1957

I Help My People Help Themselves

Amelia Caulker

Iowa State College

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In college I grasped fairly well the idea of the theory of social work, but the answers to my questioning mind as to how to put theory into practice when I went back home presented itself quite casually elsewhere. I was convalescing from a brief illness with friends in the county of Essex, and one day visited the village Women's Institute. The meeting deeply impressed me, and when I returned to college, I requested that my next practical work assignment include Women's Institutes.

While visiting several groups I learned a Women's Institute was made up of women of all classes in the village, regardless of color or creed, and that it was nonpolitical and nonsectarian, the aims being: "To bring women together to learn things which are useful in the home, to improve conditions in the village, to consider the needs of country people throughout the land, and to develop a spirit of friendliness, cooperation and initiative."

These aims and objectives were achieved through monthly programs including a business meeting to train members to run their meetings, a lecture, talks or demonstrations, an informal tea and a social half-hour for entertainment. In addition I found that institutes had a Guild of Learners which met more frequently for teaching of cookery, handicrafts, keep-fit exercises and music.

On my return home I was appointed a Social Development Assistant in the government. Most of what had been attempted before by the still young department had been in connection with juvenile delinquency, family case work and youth organizations. The need for informal education, especially among illiterates, was recognized, but the method of approach remained undefined.

I had been earmarked to start a branch of the department in the provinces. Gladly I drew up a plan to suit local conditions. It was accepted and I went out in the first instance to the Northern Province. This proved to be quite a difficult area as the idea was new and people were conservative and uncooperative. However, it was a beginning, and after a year and a half I was transferred to make a start at Bo, the second largest town in the country.

In Bo a small group of literate women was started. For the longest time no illiterate women would have anything to do with the institute. I was most dissatisfied, and sometimes most discouraged. As a multi-social worker I spent part of my time in organizing services in juvenile delinquency, youth organizations and whatever else came into my program. I interested myself in everything so as to make my mission known and accepted as quickly as possible.

My opportunity with the illiterates presented itself quite unexpectedly. I ran into a girl I had known in another town, and invited her to call at my office to see if she might be interested in my program. She came the following morning with a friend. She was interested in a crochet pattern, and the other girl wanted to learn embroidery. A third girl came with them the third day. They were all wives of court messengers living in a barracks where there were many women. When I asked why they did not bring more of their friends to class, they said they could not...

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not convince the women that I was friendly and affable. (Our illiterate people are very sensitive and ever so suspicious of literates.)

In keeping with the old adage, "If the mountain will not go to Mohammed, then Mohammed will go to the mountain," I decided to have my nucleus of three women and myself meet and work at one of their homes. We sat working on the open veranda facing the road. What happened that day was better than anything I had expected or even dared to hope for within such a short time. As the women were on their way to town they saw us and stopped. They asked if they could join too. Within a few days accommodation was inadequate, and the women suggested what I had wanted but wouldn't ask for—that we move to the workroom attached to my office. Knitting was new and quite the craze, and they learned fast. There was hardly a woman who did not knit a sweater for her husband.

Social Meetings

The literate group was reorganized, with many more people joining in—women of various educational attainments, and wives of Europeans. The atmosphere at meetings was most congenial, and members contributed towards success through their time and talents. The peak of the meeting was always the social half hour, during which refreshments were served and members either moved freely for little chats or had informal entertainment of games, storytelling and story dramatization and singing.

In the meantime the government had decided the program was worth extending to other parts of the country. Today there are Women's Institutes in many places. Some of them are small and struggling for lack of leadership. Others are thriving and improving. The only problem is shortage of trained staff.

There is now a National Federation of Women's Institutes, with the president and secretary, both voluntary. The ultimate aim is to have the movement run purely as a voluntary organization, with civil servants like me being responsible for the training of personnel and general supervision. It is constantly borne in mind that the essence of social work is to help people help themselves.

National Competition

An Annual National Exhibition of Handicrafts and Cookery has proved successful in fostering a healthy spirit of competition among groups. Competition for trophies awarded on a point system is keen, and year by year an improved standard of work is being noticed.

Space does not permit me to tell of my experiences in dealing with juvenile delinquency, youth organization and case work in general. I found these very interesting and worthwhile too, but my main interest is informal education among women, because I believe that is where I can make my highest contribution, and because I love it. I believe that in social work as in many other things in life the realization of one's aims is its own reward, and it cannot be evaluated in terms of a salary.

My beloved Sierra Leone is a very small portion of the vast piece of land known by many as the "Dark Continent," and by me, "Home Sweet Home." If I can take back to it through informal education among women, the very valuable knowledge and experience I am acquiring now, I shall be happy indeed.