where they were being stored and distributed it themselves.

Parents’ committees have been set up to monitor the performance of teachers, and leaders of the women’s groups have to sign before a teacher can draw his or her salary. And many of those who have learned to read or write in the REFLECT circles have gone on to paid employment as teachers in government schools. The women are now running a campaign to make sure that children in government schools get the midday meal that they are entitled to.

Shail, a dalit (ex-untouchable) leader, told the story of how she led a struggle for land for 23 families in her community. The families had all been given the land in the 1970s as part of a land redistribution scheme. But the families never gained access to it, even though they regularly received demands to pay tax on its produce. Shail and women from the other families led a long struggle, involving many meetings with officials, and sometimes violent attacks made on them by those occupying the land. But nearly 30 years after they first became entitled, the families were able to farm the land. Even though it looked like the situation would never change, the women finally decided to organise, and the families won the land.

Ownership of houses is another issue that the women have taken up. In several villages, women’s groups have ensured that a government scheme for housing has been properly implemented, and in many cases, have even won the right for the house to be registered in the woman’s name.

Once the women have gained confidence in matters such as these, they gain confidence to start tackling other issues — issues that are either deeply embedded in the society, or that are very sensitive and therefore difficult to tackle. These issues are the many atrocities that are inflicted on the women by their community, in one way or another.

There are many stories. Here are a few:

Poonam

“Poonam is one of the non-formal education instructors working with Adithi. She is from a low-caste community. One day she was coming home in the evening, after collecting a government grant for repairing her house, when some men from a higher caste attacked her. They molested her and tried to rape her. She was able to get away before they raped her, and the next day she came to us and asked us to help her file a case against the men.

There was a huge amount of pressure on Poonam from other people in the village to drop the case. But she went ahead and filed the case with the police anyway. After that, both Poonam and other workers with Adithi were constantly intimidated by groups of men who demanded that she drop the case, or at least make a deal with the men. Poonam’s father-in-law was also beaten up as part of the pressure.

With the support of other women, Poonam refused to back down and persisted with the case. In the end, the culprits were arrested and taken to court, and were finally sent to jail. The solidarity of the women was very important in this case. The men did not believe that the women would

raise the issue, much less persist with the case. In fact, one thousand women in the community, all from different castes, came to local meetings and demanded that the men were punished. Only because of this solidarity among the women did the case go ahead.”

Shahanaz

“Shahanaz was married to a man fifteen years older than herself when she was twelve or thirteen. Now she has three children. Her husband forced her to sleep with other men. He used to send men to her and take the money from the men. Shahanaz did not agree to this, but did not find any way to resist her husband. Then finally her husband tried to sell her to be a sex worker in a brothel. Shahanaz came to the women’s group for help.

All the women from the group organised a community meeting, and asked others to support and help them. But the head of the village supported the husband. The women took the matter into their own hands and threatened the husband themselves, so he ran away from the village. After a few months though, he returned to snatch his son. He also threatened to sell off all the family’s property and land, leaving Shahanaz destitute.

All the women in the group supported Shahanaz in taking out a petition in the Land Register office to stop her husband from selling the family property and land. They were successful in the court, and he had to return the son to Shahanaz.

This is an example of a successful struggle of the women in the village which stopped a man from selling his wife into prostitution. The struggle took six months. As a result, on 8th March,

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International Women's Day, about 1,000 women from three or four villages held a huge meeting. They decided to set up a permanent group to work against further atrocities against women. Now any woman in the village can go to this group for help when threatened by her husband or other men. This kind of success is only possible after a long period of work with the women. It is only when the women want to take action themselves that anything can be done."

Other atrocities against women and girls

Female infanticide

"There are still many more issues that need to be taken up. But we have to wait for the right time, when the women themselves are ready to tackle them. We have been aware for a long time, for example, of the problem of girl infanticide in the area. In some villages, there are as few as 500-600 girls per 1,000 boys. We are now gradually working around the issue. One step that we took was to open an evening centre where young girls could come. We have discussions with them on many issues: their legal rights; sex education; and we give them skills training for income generation. Later on, the girls willingly come to us to discuss problems and raise issues, and seek advice. They draw charts showing the different treatment of boy children and girl children. One chart showed how boys got an additional meal in the day, and how only boys were given milk or eggs.

Another step that we took was training the traditional midwives. These were untrained midwives using traditional methods, and they were closely involved with the killing of baby girls. We gave them training in modern hygiene

and basic health practice, and they started to organise. As a result, they have gained self-respect, are standing up for themselves, and are saying no when families ask them to kill the girl children. Before, pressure from the community meant these women were not even allowed to wear shoes. Now they are wearing chappals (sandals), and they are working with us to stop girl infanticide. We held discussions too on the new law against using scans to diagnose the sex of a baby in hospitals, and we have been actively monitoring the lives of baby girls. Many groups now are keeping a register of all the births and deaths in their village, and are lobbying the authorities to keep proper records. Where a group judges that a baby girl is at risk, they liaise closely with the mother to try to ensure her well-being and health and give practical support where necessary. The midwives now work on a range of health programmes, and accompany pregnant women to hospital and health centres for check-ups and basic medicine."

Child marriage

"Before, the girls used to get married very young, at twelve years old, or even younger. Now they are becoming more aware and are raising issues themselves with their parents and teachers, and the community in general. In many villages now, early marriage is almost unheard of. Girls rarely marry before 16 now. Some even refuse to consider marriage until they are older. They are now aware of the implications of early marriage, and they take action themselves."

Trafficking of women

"There is also a big problem of trafficking in the area. Sitamarhi is on a popular trafficking route leading to Kolkata, other big cities, and even

abroad. We are near the Nepal border, and there are many Nepalese girls being trafficked, with a lot of intermediaries in different towns. We could not raise these issues with the women straight away though. We had to build trust first.

Some of the most difficult cases to resolve are those of rape, where frequently families are afraid or ashamed to file a case, or they worry their daughter will be unable to marry if they complain. Often the culprit escapes free, or if a case is filed, he escapes through bribery. But the women hold meetings and protests, and hold dharnas (sit-ins), sometimes involving thousands of women, until something is done.”

Working with men

“Another step that we have taken is to organise awareness meetings for men. When we work with the women, many men say Adithi is doing bad work, that we are breaking up the families and want to separate the women from their families. So we organise meetings in each village, bringing together between 50 and 55 men in each. We hold discussions with them, and listen to their arguments and objections. Actually, we want to brainwash them into behaving better! We tell them that they should treat their daughters equally to their sons. We tell them they should send their daughters to school as well as the boys. We tell them they should not marry off their daughters at a young age. We also explain that it is not the woman who determines the sex of the child (often it is the woman who is blamed if the couple conceives a daughter).

It is important that we work with boys when they are young, and we look in detail at the discrimination that takes place against women, and question why this is.”

Small steps

“These are some of the steps we have taken. Sometimes it takes two to three years to see a difference. Change does not come quickly. But now we feel we are ready to really focus our campaigns on specific issues: the serious atrocities against women, and against girl infanticide.

These are just examples of the work that we do, although there are many different programmes. We started off running literacy classes and non-formal education centres, for example, but now we are lobbying the government to provide decent schools for rural children. We are fighting for land rights for women, and we run health awareness projects and lobby the government to provide a decent service. In many different fields now, we are working as advocates for the government to fulfil its responsibility. We are also making sure that women have a say. The panchayats (village councils) are traditionally dominated entirely by men. But new laws mean that women must be represented, and they can invalidate its decisions if women have not participated. When an issue arises, such as a woman is declared a witch, or there has been an incidence of violence, the panchayat is supposed to impose fines or other punishments. Now the women often call meetings of the panchayat themselves to expose an injustice, make their views known, and arrive at a solution.”

Encountering opposition

The activities of the women’s groups do not develop without some resistance from members of their families or communities. Mantonia, for example, is a founder member of one of the groups. She was the first in her village to take out a loan, and she would travel to Patna

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(the state capital) herself, to receive training. She faced great opposition from the men in her family and from her community. Shail, the woman who led the landless movement, explained that it had caused a lot of trouble within her family, even though it would have benefited them in the long run. Her husband used to beat her for causing this 'trouble'.

Rubi, a young woman from a village in Dumra, faced opposition from religious leaders who said that women should not meet together. She is very dynamic and enthusiastic about her group's activities, and what she has gained since working with Adithi:

"When we first started meeting, the local maulvi (religious teacher) said that this was not proper, that it was against the religion for women to go out and meet. They said that Adithi was teaching us to sing songs, smoke and dance. The maulvi decided that the REFLECT circle should stop, and there was a 500 rupees fine. But in the panchayat meeting, all the women refused to allow this. They united together, sat down, and refused to move until the fine was removed. We also prayed to Allah that the circle should not close. The circle did not close, and we are still here, so no problem! If women want to sit together, talk and eat rotis (bread) together, that is not bad.

Another thing we did at the beginning was to clean up the mohallah (village centre). The men told us not to do it and to leave it. But we went ahead at any rate and in the end they joined us and helped us clean it up!

When I first came to Adithi I begged them to teach me to read and write. They agreed to give me tuition and in return I had to pass on what I

learned to other women. Now I run the circle in my village and another circle in a different village. At the start, another more experienced facilitator helped me, but then I learned how to do it on my own. When there was a campaign for total literacy by the government, I was selected to be the trainer for the campaign.

We have campaigned for a road to be constructed from the village to the main road. Before there was only mud. Then there was also a case of a woman who was labelled a witch, and she was threatened with being thrown out of the village. One woman had died of snakebite and the people were saying it was the woman that caused this. We called a village meeting and told the leaders that if one woman was to be thrown out as a witch, then we were all witches, and we would all have to go!

Then this year there was a big health campaign. We did activities around polio eradication, and made sure the children got vaccinated. We also organised a workshop in our village to raise awareness about AIDS. There is a lot of migration from our village, and we had to educate both men and women about AIDS.

We are also working with women to educate them about the need to give their daughters good food. We say that girl children have the right to food. Girls have a double burden in this life, and they must take nutritious food."

Women like Rubi have gained confidence from their new found mobility, and have found the strength to resist the opposition. Whereas previously many had been confined to their homes, village, or surrounding area, many of the women now travel far and wide.

Some travel to Patna for meetings with other women's groups, or even to Delhi. They do this determined not to be cheated or misled by people on the way. One woman even went all by herself to Haryana, a far away state, to look for her child who had been taken from her, and bring her home.

And in one village this year, the women of the region have declared it the 'ideal' village — no atrocities against women have been committed there in a whole year.

The starting point is a place where women can sit together and talk to each other. Step by step, women are transforming their lives both individually, and together. They are breaking down ancient barriers of caste and religion to build a new future for themselves and their children, both boys and girls.

One afternoon, Adithi held a discussion with some women about the way the women's groups work together. As the light changed from the bright light of day to the soft pinks and greys of the Indian dusk, the women said it was time for them to go home. But before they left, they sang together:

*Break your silence,
Break all your bonds.
All women come and forget your old customs.
When the storm comes,
Take the boat,
Don't be afraid.
All people are equal, there is no class or caste,
There is no need for darkness.
We need only light.*