

PJW-33
Zimbabwean Women's Groups

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Nairobi, Kenya
28 February 1989

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

For promoting women's participation in, and realization of benefits from, development, the strategy of promoting women's organizations has often been promoted. Together, women can achieve much that might be difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish individually. For example, in a particular society, men may control household income. If an individual woman earns money, her husband may lay claim to it. If she belongs to a women's cooperative, however, the earning may be controlled by the women as a collective, or may be allocated to members on an individual basis. If the group is all-female, as opposed to a mixed group of both women and men, then it may be easier for women to assume positions of leadership. In some societies, however, a group may be more successful if it has ties to local male leadership -- which may be easier if some men are in the group.

The role and functioning of women's groups varies greatly, as does perception of their effectiveness. Some interesting examples are presented by women's groups in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe has been an independent country, with majority rule, since 1980. Previously a British colony, then the country of Rhodesia under minority rule of white settlers, the indigenous African population had a long struggle to achieve independence. Much of the guerrilla fighting to liberate the country occurred in the countryside. Women were very active in the struggle for liberation, as combatants and supporting the freedom fighters.

As a result of their active participation, women adopted many new social roles. Now that peace has been achieved, many women are unwilling to go back to old roles. This situation has generated a great public debate on the role of women in modern Zimbabwean society.

The newspapers are full of letters to the editor and articles, some recommending a return to the traditional ways, where male household heads made all decisions, blaming all modern social ills on the changed ways of women. Others, conversely, argue that greater efforts need to be made to more fully incorporate women into the development processes of the country. Several books have been published on the new roles of women, showing women in a wide variety of non-traditional roles and recounting the experiences of women who served as freedom fighters. One such book is entitled, Independence is Not For One Sex Only.

In a previous trip to Southern Africa, and again on my most recent trip, I have been struck by the number of efforts being made to involve women in

Paula J. Williams is a Forest and Society Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, studying human uses of forest resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

development activities. In Zimbabwe many women's groups have been formed, in both rural and urban areas, to promote women's activities. Many of these groups are active in reforestation efforts.

The Ministry for Cooperative and Community Development and Women's Affairs is encouraging women's groups to participate in National Tree Planting Day activities. The response has been so great that shortages of seedlings have occurred, which the Forestry Commission is trying to rectify. The Ministry has projects with numerous women's groups throughout the country. Some groups have set up small-scale fruit processing operations, to utilize nearby fruit orchards. A major problem for such groups, however, is obtaining the foreign exchange necessary to buy tin to can their products.

Women's Affairs primarily aims to liaise between communities and the technical ministries, non-governmental organizations, and parastatals, to encourage greater participation of women in development activities. Rather than having their own agricultural extension agents, for example, they work with AGRITEX, the national agricultural extension service, encouraging them to work more with women farmers and clients. They also try to secure land tenure rights for women's self-help groups.

The Association of Women's Clubs is a national organization with a membership of over 200 women's clubs. Over half of the clubs are in some way involved in tree-planting activities. While these started out on an informal basis, AWC now has outside funding to support their forestry program, with a full-time staff forester and program coordinator. The Homecraft Section of the Women's Institute of Zimbabwe is also actively promoting forestry activities among rural women. Of their 1000 member groups, perhaps one-quarter are planting trees. The Women's Institute lobbied the government to establish an annual National Tree Planting Day.

Other efforts to promote women groups' involvement in forestry activities are being undertaken by other organizations. The Ministry of Natural Resources, for example, is sponsoring a competition for women's groups on tree-planting. The Ministry of Energy is conducting some applied research with women's groups on fuel-efficient cookstoves.

During the African Women's Assembly on Sustainable Development in Harare, from 6 to 9 February 1989, I had a chance, with other Assembly participants, to see some examples of development activities being undertaken by women's groups or other community groups. On the afternoon of 8 February, we visited three rural development projects outside of Harare.

The first project was a women's cooperative woodlot located in Mushonga, in Mutiusinazit Ward. This woodlot of Eucalyptus camuldensis had been started in 1985, and trees had been planted for three years. Some of the trees have already been harvested, and stumps have coppiced, or sprouted back. The fifteen women members of the cooperative have evenly split the trees harvested, with excess trees sold for the group's treasury. Each woman was free to do with her trees as she liked -- either to use the wood or sell it.

The second project that we visited was the Karengwa Vegetable Project, a cooperative women's garden, with thirteen members. This project had started as a small-scale poultry project. As the women began to accumulate a lot of chicken manure, they decided to start a garden. The Zimbabwean Christian Council had assisted the group with Z\$9000 (US\$4600) to put up a fence and install a water pump. The garden was well-maintained and very productive.



Members of the Mushonga woodlot cooperative dancing for their visitors

The women had received agricultural technical assistance from the local (male) extension agents, and had also learned about keeping records and banking. The women work on this garden twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday mornings, which leaves them time for their own farming, household responsibilities, and other income-generating activities, such as poultry-raising.

Visiting the Karengwa Vegetable Project



The women are quite proud of their garden, believing that they grow better vegetables than do urban women. Their major problem, however, is getting their produce to market, as they lack transport. Sometimes when they want to market their vegetables, a group member takes them to a bus stop, waits for two days, and is unable to get a space on a bus -- as they are all full. The vegetables just rot and have to be thrown out. This problem of transport and marketing is not unique to this group, but often occurs when cooperative activities are too narrowly conceived.



Gully Reclamation in Mandedza

The third project that we visited was a community gully reclamation project in Mandedza. Community members had been working on a self-help basis two mornings a week, starting in October 1988. The local district officer had helped to arrange transport for the rocks used to build the small check dams across the gully. Women and men both contributed to the project -- the women by collecting and carrying rocks and the men by building the stone walls (check dams). They had also planted star grass next to the gully. The hope is that with time, the check dams will trap sediment and fill up the gully. The grasses should stabilize the surrounding land and prevent further erosion.

While we were visiting the project, some local men asked the district officer where was their food. The previous year the community had engaged in a food-for-work project. The district officer explained that the community had agreed this year to do a project on a self-help basis, but that perhaps all the community members had not been at the meeting and thus had not understood the arrangement. The district officer said that they hoped for donor assistance to help with the project. They need money for fencing, to protect the gully area from animals, to facilitate the growth of the grasses.

It is obvious that some of these activities with women's groups, or mixed community groups, are just beginning, and have many obstacles to overcome. Many organizations and government agencies disagree as to whether development is more effective through women's groups as opposed to mixed groups, or whether women extension agents are more effective at reaching women clients than are men extension agents. All agree, however, that, in Zimbabwe, working with women's groups is a good way to promote women's participation.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

Paula J. Williams
Forest and Society Fellow