

Chapter IX

Organisations in the Services of Women Workers of Informal Sector

In the hill areas of Darjeeling district, as discussed in the earlier chapters, the growing informal sector activities like the homebased production units such as knitting of woollen garments, weaving of carpets, tailoring, embroidery works, paints and patch works etc. along with service works such as domestic service, road and building constructions and the independent petty trade in the urban areas have absorbed the bulk of women workers. The majority of women workers in these occupations suffer from social tensions of insecure common law marriage, bigamy, desertions, male alcoholism and in some cases physical assaults too. In spite of all these, they are compelled to join economic activities and shoulder the responsibility of the household works and child care. Many women although not widowed or destitute are found to be the main food providers to the dependents because their husbands are either casually employed or do not contribute fully to family income. But the social attitude of the male-dominated society has been so developed that in spite of their equal contribution in the development of society, culture and civilisation their role seems to be less recognised. In real life, these women of informal labour market are very weak and are ill-treated in the family and in the society as well. It is the general picture of these workers everywhere in India.

To help them gain their status and establish themselves as the economic agents of equal importance of their male counterparts, their mobilisation is of utmost importance. And this can be done through their own organisations which are very rare in our country. Despite tremendous problems, poor women

workers at various corners of the country have slowly begun to organise to cooperatively improve their conditions and treatment within their house, the market and the community. Side by side, voluntary organisations have also come up in the country to utilise their experiences in mobilising and educating the women workers and also to help implement the various plans and programmes meant for them as announced by the govt. time to time. This chapter makes an attempt to highlight the role of a few important women's organisations of our country which can be the examples in the direction of organising the large number of exploited women of the informal sector in our study area. In this connection, we would also evaluate the role played by the govt. organisations and a few non-govt. organisations devoted to the upliftment of the status of women workers of both the rural and urban areas in the hills of Darjeeling district.

9.1 : A Few Important Organisations Solely Meant for Women Workers in India

I. Working Women's Forum (WWF) - WWF in South India has become interesting development model for the country as a whole for several reasons : first its size and rapid rate of growth at very low funding levels; second its grass root character and the absence of elite women, with poor women taking an organising and leadership roles; third its exclusive women focus and stringent inter caste ideological stand; and lastly, its primary emphasis on income generating activities rather than on social welfare services.¹ The idea for WWF arose from the frustrations of a few women political party workers in Madras, who eventually became the organisation's founders. In the process of mobilising poor women for political rallies, the leaders observed the low economic and social status of women and noted that the govt. programmes are too minimum to uplift their position in the society. Tired of asking for women's political support, yet

failing to provide them with any return, Mrs. Jaya Arunachalam, a noted women politician, left the women's front of the congress party and brought together several co-workers in order to build a truly responsive women's organisation based on self participation with leadership coming from the poor women themselves.² The result was the WWF. The Madras base of the organisation was started with 800 members in 1978 and by now it has nearly 50000 self employed petty traders and producers, lace makers, bidi workers, food vendors and homebased producers with an extended network to the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

The forum avoiding contacts with political parties, seeks to empower women at home and in the community through the exclusive mobilisation of theirs. In order to overcome the barriers to the mobilisation of women caused by the divisions of caste, religion and politics, the forum has taken a strong anti caste position and encourages integration among different castes and religious communities in the composition of neighbourhood loan programmes. Also worthy of credential is that under its encouragement, the entire loan programme, training and education activities are operated and controlled by the women themselves.³

The unique of its all activities is its loan programme. Under the loan programme, the organisation acts as an intermediary between women workers and the nationalised banks in securing loans for business investment purposes. The loan programme has resulted in a significant number of jobs for unemployed women, in the transition of a large number of low paid piece-rate workers to a more remunerative self employment and in substantial increases in the earnings of women traders previously exploited by money lenders or middlemen creditors.

Examples of a few important loan programmes undertaken by

the Forum are as follows. In Dindigul, 500 landless women have received Forum loans and a govt. subsidy to purchase milk buffaloes. Previously the women were under-employed as seasonal agricultural labourers earning Rs. 60-80 per month. Now, after the loan programme these women earn a stable monthly income of Rs.160-200.⁴

In Vellore, women's access to low interest credit through the Forum has enabled *bidi* rollers to purchase materials directly and by pass three layers of middlemen who each pilfer a portion of the contracted supply. Instead of earning Rs 5. 50 per day under contract system, they are now earning Rs 7. 50 per day.⁵ In Adirampattinam, access to Forum credit has eliminated the dependence of fisherwomen on middlemen fish suppliers who charge high interest rates and weigh fish falsely. The women fish marketers are now able to purchase fish directly from the seashore and obtain a high profit.⁶ In Bangalore, *agarbatti* workers have utilised their loan money received through the Forum to bypass middlemen suppliers and purchase their inputs more cheaply through bulk orders, thus increasing their earning potentials.⁷

Thus WWF, through its marvellous work, has become a leading organisation in the country in mobilising the women workers and helping them to come out of the chain of obstacles in various informal sector activities.

II. Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) - Another organisation of women workers of informal sector that has established itself to be a pioneer in injecting the determination, coordination and self respect in them is SEWA. Initially started in Ahmedabad, under the leadership of Ela Bhatt, the general secretary at present, its area of functioning has extended to the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. The target group of the women workers that SEWA gives priority in

the field of organisation are the street vendors, domestic servants, papad makers, vegetable vendors and so on. Its role is not only confined to an association which helps in arbitration on matters related to their jobs, SEWA helps in the establishment of alternative economic structures such as cooperatives, schemes for functional literacy and credit & saving facilities through the Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank.⁸

SEWA believes that struggle is an essential part of development. In the process of development, there are many cases when injustice has to be effectively opposed, struggled against. When a policeman beats and kicks a helpless vegetable and fruit vendor, it has to be opposed. When an employer makes garment-stitch-labour work for 10 hours a day and earn only a minimum, a struggle has to be launched. When a *bidi* worker dies without any medical treatment, a voice has to be raised for them. When a cart puller breaks her legs in a street accident, someone must be held liable.⁹ And in all such cases everywhere SEWA has reached to help the women workers, in the right direction. Very recently, to stop the police atrocities on the poor street vendors of Ahmedabad, after much discussion, SEWA decided that since the root of the problem was the vendors' illegal status, SEWA will try to get licenses for the vendors.¹⁰

SEWA has also kept itself free from any political control over it. Over the years, side by side of the struggle for women workers, it has succeeded in receiving the grants and aids from the govt. institutions and at the same time, it has made the arrangements for supplying the small women entrepreneurs with credit. It has undertaken projects to impart vocational training to them. SEWA organises workers' education classes for vegetable vendors, teaching them simple accounting procedures to supplement their sharp intuitive calculating abilities.¹¹ SEWA thus has indicated that with certain amount of direction, organisational

skill and plenty of determination, women are able to bargain for better wages as well as learn to save in the cooperative bank.

III. Hamal panchayat—This is a typical women's organisation of Pune. The women coolies of Pune city are known as "Hamals". They are generally involved in the transportation of goods by carrying head loads or pushing handcarts from railway wagons to godowns and from godowns to shops as well as to the residence of customers. In addition to carrying of goods, they are responsible for sorting, grading, weighing and arranging goods and repairing gunny sacks used for transportation.¹² This particular set of women workers are the lowest paid and suffer from "utter destitution and starvation".¹³

With the objective of bringing these exploited hamals together so that they can bargain for higher wages and thus fight for their existence, their organisation called "Hamal Panchayat" was formed in 1970. Although, the panchayat has not been so successful to uplift the status of its women members, the hamals have loyalties to their leadership. The hamal panchayat has succeeded in introducing the wage standardisation, at least of the hamals. A minimum rate has also been fixed by the association. The members do not expect to benefit directly from its activities but they are happy to know that there is an organisation to fight for their rights. The existence of an organisation of their own, thus gives mental strength for the continued fight for their existence.¹⁴

IV. Domestic Servants' Organisations --- Domestic service all over the world has been considered to be a job meant solely for women and accordingly it has absorbed large number of women. These servants are subject to a variety of exploitations in this sector starting from low wages to mal-treatment by the employer to the mostly untold stories of sexual harassment. In view of their increasing demand and the deteriorating employer-

employee relation in the cities like Delhi, Calcutta and Madras, voluntary organisations have been set up to deal with the up-coming problems. Few such organisations working solely for the women domestic servants are as follows.

a. Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum - A new phenomenon in the city life of Delhi is the creation of Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum (DDWWF). It has 1500 members till date and it runs three centres in Delhi, members of which meet every Sunday to discuss problems faced by the member domestic servants. Each of these centres has a coordinator who meets the would be employees, interviews them, assess their financial position and then gives them suitable household. The Forum has been able to arrange for a weekly holiday for the maids and only 8 hours of work everyday. The Forum also tells the maids what their rights are and what kind of legal action they can take in case of harassment by the employers.¹⁵

b. The Religions of Mary Immaculate, Delhi - It is, in fact, a welfare organisation for the maids of Delhi. The institute acts as an employment agency. Besides stepping in to resolve problems of sexual abuse or the maids not getting along with employers, the institute also negotiates salaries for the maids and gives them vocational training classes in English conversation and typing to the domestic servants of Delhi.¹⁶ Such training to the would be domestic servants has proved to be very useful as this would increase their capabilities.

c. The Housemaids Service Home, Madras - This home at Madras imparts three months training to its members before they are considered suitable employees. During this period, they are taught how to conduct themselves, how to deal with the employers and how to operate modern household gadgets. After the training, they are employed with the 4000 odd registered employers. The home negotiates the salaries for the maids and for the first few

months, they are asked to deposit their salaries with home, which in turn deposits them in bank accounts in the maids' names.¹⁷ The home, thus, serves the interest of both the employers and the employees.

d. Helpful Hands, Calcutta - Gayatri Chopra, a famous air hostess is the organiser-cum-chairperson of the agency, Household Hands at Calcutta. In view of the increasing crimes occurred through the maid's help in Calcutta, Helpful Hands was started with to protect the interest of both the employer and the employee maids. It has 200 plus registered servants in its jurisdiction. A maid servant who wants to become a member is required to get some form of identification (ration card, landlords' rent receipts etc.). The identities are verified by the local police and the persons registered. They are then placed in various categories such as cooks, general maids, part-timers etc. and helping hand makes sure that they get employment in areas which suit the individual servant's requirement and they are placed accordingly as per their abilities and the budget of the employers.¹⁸

e. Pune Household Maid Servants Union-All the four organisations above work for the betterment of the maids but they are not the unions of their own. Pune Household maid servants union is the only union of women domestic servants in the country. This was set up in 1991 under the banner of Lal Nishan party and at present has a 3000 odd strong members. They had even organised two hartals, when one of their members was fired for being absent from work for one day. After the agitation, the maid was taken back by the employer. The union has worked out a charter of demand which are being followed up by the employers in Pune. Their demands include an increase of Rs. 30 to Rs. 50 a year to neutralise the inflationary effect, a minimum wage of Rs. 20 for per sweeping and mopping one room and Rs. 30 per person

for washing clothes and utensils, besides a yearly bonus.¹⁹

All these organisations and the agencies although have separate entities, they have some common goals and all have played crucial role in mobilising and educating the women workers of the lowest social strata by addressing critical economic needs and supporting feminist and human rights issue. Accordingly, they have succeeded in building up leadership and self confidence among poor women and brought visible changes in women's treatment and progress in the community. With more and more domestic help realising that they are finally getting a better salary, it does not come as a surprise that most of them have become upwardly mobile. Also the standard of living of these maids in the big cities have improved. In a country like ours it is only through such organisation that the workers of the informal sector can be made aware of their duties, rights and importance.

9.2 : The Role of Govt. and Non-govt. Organisations in Mobilising Women Workers of Informal Sector in Darjeeling Hills

Darjeeling hills in the state of West Bengal although caters a large informal labour market for the poor women, it still suffers from the virtual non-existence of women's organisations as such. The concept of trade union among the women workers of the informal sector has not developed at all. In fact, trade union movement in the informal sector is very difficult to organise. Here the difficulties arise mainly because of the following reasons;

i) There is no permanent work force in any particular informal occupation. The workers always try to move from a lower to upper hierarchy of the occupation structure in the informal sector.

ii) Workers do not have common interest as the nature of

the work is not the same in various occupations.

iii) Most of the workers being less educated, the awareness to form a union is lacking among them.

iv) The workers of the informal sector do not have the spare time.

v) Trade unions in the formal/organised sector have indulged in so much of violence that the workers of informal sector, particularly the women, have a strong distaste for trade union.

However, since the inception of the sixth plan in the 80's, special measures have been launched by the govt. to uplift the status of the women workers especially of those working in the informal sector. A few agencies have been set up for the execution and implementation of the programme measures. Apart from these, some non-govt. organisations (NGOs) within their limited capacity have played appreciable role in promoting the socio-economic development of the women workers of both the rural and urban areas of Darjeeling hills. The following are a few govt. agencies in our study area serving the women workers of informal sector; engaged mainly in weaving, knitting and tailoring.

I. West Bengal Comprehensive Area Development Corporation (WBCADC) - WDCADC (a govt. of West Bengal undertaking), Kalimpong project was established in the year 1976 with an objective to develop farmers particularly in the category of agricultural labourers, share croppers, marginal farmers and small farmers in a comprehensive pattern. It also felt, besides animal husbandry, agriculture and allied activities along with basic needs programmes, small scale industries could also play a pivotal role for the economic development of the rural people,

particularly women of the area. Accordingly for creating gainful employment for unemployed women, the corporation started a programme for knitting of winter garments in the year 1979-80 involving skilled rural women of the project area in Kalimpong subdivision. It started the project only with 9 women artisans and by the end of the year 1992-93, the number of wool knitters attached to it had increased to 180. Necessary arrangement for training of prospective knitters, helping to obtain machines by them through bank finance, supply of raw materials which the corporation brings from Ludhiana, Punjab have been made by the corporation. The knit-wears are generally marketed all throughout the state by "Tantusree" and "Tantuja", the govt. undertaking enterprises. The corporation also secures order in bulk for woolen garments from N. B. S. T. C, Calcutta Police, Fire brigade, forest departments and some other organisations.

CADC has made its presence felt in the locality in such a way that about 60% of the knitters' families attached to it are completely dependent on this project. Progress, achievement and mandays generated by the corporation during the last ten-year period has been shown in the following table which itself would speak about CADC's success.

Table 9.1 : Year Wise Production and the Progress of the Small Scale Industry of the Corporation : 1983-84 to 1992-

93

Year	Production (Rs.lakhs)	Sales (Rs.lakhs)	Wages paid (Rs.lakhs)	Mandays created	Employment* generation (No.of artisans)
1983-84	8.85	8.52	1.77	15330	138
1984-85	10.87	10.07	2.18	18820	144
1985-86	10.42	10.35	2.35	29460	199
1986-87	14.34	14.40	3.23	16150	220
1987-88	6.98	8.26	1.57	8727	220
1988-89	6.59	7.23	1.49	7450	225
1989-90	13.91	12.14	2.78	13900	237
1990-91	15.94	17.35	3.33	16681	274
1991-92	20.59	19.74	4.63	23150	292
1992-93	18.85	15.99	4.10	20500	292

Source : Annual Report of WBCADC, Kalimpong Project, 1992-93

*The employment here means the total number of the women knitters enrolled that year. The drop out cases are not shown. In 1992-93, excluding the drop-outs, the effective number of women knitters were 180.

The plus point of the corporation which attracts the local knitters is that they are not required to work at the CADC work-shop. They are given the raw materials and they knit the different size woolen garments at home. The wage the corporation pays to the knitters varies according to the type of knitting. For example, the rate of wage for leverage knitting is Rs.55 per Kg, for designed knitting Rs. 65 per Kg and for hand-knitting Rs. 70 per Kg. According to the project director, a full dependent

artisan draws about Rs. 2000 or more per month whereas the part time knitters earn around Rs. 300 - Rs. 400 per month.

The CADC, thus has played a crucial role in improving the economic condition of a number of women knitters. The finance for the purpose of installing knitting machines has been supplied by the co-operative bank. The problem that has arisen during the last couple of years is the deliberate non-repayment of loans by the artisans. In view of these problems, CADC has decided not to hand the new machines over to the newly enrolled knitters. Considering the increasing demand of the knitwears, it has a plan to install 50 more knitting machines at its centre at Kalimpong and the knitters would be required to work in these machines at the centre's workshop.

The CADC is involved in creating the alternative income earning opportunities to the skilled knitters of the locality. But the network of the corporation has not been extended to a large mass of the artisan women outside Kalimpong subdivision. Also it is not an organisation to redress the grievances and employment hazards of the women workers.

II. District Industries Centre (DIC) - DIC is the highest level organisation set up by the govt. in every district of West Bengal to help mobilise and patronise the small scale and cottage industries in the urban areas as well as in the rural areas. The DIC, Darjeeling, according to its project director, suffers from all kinds of infrastructural difficulties thereby restricting its capabilities in fulfilling its target in the hill areas of Darjeeling district. The centre has a large number of posts, in its office, lying vacant for years. Due to the lack of manpower and the resulting coordination among them, it has not been able to extend its network to the grass root level. The office is situated in such an old unhygenic building without the provision of an urinal even that the employees have enough excuses for not

remaining in the office, during the office hour. Their grievances seem to have some reasoning once one happens to be at the newly built DIC office at Siliguri. Many people find the step-motherly attitude of the govt. in setting up a separate centre in Siliguri by neglecting the old one situated at the district headquarter..

The facts mentioned above are sufficient to make one understand the role DIC plays in patronising the artisan workers in the homebased industries. With its limited resources, the centre, however, every year conducts training programmes for women knitters, weavers and tailors. In 1993, DIC had successfully completed eight such programmes. As a feedback, after the training it has presented a few knitting and sewing machines to those women who did excellently well during their training. It has also initiated the women weavers to form co-operatives. Over the years in Darjeeling hills, 4 weavers co-operatives, one embroidery centre and 8 other co-operatives of women are functioning under the direct supervision and financial help of DIC, Darjeeling. In order to create local markets for the products of co-operatives and other private entrepreneurs, DIC every year arranges the exhibition of their products.

Needless to say, DIC could do much better and help establish the small scale and cottage industries in a more productive manner, if some extra care and initiative were taken. The entire hill area has enough potential among the women. They can be used as efficient knitters, weavers and embroiders as the hill women have the inherent qualities and skills in these artistic jobs. What they need is the timely financial support, the know-how and the inspiration.

(iii) Manjusha --- It is a govt. of West Bengal undertaking that deals in the local handicrafts. Manjusha, Darjeeling is the only one branch authorised to procure the local made handicraft items. This branch is so empowered with a view

to promoting the homebased industries and the attached workers with these in Darjeeling hills. It arranges for the supply of raw materials and the marketing of the produce. With this objective in mind, it had taken the initiative of forming the cooperatives of women artisans in the locality. Since 1980, 9 such women cooperatives were formed in the rural and semi-urban areas under its direct patronage. Although Manjusha had taken the responsibility of supplying the members of these cooperatives with raw materials as well as the marketing of the handicrafts produced (for example carpets and knitwears etc.), the cooperatives have failed miserably. At present only two women cooperatives - (i) Sonada Mahila Galaicha Bunai Sahakari Samity and (ii) Bijanbari Mahila Galaicha Bunai Sahakari Samity are somehow functioning with only 6 to 8 members in each. Both these cooperatives have excess capacity and underutilised resources. Over the years, both these cooperatives are found to weave only three pieces of 6' X 3' carpets per month at the average. It is calculated that the members of these cooperatives earned hardly Rs.320 per month from carpet weaving whereas Manjusha retains nearly Rs.600 as the profit from the sale of one such carpet received from the cooperatives.²⁰

It also procures embroidery and other handicraft items from a few self-employed women of Kalimpong. Besides these, 15 women knitters from Darjeeling villages are affiliated to it. They are being supplied with the raw wool by it and they are required to work for Manjusha at various wages. The wage rate paid by Manjusha to these knitters varies from Rs.100 per kg for 4-ply wool knitted, to Rs.80 per kg for 6-ply wool knitted, to Rs.45 per kg for machine and *kurshi* knitting. These 15 knitters at an average knit 25 to 26 kgs of wool per month.

It is thus seen that Manjusha has not been able to expand its network to the large mass of the women artisans of Darjeeling

hills. Only a negligible section of them have been able to avail of the Manjusha Employment Generation Programme. No positive steps so far have been taken to revitalise the defunct cooperatives. It has rather been found to be interested to expand the business. As such, the objectives to mobilise the women workers of the informal sector have remained unfulfilled.

The voluntary and charitable organisations (the NGOs) in the hill areas of Darjeeling district have outplayed the govt. organisations in serving the poor, and helpless women workers of the informal sector. In many recent plan documents published by the planning commission, Govt. of India, the role of voluntary organisations in promoting rural development and in implementing the various women development programmes has been emphasised. The voluntary organisations are supposed to be potentially superior to official agencies in at least three respects. These are

(i) Their workers can be more sincerely devoted to the task of reducing the sufferings of the poor than the govt. staff.

(ii) They can have a better rapport with the rural poor than the salaried govt. employees and

(iii) Since they are not bound by rigid bureaucratic rules and procedures, they can operate with greater flexibility, they can readjust their activities quickly and continuously as they learn from experience.

The leading voluntary organisations serving the women workers of the informal sector in Darjeeling hills are:

I. The Hayden Hall Institute (HHI), Darjeeling—The HHI, a Christian motivated organisation, was established during the 60's. The record of almost three-decade services rendered by the HHI is unique in the history of the growth of the voluntary organisations in West Bengal. It has developed into a Human Development Centre with a view to attaining the goal of total,

integrated, human development at the organisational and the grass root levels to help not only women workers but all kinds of people and not just implement projects.²¹

The HHI raises funds for the purpose from abroad through the simple system of correspondence. There are private benefactors who believe in the motive behind the works of HHI but who cannot themselves become involved in such activities; they send in their contribution to the head office in Canada, which in turn is channelised through the Jesuits of North Bengal. The local resource groups like Lion's club and govt. have always come forward to give aid. Bigger social service agencies like Indo German Social Service (IGSS), GOAL, CARITAS and CRS have also been extending financial help to materialise the various welfare and developmental programmes undertaken by HHI in the hill areas of Darjeeling district.²²

Of the various programmes the HHI has undertaken over the years, functional Literacy programme is solely meant for the women artisans of the informal sector. Functional literacy of HHI implies that the programme is directed towards making the needy and backward women of the society functionally more competent by imparting them with vocational skills in weaving, knitting and embroidery. For this purpose, women's weaving co-operative society had been formed under the HHI in 1972, where the women are trained systematically. At the same time, HHI has undertaken the responsibility of marketing the handicrafts items produced by the trainee women. HHI has its own showroom in its own building at Darjeeling. The total number of beneficiaries of the functional literacy programme and the corresponding sales of their products (viz. carpets, jute bags, woolen garments etc.) over the last three year has been shown below.

Table-9. 2 : Number of Beneficiaries under Functional Literacy Programme and Gross Sales Proceeds from the Handicraft Items

Year	No. of beneficiaries in various categories				Total no. of beneficiaries	Gross sales (in Rs.)
	Carpet weaving	Cotton weaving	Machine weaving	Hand knitting		
	1990-91	35	54	08		
1991-92	35	61	08	25	129	336922
1992-93	40	33	10	07	90	339276

Source : Hayden Hall's Annual General Reports

The artisan women are given a free meal a day and a stipulated wage too by the HHI. The organisational network of the women-oriented programmes works under the able and efficient supervision of Miss N. Dunne. She knows that unless the children of these trainee beneficiaries are looked after carefully, it is not possible for them to concentrate in their work. And accordingly, HHI has made the arrangement of "strive" and "creche" for the children of the women workers. In strive, the children ranging from 2.5 years and above receive regular pre-school education, along montessory lines. They are served with regular meals a day and the necessary medical care. In the creche, children of working mothers of HHI ranging from a few months to 1.5 years in age are fed, bathed and medically treated. However, for the smooth running of these "strive" and "creche", mothers of these children are required to contribute one working day per week there for their children.

HHI extends help to other organisations too. The social education department has trained its teachers at HHI and has also fallen back on the adult education section for its primers and follow up books. HHI has participated in the ICDS also at Mirik. In the weaving section, the govt. avails of all expertise of HHI

from costing to training of the rural women. Very recently, in view of the deteriorating medical services in the rural areas, it has trained a number of paramedics for the Diocesan Child Care Project. These paramedics are being sent to the interior villages for extending the medical help to the villagers, particularly for the working women mothers.

HHI has undertaken many other social welfare projects of which house building scheme for the home less, free medical services at its own clinic for the poor and the needy, old age home, income generating programmes through the formation of diary co-operatives etc. are worth mentioning.

Another recent development towards serving the women by HHI is the formation of "Ama Samaj"²³ and "Nari Sewa Sangathan", composed of women primarily engaged in the various HHI programmes plus other women from the locality. The Ama Samaj till date has 449 members. This group is formed from a need for unity and solidarity among women and to help share common problems. On March 8, 1993, international women's day was celebrated by this organisation with the aim of creating awareness among the public and members of the community regarding the dignity of women, and of awakening the women themselves to their significant contribution to their own communities. Such an attempt was first of its kind in Darjeeling hills. The women's day has been celebrated also in 1994.

HHI also has established one "Mahila Mondal" at Phoolbari having 56 female members. The major goals of this women's group being integrated development of their community. It handles the Housing Resolving Fund of HHI and the loan grants and refunds. They gave loans upto Rs 13000 in 1992-93 which helped their members build 6 homes with the revolving seed money and interest.²⁴

Thus, HHI in Darjeeling hill areas is working mainly as

an welfare organisation giving special attention to the women. It has not yet involved itself in organising the women engaged in various self-employment jobs. But it can take a lead role to work as women's own association to fight for their rights and protect their interest as well as to raise their voices against exploitation. This has been proved by the Nari Sewa Sangathan by organising some big rallies of women in the hills. With proper direction and supervision, HHI's Nari Sewa Sangathan can be channelised to work in the model of WWF or SEWA.

II. Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre (TRSHC), Darjeeling -- Started on October 1, 1959 and registered as a charitable organisation in 1961, the sole objective of the TRSHC, Darjeeling was to provide the shelter and employment to the Tibetan refugees who came into Darjeeling after the Chinese aggression in Tibet in 1959. Started only with 4 members and a small room, today TRSHC has established itself as an important handicraft centre and the home of 650 plus refugees (including more than 300 women) taking food from a common kitchen.

The centre over the years has undertaken multifaceted activities ranging from the production of handicrafts such as famous Tibetan carpets, woolen garments, wood metals, leather items, footwears and the world famous Tibetans dolls. In all these activities more than 200 refugee women directly participate. These women are free from the hazards of housekeeping as most of the women everywhere are required to do. Moreover, the centre has a "creche" too where thirty babies of the women artisans can be looked after at a time. Three experienced baby-sitters mostly the old ladies from within the refugees are deputed in the creche. The researcher at the time of field survey for this purpose in November, 1993 found only nine children in the creche being attended. The women at the TRSHC, as a matter of fact, can devote more time in the works assigned to them.

The number of refugee women engaged in various artisan works in the centre was as follows:

Table 9.3: The Women Artisans at Various Works at TRSHC in 1993

Type of work	Number of women
Wool carding	10
Spinning	56
Carpet weaving	84
Cotton weaving	31
Knitting	08
Painting	01
Doll making	02
Composition in press	02

Source: Field Survey

These women workers are required to work for 8 hours daily. The wage payment system of TRSHC is somewhat different in the sense that these women along with others are served with one meal (i.e. lunch) daily and are given a basic pay ranging between Rs. 92 to Rs. 275 per month. The skilled weavers are paid incentive at the rate of Rs.18 per square feet of the carpet woven in addition to the basic pay. It was surprising here to note that the women workers engaged right from dyeing the yarn to the weaving of carpet or knitting of woollen garments were above 55 years in age and quite a few of them were even 70 years old or so. It apparently seemed inhuman to make such old ladies to work but Mr. Gan-dak-la, the Head Assistant of the centre, defended the centre by saying that old ladies were the expert weavers and they were retained in the work in order to keep them mentally and physically strong.

Side by side of the creation of employment opportunities for the refugee women in the centre, TRSHC runs other welfare activities which include the adult education programme, old age

home, primary education for children, shouldering the expenses of higher education for the youths of the centre. It also runs a hospital for the medical benefits of the refugees. The local people can also seek the medical benefits from the TRSHC hospital.

The production of handicrafts continues to be the main activity of the centre. The total sales during the financial year 1989-90, had reached a total of Rs 2390000 in 1992-93, more than of which represented foreign exchange earnings from export sales. To date, the centre has been exporting its handicrafts to 36 countries all over the world. The increasing fame of the products of TRSHC all over the world has automatically expanded its market and these days it takes 6 months for the centre to fulfill the order once placed.

In traditional Tibet the market for fine handicrafts was generally limited and hence master craftsmen who had long periods of apprenticeship were few. Even fewer had managed to escape from Tibet and hence for the centre, it is of utmost importance for the future of the Tibetan handicrafts that the skill and expert knowledge of the master artisans would be passed into a new generation of workers. Thus right from the start, the TRSHC laid great stress on training new workers, particularly the women. During its 35 years of existence, the centre has trained 1600 persons (both men and women) in various crafts.²⁵ The result is the growing entrepreneurship among their women in Darjeeling hills. It was observed (as discussed in the previous chapter) that the Tibetan women have proved themselves more successful entrepreneurs than the native women. This is how the TRSHC has succeeded in promoting the entrepreneurship among a selected group of women in Darjeeling hills. It should be mentioned, in this context, that TRSHC stands for their own community only and although it has played a crucial role in developing

entrepreneurial traits among the Tibetan women, it has not worked as the spokesman neither a true association of the women workers irrespective of caste, creed and religion.

III. Bikash Kendra, Kaijalay --- Bikash Kendra, a registered non-govt. organisation has started functioning at Kaijalay, in Bijanbari block of Darjeeling Sadar Subdivision since 1990. It is being sponsored by the Jesuit Society of North Bengal, a minority Christian organisation having the base at St. Joseph's School, Darjeeling. The area being agriculture based, Bikash Kendra was started with a view to helping the poor people of the area in producing cash crops like orange, ginger and other green vegetables etc. For this purpose, from the very beginning it has started with the programme of distribution of the HYV seedlings among the cultivators. During this 4-year period, the seedling distribution has received a mixed response from the local people.

The programmes of Bikash Kendra for the development of women workers of rural areas have evoked great response from the locality. Its role in mobilising the women workers of rural areas for the need of saving is quite appreciable. Kendra has deputed two sisters for this purpose at Kaijalay. Under their guidance and inspiration, so far 200 odd women workers of Bijanbari, Lodhama, Kaijalay and Rammam have opened their recurring deposit accounts in the Central Bank, Bijanbari branch. The working women members of Bikash Kendra are required to deposit Rs 2 per day at Bikash Kendra and are given the receipts and Kendra in turn takes the responsibility of depositing the collection every month in their respective accounts at Central Bank. This has kept the busy workers free from going to a distantly situated bank and the hazards of paper works in connection with the deposits. The Kendra has achieved a great success in motivating the women to set aside a part of their earning for saving.

In Kaijalay area, Kendra has started playing a key role in implementing the various employment generation programme too. The block agencies are being helped and well supported by the Kendra in implementing the schemes like DWCRA and TRYSEM. In the absence of panchayats in the DGHC areas, the role of such organisation has its typical relevance in the village based hill economy indeed. The recognition of Kendra's contribution is given through the responsibility it has been told to shoulder. Institutional credits to the women are being supplied through the Kendra. The institutional credit, previously was being granted whimsically and therefore the trickle-down effect of credit was not visible at all. But after Kendra has been involved, the channelisation of credit is being done in the proper way. And accordingly, the earnings of the women have noticeably increased in the locality.

Besides, Bikash Kendra has undertaken some other women oriented welfare programmes too. Very recently, Kendra has successfully launched the making of smokeless wovens for the village kitchens. And with the co-operation from the women, it has been able to distribute nearly 50 such wovens to the housewives of the area. Keeping in mind, the need for education and entertainment of the children, Kendra had started with two "bawaldies" and a primary school at Kaijalay under its direct supervision. Altogether 80 children are getting benefits out of these. As most of the women workers in the rural informal sector are mothers, it has launched the mother and child care project. The mothers are taught how to care a child, what precautions they should take at the time of pregnancy etc. This project has become quite popular and helpful.

Father Cherian Nampeli, S. J. is the chief co-ordinator of the Kendra. During an interview in connection with this research work, he was asked about the reasons for the Kendra not

undertaking any functional literacy programme. He said that they differed from other voluntary organisations in the sense that others were basically welfare organisations; they impart training to the women but cannot take the support measures to help them establish their own enterprises. But Bikash Kendra from the very beginning has dealt in with the schemes which would directly help uplift the status of the rural people, the women in particular. As such, Kendra does not emphasize on the functional literacy programmes.

The Kendra, however, had to cross a series of hurdles before it has reached this performance at present. Being run by a Christian religious minority, it faced continued difficulties in mobilising the workers belonging to other faiths, at the beginning. Also it had to face frequent resentments from the beneficiaries. Till its establishment at Kaijalay, the loan programmes were at a mess. The needy people were neglected and those who received the institutional credit had misused it. But once Kendra stood as a mediator, between the loan receivers and the bank, the loans have been sanctioned to the needy people and encouraged them to invest in useful and productive ventures such as poultry, piggery, beekeeping etc.. The interest of the so called middlemen and moneylenders got hampered. The affected groups at times have worked against the Kendra and its workers.

But once the members have realised the importance of such an organisation, Bikash Kendra has moved steadily forward to their help. A healthy atmosphere has been created. The kendra has just taken the initiative; the area network is also very limited. It still has miles to go before it can establish itself as the saviour of the women workers of the rural informal sector in Darjeeling hills.

IV. Nari Kalyan Samiti, Kurseong - Nari Kalyan Samiti, Kurseong is the only apolitical organisation run by the women and

is devoted to the social works in the locality. The samiti was established in 1992 and at present has a membership around 300. The fund for the organisation is generally raised from the membership fee and the initial admission fee. And at times it organises lottery from which it earns something to be used for its smooth functioning. At present, each member has to contribute a monthly subscription of Rs 5 as membership fee. So far, this samiti has confined itself in the social works such as keeping the subdivisional hospital clean, giving legal protection to the poor and destitute workers in case of police harassment, raising social consciousness about the increasing drug-abuse in the society etc.. Very recently, it has decided to spread its work ward-wise at Kurseong municipality and for the purpose is organising its members to organise ward-committees. According to the secretary, Smt. Nirmala Lama such a decentralisation of the leadership would help them to function in a more effective way. In course of discussion with her, she said that they had to face varieties of obstacles and the local people had hardly stood behind them. Not only this, the members very often have to withstand the apathy and zeal from the male chauvinism too. The samiti suffers from inexperience and lack of proper guidance. The secretary admits that they would welcome any suggestion and guidance to make the samiti work for the oppressed people and the needy women workers of informal sector. The devotion and sacrifice of the members and the office -bearers of Nari Kalyan Samiti, Kurseong can be put to organise the women workers of the streets and the self-employed as well, if proper guidance and support extended to them.

V. All India Women's Conference (AIWC) - The organisation of women meant for the welfare of women workers under the patronage of congress party was started in Darjeeling in 1958. AIWC, in the hills, at a time was so active that for its smooth

functioning it constructed a 4-storied building with the facilities of a "creche", a "bawaldy", a conference hall, two classrooms for the women trainees coming in various vocational training programmes undertaken by it, a two-room flat for the instructor, a guest-room and a number of ordinary rooms in the ground floor lent out to businessmen which is still the main source of income of the association. Having endowed with such infrastructural facilities, AIWC is generally expected to render valuable services for the general welfare of a large number of poor and exploited women workers in the hill areas.

But with a handful of its members, the association is virtually non-existent. At present, its women oriented activities are restricted to the occasional cutting and tailoring training. During the last two-year period four such training programmes were conducted and altogether 120 women from various classes of the society availed of the opportunity. The researcher in 1993 November found eighteen children (below 5 years in age) of the women coolies and construction workers being looked after in the creche free of cost. One matron is appointed in the creche for the purpose. These children are given a free meal a day. Of the children put up in the creche, a few receive the pre-school education at the bawaldy. The general sanitary condition of the "creche" and "bawaldy" was found to be unsatisfactory. All other resources of the association are left unused for years. "

Over the years, AIWC Darjeeling unit has suffered from the lack of leadership, lack of communication network and overall mismanagement. It is high time now to avoid politicising the welfare programmes and initiatives should be taken in the right direction to utilise the unused resources of AIWC for the benefit of the hundreds of needy women workers in the informal sector of the locality.

It is thus observed that the existing organisations have

the resources but in many cases, particularly the govt. agencies, they are not utilised properly for the purpose. The go-slow attitude of the govt. employees and the lack of the feeling have so far made many programmes meant for the women workers ineffective. The NGOs, on the other hand, with their limited resource and man power have tried to reach the women beneficiaries. What they need is the continuous support from the govt. and the cooperation from the beneficiaries themselves. The organisations of the workers themselves is also of vital importance.

9.3 : Summary

Trade union of workers engaged in informal sector is very rare in our country. As such their power to fight collectively against wage-exploitation and for better service condition is too minimum. In fact, they are at the receiving end having no real power to bargain with. To speak of the women workers in general, they are subject of easy exploitation and less recognition and many other problems even in the formal sector where they are protected by labour laws and supported by trade unions. Quite understandably their plight in the informal sector is inexplicable. In view of the acute social and economic exploitation in the informal sector, a few women's organisations in the recent past, have been set up. Among them WWF in South India and SEWA in Gujarat and Maharashtra have been able to stand firmly behind their members. The welfare activities, the institutional credit programmes and the struggles of these organisations led to the self employed women to undergo a remarkable change in their economic status. Similarly the association of women domestic servants in the Metropolitan cities in our country have played pivotal role in launching the movements advocating fair working conditions for them and have succeeded in making the maids conscious and realise that there is

dignity in what they are doing.

Needless to say the women workers of informal sector in Darjeeling hills are not so fortunate. They do not have any association of their own. A few voluntary and charitable organisation like Hayden Hall Institute, Tibetan Refugee self help centre, Bikash Kendra etc. are working in Darjeeling hills and most of them have emphasised in welfare activities. Efforts have been made to some extent to create alternative employment opportunities for women. But they have not taken any positive step to empower women in their struggles for existence and against inequality and exploitation, nor to render 'invisible' women 'visible'. GNWO - the women's wing of the GNLFF party having the largest base in the hills, with a large number of women members stands for mobilising poor women for political gains; it has little time to think for the problems faced by the working women in the informal sector and the corresponding upliftment of their status in their society.

Notes and References:

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2. ibid, p.231
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4. Nandini Azad, Improving Working Conditions for Rural Women Through Creation of Alternative Employment Options : A Case Study of the Working Women's Forum Dindigul Dairy Women's Project and Andirampattinam Fisher-Women's Project, ILO, 1981, p 93.
5. ibid, p.13
6. ibid, p.94
7. Helzi Noponen, op. cit., p.243
8. Malarika Karlekar, Poverty and Women's Work—A Study of Sweeper Women in Delhi, Vikash, 1982, p.137
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13. ibid, p.47
14. Malavika Karlekar, op. cit., p.138
15. Punam Thakur et al, "The Changing Face of the Domestic Servants", Sunday, Calcutta, 3-9 April 1994, p.45
16. ibid, p.49
17. ibid, p.54
18. ibid, p.54
19. ibid, p.50
20. For weaving a carpet, two weavers are required to work simultaneously. Six women weavers from each cooperative are found to work with 18 Kgs. of woolen yarn and 1.5 bundle of cotton yarn for producing 3 carpets of standard size a month. The price of woolen yarn is Rs.128 per kg and that of Rs.260 per bundle. Manjusha pays them Rs.85 per square feet per carpet woven. Thus for the three standard size carpets the earnings of the six members of the cooperatives comes around Rs.4590 from which the cost of raw materials Rs.2758 is deducted. Manjusha, on the other hand, sells these carpets at a rate between Rs.2000 to Rs.2200 a piece.
21. C. B. Rai and R. L. Sarkar, Developement of Human Resources in Darjeeling Hills : Case Study of the Impact of the Hayden Hall Programmes on the Weaker Sections of Population, I. I. H. E, 1986, p.6
22. ibid, p.18
23. The society of mothers, in the local language, is called the "Ama Samaj".
24. The Mahila Mondal takes loan from HHI and grants loan to its members for housebuilding and also for the purchase of cows by the Mahila Mondal Milk Cooperative. As per the annual report of HHI, 1992-93, the Mahila Mondal had taken a loan of Rs 10, 000 from HHI out of which Rs 1800 was repaid at the end of the year. For the purchase of three cows, the Mahila Mondal had taken the loan amounting Rs14500; during the year the net income of the Mahila Mondal was Rs21000 from the milk cooperative.
25. Report of Tibetan Refugee Centre, designed and produced by Computers Unlimited, p.7