

# ORGANISING FOR MENTAL HEALTH

*Thousands of women in the rural reserves of South Africa are being given long term drug therapy as psychiatric out patients. We spoke to ten women, half of whom have been hospitalised as psychiatric patients, and who are receiving drug treatment. They have recently formed a women's club with motivation from a local social worker who sees their mental health problems as stemming almost exclusively from the stressful socio-economic conditions these women have to endure. Similarly, she sees the solution coming from a relief of these stresses and thinks that group work and community organisation are part of this solution. She rejects drug therapy, accompanied in dire cases by food rations in the form of 'poor relief' as anything but stop gap, crisis control measures with no long term benefits for either the mentally ill woman or the community to which she belongs.*

*Here is part of the discussion we had with this group, translated from Sotho.*

Q . : How did your group start?

Mrs P : One of our members went with the social worker to another village where the women have had a club for a long time. She was very impressed with the food in the gardens of those women, so she came home and told us we should also start a club and grow food for our children.

Q : Mrs M, why did you go to the social worker?

Mrs M : It was that time when I came from Grootboek hospital. I slept for 2 months at Grootboek, then when I came home I found my children were living with no food at home, just asking some food from my neighbours, so I went to the social worker to ask help with buying food.

Mrs K : (social worker) When Mrs M. was admitted to Groot-hoek, she could take only this small baby with her - the one you see here which is now about 5 months old. The other children were left at home to look after themselves. There was no assistance from the government or anywhere for them. That's why these other women had to look after them. They gave them food, money for school, everything. You know, Mrs M. did not know what was happening to her children while she was in hospital. She just had to stay there for two months worrying whether her children were managing at home. Then when she came, she found that her neighbours had been helping the children.

Then she came to see me because she was desperate - there was no food from the fields, there was no money because she is the breadwinner in the family. She told me that usually she goes to work on Schoeman's farm (former Minister of Agriculture) but now since she has been sick, she had been staying at home. I wondered what I should do to help this woman. Usually I don't like poor relief ' it keeps you alive for today but tomorrow you can starve - so I didn't see that as a solution. I suggested to Mrs M. that she talk to her neighbours, several of them are struggling with similar problems, and see if we could not form a womens group which could do things such as buy vegetable seeds together in bulk, then work as a group on each others gardens. I saw that as a possible long term solution to some of the difficulties these women were having - if they could co-operate and have a joint interest, it would help them to overcome the frustrations and despair which made them be admitted to Groot-hoed and treated as depressive psychotics. They just give them injections, pills and what not, then when they are a bit calm, they discharge them, send them back to the very home conditions which drove them into this condition in the first place. They know, they say people are mad, but it's mostly that they are suffering terrible burdens from living in these barren, dry places with no employment possibilities, no income, children and so on, that they just can't stand it. As a social worker in the rural

areas, almost each and every day you find one or two of these cases at your office. What can you do?

Mrs R : It's good that we have made a club, because we know that if one of us goes to hospital, others will be looking after her children.

Q : How many of you have been to hospital?

Mrs R : You mean to Groothoek?

Q : Yes

Mrs S : We are five. Others also go, but from the members of our club, we are five.

Q : Do you also get treatment at the local hospital?

Mrs M : Yes, some others go every month for injections, others get only tablets. They say we must take those tablets every day otherwise we'll do funny things.

Q : What do you do together in your club?

Mrs P : We are growing vegetables and making fences for the gardens from aloe branches because we haven't got money for wire. We will work together more when our work in the fields is finished. We are still working hard in the fields.

Q : What do you grow in the fields, and how much land have you got?

Mrs M : I've got only this field we are sitting in. It is 7 acres but because of lack of money, another rich man ploughs for me, then I give him half of what I grow. He ploughs then I've got to look for my own seed - I just ask seed from anybody who can spare some.

Q : Don't you keep seeds from the last harvest?

Mrs M : I did keep seed from last year, but they became cloud-ed with ants, so they were useless. Then I just

asked some mabele (sorghum) seed from anybody and some mealie seed, and planted them.

Q : What do you do with the grain you harvest?

Mrs M : I grind it with a stone, then make porridge for my children. Sometimes, I also get merogo (wild spinach) from the field. But since we came to this place, we do not get good harvests. We used to live on the other side, but they said we must move and come to live here. Then, after we moved, my husband died, so I've got nobody who can help me. My children are still at school.

Q : How many children have you got?

Mrs M : They are five; the first-born is a boy doing Form 2, next is a girl - she is 15 years, born 1967. She is staying with a school teacher in Johannesburg as a baby sitter. She is not attending school, she just looks after the children of the school mistress. That mistress from this place, then she saw that I was struggling with my children, so she said I must give my daughter to her to go to Johannesburg. She said she was going to send her to school. Now when my daughter came home at Christmas, she gave her R20, but my daughter said she was not attending school. She is looking after the small children of that mistress every day without wages. But what can I do because I've got no money?

Then, the third-born is a boy of 12 years, doing Std. 1. The other two are here with me in the fields - this one is a boy of 4 years and this one is a girl - she's 5½ months. After my husband died, another man told me he wanted to marry me, but when I got this baby he ran away.

Q : How do you think that working together in the club can help you all to solve some of the problems you have?

Mrs M : When we work together we can talk and then the work goes quicker and it is less tiring. Also when, you've

got problems, maybe the others can help you. The trouble is we are all new to this place. We come from different places. My home is far away, then I came here with my parents five years ago. They said we must move from our home because they say they are going to make some big farms there. I think that's why I became sick because it's not good to go to a new place.

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## **WOMEN AND MENTAL HEALTH: A COMMENT**

In the last issue of Critical Health we argued that so-called "mental illness" comes about as a consequence of the social conditions under which we are forced to live. We saw that working-class people experience poor working conditions and inadequate living standards as a result of low wages; and that this causes a great deal of mental suffering and breakdown.

The discussion with Lebowa women above shows that mental health is also a social and political issue in the poverty stricken and underdeveloped areas of South Africa. The hardship which these people suffer is on two levels: as women, and as the "forgotten people" of South Africa's bantustans.

All women experience the kind of pressures which make them prone to mental breakdowns. We must realise that this is not the result of female hormones, but is directly related to the social role and position of women in society. Women are oppressed in the home and at work. Society expects women to be passive, to repress their anger and frustration, and to bear the burden of having