

# ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL REFORM IN ZIMBABWE

## *The Zimbabwean Women's Action Group*

Le Groupe d'action des femmes du Zimbabwe (Women's Action Group) fut fondé le 31 octobre 1983 par un groupe de femmes qui, à l'origine, l'établirent pour opposer les arrestations au hasard par la police de filles et de femmes soupçonnées d'être des prostituées. Ces rafles soulevèrent maintes questions au sujet de la situation des femmes en Zambie. En

mai 1984 le Groupe d'action organisa un atelier pour discuter ces questions; le rapport de l'atelier, *La parole aux femmes du Zimbabwe*, (qui traite de questions urgentes telles que celle des droits à la propriété, le gardiennage, l'héritage et le lobola) fut publié par la suite.

Un deuxième atelier, sur le thème "Les femmes au travail", a eu lieu en janvier 1985.

Le Groupe d'action joue toujours le rôle de groupe très actif engagé à appuyer les droits et le progrès des femmes en Zambie. Le rapport qui suit documente l'histoire de l'organisation, la participation des cinq déléguées du Groupe à la conférence de Nairobi, et décrit le second atelier.

# WOMENS ACTION GROUP NEWSLETTER

JUNE '84  
No. 1



## THE HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S ACTION GROUP<sup>1</sup>

On the 30th October 1983 it was reported in *The Sunday Mail* that police were rounding up single women suspected of being prostitutes. Flats occupied by single women were raided and women "roaming" the streets were arrested and taken away. There appeared to be no discrimination. Old women, young mothers with babies on their backs, girls of 11 and 12 years old were included in the sweep.

This violation of their personal liberty aroused deep fears in the minds of most women. Their freedom of movement was being threatened and they feared that the police action would encourage male violence against women – an ever-present threat at the best of times. These fears were well-founded, as subsequent events were to prove.

One woman, Rosemary Doughty, decided that the seriousness of the situation demanded more than mere verbal protest and that action must be taken. She called a meeting at her house on 31 October at which more than a hundred women were present. A large proportion were expatriate women whose long experience of women's struggles prompted them to immediate action. The black Zimbabwean women were more hesitant to engage in overt protest action, although they were prepared to give covert support to the group without identifying themselves publicly. This apprehension was understandable in view of the fact that, with one or two notable exceptions, it was black Zimbabwean women who were the victims of the round-ups and it was they who would suffer any repercussions that protest action might bring.

At the meeting women expressed anger, shock and disbelief over what was happening. They discussed ways of protecting women's human rights and preventing further indiscriminate round-ups taking place. But the major achievement of the meeting was the forging of a bond of solidarity amongst those present which braved them to face the difficult months ahead. On that night, 31st October 1983, the Women's Action Group was formed.

The roundups raised many questions about the situation of women in Zimbabwe. In May 1984 WAG organised a

weekend workshop to discuss these issues. This was attended by more than 450 women (and some men) from all parts of Zimbabwe. The report of this workshop, *Women of Zimbabwe Speak Out*, dealt with land rights, custody, guardianship, and maintenance of children, inheritance, lobola and other pressing issues. It was published in October 1984.

WAG continues as a working group interested in the rights and progress of women in Zimbabwe. The group has no affiliations with any other organisation, but wants to work with and support other women's organisations with similar aims. Membership is open to all women. Meetings are held on the second and fourth Tuesdays of every month at the WAG office, 511 Frankel House, corner Second St./Speke Ave. Harare. The use of all three languages is encouraged at meetings. WAG also organises monthly public presentations on issues affecting women in Zimbabwe.

## ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN AT THE NAIROBI WORLD CONFERENCE<sup>2</sup>

This month (July 1985), more than 150 women from NGO organisations in Zimbabwe are attending the Nairobi Conference to mark the last year of the United Nations Decade for Women.

They are representing their Zimbabwe sisters from grassroots, and joining about 8000 women from all over the world. The Zimbabwe NGOs which work among women from all parts of the country have prepared thoroughly for the Conference. They are in Nairobi determined that Zimbabwe will make an excellent contribution in all areas of women's experience in Zimbabwe, including agriculture, women's development projects, the law, education, health, media and other fields affecting women.

The Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs organised an Orientation Workshop for all the delegates. It took place on June 7, 8, 9 in Kadoma, where NGOs and the Ministry worked closely together to prepare resolutions for Nairobi.

### The WAG Delegates

WAG elected 5 members to represent us

in Nairobi. We felt it appropriate that they should be mainly from trade unions, so we chose women who have worked hard for full participation of women in trade unions. Our delegates are: Doreen Nelson, Sheila Chikooro, Eunice Kapawu, Dorothy Gona, and Mary Tandon.

Another member of WAG, Zine Chitepo, is travelling from London as a WAG delegate. Zine has been studying for a Masters Degree in Law, and will be returning to Zimbabwe later this year.

Rural women are well represented in Nairobi. The WAG delegates have as their theme "Women in Employment and Women in Trade Unions."

All the NGOs sending delegates have been responsible for raising their own funds. They have also worked hard together to raise funds collectively to send women so that there can be a strong united Zimbabwe delegation. We know that these sisters will bring back to us valuable knowledge gained from meeting women who struggle with the same problems and have achievements to share with us in Zimbabwe.

WAG wishes all the women in Nairobi great success at the Conference, and we are looking forward to welcoming them back and hearing their report-backs.

In a letter (14 Nov. 1985) to CWS/cf, WAG delegate Zine Chitepo described the group's participation at Nairobi:

*WAG was fortunate to be very well represented in Nairobi in July, and given the broad spectrum of interests that individual members have, we were able to participate in and contribute to a wide range of issues that were debated and discussed. We were not, unfortunately, very well prepared in terms of actual written papers (as the funds for travel arrived very late), but there were a number of notes and draft papers that we put together just in time.*

*I, personally, was a participant lawyer to and made a presentation at the Women, Law and Development Forum, and my subject area was 'Violence, Rape and Prostitution.' My presentation was more or less a "Case-Study Report" which outlined the Group's experience over that particular issue, and because of this, I was able to speak off the cuff.*

## REPORT OF THE WAG WORKSHOP ON "WOMEN AT WORK" (19 JANUARY 1985)<sup>3</sup>

In November 1984, funds were made available to the Women's Action Group for the specific purpose of holding a workshop. This was to be on a smaller scale than the workshop held in May 1984, which had dealt with a wide range of issues affecting Zimbabwean women. The topic chosen for WAG's second workshop was "Women at Work". Almost all women are working women, and the problems they face depend largely on the type of work they do. For this workshop WAG decided to concentrate on the problems of women who are employed in the formal sector. That is, women who are paid a regular wage or salary.

### Participants at the Workshop

As the planning time and budget for this workshop were limited, it was decided to invite participants mainly from the Harare area. However it did seem important to have some representation from women in other areas as well.

Visitors to Zimbabwe who attended the workshop included a member of the Maputo International Women's Group from Mozambique, a trade unionist/ILO consultant from Botswana, a film maker from the Netherlands, and a women's film crew from Britain. Also present were several Harare-based representatives from the foreign press and from international volunteer organisations.

Of the 256 participants, 198 were from Harare. Twenty four of these were men who shared with us their perspective on the issues discussed during the day. In particular, the contribution of the men in the play, "Madzimai pa Basa", enabled the drama group to make a powerful contribution to the workshop. The members of the drama group were amongst a total of 95 trade union members who formed an important sector of the participants in the workshop. Also present were 20 government employees, including representatives from various Ministries, teachers, and medical workers. In addition there were three educators from non-governmental institutions or organisations, and five workers from international volunteer or aid organisations.

Thirty three of the participants were members of the Women's Action Group, 9 were from other women's organisations, and 6 were from various professional associations. A different and very welcome perspective was provided by 11 members of cooperatives from various parts of the country. The 9 journalists who attended included representatives of National Public Radio (USA), Vara Radio (Holland), ZIANA (Zimbabwe Inter-Africa News Agency), the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, Agenda Press Services, and a German feminist magazine. The remaining participants attended the workshop in their private capacity.

### Description of the Workshop

Early in the morning of 19 January, a minibus with two banners reading "WAG Workshop" was at the station to meet the delegates on the Bulawayo train. Women from Mutare had arrived the day before and were offered hospitality for the night by their sister trade unionists in Harare. Registration began at 8:00 in a hall at the Harare Polytechnic. Most participants had already received registration forms with their invitations, and were given their discussion group number (and colour) when they arrived.

The workshop was opened by Ms. E. Mapondera, President of the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau. Referring to the "Women of Zimbabwe Speak Out" work-

shop organised by WAG in May 1984, she said: "It became very clear that it is not only rural women who struggle with problems. Urban women also have serious problems, and at this workshop we shall concentrate on those problems . . . Women have a right to work, to earn money, to participate . . . we are ready and willing to take responsibility for our lives and our future." She said that women acknowledged that there had been progress for them since Independence, for example the Legal Age of Majority Act. "In theory at least we have equal pay for equal work. The income tax laws which hurt women are now the subject of investigation by the Tax Commission."

This progress, however, was only the beginning of the struggle for women to become equal citizens. Problems such as lack of promotion, lack of training for women, lack of health and child care facilities for working women, as well as inequality of pay and sexual harassment, still had to be confronted. Ms. Mapondera said that: "All over the world we see a new generation of women - our generation - participating in union and community organisations in South Africa, Mozambique and many other countries. These examples must give us strength to participate ourselves in overcoming our disadvantages as women."

The next speaker was Ms. Rudo Gaidzanwa, an active worker for Associated Women's Clubs. Ms. Gaidzanwa is



Forum '85 participants

Credit: Sylvia Spring



Forum '85 participants

Credit: Phyl Kohut Sereda

employed as a sociologist at the University of Zimbabwe. Her analysis of "The Role of Women in the Workforce" suggested that women's contribution to the economy of the country in all spheres is a major and essential one. She said that the notion that women worked for "pin money" while their husbands were the breadwinners, was not true. Most women worked because their income was essential for the support of their families.

Ms. Dorothy Muchenji, Industrial Education Officer from Silveira House, was the next speaker. Ms. Muchenji urged women to take advantage of any training opportunities available. "It is no use to have training and then not to have the confidence to use it on decision-making bodies," she said. She urged that where there were women with the necessary skills, it was up to women to elect them, and to press for and support their promotion. Why should we continue to elect men when we can do these jobs ourselves?

Dr. Sue Fawcus, a specialist in women's health, who is also a member of WAG, then led the discussion on women workers' health needs. She said that the special health needs of working women were neglected worldwide. She mentioned that in China there was more recognition of the health needs of working mothers than in most countries. There were facilities for adequate, paid maternity leave, breastfeeding, and creches to

enable women to be effective workers while recognising their contribution to the nation as mothers. She remarked that: "Working class women have to work—it is not a choice. Yet they usually cannot afford labour saving devices or domestic help. So they normally do three jobs—paid employment, domestic work, and childcare."

Dr. Fawcus pointed out that women found it very difficult to have paid leave to attend a sick child, and yet society held working women responsible for the care of children, as well as for their duties as workers. A capitalist economy exploited women workers, she said. In a depression women workers were the first to be retrenched and told that "a woman's place is in the home" and that women were not economically productive. One of the main reasons that women's health needs lagged so far behind other workers' issues, was that women feared to stand up for issues related to their health. When confronted with these issues, employers claimed that women were unreliable and they would rather employ men. Another reason was that trade unions tended to be dominated by men. Women were unable to attend trade union meetings out of working hours because of their domestic responsibilities. She suggested that women should campaign for union meetings to be held during working hours.

According to Dr. Fawcus, both employers and trade union men regarded

health issues as personal and private, leaving a woman to handle them herself and making her see her health needs as a failure on her part: "We women should stop thinking these are personal problems only. They are very fundamental for our health and that of our children. We need to campaign collectively. These are not secondary issues. They are vital demands which must be understood by both employers and trade union men." She said it was time for acceptance of the reality of working mothers. Working women should not have to suffer double guilt—guilt about taking time off work for pregnancy and childcare, and guilt about the needs of their children. "Do we have to accept this guilt? If society was geared to recognise that a woman could be both mother and worker, couldn't we fulfill both functions?"

Dr. Fawcus went on to say that working women faced many health problems because of lack of job security. Up to now, although some maternity leave was written into most industrial agreements, it was unpaid. Most women had not been able to afford to take as much maternity leave as their health and that of their babies required. "Very little is done to provide working conditions which make allowances for pregnancy, for ante-natal visits or adequate breastfeeding breaks." It was suggested that women's caucuses in the unions were important in carrying out this task. If the unions could afford to employ their own health workers in workplaces, answerable to the needs of the workers rather than those of the employers, these health workers could act as agents of change.

Ms. Eunice Kapawu, a member of WAG, who is also Vice Chairperson of the Harare branch of the National Union of the Clothing Industry, pointed out that no woman had ever been consulted on the industrial agreements' provision for maternity leave and breastfeeding. The provisions were usually impractical and of no use to women. For example, a woman was allowed half an hour in the morning and afternoon to breastfeed: "It is impossible for her to get a bus and go home to feed her child. The agreement is obviously made for women who have creche facilities at the workplace. I do not know of any factory in Zimbabwe where there is a creche. These agreements are

signed on our behalf, not thought out and discussed by women, or signed on their behalf by women who are known and elected by women themselves."

Another participant said it was no good for women to continue to meet by themselves: "You get home and then Dad says, 'Oh, it's a women's affair. I am sick and tired of women's affairs.' Let us unite as women and bring all the women's organisations together and make sure the problems women face get to men's ears, and see what men and women can do together."

The participants clapped loudly when a woman told of how she had found that in-service training and promotion was reserved for men, and a woman's career prospects fell far short of a man's. She pointed out that a woman had to fight every inch of the way to progress in a career: "we have no job security and no matter how hard we work, and how much we want to improve our skills, the men always get preference." She said that she was retrenched in the late stages of her pregnancy: "I wanted to say this because I am a typical case of how women are treated because they are women."

The meeting then broke for tea in the adjacent canteen and courtyard. During the breaks the participants were able to study the displays of books and literature related to women at work, and family and childcare. Special interest was shown in the booklets published by CASS (Centre for Applied Social Sciences) explaining the legal rights of women. Other displays were mounted by the Zimbabwe Publishing House, (which has published a series of books about Zimbabwean women), Grassroots bookshop, and the United Nations Development Program. There was a photographic display of the important role of women in the African Liberation movements. To call the women back to the hall after the breaks, some of the women played drums and other traditional instruments.

After tea, the Workers' Rights Drama Group, made up of women and men from three different trade unions, presented a play called "Madzimai pa Basa". For many of the participants there was no need to introduce the group, Kodzero yevashandi, who had also performed at the workshop held in May 1984. This time they were dramatising sexual harrass-

ment, and showed the problems which follow women from their homes to their workplaces. The play also showed how women are forced to leave their homes and children to look for jobs, and how they face many hardships in getting a job and trying for promotion. According to one member of the drama group, sexual harrassment has become very common for women workers: they are aware of it and are determined to put an end to it. This play, written by the group themselves, was a great success and provoked a considerable amount of discussion from participants, especially in the afternoon's small group sessions. After the drama, lunch was served in the canteen.

After lunch, Ms. Doreen Nelson, an executive member of the Posts and Telecommunications Union, who is also a member of WAG, spoke on the "Effective Participation of Women in Trade Unions." She put the present position of women in trade unions into a historical context, saying that before Independence, when there were separate Black and White unions, men had been in the leadership:

*Since then there has been no concrete trade union policy to redress this imbalance, no special facilities or policy to educate women in trade unionism. Women's interests have not been properly represented or catered for. There is no provision in the ZCTU constitution for women. A few women have been put into high positions as 'window dressing.' They have never really been given the authority of the real job.*

*When there has been the odd workshop for women, the problems to be discussed are put on the agenda by men. Up to now we have never been consulted, even about which are the most urgent and pressing problems which we experience as women. Now is the time for women to unite, to write our own programmes, identify our own problems and say what we want to discuss at workshops.*

She said that, for effective participation in trade unions, women workers should not only elect women to represent them from workers' committee level up to national level, but they must actively support and trust their chosen representatives. Within trade unions, women's caucuses should be set up, and women from different trade unions should keep constantly in touch:

*We can put in petitions, we can campaign on certain issues which affect us, we can use education programmes to motivate and mobilise ourselves. It is for us to join Conciliation Boards and decision-making bodies. We must forget about our divisions, whether we are Miss or Mrs. rich or poor, educated or not, and see promotion for other women as a step forward for ourselves.*

*We know our problems in the workplace and at home. It is for us to enlighten our male counterparts and say: 'Give us space there beside you and let us speak for our sisters.'*

She said it was not enough to talk, but that women wanted channels for positive action, and "where we decide we want action, action will come . . . I do not recall a workshop before this one which brought women together from all levels of the workforce. From now on we are going to take action as women."

The participants then went to small group discussions. Each group, which was randomly selected to allow for a full cross-section of workers, was allocated a note taker and a facilitator. The facilitators had been briefed to encourage women to speak in the language in which they felt most comfortable. The note-takers noted the problems stated by the participants as being the most urgent for women workers. At the plenary session after tea, a representative of each group presented a list of recommendations for action to the whole workshop. A men's group, consisting mainly of trade unionists, discussed the position of women from their perspective. They recognised that women had particular problems as workers, and supported progressive changes.

The presentation of recommendations was followed by comments and discussion from the floor. One suggestion made by a trade union woman was that women workers should take care to read and understand their industrial agreements so they could attend meetings with full knowledge of their position.

Ms. J. Mawema, Under Secretary from the Ministry of Labour, Manpower Planning and Social Services, officially closed the workshop: "I feel the value of this workshop has not just been that women have come from so many different fields to share their experiences of what happens at work, but that recommendations put forward here will have far-reaching



Women's Action Group

Credit: Birgitta Lagerstrom

effects in the national deliberations and will be taken note of in some of the official policies."

Such workshops, she said, assisted women in gaining bargaining skills. The gross injustice suffered by women under the oppressive colonial regime should never be repeated. Women themselves could ensure equality in Zimbabwean society by changing the socialising of their children to break away from the stereotypes of women's roles and aspirations:

*Fifty-one per cent of the population of Zimbabwe is female, many working side by side with men in those professions and jobs which have been opened to us. Meaningful recognition must be given to our role as potential labour power. It must be fully recognised and utilised. Women must be aware that it is illegal to discriminate in employment on the basis of sex. Employment is a right, not a privilege. If discrimination occurs, we must report it to our unions, or bodies which are concerned with women's rights.*

She suggested that if there was dissatisfaction with the way in which women's affairs were handled by her Ministry's Industrial Relations Officers, formal approaches should be made by women to the relevant department so that their interests would be met.

After supper there was a short time of celebration and music, with well-known Mbira player Ms. Virginia Chiweshe, providing entertainment, joined by other

women playing drums and hoshos, and singing. The participants dispersed, expressing determination to meet again as soon as possible to examine the new Labour Bill, and to work together for fairer working conditions and equality in the trade unions.

#### Women at Work: Problems and Recommendations for Change

In the afternoon of the workshop, the participants separated into ten discussion groups, each with approximately 25 people. One group was exclusively for men, and the remainder were for women only, as it was thought important that group discussions should not be dominated by men. The reports submitted by the note-takers from each group described the major problems identified by the women (or men) and then described strategies for their solution. Solutions fell broadly into two categories, those which women could implement themselves, more or less immediately, and those which involved making demands or recommendations to the relevant institutions.

#### THE PROBLEMS

- lack of solidarity among women
- discrimination against women in job selection
- few women hold positions in decision-making bodies
- inequality of opportunity in training and promotion

- low pay for women's work
- lack of information on women's rights
- unpaid maternity leave
- lack of creches and provision for breastfeeding
- sexual harassment
- taxation of married women
- health hazards at work
- disapproval from husbands

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR OUR OWN ACTION

- unity and solidarity among women
- prepare to take responsibility in the workplace
- open discussion with men
- join the trade unions
- educate children in non-sexist roles
- use the Ministry of Labour, the courts, and the Ombudsman in disputes involving sex discrimination in the workplace
- be aware of worker's rights

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

- paid maternity leave
- creche facilities at the workplace
- breastfeeding
- sexual Harassment-Legislation and action
- access to knowledge of our rights
- equal and separate taxation for married women
- the implementation of existing workers' rights
- increase women's representation in the unions
- equal opportunities for training and promotion
- union meetings must be held during working hours
- family planning education for men and women

<sup>1</sup>This section is excerpted from *Women of Zimbabwe Speak Out: Report of the Women's Action Group Workshop (Harare, May 1984)* p.1, and *Women at Work: Report of the Women's Action Group Workshop (Harare, January 1985)*, p. 14. Both reports are available from WAG at P.O. Box 135, Harare, Zimbabwe.

<sup>2</sup>This section is excerpted from *Women's Action Group Newsletter*, No. 3 (July 1985), pp. 1-2, and from Zine Chitepo's letter to Nikita Crook (14 Nov. 1985).

<sup>3</sup>This section is excerpted from *Women at Work*, pp. 1-13.