

## SWEDISH REPORT ON STAGE 2 - A FLAGSHIP AGENCY

### NEW NETWORKS, NEW DEMOCRACY

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#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are many terms for the various prototypes of social and political units which have promoted the dynamics of modernity and democracy in societies belonging to the European Union. In fact social movements, popular movements, interest organizations, groups and agencies in general, have provided the required infrastructure for the building of modern democratic society. (Movements and organizations will later be referred to as agencies) However the rise of these units has been determined by circumstances in which pressure for change united political pioneers from below and political writers from above. In other words the direct involvement of intellectuals in movements for change secured an inspired and clear articulation of the just cause. By the time such movements had come to a point of political maturity, some generations later, they were no longer in any need of intellectuals. The major weaning period occurred during the 1930s.

Still we need to understand the whole phenomenon and not least the causes of changes in character over time. Movements or agencies of the 19th century certainly shared characteristics with those of later dates, not least those of the 1990s. But there are also important differences. A major hypothesis is that the early movements were born when vertical relations dominated in society. The agencies of the 1990s are the results of a society where largely horizontal relations have come to prevail. A common feature is that social and institutional structures of both periods are in a state of flux.

Movements precede interest organizations. But during the stage of formation both need ideology. It is this ideology that acts as the unifying collective memory for the duration of the unit. The point is that the ideology is determined by the historical circumstances at the time of formation. This may cause problems later when historical conditions have changed but the ideology, as a unifying collective memory, remains virtually the same. It has indeed raised some difficulties for the trade union movement in coping with radically altered settings at crucial points in time. The latest crisis of this type coincided with the paradigmatic change from Fordism to post-Fordism.

The organisational structure of an agency is also an accurate mirror of its ideals and the preconditions for its success. A tight organization may make initial gains and move forward. A loose organization may be adaptable to change but will not triumph against competition. A flexible organization may be both adaptable and successful in the longer run, but that will depend entirely on the particular people responsible for the running of the agency. An organization is not easy to alter without changing both the ideology and character of the agency.

Thirdly there is the function of the agency in relation to other actors in the field. This is a factor that is more susceptible to change without causing major upsets to the orientation of the agency. Lastly, something that can be identified as the agency culture will have an impact upon its success. This culture is steadily cultivated by those involved in forming and creating the successive policies of the agency. It must change with changing circumstances even though this process may not be noticeable. The important element is that the personal rapport in intra and inter agency relations should

develop in qualitatively new ways, which in turn will affect the function of the agency and may be a molding factor for the agency's organizational structure and eventually its ideology.

In the following account we follow up some new agencies, which are archetypical products of the 1990s, in terms of their background, formation and the initial years of their activities. These agencies have made it their mission not only to complement the public agency, the State labor exchange that in Sweden has been invested with particular influence, because of its central role in the workings of the Swedish Model, and the private agency, the trade union organizations that in Sweden have assumed a semi-official role because of their impact, but it goes beyond both. In these cases it is quite clear that the state agency and the unions have proven themselves to be out-dated because of ideologies, structures and antiquated cultures which have lagged behind more global changes. In short, the latter are victims of their own collective memory, which has determined their ideology and been the cementing factor for organizational cohesion. A number of theoretical positions, concerning interest organizations and their role in contemporary democracies, have tended to assert that representation by functional interests may operate as a supplement to governmental institutions by providing relevant alternative information and perspectives (Mansbridge 1992; Cohen & Rogers 1992, 1995). However, this attempt at a neo-corporatist perspective is already dated. The new agencies represent today those proper interests which may supply adequate alternative information. At the same time those new networks which are spun across both old and new interests have moved to the center of political gravity from the old neo-corporate institutions to new horizontal and often transnational groupings (Peterson 1993).

The agencies concerned here are 1) The Women's Resource Center (WRC), 2) AGORA, which is a meeting place and activity center for women from different ethnic cultures 3) HARMONIA, which is a rehabilitation and empowerment center for women in distress or difficult circumstances. All three are voluntary organizations. In the initial phase they had local public backing that fairly soon after their establishment they managed without. WRC and AGORA are both to a large extent financed by the European Union. In fact public authorities such as the Labor Exchange have tried to send their clients to both WRC and AGORA. Neither of them has however accepted a role for alleviating the responsibility of any public institution.

There is no doubt that these new agencies are products of the new network society. In this society the ground rules are qualitatively different from those under the conditions in which the prototypical social movements and interest organizations were established. The long route from the conception of time as cyclical to linear, and then to the present conception of time progression into what Manuel Castels has called timeless time, where the starting point of unit formation is the network. Every new agency results from a topology of networks shaped by distance, meaning here the intensity and frequency of interaction between two social actors. This distance is shorter, that is, made up of more intense and frequent interactions, if both positions are network nodes within the same network system than if they belong to different ones. This may sound obvious but in fact is only a verification of the importance of communicative bases for the homogeneous value of the network. The architecture of the relationships between networks configures the dominant processes and functions in our societies.

An agency then becomes a specialized structural product that continues to depend upon network relations for everything from internal equipment and furniture to vital support in applications for, for instance, program or project funding. The front spokespersons of such agencies emerge out of an established public administrative

structure and are vital actors in new networks. While using the private or semi-private sphere to define their goals, these front actors retain their public sector values, which usually means loyalty to the social democratic movement. The person who occupies the best nodal position becomes the natural chief representative of the agency.

A network is very dynamic and able to innovate, without threatening the often delicate balance between actors in society. The culture of the network society thus favors flexibility and adjustment. It is a culture consisting of endless deconstruction and reconstruction, and a political class or polity that is intent on instant response to and transformation of every public mood or values, or evaluation of its process. It opens up the potential for deepening the democratic process and for a more meaningful understanding of the concept of democracy. It may however also be abused, by becoming a less transparent social system that may be built on a network of graft.

## **THE INITIAL SETTING OF WRC**

As we have mentioned in an earlier brief the Women's' Resource Center (WRC) represents perhaps the most interesting Flagship Agency among several new very active interest formations, and also the one with the greatest development potential. The point here to note is that there is no talk of new interest organizations nor even of interest groups per se. New agencies are products of new social movements (NSM) to a considerable extent. The implication is that they are largely off- shoots of NSMs, which are not able in themselves to engineer change in the society of the 90s in the way social movements did a century ago. In a sense the new agencies represent specialized and often professionalized definitions of a particular movement's orientation. But they have not come about as a result of deliberate decisions by some NSM higher council. On the contrary they are spontaneous outgrowths of a situation requiring new action.

The historical circumstances leading up to the establishing of WRCs, and their particular branch activities, were ripe for public measures on both multicultural issues and female unemployment, which had become dramatic with the 90s economic crisis. The government had presented a proposal to parliament that had enacted the establishment of resource centers for women across the country, but with the idea that they should be publicly controlled and run by regional administrators.

It is interesting to note that it was a government led by the Swedish Conservative Party that instituted these measures during the course of 1993-4. Many a WRC came to be run in this fashion i.e. administrated by a representative of the County government. The one in Göteborg assumed an autonomous and partly pioneering character. One of its leading employees-to-be was sent up to the northern province of Jämtland already in that year to study what was considered to be a model WRC. Soon however the Göteborg branch ran its own line.

The prelude to the WRC was initiated in September 1993. It was a project initiated by the local and regional male power structure - governors of the provinces in question, chairmen of relevant municipal councils, president of the chamber of commerce, vice-chancellors of the respective universities, executives of regional development funds and the business secretariat, etc. - known as *The Future of West Sweden*, proved to be entirely without women among its leaders.

At the County administration, one woman, today the representative for gender equality in the County, gathered several women representatives of female interests to a general meeting for the inclusion of women in the *Future of West Sweden* project. In a way it was a strong reaction on the part of the women against the habitual male

domination whenever some important decision on the future was to be taken. Above all only 3% of the money allocated for regional development was given to women! The meeting resulted in a network of women with the idea of an establishment of WRCs across the whole of western Sweden, at the provincial and urban levels.

Interestingly enough similar discussions were being held all over the country. As a result most provinces - in accordance with an act put forward by the Swedish government, the County Government under the respective governors, and the County Labor Board - established WRCs, which then formed a national network that was not particularly coordinated in the beginning. Since this was a movement initiated very much from below, every WRC was allowed to develop its own profile according to local conditions and needs. The particular female slant to this approach was further mirrored in the split between several centers and networks as a reaction against the common male concentration of power to one or two huge centers. The driving idea and the general framework were, from the beginning, the support of women's ideas for projects up to the level of self-sustainability and a certain level of practice.

The main strategies have become project development concerned with female empowerment and creativity. Most of these strategies have come to deal with the acquisition of knowledge in accordance with the needs and desires of women. Proper counseling and advice constitute the basis of activities.

## **THE CAUSAL SETTING**

In the formative ideology behind the creation of WRCs some basic facts about actual gender relations in the labor market in the supposedly most egalitarian (gender-wise and in general) society in the world tell an appalling story. In an official investigation of 1998 it was established that Sweden has a very gender-segregated labor market. Women have throughout lower wages for the same job, with an average decrement for women of £1.50 per hour. Women are found predominantly in the lower range of wage earners. A recent poverty-cum-exclusion investigation (B.Halleröd 1998) concluded that those found in the lower ranges tend to be stay there. Sweden had been able to demonstrate a remarkable equalization of wages between men and women through the wage policy programs between 1960-1983, after which differences began to grow wider again, due to educational levels and related factors. 89% of all job-leased cars are held by men. Moreover households with a single parent are overwhelmingly female. Of 229 stock exchange firms only one has a female CEO or president and only 3% of the board members are women (SOU 1997:135-6). Corporate cultures and corporate leaderships are permeated by male norms and patterns. Male executives or leaders recruit other males who resemble themselves. This goes for politics as well as business. Family and social domains are habitually female, whereas the tough decision-making in economic affairs is male dominated (L. Wängnerud & M. Oskarsson 1995). None of these facts is a cause for surprise, like many new trends they reflect patterns that have been there all the time. More disturbing is the condition for exposed single parent households, which have grown by 100 000 since the 1970s. Nine out of ten households with incomes below the poverty line consist of single mothers with children. The divorce rate has gone up quite drastically in the last decade due to increased demands for equality in the household. Today only 3% of women have voluntarily chosen to be at home, to take care of the household, compared with 30% during the 1970s, which was the decade of leftist reforms. Working is however still designed according to a traditional male dominant role, with a wife at home (G. Fürst 1998). This

has also been evident in the futurology seminars of the regional technical parks and other relevant think tanks, whose scenarios are male-constructed. Those women who have made a career inside these structures have entirely adapted themselves to a male value system.

## **FORMATION PROCESS**

At the meeting on the 20th of September in 1993 the framework for future WRCs was set-up: they were to be easily accessible; completely open to the needs and requirements of women with ideas and wanting ideas for employment-generating activity; they were to provide a framework for infra-structural support in all matters pertaining to relations with authorities, credit institutions and the like; the task was not be limited to counseling but concerned with the creation of a new generation of female leaders, politicians, board members and all those functions involved in decision-making power, for the transformation of the labor market to a non-gender biased domain. Obviously these tasks attracted the attention of a number of women in research. Inevitably careerist women with less serious intentions were initially drawn into this formation process. But those who came to be decisive for the WRC development after its inception in 1995 arose alongside the gradual drop out of careerists when hard realities had to be met and coped with.

One source of strength during the formative process was represented by the confluence of experiences, both in the less populated rural areas of Sweden and in urban areas. One important rural network was named Women Power (*Kvinnokraft*). In concrete terms however only 3% of regional structural funds, administered by the Provincial Boards, were allocated to women's activities, according to a female researcher, Tora Friberg, whose publication "*The other side of the coin - on the one sidedness of regional policy*" (*Den andra sidan av myntet - om regionalpolitikens enögdhet*) in 1993 was the actual basis of the government proposal for an active regional policy in this direction.

Another fundamental source of ideas for the formation of a resource center for women was constituted by the rurally based grassroots women's movement. For a longer time rural women have been organized in networks at village/district, municipal, regional and national levels. These networks constituted the groundwork and paved the way for Resource Center types of institution by illustrating the situation of women, demanding change and forming opinion.

Within the framework of the campaign '*The whole of Sweden must live*' a group of women belonging to the State Delegation for *Glesbygd* (less populated rural areas) worked out a program for village development and women's issues. It was this very group of women who were the first to propose the establishment of regional development centers in every province. The proposal was further elaborated by a group named "*Women power*", which was initiated in 1992 as a three year project funded by the State Department for *Glesbygd*. The intention of this group, in conjunction with the State, was to infuse regional policies with a woman's perspective. The strategy was to establish resource centers where the proper information, advice and regional support for women could be gathered. The resource centers were to take their departure from regional needs and preconditions. The main tasks for these centers would be to found development projects for women, encourage and run competence programs for women. In the government proposal for regional policy the experiences of these group efforts constituted another essential background.

The foundations of a proposal existed in January 1994 when, however, the main steering group for this important NGO consisted of a conventional public assembly of authorities and business-related units, with an agency such as Cooperative Consulting somewhere in between. The steering group gave certain guidelines for users (certain groups of women should be given priority under special circumstances), resources and expected results. In June 1994 the government, which at the time was a conservative-liberal coalition, took the decision to establish a National Resource Center for women. Within a year some autonomous WRCs had come into being.

It is of both great significance and symptomatic that this NGO was engineered through a process of established institutions, which were very much part of the Swedish model. For instance, not only were the state agencies for Economic and Technical Development (NUTEK) and the *Glesbygdsverket* called in, but so were the labor exchange authorities. The initial work to construct the WRCs as institutions was carried out by unemployed women, who became employed on a project under the special labor market measure called ALU during the spring of 1994. These women, who in actual fact designed the content of WRCs, were employed in semi-housed and temporary conditions at first by Cooperative Consulting and then the County Government. During the autumn of 1994 four women were thus ALU-employed in order to create a plan for WRC activities. These women were also to constitute the framework of the future organisational structure of the Göteborg WRC.

On March 8 (the International Day for Women) in 1995 the WRC in Göteborg was inaugurated. One thousand women (putative users and representatives of the public power domain) were invited and 500 came. The WRC was still aimed at giving unemployed women, and those women who wanted to change the course of their lives, an impetus and knowledge-based advice to get in to something new in terms of employment. The woman in charge of WRC worked part-time as an employee of the County Labor Agency. The funding at that time came from two sources within the same sector: the County Government and the County Labor Agency. From the beginning of the WRC activities she worked full time.

Hence in September 1996 the WRC changed its project title to the Idealist Association of Resource Centers for Women's Work and Development in West Sweden. From this moment on the WRCs became independent of authorities and thus secured their autonomy as fully fledged NGOs. At this juncture the WRC has had to seek funding from other sources independently. Among new sources EU projects have begun to play a significant role. In the middle of September WRC will sign the papers for a pre-study in RECITE II, 'Regions and Cities in Europe', an EU project under DG XXVI. The main aim of this project is to build two other WRCs, one in Italy and one in Greece. The project will work on regional, national and transnational levels, with Finland, Italy, who hosts the project, and Greece as a counterpart.

The wide networks of WRCs, not only on the regional basis of western Sweden, but on a national basis, now took off as the agency from below many initiators had hoped to create, (in all likelihood against the expressed wish of certain categories of women). On the other hand the growing influence of the grass-roots implied an increasing share of those who came as users, or out of sheer curiosity to learn.

A basic goal has been to function as a neutral place for planned meetings and occasional encounters between women, in their endeavors to combine their own development with job design, as a form of practical cross-fertilization. The numbers of visitors grew from 2500 in 1995 to 3000 in 1996 and 4000 in 1997; advice from 80 to 200 or 300; contact registers from 856 to around 2000; and estimated telephone calls from 15000 per annum in 1995 to 20000 in 1996 and 30000 in 1997. The oral spread of

knowledge about WRC and its goals and the possibilities it offered has increasingly caught on with younger women, and more difficult cases of women unemployed with very little hope of ever getting steady salaried work again.

Several jobs are increasingly becoming the solution in a fragmented labor market. Steady jobs are no longer available. Hence a many-sided competence is required and the WRC spokespeople feel this concerns women in particular, since the male agenda on the labor market is inherently mistrustful of the competence of women. As a result the WRC combines a standard consciousness-raising-cum-empowerment process with both a defensive and offensive strategy.

The nation wide networks of WRCs came into being at a time of a unique crisis. The inception of the major, and in many ways pioneering, WRC in Göteborg bore the relatively confused and defensive mark of the times. Several groups of women feared destitution, since they felt that once they had become unemployed an increasingly overt male agenda would guide the labor market. Many interests were involved in the design and funding of the WRCs. Nobody was quite sure in which direction it would be heading, in spite of its fairly explicit instructions to be a forum for the confluence of many female aspirations, and an advisory board to the ambitious, needy, unemployed and excluded alike.

If a broad spectrum of public and semi-private interests were behind the launching of the WRCs, these centers nevertheless formed their own new realities, missions and tasks. What began with a Samuel Smiles gospel to suit certain prevailing currents, was soon turned into a classic NGO, adapted to serving more general needs and orientations. When it started the WRC in Göteborg had developed a pattern of ambitions and goals which gave it the possibility of choice regarding orientations.

## **IN OPERATION**

The mainstays of the WRCs derive from the following resource pools: Localities, Advice, Sluice, Technical Equipment, Information, IT, Home Page, Links, Networks. Here the central location of the WRC is important, since it is possible for it to house itself in a church if necessary. It is strategic for the function of the agency. There is an important confluence here between organisational structure, function and agency culture. The head of the WRC in Göteborg is a veteran of the municipal administration and a woman of high personal reputation. Her networks and personal influence, with central departments of the municipal bureaucracy, are obviously invaluable to the functioning and legitimacy of the WRC. In this case, as in the case of AGORA as will be seen below, the importance of the leading personalities tends to become overriding in that, as one might hypothesize, the new agencies, and in particular the flagship ones, are much more dependent on the social-cum-network competence of their leading personalities than is the case with regular interest groups.

The location of the WRC is of importance. The same goes for the initial agency culture. You may either have a formal appointment or you may just slip in for a chat over a cup of tea. In one sample the women involved expressed the strength and profile of the WRC as follows: "The unique aspect is openness, that the WRC is not an authority and does not act as an authority, but instead is an equal partner in a relationship promoting equality. Women are expected here to define their needs themselves according to whatever assistance they can get. They can come and have a look, get a taste of the agency without having to declare what category they might belong to. Nowhere else do you experience anything of the sort. It may take quite a few

visits before women actually ask for assistance in the form of advice. In contrast the normal way of making an appointment with a business advisor often runs counter to a women's ideas about development. Here they are guided quite imperceptibly into project thinking via a cup of a tea."

Many do not know why they come but nevertheless keep coming. They are unemployed and they have poor financial resources and lack confidence in themselves, as well as in the social system as a result. They need to meet others, listen to what is on offer and borrow office machines. It is important that they should not experience yet further pressure in addition to the burdens they already carry. That is why those presenting themselves at the WRC are becoming younger and tending to represent increasingly harder cases of unemployment. One project is working with young well-educated women trying to find work in Europe. In a document from spring 1995, that is at the time of its inception, the main orientation was considered to be client-orientation: a client-orientated activity looks after the client and gives her special treatment whatever her situation.. Right at the entrance it's important the client is regarded as an individual and a likely resource for the agency. There are no desks between the staff and the clients. The initial talking takes place in armchairs around a coffee-table and never at a desk. It is the experience of being treated as a person that is the decisive first step, which gives the client a sense of being attended to, and which is a prerequisite for the advisory process to be successful. The advisory process is seen as a creative one where both client and advisor are equally involved. In fact out of the advisory process came SLIPEN, a project for women to go further in a group at the WRC, to follow through their ideas and ground them more realistically before starting their own enterprises.

An important element in the activities concerns the series of lectures by specially invited resource people. These are free and open to everyone. They have been proven to reach out to a very large number of people who otherwise would never otherwise be exposed to the public discussion of their problems. To take advantage of these experiences there is need for a chairperson, someone on the staff who brings experts and resource people in society into contact with unemployed women.

## **DEVELOPMENTS**

As a consequence of its inherent dynamism, which was not anticipated by the funding authorities (the Peoples' Health Secretariat, the Leadership Academy, New Enterprise Center, Labor Exchanges, etc.), a vital and exciting ramification of other expert agencies grew up through its branches. While WRC concentrates on work and work conditions for women, there are other agencies to which women with special needs can be passed through the advisory processes at WRC: Agora ("marketplace" intended primarily for immigrant women through renewal and empowerment – to them magic concepts), Harmonia (catering to psychologically damaged women, see Swedish National Report Category III), the Suncat, Lone Mothers, etc.

A central concept is that of Empowerment (this is the actual word used in the Swedish context). It deals with the development of personal power - to take control of one's life. This is the core of the WRC and has implications for all activities. But Empowerment in this context also implies access to networks. It is within this framework that policy meetings take place in stages. The process is very evidently one of maturation. Policy meetings to follow up and indirectly provide feed back to actual developments have to be spread over a certain period of time.

The policy meetings have been concerned with the labor board at the county



level. Since this public agency was involved in the initial stages of the WRC it represented the foundation of a public policy ideology in relation 1) to the building of networks joining the public-private domains and 2) to the launching of a specialized activity, which the ordinary public authorities could not possibly handle, either from a resource or from a competence point of view. In its turn the labor board has ramifications to, for instance, another research-policy agent called Work in West Sweden, which may sound ironic to those acquainted with the situation. It concerns mainstream industry and male job opportunities, but is very far from the focus of the WRC and its ramifications.

### **AGORA: THE AGENCY AS A MEETING PLACE FOR WOMEN OF ALL AGES AND FROM ALL CORNERS OF THE GLOBE.**

The essential background to the rise of AGORA was the availability of a pleasant location in the center of Göteborg, discovered by one of the main female operators handling funding for voluntary associations, and made known to the future project leader of AGORA. What this shows is the powerful informal network between women in various important capacities in the municipality. The project leader of AGORA had for a long time been looking for a centrally located meeting place for women in Göteborg. Many women were prepared to demonstrate for a location. So there was now both the location and the manifest need. However funding was still lacking. Then the future project leader talked to a male colleague familiar with EU applications and together they found that there was integration money that could be applied for.

AGORA was established on the 1st of November 1997. The temporal coincidence of historic circumstance and social climate was striking. It was one of 50 major integration projects receiving EU-funding, but only one of two that concerned women, and the only one addressing the integration of national and immigrant women. It was to be run as a project for three years, based on the EU policy of giving refugees the opportunity to attain independence and thus forestall social exclusion. But it was obviously in the back of the minds of those involved in the activities of AGORA that it should become a permanent agency if it proved to work. The overall aim is to create a natural meeting place between women from widely varying cultures, including and of considerable importance, the local one, in order to cement a real and permanent integration.

The primary target group is refugee women. A secondary one is then all those Swedish women who have an engagement with and who want to actively take part in common activities and goal setting with the primary target group. A central feature of the program was that the knowledge and skills accumulated and developed at AGORA used by the women there would spread to immigrants, whether they came in groups or were professionals in the local community, in Sweden and in the whole of Europe.

AGORA arose as a project idea in a mutual exchange of views between a voluntary association Göteborg Refugee Aid (GRA), which is a NGO umbrella organization, and the municipal council of Göteborg. The member organizations of GRA include the Red Cross, the Jewish Community, YMCA/YWCA, the Göteborg Christian Collaboration Council, the Association Springboard, the Rescue Mission and the City Mission. However it has been the umbrella organization GRA that has been most active in promoting the application for EU funding.

When the application was written the main author, who then worked at the

People's Health Institute, decided to avoid what she thought to be the typical female approach - a high awareness of domestic issues - and opt for a mainstream male approach that would be considerably more ambitious in its demands. There were only four days of which two were holidays to anchor the application in the municipal council. Hence it was GRA which became the main applicant and thus the owner of the project. Even though AGORA had the NGO stamp it quickly received the public backing of the local authorities.

GRA has been handling refugee issues in the Göteborg region since its inception, through information and cooperation campaigns, instruction courses, supervising missions and the like. The umbrella organization is financed partly by EU means, partly by membership fees, gifts and contributions from the various member organizations, and partly from activity funds from municipal and state authorities. As AGORA was established as an agency, its organizational structure mirrored the relative freedom it enjoyed to create a program containing new elements, and was firmly rooted in the support from all the member organizations of the GRA. AGORA has set up shop in a spacious location in an attractive late 19th century apartment house, in the very center of town, next door to the Rescue Mission, which takes care of socially excluded males.

AGORA is headed by a middle-aged woman with a university qualification in social sciences, in particular social work, and substantial experience of about 25 years of work for the municipal authorities in various capacities. She knows inside out the workings of the municipal bureaucracy which in itself is an advantage. At the same time she is dissatisfied with the inert processes of the local bureaucratic administration. She would like to realize some of her own ideas and ambitions in relation to the empowerment of women. So much of the profile of the agency is linked to the personal visions and aspirations of this influential woman.

However she is in dire need of good collaborators from the primary target group. The staff of AGORA is, according to the statute, primarily to consist of refugee women. At the start AGORA had two employees. An Open House Day on the 17th of February 1998 was attended by 300 persons and opened up for the recruitment of additional staff. After a little more than six months activity the staff has been expanded to six women, who were previously on the payroll of the EU, the Göteborg municipality, GRA and the Labor Board of the Provincial administration. Of the six women on the staff two are from Sweden, and one each from Bosnia, Chile, Eritrea, and Iran.

The Iranian woman illustrates the membership process. In early 1998 she rang the bell and asked if there was an organization for women there. Then she offered her skills and services in terms of sewing and the like. A lot of basic work was being undertaken at the time so every skill was welcomed. The Iranian woman did not only do handicrafts, she cleaned, washed up and became an indispensable factotum, a kind of hostess, though on a modest level. She was shy and kept to herself during meals for the first months. After a while, when she realized that it was recognized that she was important, her confidence increased and a year later she was an assertive project employee in her own right at AGORA. A similar case is that of the Bosnian woman, who is now also a project employee, and who has developed noticeably during her time with AGORA. These women are such evident cases of female empowerment that the message has become clear even to the municipal authorities.

The agency is driven by a broad ideology which can be summarised as follows: men have lost so much of their former role and influence, due to the insecurity of the labor market and long term unemployment in all categories, that they tend to live in the past, whereas women must live in the present (as always) and with children live also for the future; women now have a unique opportunity to formulate goals for the future and

realize them by taking a broad approach towards the integration of many cultural strands.

The more specific ideology concerns a growth in consciousness of the immense transformative potential in agencies beyond the prevailing structures of society, developed both individually and through group interaction. The project leader brought an immense amount of experience and network contacts into AGORA, thanks to her 25 years of work in the municipality. She was well able to see the wasted skills of highly educated immigrant women. Swedish society and Swedish employers would just not let them into the community of the Swedish labor market, and hence into the community of the Swedish society at large. AGORA was, on the other hand, on a small scale, a vivid example of how, for several women, their competence was shown to be in demand if only they made them known. The establishment of direct contacts, with a number of smaller specialized agencies and associations in the suburbs, provided this transformative power beyond established structures. This in turn should be able to transform society as a whole in the long run. The awareness of this potential gave AGORA the added conviction of having found a viable route.

The essential element of AGORA as an agency is represented by its function i.e. its program of activities, which includes both much network creation and the usage of existing networks. It consists of both formal and a whole variety of informal contacts. It is emphasized as one of the strengths of AGORA that women are more apt to create and make use of informal contacts and networks. This provides activities with a much more broader range of possibilities. It also creates loyalties across sections of society which otherwise would never be in touch with one another. In a fundamental sense this represents new socially created resources in society.

A number of new associations and interest groups have been spawned in recent years in the suburbs. These are, however, almost solely of immigrant background. AGORA has made a point of contacting these and integrating them with their Swedish counterparts. Associational activities and, by extension, the construction of associational democracy have tended to be highly segregated phenomena. The list numbers 33 different either local Swedish or immigrant voluntary associations. These associations have made study visits to AGORA and vice versa.

During the first year's activities AGORA carried out 1) an 'analysis of the world around', which is a fashionable Swedish expression for updating oneself with national, European and global events; and 2) mapping existing activities and actors in the field of cultural integration and labor market. One curious measure, which may just have obfuscated rather than clarified future prospects, concerns the constitution of the voluntary women's organization Torget, (meaning marketplace or agora). It was intended to secure the future of AGORA activities after the three year project period. It has however so far caused little interest on the part of concerned women groups.

Apart from networking, the main points in the activity of AGORA are courses and group cooperation around relevant themes. As a strategy to entice women to come from the suburbs into the center of town and the meeting place provided by AGORA, a very rich supply of activities is on offer. Some activity groups are inherited from earlier contexts, others newly created within the framework of AGORA. Among the most frequented and stable were "Woman in the World" with about 20-25 participants of mixed nationalities, 'The Bridge' (for immigrants from former Yugoslavia) and 'Spanish speaking pensioners', all inherited from the past. Most courses have been frequented by a majority of refugee women. Some courses have appealed only to Swedish women. Of 29 ongoing courses 12 are led by refugee women. There is a 'smörgåsbord' strategy with a richly assorted choice available: Women's Quality of life,

Cooking Group, Akupressure, Cold Ceramics, Sewing Group, Democracy Group, Spanish Speaking Pensioners, Choir, PC Training, Belly Dance, Dream Course on Fairy Tales and Myths, Creative Writing Workshop, Beginners Swedish Conversation, 'DC-7', Refugee Friend, Everyday Massage, Meeting with Sweden, Bridge, Ornamental Plants and Flowers, The Health of Women, Women in the World, About the Close Relations between Women, Swimming, Painting; Demonstration of Make-Up, Young Women, English and Swedish, Easy Aerobics, and The Balance.

Visits to AGORA are estimated only approximately since there's no registration. Around 500 women came each month up to October 1998 when there were 1142 visitors mostly due to the so called 'Kulturnatta' (Cultural Night Open House) when 400 visitors came to AGORA. There is no information about how and to what extent visitors have responded to AGORA. The impressions of the activities at AGORA appear to be highly individual. It has also let out its facilities to certain courses beyond the regular ones.

The Agency culture is still more difficult to delineate and pinpoint. One way of making an approximate estimation concerns how specially interviewed visitors have responded to the activities. Some have considered AGORA as too 'soft', or displaying too little resistance to male society. But others have seen AGORA as an adequate meeting place for its purpose. The staff have tried to update their own competence with regard to both usage of technical means such as IT, as well as to factual knowledge.

General points of opinion concerning the culture have included a positive evaluation of the project leader, the Open House action, the breadth in the supply of courses, the presence of so many refugee women, the welcoming atmosphere of the localities, the wide variety of groups, the actual meetings taking place. Certain immigrant women groups have complained about what they see as a lack of a more substantial contact with the rest of society and in particular with qualified job opportunities.

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