

Chapter 1

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Taking Action for Women's Health



Women and men of all ages, everywhere, are taking action to improve women's health. It is important to learn about the different challenges people face and the imaginative ways communities come together to make change. While no two communities are the same, there is much we can learn from each other. The experiences related in this book can help you think about the health challenges women face in your community and inspire you to find solutions that will save lives, improve the health of women and girls for years to come, and make your community a more just and equitable place where everyone can thrive.

In Peru, a midwife watches one of her indigenous patients die in childbirth. It didn't have to be that way! So instead of just accepting this sad outcome, she starts talking with other people in the community so they can work together to figure out how to prevent it from happening in the future.



In Zimbabwe, adolescent girls who are survivors of sexual violence work together in "Empowerment Clubs" to build their leadership skills, confidence, and support each other to stay in school. With the support of sensitive adult mentors, they discuss their hopes and dreams as well as their experiences of abuse.

In Sri Lanka, young women working in Free Trade Zone factories face robberies and assaults as they travel home from the factory at night. Working with their union, they persuade the factory owners to start a local bus service between the Zone and their boarding houses, so they can get home safely.



In Afghanistan, health educators use picture cards to teach men the danger signs to watch out for when their wives or daughters are pregnant or in labor. The men make copies of the trainers' picture cards to show their wives, families, and neighbors. With this new information, families are better prepared to evaluate how well a labor is going, recognize when it might become an emergency, and decide whether they should make the long trip to the hospital.



In South Africa, women who receive micro-loans also discuss other issues at their meetings, such as good communication with their partners and the importance of safer sex. These “Sisters-for-Life” are not only building their businesses and repaying their loans, they are also increasing their understanding of gender roles and sexually transmitted infections, and how to make their relationships more fulfilling.

Improving women's status to improve health

As you read through the stories and strategies like these that are collected in this book, you will see the many and diverse ways that organizers and community members have taken action for women's health. They have arrived at these strategies by asking themselves: How do women fit into society as a whole? How are they treated as mothers, daughters, neighbors, co-workers, and community members? How are their experiences different due to their ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds? What conditions and obstacles get in the way of women's health?

By asking these questions, people and organizations concerned with women's health have found they need to take action in various ways, including:

- addressing gender inequality, especially violence against women, so that women can speak up for themselves, be heard, participate in decision making, and become respected leaders.
- eliminating racial, ethnic, religious, or language barriers to health care so that no one is excluded from the support they need.
- organizing for improved working conditions and equal pay for women to lessen the harm caused by overwork and poverty.
- creating safe opportunities for women and men to look at all the different ways people feel and express their sexuality, so they can communicate better with each other, experience sexual pleasure, and practice safer sex.

Collected wisdom

Hesperian's books about women's health (*Where Women Have No Doctor*, *A Health Handbook for Women with Disabilities*, and others) offer community health workers and health promoters practical knowledge and skills to prevent and treat common health problems, overcome barriers, and save lives. People have found these resources to be incredibly useful. Over the years, women and health workers from around the world have sent us letters and stories telling how these materials made a difference in their lives and communities. They also told us that to make a deeper, long-lasting difference in women's lives, they needed more tools and strategies to raise awareness, organize, and advocate for women's rights, specifically the right to health. The goal of this book is to respond to those needs and support grassroots groups doing that important work.

Hundreds of women and men, young and old, from many countries have contributed to this book. As individuals and members of organizations, they passed on their experiences and wisdom about how they have taken action to promote women's health in their communities. A team of women from diverse regions in the world collected their stories, strategies, and activities and have woven them together to show the many different paths people have walked towards this common goal.

Grassroots groups of women and men in 23 countries then helped by reading this new material and trying out these activities in their own communities. Their feedback has helped create a resource that we hope you will adapt and use in your varied and changing contexts.

This book is for you!

Everyone can play a role and take action to support the health of women. The midwife in Peru whose client died in childbirth did not see herself as an organizer. Her job was to support women in labor. Yet, when she saw the challenges her patients faced, she stepped into a new role — one that still supported her clients' health but in a different way. She started talking with others to see what changes they could make together so that fewer women would die in childbirth. They held community meetings, discussed needed changes at the health center, made connections with people in power, challenged discrimination against indigenous women, and learned about legal protections. She didn't do it all by herself. She didn't need to be a skilled community organizer herself. But she did need to be able to notice a problem, imagine that it could be different, and begin gathering people who could work together to make a difference. That is what we mean by taking action.

You too can bring people together to solve the problems that get in the way of women being able to enjoy good health. This book is for everyone, not just community leaders or health educators.

This book is for all women because when women work together to understand and address health problems, they can take effective action to promote their health and the health of their communities.



This book is for young people, because they will lead the way to change. All over the world, they are already challenging old ideas about inequality and developing new ways for women and men to foster mutual respect, trust, and health.

This book is for men because they are essential partners in the struggle to promote the health and rights of women and girls. They also benefit from a loosening of restrictive gender roles. Improving conditions for women improves the conditions for the whole community!



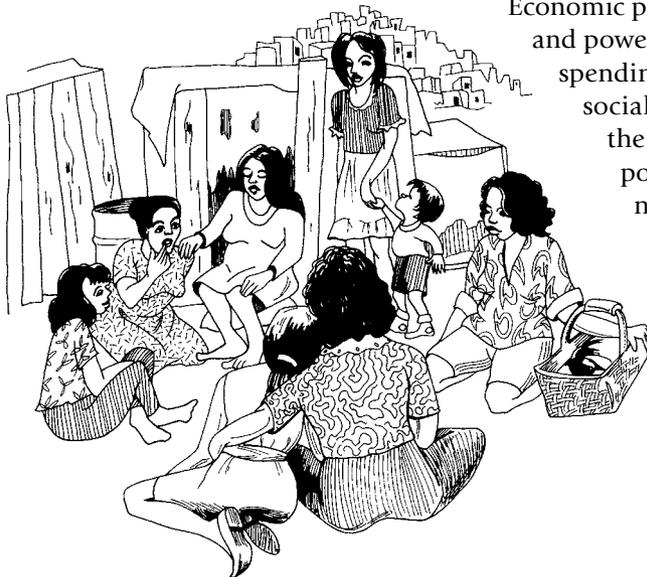
This book is for health workers who share the belief that their job is not just to treat health problems, but to work together with their communities to prevent health problems and promote well-being. Health workers are most effective when they participate in community-led actions to address root causes of health problems, encourage community organizing efforts to improve women's health, and advocate for change in the institutions that influence health and health care delivery.

All women have a right to health

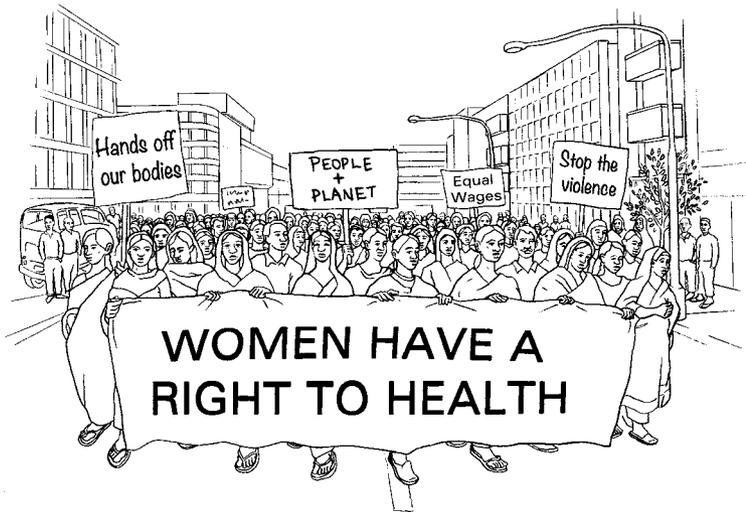
All women have a right to health. In part, this means all have a right to good health care. Good health care for women takes into account the different stages of women's lives, from adolescence to old age. It means caring for all her needs, whether or not she is sexually active or planning to have babies. For too many years, "women's health care" has meant little more than maternal health services, such as care during pregnancy and birth. These services are necessary, but they address only motherhood, a fraction of women's health needs.

The right to health goes far beyond good health care. It also means the conditions women live and work in — at home and anywhere they go — should safeguard their health rather than weaken or endanger it. A clinic where broken bones can be set is not enough if a woman lives every day with someone who beats her. Education about sexually transmitted infections is an important ingredient in a woman's health, but it is not very helpful if that woman has no say in her sex life. Asthma treatments can save lives, but more people would breathe easier and be healthier if factories were not allowed to dump poisons into our air and water.

Many great advances in medicines and treatments to improve women's health problems already exist, yet millions of people still suffer from preventable and curable diseases. This is partly because economic and political forces give priority to the needs of those who have power and wealth. People with less power and fewer resources pay the price — often with their health. Corporate globalization has caused extreme inequality, leaving millions without the resources they need to live in good health.



Economic policies dictated by the rich and powerful force governments to cut spending on health, education, and social services while the majority of the world's population — living in poverty, lacking basic sanitation, nutrition, and medical services — needs more, not less, of that. Women, often denied basic rights only because they are women, are often the most impoverished, and their health is increasingly threatened by these global policies.



Attaining the highest possible level of health and well-being is a fundamental human right, regardless of a person's color, ethnic background, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, religion, class, or caste.

The information and activities in this book can help you, your families, and your communities improve health at a local level and confront the larger social forces that undermine women's right to health. You can use this book to help develop campaigns and strategies in your community to challenge and change these conditions. You will find that you are not alone; you are a member of a broader global movement that cares about women's health and promotes the right to health for all.

Addressing root causes

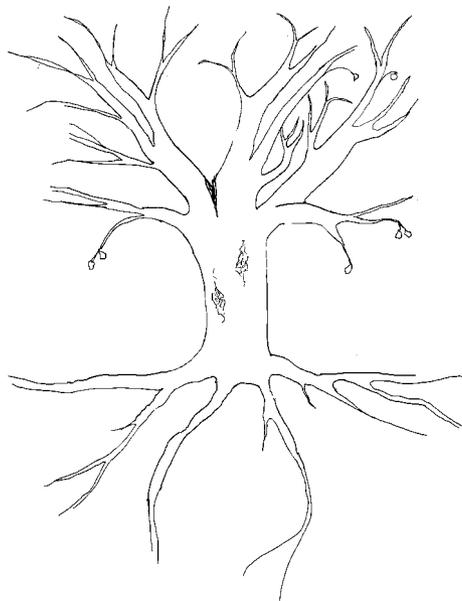
Good health is more than the absence of disease. Good health means the well-being of a woman's body, mind, and spirit. A woman's health is affected not just by the way her body is made, but by the social, cultural, and economic conditions in which she lives.

Improving women's health means addressing the "root causes" of ill health — including poverty, gender and racial inequality, and other forms of oppression. While men's health is also affected by these factors, women as a group are treated differently from men. Women usually have less power and lower status in the family and community. This basic inequality means:

- more women than men suffer from lack of access to resources like money, food, land, and mobility.
- more women than men are denied the education and skills to support and protect themselves.
- more women than men lack access to important health information and services.
- more women than men lack power and control over their lives and basic health care decisions.
- poor women, women with darker skin, migrant women, and women from ethnic minority groups experience even more challenges than other women.

This larger view can help you to understand and work to change the underlying "root causes" of women's poor health. Root causes are the many factors that influence and affect women's health. These may not be visible, but like the roots of a tree, they are important to promoting life and well-being.

Just like a tree that is denied water or healthy soil, when women and girls have less power and lower status in their family and community, they cannot become healthy and strong.



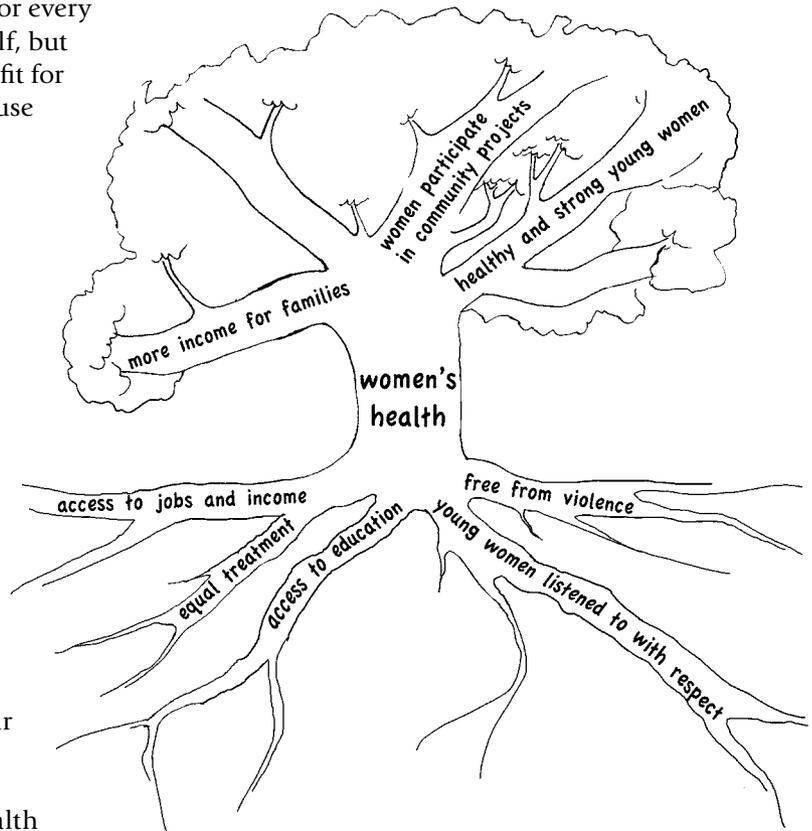
Women's health is a community issue



As you listen to women share their stories, you will see that a woman's health problem is almost never her problem alone. Women's health is a community issue!

When you address the roots of poor health for women, everyone — the woman, her family, and the whole community — benefits. A healthy woman has a chance to fulfill her potential. She can decide how to live her life on her own terms and work towards her own goals. She can contribute to her community in the ways that she chooses, and she can gain access to the resources she needs to have a healthy family, if she wants one. Winning these rights for every woman is important in itself, but there is an even larger benefit for all who surround her. Because when women are treated as second class citizens, the whole community is deprived of what they have to offer — their intelligence, creativity, and participation in helping the community move forward.

This book will help you find broader, more inclusive, and more realistic ways to improve women's health and the health of the entire community. As you address the conditions that deprive women of good health, your efforts will help replace the roots of the problems with roots that support good health for all women.



Community organizing builds support and solidarity

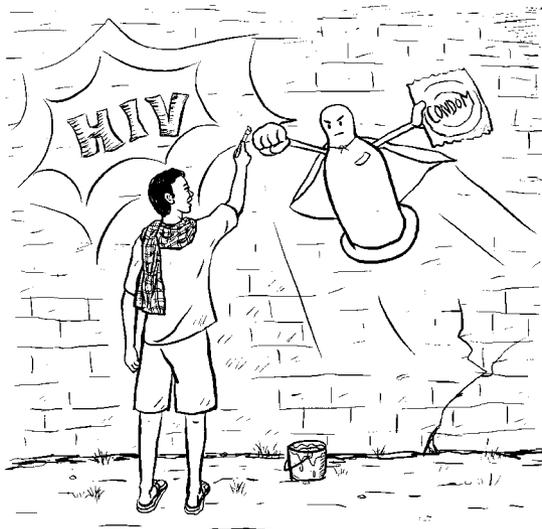
Working to improve health brings people together around a common concern. As you and your community identify and break down obstacles to good health, you will build organizations and movements that bring women together, give them the opportunity to share their stories and experiences, and begin to take action. When focusing on women's health, many of your actions will address gender inequality and other root causes of women's health problems. As you join with others to make change, people will experience the power and excitement of solidarity, which can lead to more people participating, more organizing, and more ambitious strategies for change.

You will find the joy of success but probably also the discouragement of failure along this path toward improving women's health. But even failures can contribute to long-term success. Both challenges and failures provide important opportunities for reflection. With each action and reflection, you will learn more and understand better what the next step should be, and you will be able to use the activities in this book to bring others into agreement that change is possible. The goal, therefore, is not to settle on one action, do it, and then decide if you "won" or "lost." Rather, the goal is to build a community that works together in an ongoing way, routinely identifies problems, plans actions, reflects on those actions, and keeps building a larger and larger grassroots base that can fight for health and justice.

Activities that lead to action

You will find many different activities in this book. All of them have been developed, shared, and tested by health organizers around the world, but it is up to you to decide what will work best in your community. Try them out. Be creative. Adapt them and combine them to suit your purposes.

All kinds of media can help groups reach out to others. Even if they can't read, most people love to make and see art. You can take information from the board game about sexually transmitted infections (see page 124) and create a mural together.



Our grandmothers' group meets each week at the market. The book suggested we do skits to raise awareness about violence against women, but we decided to sing songs instead. We knew this would engage men and women best.



Many types of activities

Guided discussions: To have a shared understanding of problems and solutions, people need to talk to each other. A guided discussion is a way for a group of people to talk to each other and to ask and answer specific questions.

Games: Board games, guessing games, and movement games are fun ways for groups of all ages to test and draw on what they already know, explore and learn more, and to start discussions. Games promote laughter and energy! They can provide a good change of pace after a long discussion or after a group has addressed a very serious subject.

Role plays, storytelling, and theater: Drama is a way to explore problems and propose solutions while entertaining and having fun. People can act out their own experiences and imagine the experiences of others. Some issues and conflicts may be easier to consider if they are portrayed in another time and place through stories or theater.

Community mapping: Community mapping is an activity in which people make a map together based on what they see and know about their community. Making a map can help people see patterns in health problems or see how conditions in the community have changed over time. A map can also help people identify important community resources and strengths they may not have been aware of.

Drawing and art: Making and looking at drawings can help us see solutions to problems that we might not see otherwise. Drawings can be used to start guided discussions, and drawing can be a way for people who cannot read or write well to express themselves and to participate. Public murals can call attention to problems, remind people of their strength and achievements, and provide visions for a better, healthier future.

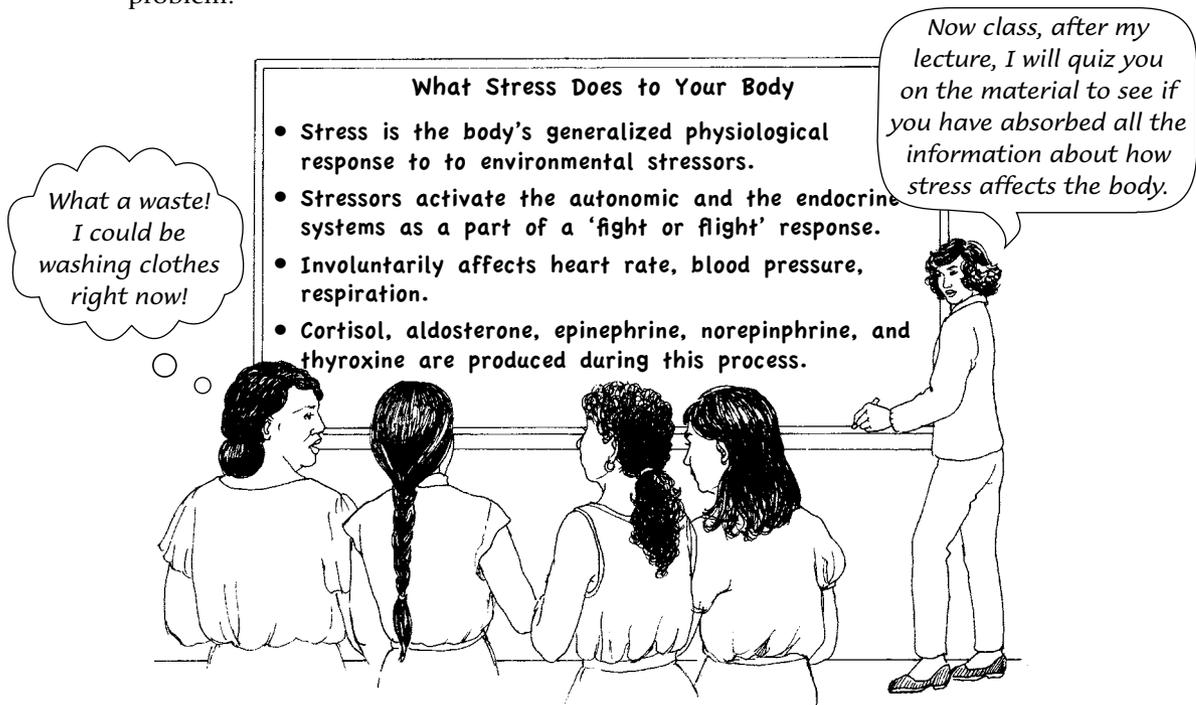
Alternative media: Short videos and photographs can be used to record and share testimonies about gender-based violence, the need for decent jobs, the dangers of industrial pollution, etc. Community radio can open a regular channel of communication in both rural and urban areas about issues important to women. These forms of outreach can spread information about problems more widely to build support and call people to action.

Popular education for building movements

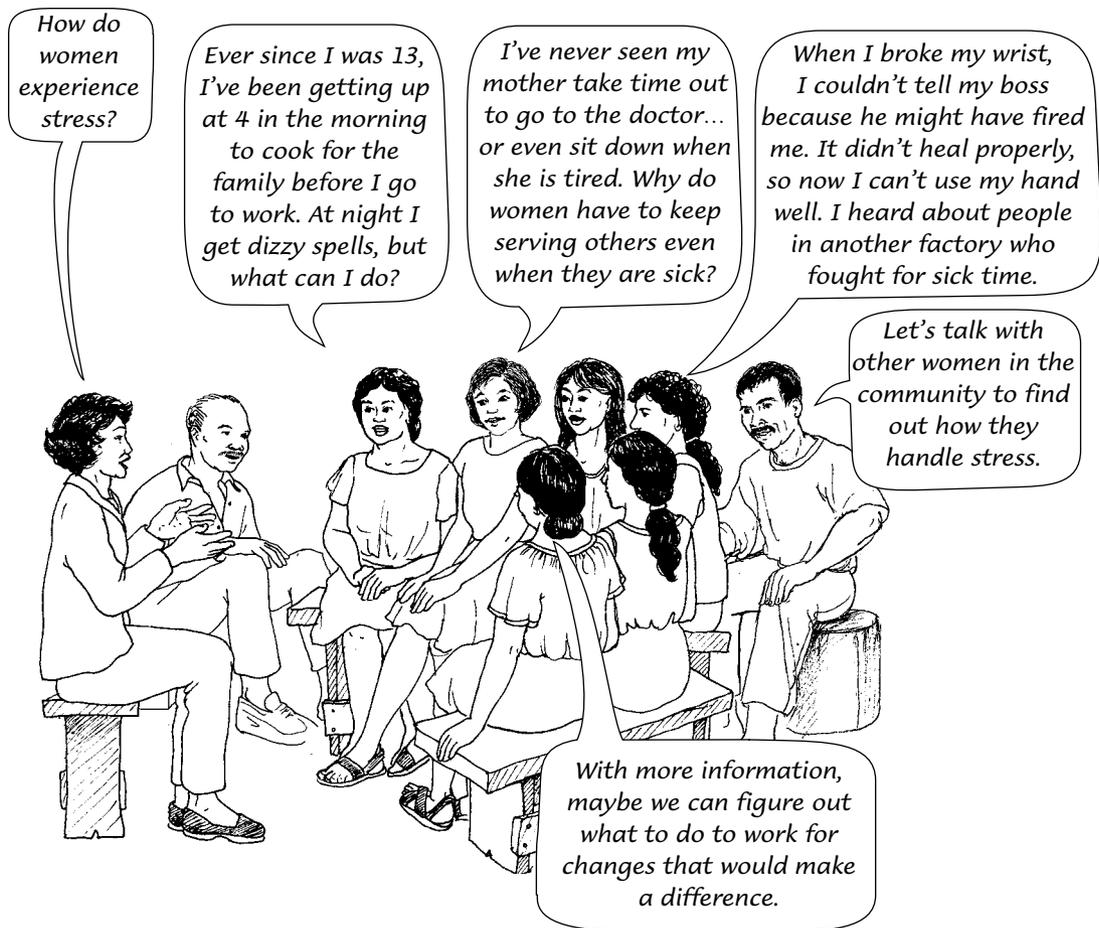
Remember that the purpose of these activities is to help the people in your community decide what they want to do about women's health and how they need to do it. How can you make sure to bring everyone's thinking into the process and develop everyone's leadership?

Popular education is founded on the idea that people directly affected by problems are in the best position to identify the causes and find the solutions. All participants are both teachers and learners, whether or not they have had the opportunity to go to school. It is easy to see how this works in the area of women's health. For example, consider how much direct experience women have with the stresses of working outside the home as well as doing all the cooking and cleaning for the family. They are the experts on managing so many tasks, and they have a lot of information about how overwork affects their health. And, if they had a chance to share their experiences, they could both teach and learn a lot about the effect that stress has on their health.

The process of popular education will collect the community's knowledge of a problem, push the community to examine why the problem exists, try to uncover the roots of the problem, and decide on what actions they might take to address the problem.



This is not popular education.



You will find that the popular education techniques in this book help to bring people together and get them talking about how to improve their lives. With that as a goal, learning about women's health does not feel abstract.

As a group works to explore the problems they experience and to understand why they face these problems, they begin to see that many of their personal struggles are actually widely shared by others in their community. They find out that their personal problems are not so personal after all. They begin to develop action steps that address the problems at their roots, which benefits everyone in the community!

Learning from and inspiring each other

We have already mentioned that organizers from many countries greatly improved this book by reading it, trying out the activities, and sending us their comments and opinions. But something more happened in that process as well. Organizers drew lessons and inspiration from the stories and activities. For example:

In Pakistan, a group of men reviewed Chapter 8: Healthy Pregnancies and Safe Births and became engaged and inspired by the story from Tanzania about how a man organized emergency transportation for birth emergencies. The men who participated in that session have continued to meet and are now organizing rapid response to birth emergencies in their own community.

In Liberia, a group working in urban slum areas field-tested Chapter 6: Ending Gender-based Violence and Chapter 7: Protecting Women's Health with Family Planning. Inspired by the stories from Nepal and Ghana, they too took actions to promote the health of girls in their own community by working to organize forums for schoolgirls, parents, and teachers to discuss sexual exploitation and the importance of girls' education. They also carried out a successful campaign targeted at young people to encourage the use of birth control methods to prevent unwanted pregnancy.

In India, a group of men and women reviewed Chapter 3: Gender and Health. They found the activity A day in the life (page 48) and their discussion about women's workloads to be especially engaging. After the workshop, they raised the issue of equal pay for men and women with their local lawmakers, especially for agricultural work.

Men get 150 rupees per day while women get less than half that – 70 rupees per day. In fact, women put in more work than men!

We decided to raise this issue with our Tanta-Mukti Committee (a village-level dispute resolution committee) and the representatives of Gram Panchayat (the local self-governance institution) to discuss this issue at the village meeting.



Our hope is that your community, too, will draw ideas and inspiration from the stories and strategies in this book. Together, the combination of our efforts will bring us closer to the day when women everywhere can enjoy full access to health care and to the life conditions that promote good health.

Working for this vision will take time and courage. It can be a long, hard struggle for people with different life experiences and perspectives to find common ground and work together. The challenges may sometimes seem complex, even overwhelming. Yet women and men, young and old, from all walks of life, are accepting the challenge and taking action to improve the health and rights of women and girls. We are inspired by their example, and we think you will be too.

Every meeting you hold, every action you take, is a step on the path toward achieving Health for All. Sometimes we see only our local struggles, and we feel that change is too slow or too small — but change is happening. Each of us, no matter how limited our role may feel, makes a difference.

Like the many stories in this book, our actions as individuals and groups are like threads that, when woven together, create a colorful, sturdy fabric of a global movement for community empowerment for health. These stories of people working together to promote women's health in their communities have taught us, and can help you teach others, that by joining together in a caring and demanding movement, we can change the world.

