



TRAC

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Transvaal Rural Action Committee

RURAL WOMEN MAKE THEIR VOICES HEARD



Women learn how to wrap strips of plastic around grass to make baskets, at the Rural Women's Workshop held in November 1991.

Pic: Gill de Vlieg

More than 120 women from 26 communities throughout the Transvaal and Northern Cape gathered for a historic meeting of the Rural Women's Movement in Sekhukhuneland, drawn together "because of our shared history of suffering because of apartheid, land policies, forced

removals and incorporations".

At the biggest meeting yet of the Rural Women's Movement (RWM) held at the remote northern Transvaal mission of Lobethal in November 1991, there was festive air amidst the serious

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MaTshepo Khumbane of EDA *Pic: Gill de Vlieg*
 teaches women the trench gardening method of
 of growing vegetables.

work of the organisation.

HISTORY

The Rural Women's Movement formed in 1990 (see TRAC Newsletter No. 17) is unique in that its membership is exclusively rural and offers village women's committees the opportunity to discuss and campaign around common concerns. Water, access to land, education, child labour and traditional limitations on women's status were voiced as central issues at meetings of the Rural Women's Movement held during 1990 and 1991.

CONSTITUTION

The constitution which was adopted in November aims to "create forums for rural women to unite against oppression, to demand that women have equal rights to land, to encourage women to be self-reliant, independent and crea-

tive, to get resources to develop their areas which would improve their daily lives and to work for the abolition of child labour."

SHARING SKILLS

The Executive of the Rural Women's Movement designed the workshop so that it was not just speeches and talking. Women spent the first morning teaching each other handcraft skills. Women from different communities brought examples and materials of their products and taught each other how to make mud pots, baskets woven from reeds and plastic, traditional dolls from wood and beads and matchstick decorations. Veteran rural fieldworker, Tshepo Khumbane from the Environmental and Development Agency (EDA) showed women the trench garden method of growing vegetables and members of the Black Sash demonstrated the energy saving method of cooking in a "wonder box".

WOMEN'S PROJECTS

Thoko Ruzidzo from Hivos' (Dutch human rights and development funding organisation) Zimbabwe office discussed with the women the strengths and weaknesses of women's projects from her experience in Africa. She warned of the dangers of relying on small self-help groups for income. Thoko talked about the difficulties of competing with large factories to make goods cheaper than those in the shops. The women in groups "are not doing this work full-time. They work only a few times each week while the factories are spending every minute of every day



A small group discusses *Pic: Gill de Vlieg*
 the constitution of the Rural Women's Movement.



TRAC fieldworker MamLydia Kompe trying to encourage rural women to speak and be more assertive at the November workshop.

Pic: Gill de Vlieg

benefit the women in other ways. Women acquire skills (like sewing), they empower each other by discussing common problems and they give rise to strong women's structures like the Rural Women's Movement. On one of the evenings during the workshop, women donned traditional dress and performed dances which told stories of their communities' struggles and celebrations.

EXECUTIVE TAKES LEAD

The executive structure of the RWM, which has representatives from the Eastern, Western and Northern parts of the Transvaal has been meeting during 1991 to discuss ways of strengthening the new organisation. They identified their own problems, as rural women, of lacking the confidence to play leadership roles and have asked TRAC to design a training programme for them. Despite their initial apprehension, members of the executive planned and ran the entire workshop successfully.

The meeting gave the executive a mandate to meet with other organisations to promote the concerns of rural women. The priority for 1992 will be to strengthen the network of rural women's groups. It was resolved that executive members should visit village women's groups and help them get the resources they needed. It was also agreed that the women themselves must initiate contact with other groups and give assistance where this was possible.

In their deliberations about the way forward, delegates said that rural women should be part of the drawing up of a new constitution for South Africa. The executive was asked to find out about money set aside for the development of rural areas and how this was to be allocated. At the end of the meeting it was resolved that the executive should "be the eyes and ears for us about women's issues and initiatives around the country" because unless "rural women are making their voices heard now, they will be excluded".

CONSTITUTION OF THE RURAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The constitution consists of aims, composition/constituency, meetings and executive structure and duties.

PREAMBLE

Rural women from communities in N. Cape and Transvaal came together because of shared history of suffering because of Apartheid, land policies, forced removals and incorporation.

AIMS

1. Create forums for rural women to unite against oppression.
2. Demand that women have equal rights to land.
3. Encourage women to be self-reliant, independent and creative.
4. Women should have a say in political matters at a national level and in our communities.
5. Women should have access to literacy, adult education and skills training to improve their lives.
6. Rural women need resources to develop their areas which would improve their daily lives.
7. Bring rural and urban women closer, and promote respect of rural women by their urban sisters.
8. Work for the abolition of child labour and the right of children on farms to schooling.
9. Take up the issues around women's legal status and social welfare (including matters such as pensions, disability grants, maintenance and women's rights over child bearing).

COMPOSITION/CONSTITUENCY

1. The Rural Women's Movement is open to all oppressed rural women who wish to join our struggle for women's rights.
2. The Rural Women's Movement must be able to reach all women in rural areas, and particularly women living on white farms.

MEETINGS

1. There should be one general regional meeting every year. Sub-regions should meet twice a year.
2. The executive should meet at least 3 times a year.
3. All delegates attending general meetings from groups that are part of the Rural Women's Movement will have voting powers.

EXECUTIVE STRUCTURE

1. Elections for the executive should happen at the annual general meeting by show of hands.
2. The executive will be comprised of 12 people elected for three year terms of office.

EXECUTIVE DUTIES

1. Give report back after meetings.
2. Hold local meetings in their areas and strengthen women groups.
3. Encourage women to develop themselves in projects and teach each other skills.
4. Encourage area meetings and to link each other regionally.
5. Planning of activities/meetings.
6. Develop leadership skills in the Rural Women Movement.