

***BUILDING GENDER EQUALITY IN URBAN LIFE***

**GLOBAL GRASSROOTS STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN'S  
COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP**

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**Background**

The Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA) were designed and initiated by members of the Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE) and conducted in cooperation with Groots International (Grassroots Organizations Organizing Together in Sisterhood) and the Huairou Commission. GWIA is a truly global methodology to secure the rich knowledge of grassroots women's groups worldwide and to make it visible to mainstream partners. Groups contributing to GWIA come from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, and North America.

**The GWIA Approach**

The Grassroots Women's International Academy aims at making the work of grassroots women both visible and influential in public policy and practice. It does so by enabling the creation and reproduction of a body of knowledge owned, nurtured, and replenished by grassroots women. The GWIA format includes opportunities for peer learning as well as for scaling up of grassroots practices. It is designed in a way that creates space for horizontal reflection and collective analysis of what is happening at the grassroots level. It is a place for community leaders and movement builders to meet and exchange experiences, in order to harvest and frame grassroots knowledge from their own perspective. Conditions for replication and transfer are analyzed and linked to mainstream debates in a strategic way.

GWIA is a methodology for harvesting the knowledge grassroots women's groups have gained by improving everyday life conditions for their families and communities. GWIA provides targeted spaces to grassroots innovators, particularly women, who often lack prominent spaces and opportunities — taken for granted by professionals — to articulate and share their experiences and develop the tools to disseminate them. The experiences of local women's groups often are not documented in the usual circuits that disseminate global information. Their practices are more vulnerable to being disappropriated by mainstream actors, who are better quipped with packaging and dissemination tools. Formats like the GWIA are needed for grassroots groups to claim their knowledge and to disseminate and expand their practices in their own name.

**Obstacles to the Harvesting of Grassroots Knowledge**

The fact that our world experiences persistent problems with poverty and unsustainable development, despite abundant natural and informational resources, points to the fact that there is something wrong with our mainstream knowledge systems. There is something wrong with the way knowledge is generated, accessed, controlled, and used in our societies.

A structural flaw in mainstream education and knowledge-building systems is that grassroots expertise and knowledge most often is lacking. Grassroots groups often are already practicing solutions, where others are debating theories. These practices, however, generally are not considered when resources are being distributed. By excluding grassroots women and ignoring, under-resourcing, distorting, or diluting their practices, a wealth of highly needed expertise is wasted. Many academic, institutional, and political arrangements manage to overlook and

abstract from what is really happening on the ground. This is quite amazing, considering the fact that it is there, that all practical knowledge needs to be implemented. It is where the ultimate answers and tests of ideas and theories is to be found.

A major obstacle to incorporating grassroots perspectives and know-how in public decision-making lies in the fact that they often stay local. Much of grassroots wisdom is held in places so highly dispersed, it is difficult for others to obtain, thus entering the channels of public decision-making very infrequently. GWIA stimulates a process where grassroots groups engage in translating their practical knowledge into something that can be used in education and policy.

## **Selected Results of GWIA**

### ***Community Building***

What characterizes grassroots women's work worldwide is its focus on community building. At the heart of grassroots efforts and strategies is the intent to reweave, strengthen, and reinvent community ties and community bonding. Globalization and its all-encompassing market orientation has heavy consequences on the quality of social relationships, and on the social and spiritual life of communities. Social cohesion and sustainable social networks are increasingly at risk. Neighborhoods are becoming individualized, anonymous, and alienated.

Central aspects of grassroots women's activities include bridging diversity, developing strategies of integration, and nurturing everyday life democracy. Whether it is called a collective, a center, a sangha (India), or a yum (Africa), grassroots women's efforts revolve around creating community space for the development of solidarity and joint problem-solving.

Even on issues of housing or savings and credit, the grassroots approach is not restricted to the practical things on which they focus, like bricks and mortar or money. The real emphasis is on how these activities can help the community to grow, develop, and transform.

### ***Community Economy***

The grassroots emphasis on community also applies to economic initiatives and activities centered around income-generation and livelihoods. Grassroots women's strategies for the creation of economic assets and resources differ from the more individualistic career-oriented approaches of mainstream society. Economic activities are linked to the creation of collective assets and the development of the community. Economic empowerment links the strengthening of individual economic literacy and financial self-reliance to improving the economic scope of action for whole collectives, communities, and regions.

By building on local skills and collective resources, the entire community is strengthened as a sustainable way out of poverty. The basis for self-sufficiency is built by engaging community enterprises in the development process.

### ***Community Knowledge***

Grassroots women's groups often explore the knowledge and expertise coming from community traditions. This constitutes a very different approach to knowledge-building than mainstream knowledge systems, which tend to base expertise on scholarly credits and professionalism. Mainstream knowledge systems are very often more about controlling and packaging knowledge than about testing if it really works on the ground.

Grassroots groups have access to valuable knowledge and expertise that is often hard to obtain. They usually have precise and accurate information on their communities. You can only solve problems when you know them. Real knowledge is a prerequisite to real solutions. Adequate and accurate information is the basis for problem-solving strategies that really work.

Much money has been spent uselessly and many projects have gone wrong because they neglected to consult the people on the ground in order to gather an authentic picture and understand a situation well. Grassroots women's groups are important and resourceful partners because of the simple fact that they really know what is going on in human settlements.

### **Health**

Health is an important issue for grassroots women's initiatives. Home hygiene, educational campaigns, and preventive measures against diseases are key areas of grassroots activity. Mobilizing community involvement and traditional expertise in relation to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is central to grassroots community organizing in Africa. In many cases grassroots groups are rediscovering and learning to trust traditional medicine practices that are available in their cultural traditions. The long-term approach to health, characterizing grassroots communities, involves exploring healing techniques and cures that people can apply for themselves and integrate into their daily lives. They focus on how to strengthen the immune system and the innate healing forces of the body. These efforts strengthen a preventive approach to health care.

### **Safety**

In a world where violence is often targeted towards women, the issue of safety plays an important role in women's organizing. Women's groups worldwide are developing strategies against domestic violence and assault in public spaces. This involves new principles of urban planning, as well as encouraging the community at large to take responsibility for preventing violence. Increasingly, women's groups have moved from handling the problem themselves, to getting municipalities, law enforcement agencies, and other mainstream players to deal with it. Fear and feeling unsafe are major obstacles to the empowerment of women. Enabling women to feel safe is a prerequisite to citizenship.

### **Housing and Security of Tenure**

Affordable housing for all is a universal right, a basic quality of civilization. Worldwide the problems of pavement dwellings, slums, and homelessness are increasing. Affordable housing is being torn down in the name of economic development. In many areas, the threat of eviction and demolition is a constant trauma for the urban poor. Grassroots groups are organizing to create shelter for the poor.

Women are often at the forefront of tenants' associations and slum dwellers' organizations. As homemakers, they have a keen knowledge of what kind of structures and spaces are needed to serve basic needs. Experience shows that housing that works for women and children most likely works for everyone.

Not having legitimate housing in many instances connects to not being able to claim citizens' rights. These can include such things as rationed foods, municipal health care, infrastructure and services, police protection, and voting rights or other benefits of citizenship. The politics of housing is connected to the politics of citizenship.

In many instances women's access to land is essential to their housing as well as their income and livelihood needs. Without security of tenure it is difficult for vulnerable groups to acquire and use land resources. Grassroots women's groups are applying holistic strategies that connect the

distribution of land to the development of supportive infrastructure to make sure the land can be used to produce food and other vital resources.

### **Governance**

The culture of politics and government in general marginalizes grassroots women's voices. Institutional arrangements are often hostile to grassroots women's participation. If there is no institutional arrangement to make sure that grassroots women's voices are included and that they count equally, then more often than not, they will go unheeded.

Constitutional amendments, affirmative action, and gender quotas have proved insufficient to truly integrate women into public policy decision-making on an equitable basis and to enter their concerns and priorities into governance. Capacity-building tools for women do not always result in women actually claiming their potential of influence and power. Grassroots women's strategies address the reasons why training and legal equality frameworks often fall short.

Grassroots strategies of governance create a favorable environment for grassroots women's participation and advocacy. Claiming physical and reflective space has proved a vital prerequisite to engendering local governance and to enabling women to meet and strategize collectively. Space allows them to mirror their skills and competencies, to learn as a group, and to formalize and sustain their involvement in local development beyond short-term volunteerism. Other conditions include creating support systems like childcare facilities, safe transportation, compensation for time invested, as well as personal support in the forms of community consultations and leadership coaching.

### **Women's Leadership**

Women's leadership is becoming one of the key developmental issues. Communities are increasingly choosing women as leaders, because they tend to be more effective. Women's leadership tends to operate on an all-inclusive and team-oriented basis. Everyone's needs and contributions are taken into account. Structures tend to be flexible and fluid and less bureaucratic. Women's leadership often results in the benefit of the whole community. It is most often based on solid knowledge of the community, as women deal first-hand with the everyday issues of life. Under women's leadership, resources are more likely to reach those who need them the most. Excluded groups like mothers and children, who have been confined to the private sphere, gain a voice and access to public participation. There is often a concern for the living environment and the conditions for future generations, which leads to long-term considerations and to an emphasis on conflict resolution. The culture of care gains social value and is reintegrated into public and collective commitments.

### **Partnerships**

Scaling-up grassroots practices requires an enabling environment that supports their replication and impact on decision-making. Part of what creates an enabling environment is effective and supportive partnerships. Creating a wide spectrum of alliances and building partnerships with many stakeholders is a crucial element of making grassroots women's strategies successful.

Grassroots women's groups identify with being problem-solvers in their own right and strive for autonomy. This requires a redefinition of the role of institutions and professionals. Mainstream partners need the courage to develop from being the ones teaching and defining capacity-building, to engaging in principled and equitable partnerships.

This process of partnership-building can be supported by developing a clear definition of mutual contributions, roles, and responsibilities. These must be based on respective skills, resources,

and opportunities, especially when interaction and dialogue are a long-term and on-going process. Mediation and support structures often prove a necessary element of bridging cultural, language, and power gaps in partnerships. Last but not least, sustainable partnerships are reinforced by defining common interests and interfaces, and by identifying the win-win situations. Part of that involves getting very clear on the non-negotiable principles and values.

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