

# ANANDI, INDIA

## FROM WOMEN'S GROUPS TO MOVEMENT FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

*Linda Mayoux with ANANDI*

ANANDI is a non-political secular organisation working with women's organizations and partner NGOs to promote an empowerment approach and gender mainstreaming throughout development activity. ANANDI works with the poorest women of the tribal and other marginalised communities in Saurashtra and Panchmahals-Dahod district in Gujarat and also networks with other national and international NGOs.

ANANDI was founded in 1995 by five young women development professionals who had worked for several years in various other parts of India. Since then it has been involved in a number of programmes:

- ◆ A large field programme to facilitate and support women's groups and form self-managed women's federations addressing health, food security, livelihoods, savings and credit and capacity building of women panchayat members. In Panchmahals-Dahod over 3000 women are members of these sangathans, which now plan and manage some of their own activities. In Saurashtra this work is done through partner NGOs.
- ◆ Relief and rehabilitation: ANANDI has been promoting a clear focus on women's needs in relief and rehabilitation after the consecutive disasters of drought, earthquake and the communal carnage which Gujarat has faced in 2000, 2001 and 2002.
- ◆ Area networking of rural women leaders and NGOs which is done by way intensive support of organisations based in 5 districts of Saurashtra to enable them to engage in dialogue with the state and civil society.
- ◆ Research studies on gender equity issues within different arenas/fields.

ANANDI is an active member of the various state NGO networks of women, environment and health.



Savings and credit are only a part of the activities around which women's groups in ANANDI organise. Nevertheless ANANDI's innovative approaches to organisation for women's empowerment could be applied elsewhere in micro-finance programmes with a commitment to gender equality.



In particular:

- ◆ Training for women in non-traditional skills
- ◆ Participatory Tools for investigating women's empowerment.
- ◆ Area networking as an effective and cost-efficient form of mutual learning and organization for policy advocacy.

The Case Study is based on ANANDI documents and also material collected by Linda Mayoux using participatory methods during two 5 days visits in December 2003 and September 2004. Further details of the innovations discussed here and other aspects of ANANDI's programme can be found on ANANDI's website: <http://www.anandiindia.org> .

## USING PARTICIPATORY TOOLS TO INVESTIGATE EMPOWERMENT



One of ANANDI's key goals is women's empowerment. However empowerment is notoriously difficult to define and measure. Although external indicators can be identified and measured, an inherent dimension is women's own ability to define and achieve their own goals. In the 2003 Participatory Review ANANDI was interested not only in measuring progress according to their own criteria, but understanding women's own aspirations and how far they had fulfilled them.

A series of participatory exercises were conducted with women members and leaders in 5 groups from Devgadh Baria in one one-day meeting:

- ◆ Empowerment diamond with one group of 22 women from Ankali village in Devgadh Baria. This village had been involved in a watershed and sustainable agriculture programme.
- ◆ Empowerment Road Journey
- ◆ Gender Violence Diamond
- ◆ Institutional Impact Map

### EMPOWERMENT DIAMOND

The diamond was preceded by a process of individual visioning and drawing before the group discussion of criteria. This was in order to give women more time to reflect and give less room for external steering of the process.

The women were first asked to divide into age groups and draw their individual visions of

### EMPOWERMENT DIAMONDS

#### *step 1: visioning*

The women were asked to divide into age groups and draw their individual visions of empowerment.

#### *step 2: ranking*

The women then voted and ranked the different visions which were placed on a diamond shape.

#### *step 3: scoring: before and after*

Then they were asked how many of them would rank themselves as empowered or not empowered before the programme and now and the responses were plotted on the diamond.

#### *step 4: practical ways forward*

There then followed a discussion of how those women who did not consider themselves currently empowered could be further supported.

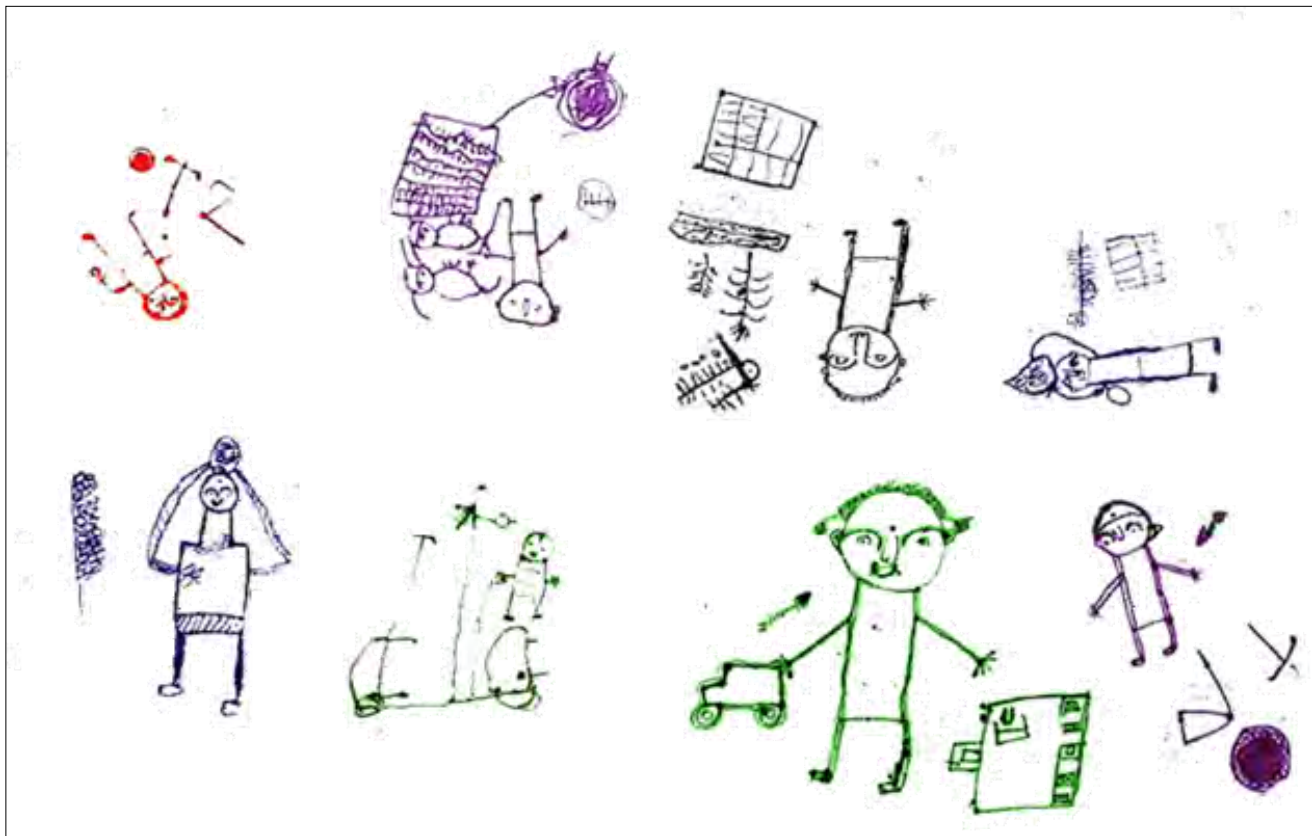
empowerment on a sheet of paper. This was done in a circle around the edge of one sheet of paper to encourage them to discuss and draw. The older women in particular had never held a pen before, but after the staff had left them alone they all eventually found the confidence to draw. The women's visions are shown in the drawings below— all of which the women took away with them.

Once the drawings had been made the sheets of paper were then cut up into women's individual pictures and the women described to the group what had been drawn. The women were then given two votes to put on which drawings they thought were the most important indicators of empowerment. These were then pinned in order of popularity onto a diamond shape.

The order of voting showed the following hierarchy:

- 1) An empowered woman is one who gets development related funds for the village, one who is able to stop migration due to wage work availability in the village and one who aids women to solve problems of family harassment.
- 2) Who does high status men's work.
- 3) One who works as an equal alongside the husband/men
- 4) One who is educated and aware of the laws and brings new information for other village women

A least empowered woman is one who cannot stand up to the wrong harassment of the forest official.



After the criteria themselves were ranked, the women were asked to plot themselves according to the ranking before the programme and now. Out of the 22 women only 4 women saw themselves as highly empowered, 10 women as women who now do work like men and 8 women said that they now work as equals alongside men. In the group present none of them saw themselves as least empowered. All these changes were said to have taken place since ANANDI started working in the village. Only one woman not in the mandal was considered to be empowered by their criteria. She was an elected representative to the District Panchayat – who does the work of a man. There then followed a discussion of how those women who did not consider themselves currently very empowered could be further supported.

This exercise was very exploratory and had not been done before in this form. The drawing exercise proved very valuable in opening up the discussion and giving women the confidence to express their own views free from interference by other women or ANANDI staff. It was very useful for highlighting which of the different activities ANANDI had supported were valued. The voting process then enabled a full discussion of the different views which was in itself a useful process. As with the other exercises there is no reason to doubt the reliability of the ranking of the women. Many of the women had never held a pen before and were obviously very pleased to go home with their diagram.

This exercise is however obviously only a start for a serious investigation. With hindsight a number of things could have been improved. In particular many of the drawings used composite criteria. These should have been discussed and separated before the voting to get a clearer ranking. As with the poverty diamond, for more in-depth analysis, there could be a series of separate diamonds for the different dimensions of the emerging criteria eg gender division of labour, household decision-making, political participation. The exercise would also ideally be followed up with more qualitative discussions and, as is being done by ANANDI, then feed into an ongoing planning process for collective action to be taken.

Old women's views focusing on livelihoods, doing men's work on their own fields and having livestock.



## GENDER VIOLENCE DIAMOND

A key issue which has come up again and again in ANANDI's work, including women's description of food security problems and empowerment above, is that of gender violence in the household and community. However beginning discussions of gender violence is often far from easy and even women will often deny that it exists. Gender violence takes many different forms, some of which are so common as to be seen as 'natural'. Other forms are very extreme but are hidden behind closed doors, and even disguised as 'suicide' or attempted suicide. Women are often reluctant to talk about such violence for fear of reprisals from men, and also often fear of being blamed by other women for 'bringing it upon themselves'.

ANANDI was therefore looking for a tool which would help to understand both the different forms which violence takes, the incidence of such violence and whether or not ANANDI's work was leading to an increase or decrease in conflict. During the Participatory Review staff experimented with the Diamond Tool and Road Journey to start to investigate these issues both qualitatively. They used the Diamond to examine the different types of violence and how women rank their relative seriousness (20 women from Sagtala village). They used the Road Journey to examine how women see themselves coming out of this situation and the role of the organization (18 women Ambaji Mahila mandal). The extent of gender based violence and the effects on women's lives as revealed by these participatory exercises was quite shocking.

For the Diamond tool the discussion began with women collectively trying to recall issues/problems they have collectively discussed / talked in their meetings. The facilitators then asked specific questions about their experience of violence at home and/ or in the community. The women then discussed their ranking of violence:

- Extreme violence was agreed to be "Beating till you get wounded (bleeding) and you feel like committing suicide is extreme, unbearable violence"
- Everyday violence: Women said that they also had to live with everyday forms of violence like verbal abuse, fights over money, daily consumption of alcohol by men, minor beating by the husband because the "meal is not tasty" "There are no answers, we have to deal with them everyday and hence we do not call it violence."

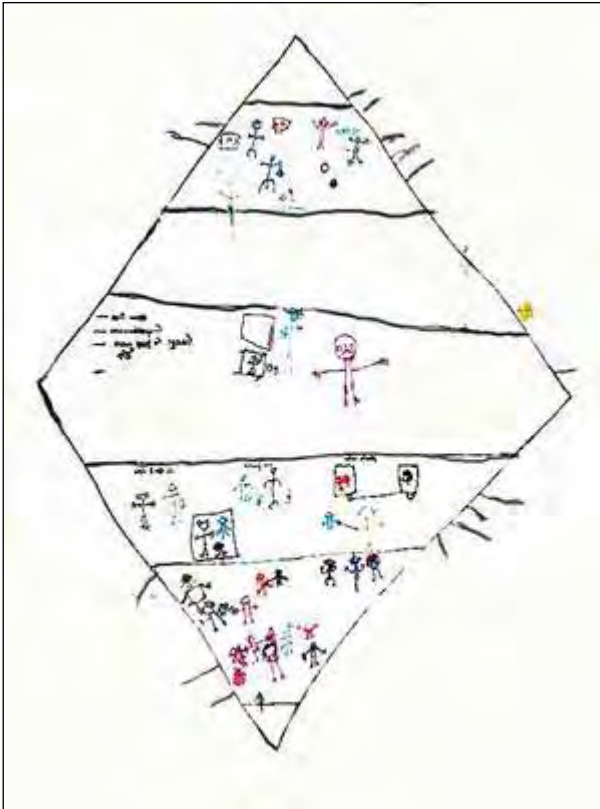
Their ideal situation was "When husband -wife stay together peacefully without any kind of mistrust and suspicion, children go to school, no illness, adequate water, and agriculture produce, do not have to migrate out for work and above all

prohibition on liquor and ban on torture would bring peace." The only women considered in this situation were those without a man: widows, divorced, young and unmarried.

After initial hesitation each women began to draw pictures in the diagrams.

Once the ranking had been discussed, each woman plotted herself in what she saw as the most applicable level of the diamond. None of the women were initially willing to talk about their experience of violence in the family - physical harassment and mental torture. They started by saying that "such episodes used to happen but now it is over and done with so why to remember or raise them again and create further problems in the family." It was only when some of the most serious cases began discussing that other women began to open up and discuss:

- Daliben, age 65, said the entire village knew that her son beats her. She used to sit in the meetings of Ambaji Mahila mandal quietly but for a whole year could not join because of fear of her son. "These women used to help women come out of their distressed situations. This motivated me to mobilize other women in my hamlet and that is how we all formed our Mahila Mandal" (She drew the symbol: Woman being beaten up by man, a bottle of liquor in hand)
- Kamtiben, age 40, said her husband used to beat her everyday. He once burnt her cloths saying he could do same to her. This incident scared her. In one of the meetings another women raised the issue on her behalf. That was the first time Kamtiben had spoken about her problem. Till then she had not even shared the problem with her family. (She drew the symbol: Husband beating, liquor bottle in his hand and a stick in another hand, cloths ablaze, children watching the whole episode, including young sons and daughters in law and the grand children) helpless and unable to do anything)
- Reshamben's (age 30) situation was known by everyone. She had got back from her parental house a couple of days back. "I have left his home and gone away at least 10-15 times, but every time the panch sits to resolve the case, he says he will not do it again. I also come back to this house. If I left I feel I would find peace but what would happen to my children, who would feed them and bring them up?"



- Kusumben is daughter of village Sagtala, married in a poor family in village Jhapatia. She had innumerable experiences of physical and emotional harassment from her alcoholic husband. When she could take no more she would come back to the parental home. She became a member of Ambaji mahila mandal during one such period of stay. But when her husband ran out of money he would come back to her and make false promises and take Kusumben back so that she would earn and give him money. The mandal supported Kusumben all through her struggle. They would intervene, talk to her husband and in-laws also argue in her favour in front of the panch (traditional dispute resolution system consisting of male heads of the community) to resolve the problem. They were not willing to accept a divorce settlement without a share of her husband's property in the name of Kusumben. A year ago moved in with her parents as she was severely sexually assaulted and injured by her husband. Members of the mahila mandal supported Kusumben to file a police complaint and hospitalised her. After 3-4 months her husband was found dead in his own house. The in-laws are denying her right over house, land and other belongings that she has set up because she is childless. The mahila mandal and Devgadh Mhaila Sangathan both are supporting her struggle.
- Janudiben's father divided the property in four equal parts for all four daughters leaving aside a small house for himself and later to be

given to Janudi who takes care of the father. The dispute is between Janudi and her nephew for he does not want her to get larger share than his mother. This case was resolved by the village panch previously but the nephew does not take note of it. Now a days the panch is disregarded easily, another problem that often occurs is where after a crime the police instead of writing an FIR and enquiring the matter, they call both parties judge who is wrong and give out a punishment and in the process not only grab money but also save a visit to the spot where the incidence took place. Such transgression from the legal procedures makes the journey to justice difficult for those who are unaware.

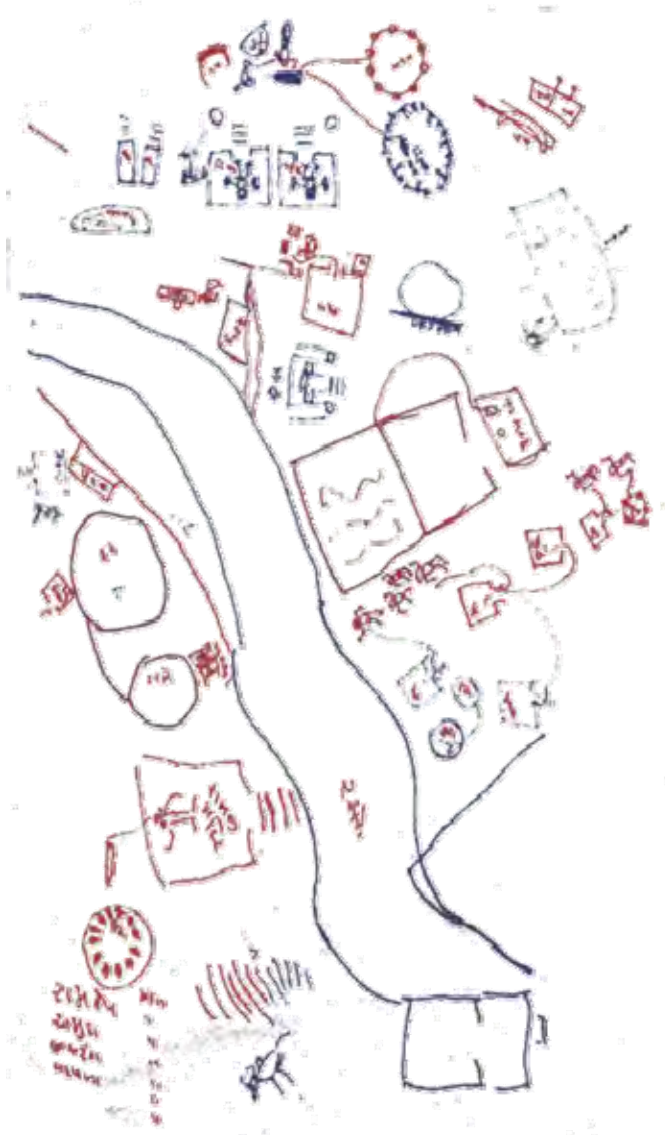
It took about three hours for the women to share their own experience of violence. It was very emotionally stressful for the person. Of the women who experienced extreme violence, Reshamben's case was very serious and the women started discussing how they would help her.

In the road journey it became clear that the mahila mandal had worked on many cases and that the women had moved from being very vulnerable to becoming more vocal in resisting violence. The road journey showed that the increase in the number of women within the mahila mandal supporting such cases grew gradually as the group members gained confidence in each other. For some women the frequency of violence had decreased or stopped since they joined the mandal.

By the end of the exercises, it had become obvious to the group as well as ANANDI staff that membership in the mahila mandal gave the women a sense of internal strength because of the knowledge it would support them in times of extreme violence and distress. The mandal has collectively been able to build pressure in the community to be more supportive towards women suffering from violence. They have also created space and acceptability in the panch which makes men think twice before resorting to violence. It was also however clear that there was still a very long way to go, and likely that many women in the area were suffering extreme violence but still not able to join the mandal and get support,

As a tool, the Violence Diamond was very effective in stimulating detailed discussion quickly where women were initially hesitant. The focus on the pictures helped women to be more open and spontaneous. There would also need to be more individual and confidential research with women who were not members of the mandal and hence had no group, preferably by the mandal members with their neighbours. This could even be done on a community map.

## EMPOWERMENT ROAD JOURNEY



In the Participatory Review Road Journeys were used to assess group activities and development<sup>ii</sup>. A road map drawn in one of the groups in Lakhwad, Saurashtra charts a process whereby about three years previously four mandals had been set up. These had now grown into 11 self-sufficient mandals and achieved the following:

1. Distribution of fodder during drought
2. Shram daan in repairing of roads.
3. Meeting the MLA and getting a grant for a well in the village
4. Meeting the TDO and negotiating towards regularising the water supply to the village and increasing it to meet the actual needs of the people
5. Building a well and repairing the drinking water tank in the village from their own funds and efforts.
6. Getting bank loans for 5 mandals for consumption as well as farm needs.
7. Constructing 105 RRWHS, including one

- for the village school, and 4 check dams under the drought proofing scheme.
8. Cleaned the funeral burning ghat under the shram daan yojna.
9. Building a water stall for the village cattle.
10. Getting an innocent victim of police atrocity released from prison.
11. Built as part of the drought proofing program
12. Under the sanitation program the mandal members selected 10 widow and disabled women for sanitation blocks
13. They also gave houses to 3 eligible widows under the house construction program
14. They spread the message of hygiene and sanitation by breaking the public urinal near the drinking water stand
15. They selected an 11 member gram vikas samiti for the overall development of the village
16. Under the drought proofing scheme the women from the mandals distributed feeding stall to all the cattle owners in the mandal and some outsiders as well
17. Helped the poor to release their assets that they had pawned to meet some emergency financial need.
18. Got 10 sewing machine under the SGSY scheme for eligible mandal members
19. The women have acquired 70 chaff cutter machines, which every body can access on need basis.
20. They were able to bargain and get the actual remuneration for the work that the villagers had done under the government relief work during scarcity periods.

This Tool proved a very good means of getting a detailed participatory history of the group in a way which the women themselves could understand. It is much easier for people to contribute and mark in forgotten details on a road map than on a linear written account.

## INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT MAP

ANANDI also wanted to look at women's perceptions of their organization and ANANDI's role, and what women saw as future avenues for influencing powerful institutions through lobbying and advocacy.

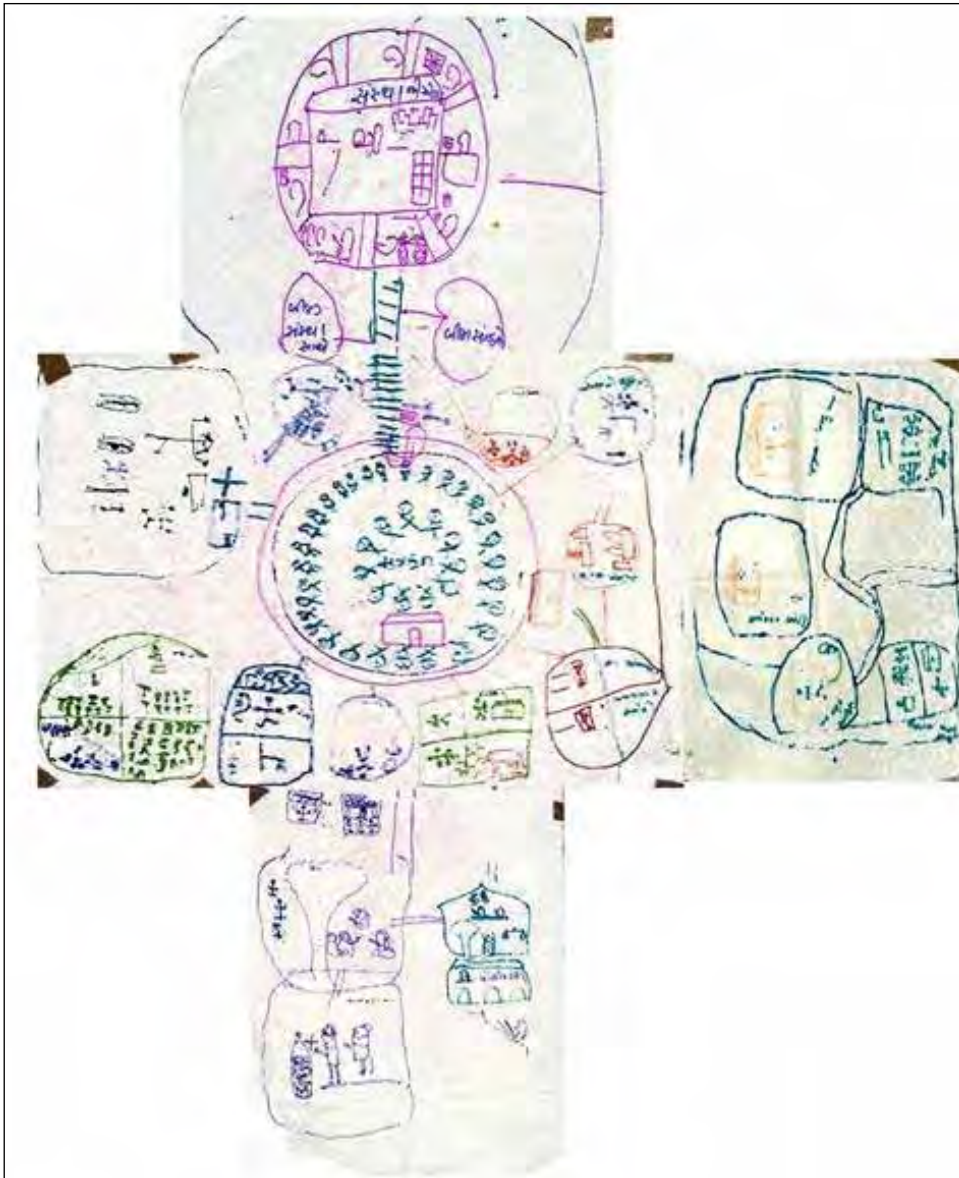
help build the capacity of the organisation. DMS has an independent bank account and an independent fund that ANANDI has contributed. Apart for the Executive Committee, DMS has several sub-committees responsible for different issues identified as priority by the Federation – Food Security, Environment, Health, Savings/Credit/Livelihoods, Education, Social Justice, Development Education and Communication. An accounts committee headed by an accountant a woman from among the DMS member manages the accounts.

Participants were asked first to talk about the changes they see as a result of the formation of DMS. After this they were asked to draw a picture of the sangathan on the large sheet of paper.

- The **central round figure** is the sangathan as they see it the women in the outer circle represents the sangathan members.
- The **inner circle** represents the Executive Committee and the house represents their office building which is nearing completion.

The group was then asked in which places/offices they feel they can now exercise influence. They began with the block level offices shown as the red or orange circle on the **lower side** divided into four sections. One section is the block level development department and the second section is the block level revenue department. Next they drew the green

rectangle depicting the forest department and the nursery raising schemes issued by the department. To the left is a diagram depicting the water department at the block level. To its left is the education system depicted by a school and children studying regularly and the teacher attending regularly due to the monitoring of the mahila mandal. Above the school diagram is the Primary Health care Centres. They have depicted a pregnant woman getting antenatal care, patients getting service free of cost as stipulated by the government. To the bottom of the sangathan in the



For this an institutional circle map (Venn diagram) of the Devgadh Mahila Sangathan (DMS) – Women's Federation of Devgadh was used. Devgadh Mahila Sangathan (DMS) is a federation of women's groups in two blocks – Devgadh Baria (Dahod district) and Ghoghamba (Panchamahaals District). This federation is now four years old but yet unregistered. An executive committee nominated by the member groups governs the Federation for a tenure of two years. ANANDI has nominated a senior programme coordinator as an honorary secretary to DMS to

extra sheet attached has a a police station which looks like a house with three doors. Above the police station is wholesale shop from where they bought the grain for the grain bank, which they then lent to the women whose families were facing acute food shortage.

To the *left* of the above picture is the local dispute resolution mechanism – the “panch” which sits under a tree in which sangathan leaders and mahila mandal leaders go to represent women's cases and ensure that the male judges listen to the woman's side carefully. Above the dispute resolution mechanism is the bank which now gives the groups credit at a low rate. Below the dispute resolution picture is the local medicine man who uses unhealthy, superstitious and exploitative practices to treat illness.

To the *right* of the sangathan an extra sheet has been attached – this depicts the various district level offices to which the DMS has access and has gone to make representations – the Collectors office depicted by several phones on his table, The District Development's office, the Elected District Panchayat head, Water Department.

In the circle above the sangathan in the extra sheet they have drawn ANANDI. Two vertical lines with rungs like a ladder connotes that there is a very special relationship between the two organisations. On asking if the small size of the ANANDI circle and the large size of the DMS circle was deliberate the women said 'yes, the DMS is larger because today if ANANDI wants to do anything in the area or with the community it cannot do without the support of DMS'. After this there was a discussion about whether they had also thought of the size of the block level offices vis-vis the DMS and the size of the District offices. They said 'yes, today we do not have to think twice about going to the block level office and we have some influence there'. At the District level they have only gone to make representations but often have been able to influence it as yet. They were asked that if in 8 years of beginning to form Mahila mandals the block offices now seem smaller than the DMS, in the next 3-5 years do they think the District offices too will become smaller? They all answered almost in unison – YES!!

Both the road journey and institutional map are very good ways of capturing a wealth of qualitative information – both 'facts' and peoples' perceptions and interpretation of the importance of the facts. Peoples' accounts of events often progress from the broad sketch of key events to detailed discussion of qualitative details, reasons etc. It is much easier to insert these additional details on a diagram than to insert them in a linear text. The group participants involved can readily give detailed feed back to other women on these diagrams and they help them to remember in

detail the discussion and analysis. As with all diagram tools however it is crucial to provide good keys to explain the symbols and to document the exercise for those who were not present and/or to aid the memory for staff who may be involved in many such exercises with many groups.

## TRAINING OF WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS

ANANDI has a number of training programmes which aim not only to increase women's incomes but also to challenge gender roles as the basis for significant and sustainable increases in women's income and control over income. This includes training women in new agricultural technologies and non-traditional crops. Women attending meetings during the Participatory Review reported with pride how they now ploughed their own or sharecropped plots and irrigated and planted new varieties of staple crops. Previously these tasks had only been done by men and single women were dependent on male relatives as and when these men had time away from their own fields. These possibilities for increasing agricultural production was also leading women to think about sustainable alternatives to labour migration and reverse the trend of declining local production, unstable household relations and fragmented communities.

A particularly innovative and successful initiative has been ANANDI's women masons training programme in Saurashtra. Attempts have been made elsewhere to train women as masons (see Wadhwa 1991) and other non-traditional occupations like the silk industry (see eg Leach et al 2000 and contrasting account in Sinha 2000). These have however often proved very problematic because training alone does not enable women to get contracts in a very gender discriminatory market in the private sector. The ANANDI experience and discussions with the women masons in the course of the Participatory Review indicate some ways forward for promoting women's entry into 'male' occupations.

In Saurashtra as in many other parts of India, women are often employed in manual labour in construction work. But the wages are very low. In this area women's daily wages were Rs50 a day compared to Rs200-250<sup>iii</sup> for a skilled mason, all of whom were men. ANANDI had been involved in a number of projects in the area which involved construction work: earthquake rehabilitation and post-earthquake house construction, construction of the Mahila Mahiti Kendra (Women's Information Centres) and sanitation programmes. In all these projects ANANDI has mobilised and trained women to manage the projects, including management of male and female labour and voluntary workers. This has had a positive impact on effectiveness of poverty targeting which has been much better in the women-managed projects than the parallel government ones.

Following these positive experiences ANANDI decided to translate this training into sustainable opportunities for women to challenge gender roles

by becoming employed in masonry work. Women were enthusiastic and forthcoming about learning mason's skills. ANANDI trained two batches of 15-16 women in masonry work with the help of Peoples' Science Institute. The trained women masons were then involved in the construction of sanitation blocks. ANANDI linked the trained women masons with other organisations for training in earthquake resistant technology for building houses to help protect against future disasters when earthquakes strike.



During the Participatory Review 10 women were interviewed. Of these 5 were landless and the rest marginal farmers and all but one were illiterate. All the women were intending to continue as construction workers. Some women had already worked together on private contracts, others were taking on more responsible jobs in contracts given to men in their households. For those women who were working jointly there had been initially some opposition – some male construction workers had come in the night and broken down the walls they had just built. But the women rebuilt the walls and put on a night watch. They knew the men in the community and negotiated with them. They said the men felt threatened but that resistance was decreasing. There was however no shortage of demand for construction work in the community and nearby towns and so the women were not causing male unemployment.

The women expected that in the long term they would be accepted in the community as skilled workers in the construction sector. They were at the moment earning Rs150 per day rather than Rs250 earned by very skilled male masons as they needed to increase their experience and establish a good reputation. Eventually though they expected to get the same amount. Much of the work of 'master' masons involved planning and supervising rather than manual work. Women had certain advantages here because they knew women's needs and priorities in housing design and there was potential for them to establish their own specific expertise on this basis.

The success of this initiative however was due not only to successful teaching of technical masonry skills (which would also need to be upgraded through work experience) but the gender and empowerment perspective and the organizational support which women received in countering resistance from men. There was significant potential for women to obtain contracts from other members of the organization. They also planned to train up other women. In the longer term ANANDI planned to use this example to encourage women's entry into other profitable areas of 'male' economic activity.

## AREA NETWORKING FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT: THE 'MELAS' OR FAIRS

A particularly innovative strategy which ANANDI has developed is the idea of 'area networking' through holding of area events or fairs 'melas'<sup>iv</sup>. The melas have proved an extremely powerful means of stimulating discussion, mutual learning and collective action between women.

The idea of fairs is not new in India. Handicraft fairs at local, state and national levels are often attended by women's organizations to sell their products, and in the process exchange (or 'borrow') design and marketing ideas. Such events have also been held in Africa. The idea to use such events for intensive mutual learning and training on an ongoing and cumulative basis, particularly around poverty and gender issues, was however new.

The first mela was held in Rajkot over a period of three days from 4th to 6th December 1999. The 16 collaborating organisations brought together over 600 women leaders from 211 'mandals' (Self Help Groups)<sup>v</sup> and NGO organizers. The various NGOs were working in different sectors like education, health, rural development or water resources. Others were working with theatre, film and design and were drawn in to assist the mandals to share their strategies in an interesting manner with a large group of women. At the mandal level intensive discussion took place to identify women's learning needs, choose representatives and generally prepare for the event. Each mandal brought a "toran" (traditional welcome wall hanging put at the entrance of the house) depicting their name and mandal.



### KEY FEATURES OF THE MELA

- ◆ Use of different visual, diagram and symbolic media for communicating ideas and information between women and women's organizations
- ◆ Lateral learning between women from different groups facilitated through discussion of their experiences using these media
- ◆ Incorporates a cost-effective training element into the lateral learning process through the various media above and involvement of skilled local resource persons and organizations
- ◆ Identifies common concerns, interests and ways forward through women sharing and discussing numbers and data gathered by themselves before the mela
- ◆ Builds networks for solidarity between women's groups from different areas
- ◆ Builds dialogue between women and invited elected officials, government and mainstream institutions as an advocacy strategy.

## ACTIVITIES FROM THE FIRST MELA

### Activity 1: Problem Matrix

Step 1 A list of issues facing poor women was drawn up after consultation with field workers and from secondary sources and drawn up as a two dimensional graph on the wall

Step 2: Each mandal representative came up to the wall and put pictured icon stickers against the problems they were facing in their villages.

### Activity 2: Recording achievements and strategies

Step 1: Ten stalls were set up where each participant was to go and get their mandal details registered. Each issue was assigned a symbol. For example a large tray of mud along with paper trees were used at the afforestation stall. Cutouts of cups and saucers to represent caste restrictions on sharing food and drink were pinned on a soft board by mandals which had overcome caste discrimination.

Step 2: As women leaders were registered each was given a badge with icon buttons representing activities/action taken by their mandal. A volunteer noted down details, using a highlighter pen to colour the symbol on the badge of the participant.

Step 3: Women then split into ten groups of 60 each, based on the color of their badges. Over the next two days as they went to each stall women constructed the road map of their work and achievements as they shared their experiences. They exchanged experiences of their struggles in taking on new roles as community leaders.

Step 4: Scoreboards were kept for savings and credit which aggregated the amounts reported by the mandals. The cumulative figures were reported in the plenary.

### Activity 3: 'We shall let our fears go'

Apart from looking at the tangible achievements of the Mahila Mandals the women shared their journey of struggle, negotiation and triumphs as they stepped out of their homes into the groups and then to government offices at taluka and district level.

Step 1: In the same group discussions facilitators used charts to document the fears shared by the women.

Step 2: At the end of group discussions, women identified the fears they had to overcome and each woman wrote one fear on a gas balloon and gathered in the open ground.

Step 3: At the sound of drums and the slogan 'beek udadishu ... himmat lavishu... ae.. ae.. gai' (we shall let our fears go and bring in strength), women collectively let go of 700 balloons symbolizing their fears. This fills the whole sky with colour and was a moment of rejoicing and great enthusiasm for everyone.

### Activity 4: Tree of Dreams

By the end of the mela women had drawn up their vision for the 21st century. The vision was that of working together, meeting each other and ending the isolation they faced.

Step 1: The women were asked to write a dream – personal or for the village or the community on to a leaf.

Step 2: Each leaf was then stuck on a panel to create a beautiful tree of women's dreams for the future.

Step 3: The huge tree of women's dreams was exhibited at the end of the mela for everyone to see.

Step 4: The mela ended with women exchanging plant saplings between mandals of different regions with the promise that they would nurture the plant saplings just as they would nurture their dreams. One day they would all grow into the kind of tree they had collectively created.

During the first two days participants discussed their problems and achievements. On the final day the theme was forward looking, identifying strategies for mobilisation and issues that required collective action beyond the village level.

As the main aim of the event was to raise awareness, exchange experiences and lead to strategies for collective action, many of the activities at the Mela were fun or educational events. The mela was also structured around a number of collective activities each of which had a product which is visual, spatial or oral to make both the discussions and outcomes accessible to everyone (See Box 14). The activities show a progression for the different issues:

- ◆ Personal to political: reinforcing values of democracy, transparency, participation
- ◆ Local to global: developing women's positive self image as actors and not only passive recipients
- ◆ From past realities to vision for the future: affirming women's multiple realities and moving from familiar to new.

The key event was production of the 'Tree of Dreams' (See Activity 4). In the plenary the experienced women's groups shared their experiences of moving from "Mandal to Maha-Mandal" or federation.

Parallel to these activities stalls encouraged exchange of experience and ideas on various issues:

- ◆ Gender Panels: a set of 14 panels developed by a local women's organization: Kutch Mahila Vikas Sanghatan, described the socialization a process by which men and women are raised differently and how they lead to the subordinate position of women in society. Debates were held on various common sayings were held here on topics such as " Women are women's enemies".
- ◆ Savings and Credit: route to self help and empowerment: A Mahila Mandal from Dwarka presented a skit showing how within eight months of initiating savings and credit activities they solved electricity problems of the village through contacting the General Electricity Board office and/or finding the fault and fixing it on their own. There was also a Panel Discussion with experts from NABARD, Department of Rural Development and Friends of

Women's World banking on linkages for savings and credit groups.

- ◆ Income Generation Activities: There were stalls where women's groups showed how they had successfully initiated income generation activities and the amount of income they were able to generate in activities like nursery raising, organic manure manufacturing, soap and agarbatti and screen-printing.
- ◆ Water: A short documentary showed how women's groups had struggled to reduce the drudgery involved in fetching water. This was used to initiate discussion facilitated by water development experts from some of the participating NGOs like PRAVAH, Utthan, and Mahiti.
- ◆ Snakes and Ladders: A large snakes and ladders board (20ft.x 20ft) was designed to illustrate what a good mandal was and the rules they should follow to keep it vibrant and active. Women then played the game with a dice.
- ◆ Health: Panels, posters and live demonstrations were used to explain the importance of health issues as an important step towards control over one's life.
- ◆ As women walked through the different stalls facilitators asked them about their experience of addressing specific issues and problems. This facilitated discussion between the women and the key experiences and positive strategies were recorded. On the final day stalls included a Mock Court to simulate women's struggle for their rights and one on strategies against alcoholism. At the end a newsletter was produced bringing together all the achievements of the different groups and listing all the resources they had accessed.
- ◆ There were also many singing and dancing events encouraging women to enjoy themselves, something which for many of them had been actively discouraged in their families because of norms of female modesty. A tribal women's drama troupe put on the play "Stree-geeta" depicting the history of women's struggles in India and another play depicting the power of Mahila Mandals in dealing with corruption in government offices and services at local levels.

## MANDAL PROBLEMS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IDENTIFIED AT THE FIRST MELA

**Savings and Credit.** 140 mahila mandals had saved a total of Rs. 9,00,389. On the strength of this capital base these mahila mandals have accessed Rs.5,22,600 from nationalised banks and have lent a total sum of Rs.11,84,010 to their own members.

**Water** 60 mandals complained of lack of proper drinking water: no source at all, source contaminated, distribution problems or broken handpumps.

**Health.** 61 mahila mandals stated that they do not have access to proper health facilities: inadequate infrastructure, services or numbers of health workers in villages. 83 mahila mandals have worked to ensure better health care in the villages

**Education:** problems of infrastructure, attitudes to girl children, irregularity of teachers attendance. 18 mandals have worked towards providing education in the village,

**Fuel and Fodder.** 1354 women from 38 mandals have raised nurseries of 5,69,916 saplings.

**Diminishing common lands.** problems of land encroachment and industrial development

**Violence against women.** 70 mandals have won cases against injustice to women.

**Alcoholism.** Although Gujarat is a dry state, alcoholism is a major problem leading to violence against women and economic ruin of a family.

**Infrastructure.** 30% of the mandals stated they they still do not have access to basic services such as road, bus or other transport, electricity or ration card.

**Employment.** there is a lack of local opportunities leading to migration and inadequate income from work. 96 mandals have undertaken some form of income generating activities such as nursery raising, embroidery, organic manure etc.

**Untouchability.** Discrimination based on caste is common. 116 mahila mandals have broken down the barriers of the untouchability and now sit together for meetings and have tea together.

Since this first event many more melas have been held on different topics in different places. All of these have involved 300-700 women covering a range of cultural, economic and political issues important to women from food security to women's role in panchayats. Planning and designing of tools specifically for the event are done over a three month period. This enables the dialogue at the village level, coordination between different NGOs and identification of key persons from the village level as resource people. In subsequent melas one of the key methodological improvements was to use participatory diagram tools and surveys to collate data from the mandals beforehand in order to increase participation of members who could not attend the event and gather more detailed information on the achievements of the groups. In ANANDI's approach women themselves are actively involved in identifying their problems and achievements. This takes place with the mandals and collated in preparation for the mela events. Even at the first mela in 1999 it was evident that not only were the groups identifying their problems, but also actively themselves seeking solutions.

## IMPACT OF THE MELAS

There has been no systematic assessment of the impact of the melas per se. It is nevertheless clear that they provide a catalyst and focus for significantly reinforcing the development contribution of ANANDI's other activities.

- At the mandal level, intra-mandal coordination and action has improved. At subsequent melas it was found that mandals themselves have taken the initiative to act locally on issues other than credit. Their interaction with government agencies has increased.
- NGOs in the region have become more active in forums/ networks addressing violence against women, women's political participation in local bodies, health. Smaller mela-type events have regularly been held by NGOs for mandals in their areas.
- Press coverage and participation of state level agencies as resource persons has led to women's concerns and development contribution getting greater visibility and respect in the wider society.

## WIDER IMPLICATIONS

ANANDI's experience shows the strength of feeling women have about the necessity to empower themselves and organise for change – for themselves and their families and communities. It also shows the potential of participatory tools to help women think through their experiences and develop strategies to address their challenges.

ANANDI's training programme shows the possibility of enabling women to enter much more lucrative male activities – countering much of the scepticism surrounding these possibilities. It is clear however that training is best where women are already employed in less skilled aspects of the same work process and have certain potential market advantages eg because of their links with female clients or specific relevant knowledge. It is also likely to be most successful when backed up by support of an organization which can counter any initial resistance. The third key factor, as with any economic activity, is a dynamic market so that women are not directly in competition with men, displacing them from work, but able to generate their own new contracts and clients.

Fairs provide a focus for intensive exchange of ideas, certain skills and information between women and developing linkages for future networking and more in-depth skills exchange between groups. Some training can be provided directly at the melas themselves through the life skills and empowerment exercises. Other more technical information can be available in the stalls in take away form. Periodic events of this type can also provide a powerful focus for ongoing reflection, investigation of eg markets and assessment of profitability of different production techniques and also economic collaboration at group level (as eg in the case of WEP above). Events can then help women exchange this information over a wider area eg on markets, gender issues and so on.

The costs of such an event are similar to the average cost for other training, per person per day. During ANANDI's events a ratio of one facilitator per 15 participants is maintained and committed funding is sought to cover at least 80% of the cost. Other costs like travel and production of tools are shared partially by the organisations and the participating groups. Costs for development of the kit, games and facilitation are decreased through reliance on volunteers: local artists and activists and committed professionals - theatre activists, song-writers, designers. The largest cost is in terms of time from various NGOs in the area and volunteers from other civil society institutions (students groups, teachers, self help group leaders/ family members).

Future plans for the mela and training include developing the PALS tools discussed in the Appendix here in a more structured and systematic way than the previous use of participatory diagrams. This will enable a much more comprehensive and strategic exchange of information at the mandal level. This will be documented at the melas as a firm base for grassroots-based advocacy. The tools will also be incorporated into some of ANANDI's other training.

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i This paper was written with assistance from the ANANDI executive: Jahnvi Andharia, Sejal Dand, Neeta Hardikar and Sumitra Thacker

ii For an account of the Road Journey Tool see Mayoux 2003 Using Diagrams (!!Insert link)

iii The Rupee exchange rate at the time of writing in December 2003 fluctuated around \$1=Rs46

iv Further details of these networking events can be found in Dand 2003.

v In ANANDI as indicated above, many of these mandal organizations involved savings and credit but this is by no means the main focus of many of them. Some mandals do not involve savings and credit at all but have been organized around other projects, local lobbying concerns or issues like gender and communal violence. In this paper the local term 'mandal' is used to differentiate these organizations from savings and credit-based Self Help Groups.