

WPP ACTION

Dear readers

I am very pleased to present you with the 1st issue of Women Peacemakers in Action!

Reading your stories gave me hope: it made me realize that slowly times are changing. And these changes are being created by you: women all over the world who are doing amazing work for peace and justice in their communities.

Finally the world seems to be waking up and realizing that in order to achieve sustainable peace, women must be involved.

A new idea always needs time to prosper, yet the best way to speed this process up a bit is by showing that it works! United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 works, because women's organizations make it work! Supporting women's peace initiatives works, because women activists courageously challenge the roots of violence and show the way to more constructive alternatives! The women in this newsletter are living examples of how women working for peace works...

IFOR's Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) began its support for women's peace work in 1997. Since then it has been in the fortunate position of receiving first-hand accounts of how women are challenging war and violence. We hope we have made a contribution through this support to the many women activists we have worked with during the past years.

We started this quarterly newsletter to keep you informed of what women in the WPP network are doing. How are they organizing, and how are they seen by the different parties involved? What are their achievements, and what are the challenges?

I hope these testimonies will inspire you to send us your stories, which in turn will inspire others.

Isabelle Geuskens

WPP Program Manager



“We at the WPP wish you the warmest season’s greetings!”



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“I remain a domestic worker”

The success story of Casimira Rodriguez Romero, former WPP women activist, today the Minister of Justice in Bolivia

I am sitting here as Minister of Justice and yet I remain a domestic worker. That is an essential symbol for a large group of women who work in the domestic field, and for all the people of Bolivia. The struggle and the activism have taken me where I am today!”

I meet Casimira Rodriguez Romero, in her office which has been occupied by her since January this year when the new socialist government took seat. Our first encounter took place at Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands in April 2005 where I picked up Ms. Rodriguez Romero and the other Latin American participants to attend the WPP Intercontinental Consultation. Back then she was representing the union of domestic workers in Bolivia. In 2003 she had attended the WPP Latin American Consultation in Quito, Ecuador.

“The Consultation in Quito helped me to gather information and knowledge from other women activists in the region. Many of the shared experiences and lessons learnt have guided me in my new position as the Minister of Justice. The discussions we had about the campaigns for the desaparecidos in Uruguay (BH: people, mainly activists who “disappeared” during the dictatorships in many Latin American countries) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Peru are great help these days when I need to discuss concrete solutions for the healing process of Bolivia”.

She recalls that in the Netherlands she was confronted with new topics that once again became evident through stories of other women activists from the Middle East, the Pacific, and Africa.



“In the Netherlands, I received new knowledge about peace and active nonviolence. Still today I see tremendous violence in strikes and demonstrations here in Bolivia. Through the women’s experiences of the Consultation I can now share solid alternatives that need not end in bloodshed”.

Bolivia has, like many of the Latin-American countries, a past of political and social instability through violent manifestations, road blockades, and short-lived presidents and governments. The majority of the population lives in poverty, the quality

“The struggle and the activism have taken me where I am today”

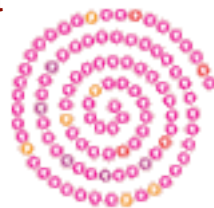
of health care and education is inadequate. Many young people lack basic and fundamental knowledge about society, governing bodies, rights, and freedoms. Women and girls suffer most from this situation.¹

General elections took place on December 18, 2005. Evo Morales of the socialist party, *Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS)* was elected as the new president. Thirteen of the sixteen ministers who joined Morales in the new government have a past in the trade unions, social movements and many belong to the indigenous groups in Bolivia. Four of the ministers are women, amongst them Ms. Rodriguez Romero who also belongs to one of three major indigenous groups, Quechua. She, as well as many others, has no past in party politics but was simply chosen for her commitment and competence within the social movement.

One of the first changes that took place in the government was the reduction of 50 % of the monthly salary of the president and his ministers. The president earns now around 15.000 bolivianos (1.535 Euros). This concrete decision was an indication that efforts were made to rebuild trust in politicians amongst the people.

Ms. Rodriguez Romero is well aware of the Ms. Rodriguez Romero is well aware of the prevalence and consequences of injustice and corruption, which have pained many in this country, as she explained.

“We need to talk about the past and the wrong doings of former authorities. My main ambition for this mandate is to eliminate the corruption and encourage transparency.



¹ Information from a report on Bolivia by the Swedish solidarity and development organization UBV. See www.ubv.se (in Swedish and Spanish only).

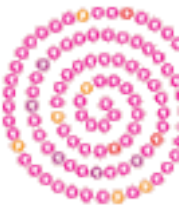
In order to achieve that we need to educate ourselves and our country. Within the government we have started to concentrate on the issue of corruption, yet it must be admitted that it is a great challenge. The promotion of human rights is another personal ambition that I want to be disseminated during this mandate.

As all other social changes one must start with one self. I want to remain to *de pueblo*, part of and accessible to the community.

That is why I keep my doors open for dialogue and cooperation with national and international activists and in particular women activists. The social movements in Bolivia have worked hard to get us where we are now. We were not seen with kind eyes, yet we were mobilizing and through all the experienced injustices we became aware and sensitized. Through this new government we are trying to pacify the country”.

Minister Rodriguez Romero started as a *trabajadora del hogar*, a domestic worker, when she was thirteen year old. Later on she organized and headed the first union of domestic workers in Bolivia. Her commitment engaged her in CONLACTRAHO, (Confederacion de Latinamerica y el Caribe de las Trabajadoras del Hogar) where she was elected as the Secretary General of the organization. Today she remains active as an advisor to the organization.

“It was during these years where I learned a lot about solidarity”, as she recalls, “I was confronted by a system based on colonialism and patriarchy. A system where women are abused and human rights are violated. Today I no longer need to be worried as often as in the past for our sisters. We have a strong base, we are organized and mobilized, we are working with our identities, self-esteems, rights and ambitions. Grassroot organizations are a core ingredient for the development of a country. What we must work on a national level now is how to combat gender-based violence. We need proposals from the social movements and the people. We can no longer afford to only work with



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“Do not burn out in your struggle to a more just world!”

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and empower women. Men must be an integrated part of this change. The violence is hurting the entire society. We ought to construct a non-violent way of thinking and acting. We have no previous experience from this but we must assimilate non-violence into our lives. A violent society is never a sustainable society.”

When Ms. Rodriguez Romero is asked to share her thoughts on recommendations to women activists she says:

“Although challenging, try to be sensitive, try to see the truth and try to be honest. Women have always been active in improving the situation for themselves and their sisters. I still remain in contact with some of the sisters from the Consultations. They sent their love and best wishes to me when I entered my position as the new Minister of Justice. Those consultations were important for all of us. Yet today when meetings go steamy I close my eyes, think about what we learnt in the Netherlands, breathe deep and then try to clean the air.

Women activists are hard working women but they must also remember to take care of themselves. Do not burn out in your struggle to a more just world. You are still needed!”

Banafshe Hejazi

Banafshe is the former WPP Information Officer. She now works for a Bolivian grassroots organization of young people, Coordinadora de Organizaciones e Instituciones Juveniles de Santa Cruz (COIJ). She is Gender Officer.

Photographers: John C. Goodwin/United Methodist News Service (picture 1) and Tomas Ahlberg (picture 2)



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Looking at the war on Lebanon from a gender perspective

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Just after their return from the WPP Training of Trainers in the Netherlands (June 2006), three women from Israel, two of whom are Palestinian, were to be confronted with the “Second Lebanese War”. WPP asked Dalia Halabi, Hana Kirreh and Talia Raz about the events and the position of women peacemakers.

Dalia sets out: “The war on Lebanon has proved once again the vulnerability of civilians, women and children in particular. Ironically, one of the most sensational news items inside Israel was not the death of hundreds of Lebanese civilians or the Qana massacre but rather the death of a woman soldier. Some Israeli ‘feminists’ have considered the participation of women in military action as a sign for women’s emancipation and success in their struggle for equal rights”.

Tali agrees: “One of the most famous myths of Israeli society is ‘the equality myth’, which is based on the assumption that Israeli and Jewish women are equal to men, because they must serve in the army”.

Dalia: “It made me think of the slogan I became familiar with during the WPP’s training: ‘Disarm Men, Don’t Arm Women’. My participation in the program made me more sensitive to women’s roles during and after wars and armed conflicts”.

Hana: “For me, too, being involved in the WPP-training and consultation has opened more ways and opened my eyes to things I had never recognized before”.

Dalia continues: “The Israeli society is a militaristic society which worships manhood ethos, for example, soldiers and fighters, and looks upon women as “mothers of the nation”.

Tali confirms: “Right, during the war, women hardly had a voice in the media, you only saw

them waving goodbye to their husbands and sons ‘the hero soldiers who are going to fight’, or coming back from the north as refugees, and taking care of their children”.



“One of the most famous myths in Israeli society is ‘the equality myth’!

Dalia: “The majority of women in Israel have accepted the fact of being discriminated against and that the issue of women’s rights has low priority at this stage. The state is in crisis and women are supposed to support the men. That explains why the feminist movement and criticism are viewed with great hostility. Active women are seen as traitors, acting against Israel. The critical discourse and the demonstrations led by women activists were either ignored or ridiculed by the media, politicians or society members.



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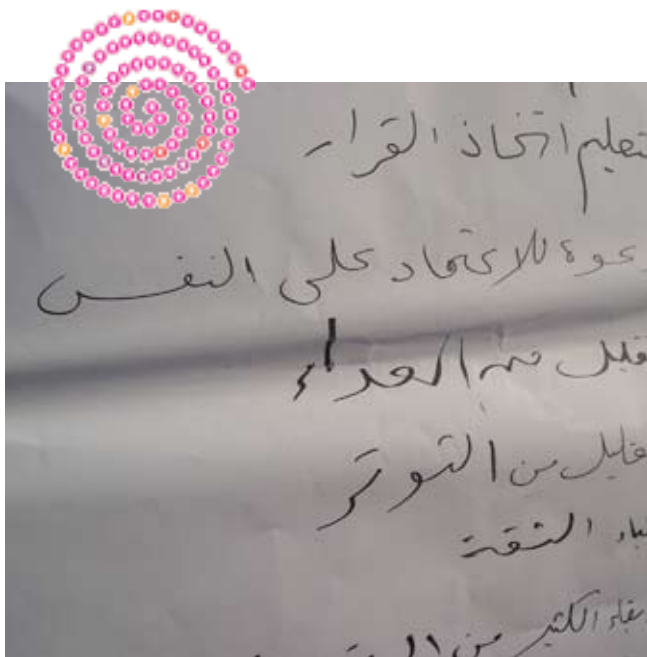
“Palestinian women in Israel suffer from double discrimination!”

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Sometimes these women were assaulted and attacked by common people and even police forces”.

Hana explains: “Palestinian women peacemakers face similar troubles. Having a connection with the Israeli peace activists is not an easy thing in our society. For many people it is not acceptable that we are in a continuous dialogue with them and join in activities. The peace movement in Palestine is effective but still needs more support from society and authority. Marches, protests, and workshops have been planned by women peacemakers to condemn the apartheid wall, to demand the respect of women human rights, and the fast release of women detainees”.

Dalia adds: “Let us not forget that Palestinian women in Israel suffer from double discrimination, based on their national and gender belonging!”



Would the women like to give a final statement to WPP?

Tali: “The ‘women peace coalition’ was the first movement who demonstrated against the war. By the end of the war, more and more people and movements joined the women peace movement. The challenge of Israeli feminists nowadays is to show that feminism is not only a struggle for women’s rights, but also a struggle for a better society, based on social and political justice, and nonviolent actions”.

Dalia: “Every human being seeks justice. Any form of injustice sooner or later will be resisted and fought against. Resistance can come in many forms but as I have experienced during the WPP’s training this year any act that doesn’t combine morals and high values is doomed to failure: morals and values such as the sacredness of life, equity, justice, fairness and respect for the others regardless to race, color, sex or nationality.

Hana: “Since my return from Holland, I have been working so hard to help others view life differently. Two workshops were conducted in the Jerusalem area about conflict management and gender awareness. Participants included young men and women who are eager to have more such workshops. Women peacemakers face lots of obstacles, but seeing change within the youth gives me the pleasure of victory and success”.

Dalia Halabi works at the Shatil Capacity Building Center for social change organizations. She is project coordinator and trainer.

Hanah Kirreh works at the Palestinian Conflict and Resolution Center Wi’am and the YMCA. She is youth programmer and trainer.

Raz Tali works at Nisan – Young Women Leaders. She is coordinator in a Jewish sector program and trainer.

Photographer: Hanah Kirreh

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Zimbabwean



Diary of Nonviolence Action..

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Netsai Mushonga is a peace and women's rights activist who serves as coordinator of the Women Peacemakers Program in Zimbabwe. The following lines are excerpts out of her diary.

5-6 November 2005

The Women Peacemakers Program held a peace and nonviolence training workshop for sixty Church leaders from Epworth and other areas of Harare. The workshop was basically to raise awareness of nonviolence and methods of nonviolent civic protest realizing the culture of injustice and violence prevalent in the country. Shortly afterwards, I was confronted with injustice myself and able to put nonviolent strategies into action...at Harare Central Police Station.

7 November 2005

The Peace Section (sic) of the Police Station made threatening phone calls to one of the participants to the workshop and later phoned me to come to the police station. I went, arriving at 2.30 p.m. The officers present asked me if I was responsible for organizing the meeting over the weekend. My reply was affirmative. They told me that the meeting we had was a political meeting and we should have informed the police in advance under the Public Order and Security Act (POSA). I argue that it was a peace and nonviolence meeting. The officers asked about WPP. The officers believed the meeting was political since it discussed the history of Zimbabwe and Gukuruhundi (the uprising in Matabeleland where 20.000 civilians were killed in the early to late 1990s) was mentioned. I maintained a pleasant attitude with them. I even asked if we could give the police nonviolence training to which the officer in charge replied that they were very peaceful already. He releases me at 5.00 p.m. but asked me to come back the following morning.



8 November 2005

Now, the head of the CIO division, which deals with intelligence for the government, referred to me as a prisoner. I had to wait very long. I chatted with junior officers who seemed to enjoy talking to me. I asked one of the officers to phone my husband and he did so gladly. A woman officer came to pick me. She wanted to be high handed with me but I remain pleasant and nice with her. I know that behind the mask she is trying to put on, there is a nice human being who probably wants the same things as me: a prosperous and happy life in a peaceful and prosperous country. She started by informing me that under POSA the police have a right to be informed of any public gathering, be it a birthday party, or a church mass. She then proceeded to charge me with holding a public gathering without informing the police. I said if that was crime I was very guilty then and what was the next step. She had not expected this and is taken

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“Why I am in prison? But I can’t be angry with the police officers.”

aback.

They took my fingerprints, three copies of them like they do with criminals. I remained cool. Why should I really worry. No crime has been committed. I remember that there is case of rape I had heard and I report it to the woman officer, she made a phone call to the police station concerned and we continued to chat. At the end of the day the officers are told to take me to the cells. I sense they did not enjoy it.

I joined the women in a sleeveless top and they asked me why I am in. “POSA” I sighed. They are all clapping hands and welcoming me. “You are a brave sister and we are here for POSA too.” We sat and laughed heartily for the next two hours. My husband brought me food. I shared it with two girls who were in for forgery and shoplifting. Around 9.00 p.m. we are headed off to sleep. There were ten of us and three dirty blankets which had lots of lice.

9 November 2005

At 12.00 p.m. my husband and friends were finally allowed to speak to me for two minutes. The day was spent uneventfully. New arrests come, most of them in different states of shock, and we counseled one another. We talked about everything, husbands, boyfriends, shortages, and political situations. The sight and smell of the pieces was horrible. I again slept on the floor. I was becoming angry by the minute. Why I am in prison? But I can’t be angry with the police officers. One of them took away my newspaper and spent five minutes apologizing and explaining why he has to do it. I told him that I understand the position and sympathized with them.

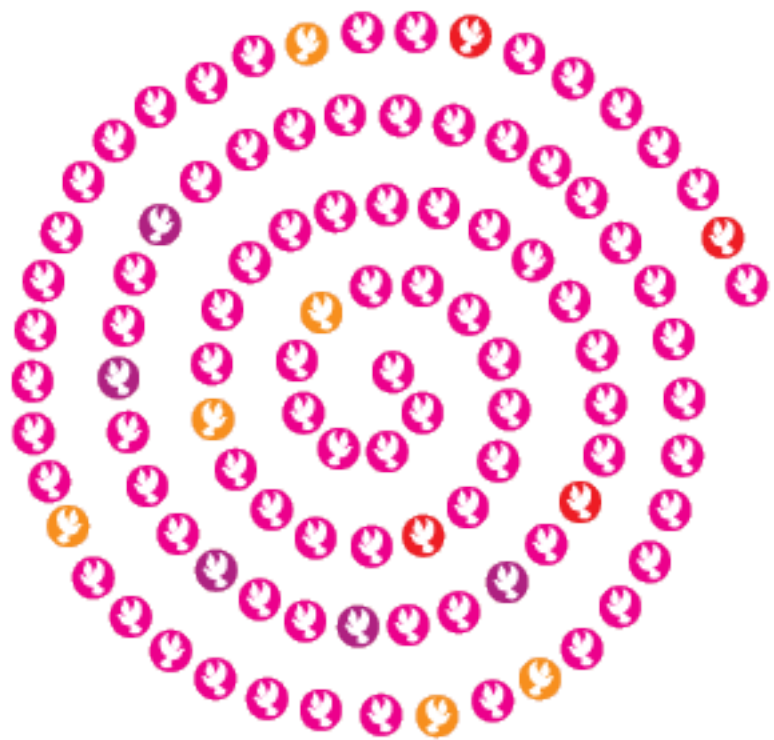
10 November 2005

One man who was in under POSA was arrested in the company of his girlfriend and the girl was with us. She looked distraught and homesick. I tried to cheer them up. I explained nonviolence to them and they gaped at me, interested about the prospects of making soldiers and police officers

their friends in the struggle for food and jobs. Every police officer was interested to know why I was in. I told them, anyone who cared to listen and somehow they did not comment, fearful I guess of who was listening.

Around 12.30 I was suddenly free to go. After hasty goodbyes, I left my new friends. Outside I was informed that the Attorney General’s office threw out the case and that’s why they had to release me after the mandatory 48 hours. I find that the people around me were angry with the laws and the system, not with me. They realized I had been a victim. It’s one thing to talk of injustices, it’s another to be a direct victim. I now know what POSA means. I now know about unlawful arrests and detentions. Nonviolence principles number 4 talks of unearned suffering as strengthening.

I only broke down and cried once during my detention. That was when I had received the news that my daughter was very worried about my absence from home.



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The Power of Somalia's Sixth Clan

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Women are so keen to be part and parcel of the solution seeking mechanism...



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Somalia, at the extreme corner of Horn of Africa, is a war-torn country in transition to peaceful resurgence in good governance. In all its forms, women and children were the most affected by the chaos and breakdown of rule of law in the last 16 years. Therefore, for their own rights and for the future of their children, women are so keen to be part and parcel of the solution seeking mechanism in Somalia rather than being passive and voiceless victims.

After a number of unsuccessful Peace and National Reconciliation Conferences for restoration of stability in Somalia, the first all inclusive and civil society-centered conference was held in 2000 by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) at Arta, Djibouti. Clan based allocations became the agreed mode

of participation, where each of the five main clans in Somalia were acquainted as stakeholders. But, due to patriarchal belief, such arrangements give no space to women which make 52% of the total population. Then, women registered their reservation and floated their proposal on the "Sixth Clan" for an independent cross-clan women's participation and identity in the national conference. Finally, the women's concern was accommodated and from there they became equal participants in the conference decision-making process. The NGO Save Somali Women and Children (SSWC), a partner of WPP, had taken a pioneering and leading role in this process.

Women were equally present in Mbagathi, Nairobi (2002 – 2004) during the second peace and national reconciliation conference for restoration of Somali statehood in peaceful means. The chairperson of the SSWC, Asha Hagi, was the first Somali woman to sign a peace agreement on behalf of the civil society "Declaration on the Harmonization of Various

Issues Proposed by the Somali Delegates at the Somali Consultative Meetings" (29th January 2004, State House, Nairobi, Kenya)¹.

The outcome of the conferences in which the Sixth Clan took part have shown more remarkable gains in women human rights in peace building and political decision-making (like 12% quota for women representation in the Transitional Federal Parliament – TFP, and others). Now, being in the post conference period – a transition towards constitutional popular governance, the challenge is maintaining gender gains in forward momentum. SSWC took a bold step in seeking audience of the Union of Islamic Courts' (UIC's) top leadership. Since Mogadishu, the capital, as well as other areas fall under the control of the UIC there had been mounting

...rather than being passive and voiceless victims...

speculation over the fate of women NGOs or women activities in general in these areas. The meetings

with the UIC resulted to ease the speculation and recharge hopes. Sheikh Abdirahman Janaqow, Deputy Chairman of UIC, declared, among other things, that UICs will kindly collaborate with women NGOs involvements in the nation and civil society as whole.

SSWC wants to continue as a contributing force for change in a country where, due to lack of effective central authority since 1991 – NGOs remain the main driving force for social betterment. Since Somali women need further empowerment and support to achieve sustainable peace and development, WPP granted a Leadership Training for 35 women from a cross-section of women's groups in Mogadishu earlier this year.

SSWC

¹ Ms Hagi was also nominated among the "1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize" (June 2005).



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South Asian Women's Mantra for Change

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South Asia has known several women political leaders like Ms. Indira Gandhi, Ms. Benazir Bhutto, and Ms. Bandaranaike. In spite of this it is not in a position either to use women's power fully or to alter the social environment in such a way that women can contribute to society in proportion to their abilities and experiences.

Why is this happening? Over the past decade our Fellowship of Reconciliation India Women's Wing and WPP organized training sessions in several parts of India for both women and men in Asia in search for answers. A series of well-thought programs of participative learning and sharing of life experiences started a process of gathering insight into the obstacles which face women and men. We started initiating actions and exploration of areas of self-help which would change women's lives and men's attitudes. We came up with our own mantra for change.

Our Mantra for Change: Redress, Renovate, Innovate and Replicate

We *redress* collective, systematic and individual injustices. Our actions in this direction range from lobbying for legislation to protect women from domestic violence to providing short stay homes, legal help, accompaniment, and counseling for victims of abuse. These support services have been extended through a network of skilled and educated volunteers. To ensure that women on a sustained basis get educated on issues which face them we have suggested changes in the syllabi at the university graduate and post graduate level. This has been considered and accepted by a few universities.

Discarding Practices

We *renovate* by discarding practices which push women into drudgery and social isolation. In South Asia opportunities for education, for employment, for leadership, for participation, for using skills, for using time are all determined by

varied demands and practices of caste, community and religion. Overall these customs and traditions keep women from getting socially mobile. Poverty, financial debt and social vices like drug and alcohol abuse worsen matters. It is in this area where tight rope renovation has to be carefully planned with the participation of broad minded people who know and understand the gender factor and its social development nexus. Our programs at the grassroot level aim at local leaders who can grasp matters and who have the power of influence. Several Panchayat (official political system at village) level meetings with elected panchayat members have been organized to find ways of empowering women. Several issues ranging from gender, nonviolent conflict transformation, women's role in village reconstruction, leadership and communication, and practical organizing figure prominently in our need based programs. We have conducted several programs in urban and metropolitan areas also for women on the social construct of gender, calling for a change. For women who have restricted movements because of practices like "purdah" (the practice of preventing men from seeing women) we have conducted programs in homes.

Collective and Participative Empowerment

We *innovate* by collective and participative empowerment. We have learnt what can happen if women are free and can exercise choice. When women break the chains of economic dependence, this is a step to new relationship building. In South Asia most women have always functioned within the framework of dependence and so are easily manipulated physically and emotionally. Our programs introduce innovative and successful income generation activities where women earn their livelihood. We have seen how this ushers more self-respect to women. With this we see a considerable paradigm shift in relationships and attitudes to women and awakened gender thinking. The position of women becomes more balanced within the family and within the community with

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“Redress, Renovate, Innovate and Replicate”

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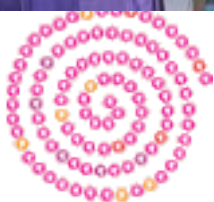
more independence. In South Asia issues which alter dependence of women goes beyond social work. We feel the need for a shift in resource allocation for women. We have seen the impact and the change in quality of life when women grasp the controls over their lives.

We *replicate* ideas and programs, skills and communication patterns of nonviolent conflict transformation which have worked in similar situations worldwide. We make these models suitable to our own needs. Communication, use of media, networking are also important as we have realized that large initiatives have an deeper impact on lives of women.

The WPP contributed significantly to the development of the mantra of FOR India's Women's Wing¹.

Suseela Mathew

Suseela Mathew is an activist of the Cultural Academy for Peace (CAP), the Women's Wing of FOR India



1 A special thanks to Shelley Anderson, Program Officer of WPP, for her focused efforts and empathy.

Colofon

The Women Peacemakers Program (WPP)
WPP is a program of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR).

WPP empowers women world-wide through gender-sensitive nonviolence training and education.

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Coming issue

WPP in Action 2

Deadline for Articles

28 February 2007

Publication Date

Spring 2007

Author Guidelines

WPP trained and/or funded women (and men) activists in the field are invited to submit original articles to the WPP in Action for publication consideration. Please consult the editor for elaborate guidelines.

WPP in Action is free of charge