

Profile

The ZWRCN Journey

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History of the ZWRCN

It is not possible to describe the journey of the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN) in sufficiently vivid colours. Suffice to say that it has involved sitting, crawling, walking and running. The organisation has had tremendous successes, but there have also been roadblocks and setbacks. Over the years, some of its many activities have flourished, some have been taken over by other organisations, and some have been disrupted by political turmoil.

The ZWRCN was set up in 1990 by a few women who firmly believed that a resource centre for women needed to be established. They believed that vital information on Zimbabwean women was available, but not accessible. The vision of the Centre that emerged, however, began to grow beyond the initial concept of an independent women's centre at which useful information could be gathered. The idea of a library that held books and other documents took on a feminist tone, and instead of merely planning to make information available to women in Zimbabwe, the ZWRCN founders adopted the goal of using knowledge to empower women, an idea encapsulated in the slogan "knowledge is power".

The idea of a Resource Centre was thus driven by a commitment to engage with the politics of gender oppression manifest in independent Zimbabwe. All the women who founded the ZWRCN were broadly feminist in their political orientation insofar as they wanted to find effective ways of challenging women's oppression and empowering women to improve their lives. All of them had already learnt from experience that activism is more likely to be effective when backed up by the strategic use of information.

This meant two things: firstly, the type of information they intended gathering had a specific focus, rather than including anything and everything ever written about women in Zimbabwe. They were especially interested in knowledge and information that could empower women seeking to challenge their oppression, and that could contribute to the development of more equitable gender relations. Secondly, as the ZWRCN was founded by women who were dissatisfied with government bureaucracy, it was clear from the outset that it would be an independent non-governmental organisation.

In keeping with this spirit, the founders were averse to dominant organisational forms they associated with patriarchy – hierarchical and autocratic structures that silenced the majority of women. Feminist organisational analysis, which explores the gendered nature of organisational dynamics, processes and procedures, reveals how organisations function (both formally and informally) in ways that are complicit with and perpetuate women's subordination. So during the initial stages of its existence, the ZWRCN was committed to developing as an alternative organisation run along lines that were in keeping with the collectivist and democratic ideals of feminism.

But as the programmatic load of ZWRCN grew and its activities expanded, there was an inevitable shift from a structure in which tasks were rotated and shared, to one where tasks were allocated to particular staff members. This created a more vertical hierarchy, with some authority and leadership invested in a board of trustees and in the post of a director, and with implementation becoming the province of administrative and programme staff.

This structure gradually altered the ethos within the organisation. While the founders (now board members) reaffirmed their commitment to feminist principles, the more formal

structure of the organisation and its staffing created a shift towards more conformist values that affected the day-to-day functioning of the ZWRCN. It is worth noting that the tensions between the original collectivist ideals and a mainstream hierarchical structure have continued to haunt the organisational development of the Centre.

ZWRCN Programmes

The mission statement of the ZWRCN has changed little over the last 14 years: “The ZWRCN is a non-governmental organisation working in the gender and development field. It was set up in 1990 by a group of Zimbabwean women with the main objective of enhancing the position of women in Zimbabwe through the collection and dissemination of materials and information on Gender and Development issues. The centre also aims at facilitating the work of development planners, implementers and beneficiaries.”

The ZWRCN has pursued its mission to empower women through a set of activities and programmes that have evolved over time, in response to the changing conditions of women's lives in Zimbabwe. The activities of the ZWRCN demonstrate how the organisation has interacted with the world around it.

Documentation Centre

The very first ZWRCN project involved documentation. It was designed to gather information on women and gender-related issues, and to improve women's access to information on these topics. This had never been done before in Zimbabwe. Collection-building concentrated on three areas: all materials written on women in Zimbabwe; relevant material on women in Southern Africa and elsewhere on the continent; and material dealing with feminist theories. Given that a vast amount of research on women being carried out by consultants, scholars, government and international development agencies was not formally published or made public, the ZWRCN resolved to gather unpublished material (“grey matter”) as well as published works.

But while the library brought together a steadily increasing body of information on women during the 1990s, it also revealed gaps. Most of the information took the form of official reports and documents written by foreign researchers/consultants, or by men, and these authors were not always sensitive to Zimbabwean women's perspectives or concerns. There was a growing dissatisfaction with the fact that Zimbabwean women themselves played little part in the production of such information, with the result that their concerns were often not addressed. Through this process, it became clear that Zimbabwean women needed to engage with the production of knowledge and information centred on their concerns and their lived experiences.

Gender and Development Talks

The ZWRCN thus called upon its members to participate in discussions, raising critical issues and identifying gaps in the information base, while providing a space in which to debate sensitive issues. These discussions became known as Gender and Development (GAD) talks. They began as in-house discussions to strengthen staff capacity, with the aim of grounding staff in a shared understanding of feminist theory and issues. Later it was agreed to open the talks up as a means of networking and building gender awareness among the wider public.

During the first two years of the ZWRCN's existence, those who used the centre were mostly policymakers and researchers, who came primarily from government and international agencies, academic institutions and other NGOs. However, the goal of distributing

information to community-based women remained unfulfilled. The majority of Zimbabwean women in rural areas simply do not come to Harare (the capital, and the location of the Centre), and the ZWRCN did not have the infrastructure or staff to transport documents and information to women living in the rest of the country. The question of how to reach rural women preoccupied the organisation for some years, but by 1994, they had found a way of rising to this challenge. They entered into partnership with an organisation working to establish rural libraries; the ZWRCN's role was to produce accessible information on gender in local languages, and participate in the innovative distribution of this information to rural women. The Centre soon discovered that this was not enough, and during this programme's three-year cycle, it embarked on gender awareness-raising workshops with local communities making use of the libraries.

Research and Advocacy

As time went by, it became increasingly clear that while gathering and facilitating access to information about women in Zimbabwe was an important activity, the information available was seldom used effectively to bring about change. A research and advocacy unit was thus set up and tasked with both producing and using information strategically.

This policy intervention was supported by a process in which the Centre identified critical themes and held formal thematic workshops twice a year. These provided a forum at which proposals or research findings could be presented in the form of discussion papers. First a topic would be identified (perhaps at a GAD talk); the library would then prepare a bibliography to support the writing of a discussion paper. Once the paper had been presented at a workshop, it was developed into a report for the library. If the discussion gave rise to a research idea, then a proposal would be developed and research commissioned to fill the gaps. The final product would be used for policy advocacy purposes.

Both the GAD talks and thematic workshops at times gave rise to activism and initiatives with and by other organisations. For example, the ZWRCN's deep involvement in the Land Commission (1994 – 1998) was the result of a GAD talk on the subject of women's access to land. A similar process led to their involvement in the Constitutional Review Process (1998 – 2001). The GAD forum has continued to function as a think-tank, involving various stakeholders, staff and board members, as well as interested members of the public.

Building on the learnings of the GAD talks, the ZWRCN began to take research seriously in order to ensure that its publications carried up-to-date information, and to develop its advocacy and networking aims. This meant that there was a move beyond simply collecting and disseminating information, with the organisation beginning to intervene in national politics through the more strategic use of information for purposes of lobbying and advocacy. The close relationship between ZWRCN's research and advocacy agendas in influencing national debate and policy has remained an important but challenging one, which has demanded significant degrees of innovation and creativity.

It cannot be denied that as the country has plunged into socio-economic and political instability during the past several years, the opportunities for interaction and engagement with the state at a national level have been increasingly limited. But work has continued nonetheless. More recently, the ZWRCN has put its energies into the issue of gender and HIV/AIDS. It has tackled sexist and discriminatory practices and attitudes that contribute both to women's vulnerability to HIV infection and the ever-growing burden of caring for sufferers, a task for which women are primarily responsible. The current model of community-based home-care has greatly increased the load of women's home-based nursing work; and the conservative nature of Zimbabwean society has made it very difficult to discuss, either privately or publicly, topics concerning women's bodies, sex and sexuality

with regard to HIV/AIDS. The ZWR CN has tried to facilitate a search for ways in which to reform the national, local and community level interventions so that they are less burdensome to women, who presently bear the brunt of the epidemic – a situation that is steadily worsening.

The Gender Budgeting Programme

The deteriorating socio-economic context has also prompted the ZWR CN and its advocacy agenda to develop a public expenditure and economic governance programme. This takes the form of gender budgeting and lobbying for the implementation of those economic programmes that represent the interests of women. What years of structural adjustment programmes, poverty reduction strategy papers and globalisation discourses have shown is that unless economic policy and practice is built around the realities of women's lived experiences, no amount of adjusting, planning or renaming will eliminate poverty.

Gender Training

From the very beginning, the ZWR CN engaged in public awareness-raising and education around gender through its documentation, dissemination and networking activities. In response to frequent requests, it began to run gender-training workshops. The international context post-Beijing demanded that attention be paid to gender. Policymakers, international agencies and local NGOs all saw gender training as a principle means of integrating a gender perspective into their activities; however, there was little local capacity to carry this out. The ZWR CN thus became the logical place for agencies to turn to, especially on issues concerning gender and development. In the end, the demand so outstripped the capacity of the ZWR CN that it was decided to create a pool of local trainers equipped to meet some of the demand for gender training work. This project was designed to increase the capacity for gender training within both the ZWR CN and the wider community; to create an ongoing process of training that promoted a commitment to enhancing the status of women; and to develop the skills necessary to produce a gender-training manual relevant to Zimbabwe. This programme took place over a three-year period, drawing on regional and international expertise.

Linking Parliamentarians to their Constituents

One of the insights the ZWR CN gained from their ongoing engagement with political and government functionaries in Zimbabwe was the realisation that policymakers were often removed from the communities they represented and for which they designed policies. The experience of the rural libraries project showed the ZWR CN that rural women often knew exactly what they wanted and needed, yet they had little access to the councillors, parliamentarians and other policymakers who might be expected to represent their interests in a democratic society. The linkage programme set out to address this by enabling a deeper connection and engagement between these very different groups. This was done by facilitating debate clinics between parliamentarians and grassroots women, informing women on parliamentary procedures, providing information, and identifying priorities and highlighting women's concerns to parliamentarians. The idea was undoubtedly a good one, and the programme was a logical extension of the ZWR CN's political education, lobbying and advocacy work. However, it was also to prove very difficult to implement, not least because of the political tensions that were developing in the late 1990s between the ruling party and emerging opposition forces. While the project attempted to remain non-partisan, there was an immediate tendency for it to become highly politicised, with workshops being hijacked by politicians with particular party interests. As the political tensions in Zimbabwe heightened, it became increasingly difficult to remain focused on gender concerns in a way that transcended party interests.

Communications

Over time, the ZWRCN's initial low-tech news bulletin was reconceptualised as WomenPlus. This was intended to have a wider appeal; it looked more like a women's magazine and mirrored the themes and issues driving the ZWRCN's programmes. It has become the public interface for the organisation.

Through support from Women Connect!, the Centre has also established an Internet café to provide e-mail and Internet skills to those women who would otherwise not be able to have such access. This project became the very first Zimbabwean initiative dedicated to training women at local level how to use the Internet and e-mail to communicate, search for information, and experience the benefits of being part of a global on-line community. Lack of access to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) has been identified as a major impediment to women's use of and control over ICTs, especially in developing countries. The ZWRCN has thus been offering discounted computer access to women on what they call "e-Fridays" in recognition of the factors that limit women's access to technology, as well as the very real economic hardships they grapple with on a daily basis.

Questions for the Future

The ZWRCN has faced and continues to face many critical questions: where should the organisation focus its attention? What issues cannot be ignored without risking the successful survival of the organisation? How does the organisation distribute power and authority among employees and continue to improve control and co-ordination? How does the organisation respond to changes in the environment while continuing to hold a sense of identity, purpose and vision? How has change been managed? What are the interpersonal and group dynamics within the organisation? How have organisational changes affected the vision and motivation of the founders? How does the organisation celebrate and remember its successes? How does it navigate past the many roadblocks in its path?

These are difficult questions. Perhaps the answers require a dynamic theory of organisational change that is attentive to the feminist philosophy espoused by the founders and the management structure in its various forms. When the ZWRCN was established, feminist organisational theory was still preoccupied with critiquing patriarchal organisations, and it did not have much to offer activists who were busy developing feminist organisations and movements around the world. Where alternative modes of organising had been tried, the experience was seldom theorised, and very little has been written or published on such alternatives. There was therefore little to refer to when this particular group of women in Zimbabwe decided to set up and develop an organisation.

But the ZWRCN has expanded and evolved; it has come a long way since it was established by a small group of women in 1990. During its 14 years as a learning organisation, it has been compelled to reflect and reorientate in order to remain relevant. Over time, it has acquired all the structures of a conventional development NGO – a formal hierarchy with staff carrying out specified jobs, under the leadership of a director, who answers to a board of trustees led by a chairperson. However, the institutional culture has remained distinctive because of the commitment to feminist organisational principles. The initial collectivist structure has been compromised, largely for pragmatic reasons; nevertheless, the spirit of equality has persisted, maintaining an institutional culture compatible with the mission of the organisation. All over the world, gender activists have tried to do things differently, a process that is as innovative as it is uneven, and which often has unforeseen consequences, challenges and successes. The ZWRCN has had its share of all these and more, as it responds to an increasingly turbulent political and economic context, in which its work

becomes ever more vital and necessary.

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