

## Editorial

### « Grassroots Women Arise »

The phrase "Grassroots Women Arise" is the theme of a six day international workshop held at the Development Education Centre (DEC) Enugu, Nigeria, 25th April to 1st May 1996. In that workshop issue papers were presented on the marginalization of women and the channels for women empowerment through self-help development projects. Two of those papers are incorporated into this issue of our *Bulletin* Barrister S.A. Akpala who is the founder and president of the Society for the Welfare of Women Prisoners addressed the issue of the denial of human rights to women in the continued practice of certain customary laws in the contemporary Nigerian society. Widowhood and the law of inheritance as practised among the Igbo are examples of such obnoxious customs. Radical reforms are called for to change such laws. The Yoruba are giving leadership in this regard. Olagoke took a critical look at women response to economic reform policies in Africa and the continuing poverty which bedevils the rural areas of the continent. His argument is that while the programmes of economic reform may be good, they are vitiated by poor policy-implementation. In many cases women have responded creatively to rural poverty despite the poor policy implementation of laudable economic reform programmes. He pointed out DEC as an example of such a creative response to rural poverty.

In addition to issue papers from the conference on Grassroots Women Arise, we solicited articles on the impact of the two dominant religions, Islam and Christianity, on the rights of women in society. Protus Kemdirim and Nubia Kai noted the astonishing degree of freedom and creativity enjoyed by African Muslim women during the period of the Moorish (Islamic) empire. This contrasts sharply with the subjugation of women in the present day practice of Islam. In his exegetical analysis of some New Testament "House-Codes", Amadi-Azuogu argues that Paul was

not responsible for the anti-feminism that one finds in the Pastoral Letters like First and Second Timothy. These letters do not come from Paul but from one who wanted to claim Pauline authority for the maintenance of order in the family. And in another paper, Olagunji points out how Jesus in his life and ministry did not conform to laid down Jewish social practices. Such non-conformist attitude is verified in Jesus' relationship to women. Olagunji draws interesting implications of the Jesus way for the contemporary Nigerian society.

The purpose of this issue of our *Bulletin* is to project the vision of the Development Education Centre (DEC) which is principally geared towards enabling women suffering from poverty and marginalization to work towards achieving self-reliance. The majority of African women are still struggling to be recognised as persons with equal rights and opportunities as their male counterparts. The focus of DEC, as a Non-Governmental Organisation, is the rural poor. DEC has the ambitious programme of designing an institutional frame-work to bring the rural poor and the marginalized women within a viable development network. This fact is brought out clearly by Cecilia Asogwa, director of DEC, in her opening address during the Conference on "Grassroots, Women Arise". She declared "if financial resources can be made available to women suffering poverty, at terms and conditions which are appropriate and reasonable, these millions of small people with their millions of small pursuits can add up to create the biggest development wonder".

The "development wonder" is the dream of DEC. The emphasis of DEC after over ten years of learning experience is self-help for the rural poor and functional education. To benefit from DEC schemes, rural women of any particular village following the programme must form themselves into a group of not more than forty and not less than twenty persons. Participation and commitment of each person and each group in DEC's programmes are imperative. Consequently, in order to strengthen the structures of this movement, DEC insists that credit would only be supplied to members of groups which had met regularly for at least one

year, had demonstrated a capacity to save, and had engaged in some form of collective activity. "A further requirement, according to Asogwa, "was that no individuals would be eligible for loans who had not first completed a functional education course - hence our strategy of training and sponsoring functional literacy workers and village health workers in all villages where DEC is working with women in their self-help groups".

DEC is currently working in two hundred villages in the five Igbo-speaking states East of the Niger - Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. There are three hundred functional women self-help groups with more than twelve thousand women participating. This experience in women empowerment and liberation at the grassroots level is exhilarating. Freedom is never given on a platter of gold; consequently, DEC provides the opportunity for women to be fully involved in a carefully designed programme of action in order to achieve liberation. In addition, since DEC has made an option for the rural poor, the mobilisation of these rural women (who normally survive through farm work) to overcome poverty and distress is rooted in programmes which lay the foundations for institutional reform. Only when these women receive functional education may they realistically embark on small-scale business, and be aware that their rights are infringed upon. DEC is an example of how the rural poor through participation help to devise concrete strategies of achieving self-reliance. This programme which has been implemented in communities East of the Niger should be extended to other parts of Nigeria.