

# IRENE

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## **Make yourself SEEN! Make yourself COUNT!**

*Women working in the informal sector work and live in a huge invisible area, their work in the productive and reproductive sphere is largely unrecognised around the world. Economic, social, political and legal policy has been inefficient and exploitative for women working in the informal sector. These women are regarded as “free commodities”. The women and men present at the seminar who work with informal sector workers find them to be courageous survivors and strategists in the face of the hardships and oppression in the informal sector.*

### Report of the Seminar:

### “Organising Women Workers in the Informal Sector – Initiatives and Alternatives to Self- Employment”.

The seminar is organised by IRENE, the international network on labour and development, and the Evangelische Akademie Mülheim.

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### Introduction

Before you lies a short report of the international seminar on organising women workers in the informal sector. The event was inspiring and has led to many new initiatives and activities. The informal sector and the women and men working in it is of current interest. Too many women and men, they are the majority of the worlds workforce and their number is growing, have to earn a living without any protective measurements.

This seminar was held in a logic sequence of earlier IRENE seminars on women workers globally, especially "The Margin makes the Picture" and “To Strengthen the Struggle of Women Workers” (News from IRENE 23 & 27). The seminar reported in this article focussed on informal sector workers. All participants were related to women’s organisations, NGO's and trade unions, dealing directly with women in the informal sector. Sixty-two participants from all over the world. From Kirgystan, Mongolia and Estonia to Peru and Venezuela. From India and Korea to Togo and South Africa. Women with different backgrounds, different cultures and a different informal-sector-context talked about their experiences in their

struggle to improve the situation of women workers in the informal sector. Result is world-wide insight, put on paper in the regional action plans.

### **The pivot is visibility.**

Visibility of women workers in the informal sector is an essential condition to get them on the political agenda of trade unions, NGO's, support organisations and on the (inter)national political agenda, in order to improve labour rights and labour conditions. At the seminar visibility was also a starting point for discussing and highlighting methods of work, connecting the individual, the organisational and the political level.

During the seminar there was special attention for different forms and styles of co-operation. Participants agreed that this is an issue that needs more investment of all the support organisations. Women workers in the informal sector must get chances to learn and experiment. Women are too poor to bear the risk of a failure. Give them time, money, skills to learn to form a (kind of) co-operative in which co-operation and competition can go hand in hand. More women selling more tomatoes on the same market will not improve their situation, nor is it useful to uplift a few women.

This article ends with action plans of the different organisations present. For IRENE this seminar was one in the row to make women workers in the informal sector visible. IRENE's workfield lies in providing support and stimulating awareness. One concrete outcome, in which the experiences of participants of the seminar are an important source, is an education pack on women workers in the informal sector, which is available via email, free of costs. (write AvLuijken@irene-network.nl)

### **Strong women in a global context.**

To listen and talk was a start for co-operation at the seminar and afterwards. But focus only on the problems and needs of poor women workers. You only can build on strength. So we first looked at the many qualities women have. Long lists of positive characteristics experienced showed the strength and capacities of women workers in the informal sector:

- Women are creative, innovative, flexible, adaptable and very able to learn.
- Women have a high sense of responsibility, are hardworking, courageous and have a lot of (traditional) knowledge.
- Women are strong and caring and have many leadership qualities.
- Women are proud and have a will to survive. They are honest and efficient.

The informal sector is not static, but influenced by international restructuring processes. At the first evening a short introduction about 'the impact of globalisation on the informal sector' was given from an Indian perspective. India's opening up of the economy resulted in the elimination of protection for local products, which led to lower competition capacity and unemployment. Local industries had to face many problems. The free market came with the Structural Adjustment Programmes from the IMF; political and economic changes caused social and cultural changes. The policy of the government was directed to deregulation and liberalisation. The result is a process of informalisation of labour in the formal sector and a growing number of, especially women, workers in the informal sector.

It is important to know the economic and legal context of the informal sector in each country/region. A participant from Estonia added some facts about the situation in her region. In Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states the transition to democracy led to the loss of markets and a wave of privatisation. Unemployment increased and many people sought their luck in other countries causing a brain drain. Problems like outsourcing and subcontracting are new to this region. The informal sector is also a new phenomenon and is shaped differently than in the other major regions in the world. Many former female professions are taken over by men and women ended up working in the informal sector. Loss of state facilities like health and child care increased the burden on women. People in general have a high educational level and have many skills. But still as a consequence many doctors and technicians work as cleaners or traders. The heritage of communism left the inhabitants with no experience in organising, with the problem of adaptation to a completely new economic system and with severe cuts in social and medical services and pensions.

## Visibility, make yourself seen, make yourself count.

Visibility; a condition to start action, to organise support. But it is also a tool to work with. Some organisations started at the individual level, to build self-esteem (to be visible to yourself), to make women realise they belong to a specific group of workers etc. Others put more effort in being clear in what kind of organisation they are and for whom, to attract women workers in the informal sector to join them. Being visible to the outside world, as a woman and a worker, to give face to the organisation, to make needs and interest known is an important strategy to raise awareness, to organise support for women workers and their organisations, and to put pressure on political agendas. Reason to choose this title for the seminar.

Working groups in the garden under huge trees, on a beautiful but hot day in June were a good environment to discuss challenging questions related to a clear view of the different useful strategies; to a good insight in the resources available and the prevailing constraints (financial, human, political, information, logistical, etc.). Basic is a clear insight in and good contacts with the people/groups you work with. However, a crucial question each of us has to ask herself is "what difference does my endeavour make and how can I tell"? The effect of exchanging experiences is not only that you inform a colleague, but it reflects on your own work, which brings you a step further.

The women workers the participants focused on are: home based workers, self-employed women, street vendors, marginalised workers, day labourers, sex workers, care workers, street youth, unpaid family workers etc. These women workers share: a lack of recognition of their needs as well as of their contribution; unemployment; lack of access to training, credit, market entrance. They suffer from illiteracy and absence of adequate health services. They are exposed to violence and discrimination. And all women bear a double/triple burden. Moreover women workers in the informal sector are not politically represented. In sum the participants had to think about what support is needed. Firstly in order to improve the situation and position of the women workers in the informal sector. And secondly what is needed for empowerment to realise real social change, which is connected to the political and structural level.

The various methods used were on the table, from interest groups, awareness building, and economic assistance, to political participation, training, micro credit and savings groups. Networking, lobbying and advocacy were recognised as very important features, though not carried out by every participating organisation. It was felt that special attention is needed to develop different approaches at various levels.

A great resource was found in women's creativity and the exchange of knowledge.

Funding (external or self-funding) is not always without problems, especially when donor organisation have demands which are not in line with the own process or strategy.

The social, economic and political context being different for each and every participant led to particular strategies in local situations. However, the problems women workers in the informal sector have to cope with have so much in common that also general strategies could be distilled and per region some specific action items came forward.

All participants representing their organisations were very good in telling what more needed to be done to reach their goals set. At the seminar it was equally important to value what is being done. So direct in line with the question of 'what difference does your endeavour make?' is the question 'what do you have to offer (as an organisation), and how do you sell it?'

At this point new working groups were formed, but now along categorical lines. Trade unions, credit organisation, network organisation and NGO's dealing with advocacy, support and services, all work towards recommendations on strategies.

The trade unions of women in the informal sector (like SEWA in India) have a lot to offer and came up with strategies like: adapt democratic (union structures), work on community basis and include family members, push equality issues in the unions, train trainers to organise the informal sector, create separate unions for the informal sector, make alliances with other organisations working with the informal sector.

NGO's dealing with advocacy, support and services recognised the need of organising especially in trade groups, they function often in regions where building a trade unions would or could not be the first step. Their strategies are targeted at women workers (information, education, legal literacy) and the use of creative forms to engage women. But public awareness, organising support and advocacy towards legislation and governmental policies are also high on their lists. An enabling environment must be created.

For the credit organisations visibility to their 'clients', sometimes members, and to the public, means transparency and accountability on policy and management. Sustainability is very important for their organisations.

All groups were very clear about the need to co-operate with other organisation, coalitions need to be build, locally, nationally and internationally.

Here the strong points of networking came to the forefront: sharing information, stimulating collaboration and 'let the world know that you are there'.

Not an easy job to fulfil, for resources, time and co-ordination and the handling of the informal workers' demands, constitutes many diverse elements of the work.

But this seminar formed an enormous stimulant.

Credit, a useful tool if.....

Nearly all participants are dealing with the issue of (micro) credit. There is a general agreement with a critical article of Linda Mayoux where she reviews the positive and negative aspects of micro-finance programmes. Her main remarks are:

- Micro-finance programmes targeting women have become a major plan of donor poverty alleviation strategies in the 1990's.
- An extremely attractive vision is presented of increasing numbers of expanding, financially self-sustainable micro-finance programmes reaching large numbers of women borrowers.
- Through their contribution to women's ability to earn an income these programmes are assumed to initiate a series of 'virtuous spirals' of economic empowerment, increased well-being for women and their families and wider social and political empowerment.

And last but not least Linda Mayoux notes that there is not an automatic link between micro-finance and wider social and political activity.

The participants agreed that within the market economy thinking 'credit' is too much seen as a panacea to solve most of the problems of poor women.

The unanimous answer from all participants out of their own experience is that micro-credit programmes and saving systems as often practised now, are only sufficient for survival, not to eradicate poverty. If empowerment is the goal, micro-credit programmes should be accompanied with support services like marketing strategies, banking education and awareness raising. Micro-credit only will not empower women. The participants give several examples of situations in their countries where the micro-credit programmes failed and women were left indebted.

Access to money is important, but it is only one tool which should be accompanied with other strategies to strengthen women, and which should be accompanied especially with organising and empowering women.

## Together we are more efficient and effective.

In the informal sector many women carry out the same kind of activities. With a growing informal sector this means more competition between women. Innovation is needed in new activities, but also in additional activities. "If they are all selling tea, who is selling the sugar and the cups?"

Diversification, spreading and sharing of activities are important, but then a market survey has to be done.

For women and for the organisations which support them it is hard to invest time and resources in such a survey. Resources (financial and intellectual) are also needed to invest in (new) skill training and learning to co-operate. The problem of competition is well known, as are the difficulties to find a way out. Poor women have no financial space nor time to invest in future activities. In this respect support is sorely needed. This issue should get a much higher priority of the organisations and of the 'donor' organisations, often the financial supporters of women organisations. Space should be created to develop new activities and new ways of co-operation. Experimenting and learning!!! -> create pilot laboratories!!!

Just as much as co-operation between women workers is important so is the co-operation between the organisations which organise and support them.

Know your members and their demands, know your partners - their possibilities and limits.

## Action Plans

The aimed outcome of the seminar is making an outline of an action plan, which is in line with the aims set for this seminar (which are also the aims for the IRENE project 'Organising women workers in the informal sector):

- \* More ATTENTION for women workers in the informal sector (also at the political level)
- \* More VISIBILITY of women workers in the informal sector. "They have to get clout".
- \* Improvement of strategies to ORGANISE women workers in the informal sector.  
Organising based on solidarity is a condition
- \* Improvement of strategies to 'join and co-ordinate forces' - Invest in learning to co-operate. Competition and co-operation lead to CO-OPTION.
- \* Plans to improve the ability to organise SUPPORT "make yourself clear and known"

The action plans were written according to regions of origin of the participants. The full text is available at IRENE and will be in 'News from IRENE'.

The results of the afternoon discussions are five different lists of future plans. They list how the organisations view their tasks and chances in the context of their region. The different political, cultural and economic context influences the plans they created.

Participants from Africa wrote a very practical, common sense action plan. These women work in (small) grass-roots organisations, dealing directly with women in the informal sector. And there is a tendency that women groups are eager to build on their own power and experience and have control over their own work. The women participating expressed the importance of creating their own base for development.

In the Asian group some participants stem from bigger (network) organisation with many international links with other regions. In their action plan they deepen out strategy issues, esp. related to the governments. Asia is very integrated in the global economy, There are better facilities for communication. Networking between women groups dealing with the informal sector is more visible and they have more links with Western groups and institutions interested with the same issues.

The developments in Latin America are different. There are many women's organisation fighting for emancipation. Organising women workers in the informal sector recently became more apparent, which is also the case in the trade unions.

The fourth region to mention is Central and Eastern Europe and the former Russian states. They face historically a new phenomenon: the neo-liberal market economy. This is reflected in their action plan. The origin of their problems stem from a rapidly changing economy and society that confront women with the problem of adjustment to a market economy and the problem of a negative history in organising. The eagerness of the women coming from this region to act now is strong. Together they decided to set up a regional network called WISS NET, Women Informal Sector Supporters Network. They reached agreement on the activities this network has to perform and they set a date for the first meeting. Everyone welcomed this inspiring and promising initiative.

Europe (and the USA) is confronted with a growing informal sector, going hand in hand with growing informalisation (flexibilisation) of labour conditions. Traditional trade unions tended

to deny this reality and, consequently, have not been responsive enough. Data are needed to show that this reality is a widespread and growing development. Trade unions themselves should commission (action) research. Coverage by protective legislation is an important aim.

Below you find a compilation of the action plans made by the different regional groups. The general objective is to improve the situation of women workers in the informal sector and to increase the visibility of women working in the informal sector. The group from Central and Eastern Europe especially emphasised that the problem is not 'women'. Women are part of a process that occurs and women constitute a specific position in this process. The Asian group started with stressing the objective of recognition and valuation of women's productive and reproductive work; they also put particular emphasis on the situation (and protection) of girl-child workers.

\* **ORGANISING!** - Central in all action plans is the importance of organising women working in the informal sector. Organisation on the basis of issues which respond to the needs of the workers and with structures that are democratic and accountable. The Asian group supplements this by stressing the importance of advocacy activities and lobby. The Latin American group stresses the development of programmes to strengthen women's associations and enterprises based on solidarity and mutual co-operation.

\* **NETWORKING** - The second important theme is networking and the promotion of networking. For Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America the first focus lies on national and regional networking. Sharing experiences and creating alliances between different organisations is needed; between women's organisations but also between the formal and the informal sector. Furthermore all regions consider contact with (local) governments and international institutions important. Central and Eastern Europe expresses their need of international meetings between organisations.

\* **EDUCATION** is seen as the third way of achieving the objectives. Development of education and training programmes regarding new job skills. An important aspect of this, mentioned by Africa and Latin America, is access to information and improved communication as well as means of communication. Africa stresses the introduction and encouragement for women to use technology.

\* **RESEARCH** on the informal sector, data gathering and documentation of surveys is commonly seen as important. Asia stresses that these data should give a proper evaluation of the contribution of the informal sector to the economy. Participants from Europe stress that the labour movement should play an important role to commission research which produces real data that can be used within unions and by opinion makers. Research is needed to make women workers in the informal sector visible. Statistics should show how the informal sector is integrated them into the economic and political system.

\* **RULES AND LEGISLATION** - Most regions mention in one way or an other improvement of legislation to protect informal sector workers. Furthermore Latin America stresses the importance of national legislation complying with international conventions that include a gender perspective and are against discrimination. Asia stresses the enactment of laws and policies on the recognition and protection of women working in the informal sector, but only in combination with organising, training, education

and networking, in order to monitor the implementation of such laws and policies, to ensure that these really contribute to the empowerment of women.

Asia also suggests creating a fund for comprehensive social security of workers in the informal sector. Women coming from western industrialised countries emphasise that all women working in the informal sector should have legal protection and support and access to social benefits as their colleagues in the formal sector have.

\* CREDIT, not only micro-credit, is generally recognised as a useful instrument if it is embedded in a holistic and empowering approach. If it is not used in this way, it will lead to growing debts of women workers. Africa mentions in this respect that an important aspect of micro-credit is strengthening the market position of women's products. Central and Eastern Europe emphasises the importance of seeking alternative markets and alternatives jobs for women.

\* RAISE OF PUBLIC AWARENESS about informal sector and the position of women workers is a condition to put pressure on organisations (trade unions, political parties, NGO's and international organisations) and governments to improve their policies..

The promotion of a public debate on issues like health, labour rights, credit, external debt and gender issues is considered important.

Awareness will be the basis for SUPPORT for women workers in the informal sector and their organisations. The use of media and investigative journalism to expose the paradoxes in the economic system is essential.

All participants mention the lobby with governments (local or national) to improve policies and to create new development plans with a gender perspective.

Lobby also to put an end to privatisation of institutions for the delivery of basic services and to put pressure on financial institutions and banks to improve capital base of initiatives in the informal sector is brought forward.

And last but not least: Reaching out to International agencies like ILO and UN. In order to promoting links, to push international agencies to include a gender perspective in their policies and give special attention to women workers in the informal sector.

## Conclusion

Workers in the informal sector, and especially women workers, create the basis for the 'formal' economy and the future. Women workers in the informal sector are the cork on which the formal economy and the future floats. A women's income is used to feed her family. Women are the caretakers of the workforce, the existing and the new. Yet they are regarded as "free commodities". Assumptions behind various policies do not value nor take into account the contribution of women workers in the informal sector to the economy and society. The result is that local and national governments, international institutions and even trade unions do not provide enabling environments for initiatives to develop on the social, economic and political level and legal improvements for the informal sector..

So.....Organise! Make visible! Give attention! Create awareness! Organise support!  
Educate! Campaign! Lobby! Network! Co-operate!

The participants of this seminar will take up the plans made and prioritise issues within their different organisations and their various context.

However, they are well aware of addressing different levels in society with their action plans: International institutions; governments local and national; employers; trade unions; civil society; and donor/support organisations.

Thanks to IRENES facilitating role a platform is created. Information between the different organisations will continue to be exchanged.

## Next steps / future actions:

This process of exchange has resulted in a commitment to future action plans.

The most immediate and concrete common action will be directed to the plans of the ILO.

The ILO has placed the informal sector as the central issues on the agenda for the International Labour Conference of June 2002. Which means that an ILO document will be prepared for June 2001.

The results of this seminar and the platform created will link up with the work of WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising), a global North-South coalition of grassroots activists, academics and international policy makers that aims to empower women workers in the informal sector of the global economy.

The international networks on homeworkers (HomeNet) and streetvendors (StreetNet) and SEWA are actively involved in WIEGO.

IRENE has built up its programme on women workers in the informal sector in line with this work and will contribute to WIEGO's actions planned around the ILO policy on the informal sector.

In IRENES policy the informal sector will remain a key issue to work on. IRENE is a network organisation and as such aims to contribute to enhancing the visibility of women working in the informal sector by taking the results of the seminar and the 'development education pack' to different organisations.

The IRENE network will be further extended to include organisations working with/on women workers in the informal sector. More international 'meetings/actions' can be expected in which specific issues related to women workers in the informal sector are worked out with partner organisations, NGO's and trade unions, researchers, activists and policy makers.

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