

## Empowerment of Poor Women for Development and Peace.

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*Isabel Quintero came from a very poor family in rural Guatemala. She became the head of household with two children to support, ever since her abusive husband abandoned the family. Her only option to earn any money was the backbreaking seasonal job of picking vegetables from the fields. One day, her friend, Maria, told her about the Grameen loan program. Isabel decided to apply for a Grameen loan and to her surprise she received the loan. With that money Isabel bought two goats and started making tamales at home to sell in her village market. She worked hard to grow her business.*

*Before long, she was the owner of a busy tortilla factory with two employees. At full capacity she could produce 35 kilos of tortillas a day. Isabel repaid her loan and was on her way to becoming fully self-reliant. Isabel 38 now wants her children to study at the university so they will be able to find good dependable jobs. “Before we didn’t know what would happen when there was no work in the fields, but now I run my own business,” says Isabel with great pride.*

The story of Isabel Quintero exemplifies the plight of poor women. It shows, that when given a hand up, a woman will dedicate herself to overcome poverty and chart a successful future, not only for herself but also for her family. This in a nutshell, is **women’s empowerment!**

Empowering poor women is the key to eradicating poverty and hunger. As demonstrated by Isabel, poor women are eager to take charge of their lives, strive hard to rise above poverty and improve themselves and their families.

According to the United Nation’s International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), fully 70% of the world’s very poor people—around one billion—live in rural areas. A large proportion of the poor and hungry amongst them are children and youth. It is reported that every 3.6 seconds one person dies of starvation, and many of these are children under five years of age. In many societies rural women, youth, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities are often disproportionately held back by disadvantages and barriers, based on power inequalities concerned with gender, age and ethnic identities.

In the year 2000, all 192 United Nations member states and about 23 international organizations agreed to achieve eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2015. The goals were mainly directed towards ameliorating economic and social conditions in the poorer countries caused by the many problems of poverty. Poverty and gender inequality have been forever entwined. Furthermore, gender inequality perpetuates and intensifies poverty.

The eight MDG goals are interwoven in such a way that each becomes a critical component of the other. But, fundamental to all the goals, is the goal of achieving equality and empowerment of women because without that, the other goals are unobtainable. Furthermore attempts at development, without empowerment, will rend the very fabric of our lives ---and that of society.

An impressive body of evidence exists that point to the coupling of gender inequality and poverty. But national governments and the development community are either unwilling or unable to rectify entrenched gender imbalances, essential to reach the Millennium Development Goals.

IFAD in its report on *Gender and Rural Poverty* notes that throughout the developing world, rural women engage in multiple economic activities that are critical to the survival of poor households. Rural poor women play an essential role in all aspects of agriculture, and they provide the food, water, and fuel families need. Male migration from rural areas has further exacerbated this situation. Almost 40 to 70% of the women of working age in low-income, food-deficit countries are engaged in agricultural work. The proportion of woman-headed households has reached almost one third of total households in some developing countries.

The IFAD report goes on to underscore the fact, that despite the essential economic and care giving roles they perform, women have significantly less access to financial, physical and social assets than men do; fewer opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills; and less voice in public decision-making.

For example, it is estimated that women in Africa receive less than 10% of all credit going to small farmers and only 1% of the total credit going to the agricultural

sector. Studies have shown that when women farmers have direct access to knowledge and technologies, crop yields increase significantly. A World Bank review found that specifically focusing projects on gender increased, agricultural productivity and output, by more than 20%. Gender equality in agricultural efforts therefore, increases food production and reduces hunger and poverty since a significant proportion of the rural poor are women farmers.

The United Nation's Development Program (UNDP) estimates that more than 66% of the 1.4 billion people living in poverty are women. They are living on less than US\$1.25 a day. The close association between ill health and poverty is well established. The World Bank recommends that governments should invest in policies and programs that support economic opportunities for women. This will allow women to break the cycle of poverty, and give them a chance to improve their health and that of their families.

Evidentiary research shows a clear link between increasing women's productivity and earnings, to better health and education outcomes for the family. By lowering household poverty children's lives are improved and families prosper.

UNICEF (2007) reported that women perform 66% of the world's work, produce 50% of the food, but earn only 10% of the money income and own a mere 1% of the property. On an average, women are paid 30-40% less than men for comparable work. Moreover, women account for much of the unpaid labor in agriculture and routine everyday tasks.

Globally, over 960 million adults are illiterate, and two thirds of these are women. Sixty percent of the 130 million children between the ages of 5 and 11 who do not go to school are girls. A large proportion of these children reside in rural areas. Even a few years of education enhances a woman's confidence, ability to negotiate, and improve her status in the family. This allows her a better chance to participate and make health decisions for herself and her family. The latest Demographic and Health Surveys, for more than 40 developing countries, show that the mortality rate of children under- five is lower in households where mothers have some primary

schooling than in households where they have no schooling. The rate is even lower in households where mothers have secondary schooling. Women's education reduces malnutrition by more than 40%. In general, education of the mother is a marker for better health not only for herself but the family as a whole.

The world population has now passed the seven billion mark. There are about 57 million more men than women in the world today, even though by nature women have a distinct genetic advantage over men for increased life expectancy. Then why do we have this imbalance in the population? Population statistics show that the surplus of men is mostly found in the youngest age groups. This anomaly steadily diminishes and then disappears after the age of 50. The reason for the large surplus of men in the younger age groups is due to the intolerable situations that exist in some parts of the world. For example: China, India, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Vietnam and others. In many parts of these countries, sex-selective abortion and female infanticide is widely prevalent. As a result the ratio of men to women becomes greatly distorted. Whereas the natural ratio of men to women is about 100: 105, the ratios reported in these countries range from 140 men to 100 women. This disgraceful fact bears witness to the gender inequality and absolute indifference to women's human rights. Unfortunately, these practices occur in both urban and rural settings, among the affluent and the poor, among the educated and the illiterate. Shockingly, women become partners and perpetrators of these crimes; challenging the very notion that empowerment can be achieved through education and wealth.

The limits of empowerment, we must concede, are embedded in traditions and entrenched patriarchal systems that result in great harm to women. These regimes are so strong and integral, that women become complicit in their commission.

Therefore, in order to be truly free women must become not only empowered, but learn to swim against the tide of long held family and community dictates. Women must break the chains that bind their lives and destinies to the self-defeating and self-destroying rules of 'male supremacy'.

Indeed, societal principles, rules, laws and customs set the environment in which individual actions take place. Decisions made as a result of cultural dictates are actualized in individual relationships. This is the reason why change is so difficult, because challenging a paternalistic regime involves a fundamental change in the core relationships that individuals encounter.

We must recognize that the problem of 'natal inequality' shows not just the limits of women's empowerment, but also the limits of government intervention in the face of long enduring social patterns. Technological advances, such as sonograms, have only further exacerbated the problem by making sex selective abortion widely possible. Obviously, strong government involvement, implementation of existing laws, and innovative action is required to deal with these troubling issues.

***In the light of this, are there measures that can be taken to empower poor women who find themselves with no resources and decision-making power?***

Researchers have described... Empowerment as a social action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and larger society...Let me make it clear, that empowerment is **not** achieving power to dominate others, but gaining power to act **with** others to effect change.

Studies have shown that participation is key to empowerment. Women's organizations have played a strategic role in this regard. Participation gives women the capacity to increase their own self-reliance and inner strength. It provides them with the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change by gaining control of needed resources. This is a bottom-up, rather than a top-down, process. By participation women learn the importance of organizing, by and for, themselves.

A clear example of this is SEWA or Self Employed Women's Association, initiated under the able leadership of Ella Bhatt in Ahmedabad, India. This organization has been able to bring together poor, destitute and illiterate women and provide them with opportunities that transform their lives dramatically. The experience gives

them the confidence to make their own decisions regarding their health and living. They have a chance to learn new trades and make new friends. This provides them economic sustainability and positive social interactions. As members of the group they have access to health care, banking and credit and the freedom to establish their own living arrangements. The salutary effects of such group activity are felt by the individual woman, along with the benefits on the groups, communities and societies as a whole.

Ella Bhatt notes, “For SEWA, women’s empowerment is full employment and self-reliance. When there is an increase in their income, security of work and assets in her name, she starts feeling economically strong, independent and autonomous. Without economic strength they will never be able to exercise their political rights in the local government.” SEWA has become a model to emulate, for other countries struggling with similar problems.

Another remarkable program to note is a hospital project that seeks to empower the reproductive choices and health of low-income women. Ananth Kumar while working in a leading family planning health care organization in India noticed the lack of good, affordable hospitals serving poor women. The government hospitals were overcrowded and under resourced. The private hospitals offered high quality service but they were priced out of reach for low-income women.

To address this problem Kumar launched ‘Life Spring’ hospitals to serve poor women with affordable, dignified quality health care. He made sure that his plan included financial sustainability. The first Life Spring hospital was launched in 2005 as a pilot in Hyderabad, India. Life Spring offered services that covered the whole range of women’s reproductive health including, antenatal to post natal care. Women pay a low, all-inclusive price for a complete delivery package, which provides them with high quality health care services. The staff was trained to recognize women as empowered clients rather than recipients of charity.

The first hospital reached operational profitability in 18 months. Much ahead of the plan’s initial assumptions. In 2008 Life Spring received joint equity funds to scale-up

their model. With the equivalent of US\$ 3.8 million in equity, they grew from the initial pilot, to six hospitals in their first year, operating as a private limited company. The hospital program from a partnership with the Cambridge based Inst. for Healthcare Improvement, greatly decreased the rates of maternal and neonatal morbidity, improved protocol adherence and reinforced a culture of safety. They report an infant mortality/morbidity rate of 1% as compared to the international standard of 5% and under.

By the end of 2010 there were nine Life Spring hospitals in operation. These serve women who earn the equivalent of about \$3 to \$ 6/ day. Well over 12,000 deliveries have taken place in Life Spring hospitals, to date. They serve the reproductive health care requirements of low-income women, thus empowering them in this critical area of greatest need. Life Spring hospitals operate as private, for-profit and financially sustainable entities.

These examples demonstrate that with innovative thinking and dedication to solve the task at hand, a way can be found, out of even the most confounding problems. I must mention here, with great disappointment, the current efforts of some in the United States, to trample on women's autonomy and rights. By that I mean the efforts launched by the 'conservative right' to infringe on the reproductive health and rights of women, by denying their choice and rights in this matter. If this succeeds it will take our country back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century!

In conclusion, what I have discussed here points to how important it is that we **rededicate** ourselves "to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of humanity", as proclaimed in the Beijing Declaration of 1995.

The citation to the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, awarded to the three women, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Peace activist Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Pro-democracy campaigner Tawakkol Karman of Yemen is most relevant here.

The citation read: *"We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society."*

