A Report on:

A workshop organized on 1st and 2nd June 2016.
Nadukuppam in Tamil Nadu, India.

We were part of the Soul of WoMen Global Campaign
This second workshop was inspired by the ‘Soul of WoMen’ gathering organized for the 15th of May 2016.

For the ‘Soul of WoMen’ gathering, GEN Auroville and hosted a 2 day workshop on the 1st and 2nd of July 2016 for a group of 15 mostly married women from the Amirtha/Meera Enterprises in Nadukuppam who lived in two villages quite close to each other. One half of the group worked at Amirtha and the other at Meera, both social enterprises that have emerged from Pitchandikulam Forest’s work at Nadukuppam, a village in Auroville’s bioregion.

The intention was to explore through Theatre of the Oppressed games and activities what it means to live as a woman in the rural Indian context, trying to unravel the narratives, the thought patterns and societal constructions of gender culminating in a forum play for the larger community. However, the workshop evolved differently according to the needs of this particular group of women.

This workshop was held by Ms. Afshan Mariam, a psychologist working in education using tools of drama, farming and mindfulness.

**Day 1:**

Day 1 of the workshop focused on image theatre and introducing the concepts of the oppressor and the oppressed.

On the first morning of this workshop the group participated in a series of playful activities designed to free movement and expression, to raise awareness of the senses and the connection of the body to the world. These exercises continued throughout the workshop in various forms.
The afternoon of the first day involved the group coming together to start the Forum theatre process. While our intention was to stage a forum play at the end of the two days - one that would be worked on by the community, Afshan Mariam, the facilitator, recognized early on that the group needed something else. We initially thought it would be more appropriate if the group formed a play just for themselves at the end of the two days using personal narratives.
We focused on staging an incident of sexual harassment on a bus, a situation where in Forum Theatre the women would be asked to intervene and change the story. The idea was to start the play process by staging an event that everyone recognises as a situation that occurs in real life. The women were encouraged to intervene, replacing the original actors and changing the story. The first day concluded with a discussion on this incident and the women’s narratives on sexual harassment.

Forum exercise: case study of sexual harassment on a bus

However, as the day ended it was very clear that the depth of sharing required to stage a forum play could not happen in just 2 days. The group was not ready. There was a shared history between them, one bigger than their personal histories. It was a collective history formed in their villages, their culture containing layers that need time to unravel. It stopped a safe space from emerging between them and seemed to prevented the women from truly opening themselves up to the wider group.

Afshan observed that what was really needed were deeper inner reflective processes and the seeds of enabling a safe space within the group for the women to share what was on their minds. The workshop then changed and evolved with the group on the next day.

Day 2:

Day 2 started with a focus on self-exploration. The idea was to bring out the life stories of the women for themselves, using symbols to understand the narratives better. The morning began with an art exercise the women looked at their life and presented their life journey through a timeline using symbols, words and other images to visualise their history. Some of the reflections included motifs such as birds, flowers, houses, fish etc representing general experiences of freedoms and joys in childhood, the start of responsibilities that emerged from marriage, and so on.
A series of body awareness activities followed, including a deep guided meditation. Afshan explained that these body awareness activities were intended for 3 connected reasons - for the women to recognise that:

1. They existed in their body,
2. Their body was contained in this space and
3. One of the ways they related to each other in this space was through their bodies.
The day continued with a ‘trust walk’ where the group split into couples roleplaying blindness, where one would guide the other on a walk and reverse positions. The exercise was intended for the group to get in touch with their senses in relation to themselves and others.

The group then performed some mirroring exercises, following the movement of a piece of paper, followed by mirroring their partners and then mirroring the movements in the entire group.
Mirroring a partner

Mirroring the movements of a piece of paper

Mirroring in a group
The end of the day came with music and dance evolving organically from the mirroring exercise, culminating in a group celebration celebrating womenhood.

The workshop ended with tea and a conversation asking the question of what the women wish for their own selves 10 years from now, apart from the wellbeing of their family and community.
On the whole, the group, whose overwhelming need seemed to be just a space to laugh and play, largely determined the direction of the workshop. Afshan reflected that there was a lot of energy needed to hold the group, through the presence of an immense amount of unsaid stories and unexpressed emotions.

It was recommended that this workshop be the start of a creation of a group process where the women can begin building relationships of trust with each other. The workshop ended with Ms.Parvati, who requested the workshop, starting a conversation on a potential monthly meeting for the whole group to come together to share with each other.

We thank you for the inspiration and the opportunity to hold this event!