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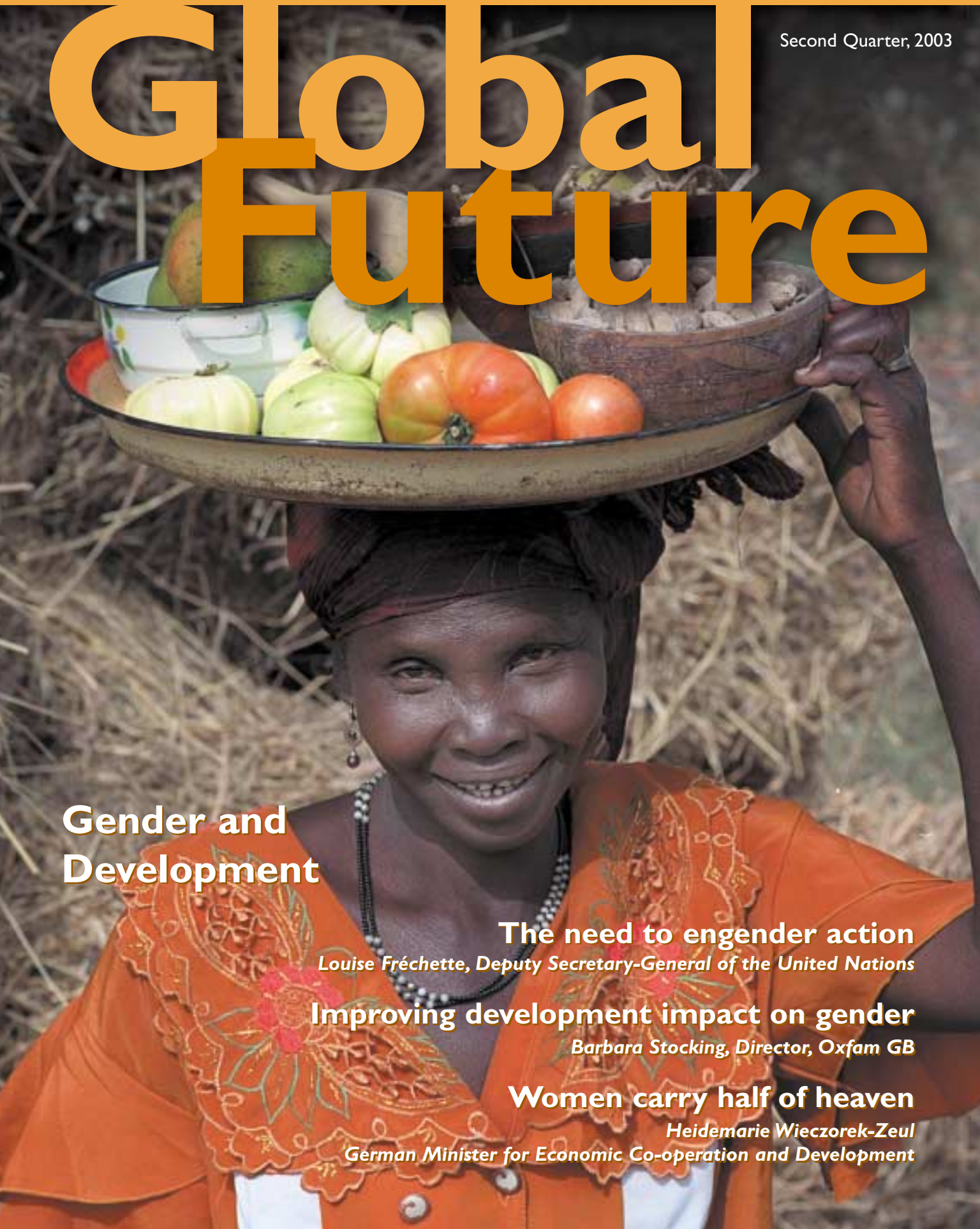

Gender and Development

The need to engender action
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Accepting responsibility

IN THIS ISSUE of *Global Future* our contributors focus on the issue of gender in development. They ask whether very real progress in some areas has been followed by a period of complacency.

Barbara Stocking of Oxfam GB makes clear that enough has not been done – indeed, the achievements from actions to date have been inadequate. Louise Fréchette, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, underlines the need for international concern to be followed by action. It is this failure to give real meaning to international conventions, policies and guidelines that occupies the thoughts of many of our authors. Whether the issue is protecting women refugees or fighting the scourge of commercial sexual exploitation, the international community has failed to do enough.

Governments must also accept their own responsibility to press further in achieving genuine equality. Two articles from Latin America show that governments can play a crucial role in bringing change, particularly in fostering the wider changes in culture that are essential. No issue highlights this reality more than that of HIV/AIDS, powerfully conveyed in an article that points to the appalling consequences of ingrained inequity.

Ultimately, all actors in development must accept that initiatives to achieve real progress in gender issues must be rooted in promoting women's rights. These rights are God-given, a reflection of the biblical call for justice and wholeness. The church itself has a vital role to play in challenging stereotypes, and encouraging education and awareness on gender issues.

FRONT COVER PHOTO: WORLD VISION

The need to engender action

Louise Fréchette

THERE WAS A TIME when the issue of gender was relegated to specific bodies in the United Nations focusing on the status of women. While one committee dealt with development, another dealt with women. We have come a long way since then. Gradually but steadfastly, a gender perspective has become integrated into virtually every aspect of United Nations activity and discussion – reflecting the growing understanding that we cannot solve any challenge that touches on the lives of people around the world without looking at how women are affected, and how they can be part of the solution.

Thanks to a series of United Nations conferences in the 1990s, we now have a set of internationally agreed on norms recognising the rights of women in basic areas such as employment, access to credit, healthcare and education, as well as to political decision-making. The number of women in leadership positions is increasing – in national governments and parliaments, as well as internationally. The Millennium Declaration – adopted in 2000 by all the world's governments as a blueprint for building a better world in the 21st century – resolved to 'promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.' The same year, the Security Council passed its first resolution on Women, Peace and Security, recognising that gender equality is relevant to every Council action, be it mine clearance or peace negotiations.

A gender perspective has become integrated into virtually every aspect of United Nations activity.

At the same time the challenges of the 21st century are bringing home to us, as never before, the disproportionate burdens placed on the world's women, as well as the key role women have to play in addressing them.

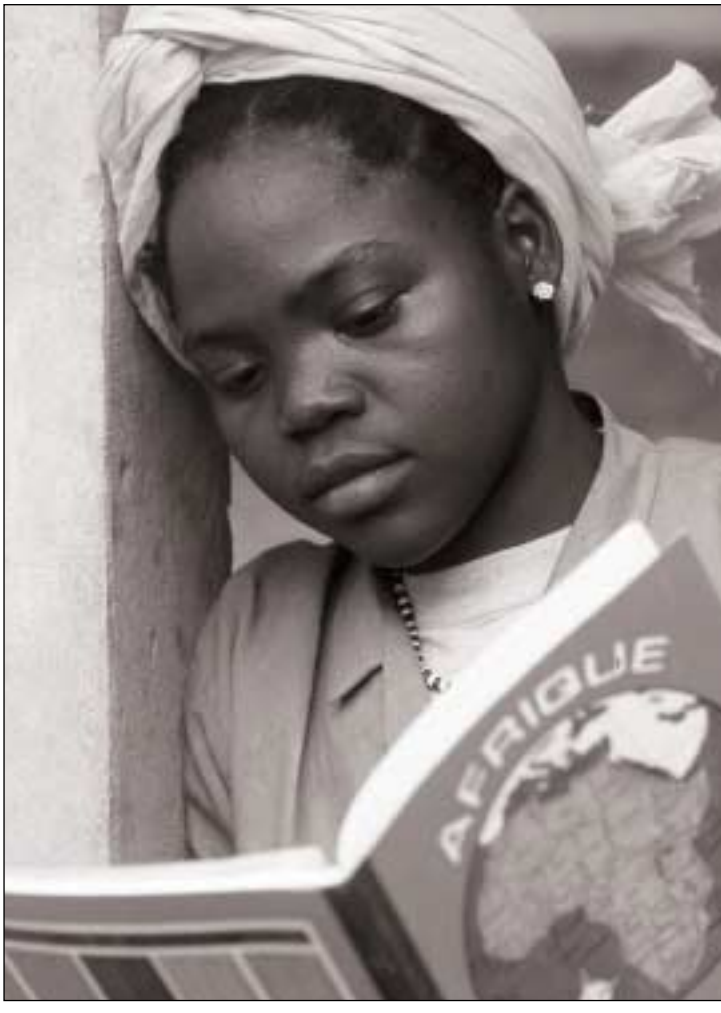
Women and HIV/AIDS

The most acute example is HIV/AIDS. At the end of 2002, for the first time, women made up 50% of those living with AIDS. In sub-Saharan Africa, the figure is 58%. The increasing burden of the epidemic borne by women is a tragic consequence of the gender inequality that persists in every part of the world. There are many contributing factors, ranging from poverty, abuse and violence, to a lack of information and power to negotiate safe sex.

AIDS is far more than a health problem. In Africa in particular, the AIDS epidemic is tearing apart the fabric of society, disrupting the processes that make communities function, and unravelling hard-won gains in economic and social development. Because of AIDS, Africa's food security is threatened with the loss of farming skills and agricultural production. The burden falls most heavily on women, who are left to care for a sick spouse while keeping the family and the farm going. At the same time, because so many women are falling ill, communities are deprived of the social safety nets that women have traditionally provided as caregivers to the youngest and oldest members of the family. And, perhaps most devastatingly of all, girls are taken out of school to care for family members or to work in the fields. A UN study in Zimbabwe found that two-thirds of the children withdrawn from school because of HIV/AIDS in their households were girls.

And yet we know that educating girls is one of the most powerful weapons there is in fighting HIV/AIDS. The more girls know about the disease, and the more they can build up the self-confidence that an education

PHOTO: WORLD VISION



brings, the better they can protect themselves against the virus.

The world's governments recognised this at the UN Special Session on HIV/AIDS in June 2001, where leaders agreed in a Declaration of Commitment on a series of specific, time-bound goals and targets to promote girls' and women's empowerment. Eliminating gender disparity in education is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals, drawn from the Millennium Declaration. (The reversal of the spread of AIDS is another.) The UN Literacy Decade launched in February 2003 will place a special focus on 'literacy and gender,' providing another impetus to redouble efforts to promote the education of girls. And Secretary-General Kofi Annan is taking every opportunity to stress the gender aspects of the current HIV/AIDS epidemic.

What is needed now is action commensurate with the urgency of the situation.

Clearly, there is global recognition that the goals of achieving universal girls' education and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS are closely intertwined. What is needed now is action commensurate with the urgency of the situation. It will require a joint effort by all actors – governments, donors, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector – on the ground, and at the advocacy and policy level.

How the international community responds to this challenge is not only crucial to the fight against AIDS worldwide. It is also a test of our ability to act on the understanding that the empowerment of girls and women is a prerequisite for reaching all the Millennium Development Goals. Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier and better fed; their income, savings, and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is also true of communities and, in the long run, of whole countries.

We have known that in theory for a long time. For far too long, we have failed to act on it. There is no time to lose if we are to reach the Millennium Development Goals by the target date of 2015. Only by investing in the world's women and girls can we expect to get there. ■

Louise Fréchette is Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations.

PHOTO BY PABLO CARRILLO

Peru: Abandoned as a child, this young woman is now a health professional.

Improving development impact on gender

Barbara Stocking

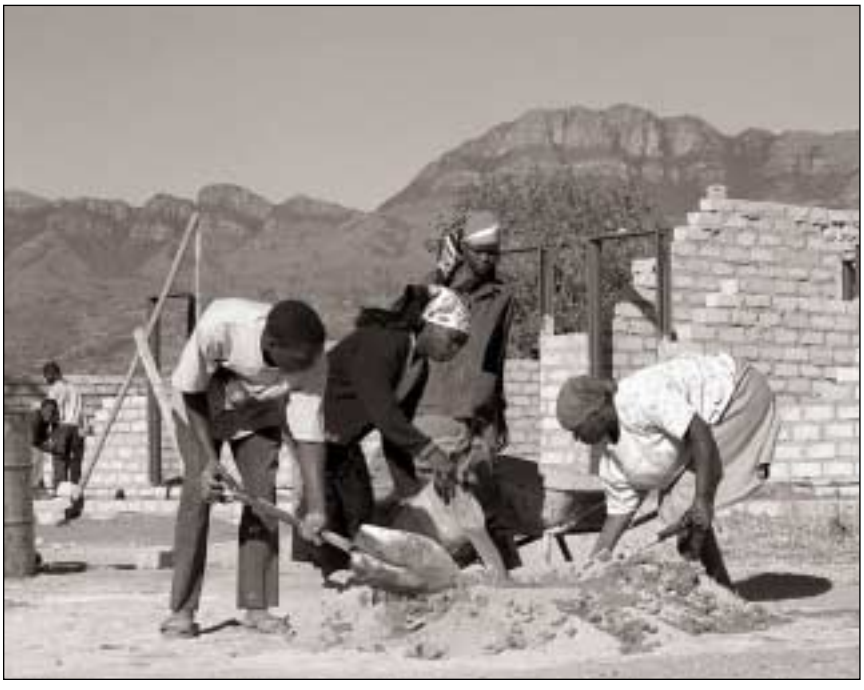


PHOTO BY WINNIE OGANA

POVERTY has a woman's face. You cannot be serious about tackling poverty unless you deal with gender inequality. Seventy percent of people who live in extreme poverty (less than US$1 per day) are women and girls. The unequal power relations between men and women play out in hundreds of ways: women are prevented from owning land and property; two-thirds of children without primary education are girls; and worst of all, perhaps, the violence against women, including trafficking and sexual abuse, which is prevalent in so many countries. As an international NGO, Oxfam is quite clear about why it has to focus on promoting and achieving gender equality in its work.

So far, so good. The key challenge then is how to build in gender issues right across the organisation and across all our work. It is not enough to have programmes specifically relating to women's development, important though these are. All development work and humanitarian action has to be considered in the light of gender inequality.

It is also important that gender issues are looked at in terms of human rights. We have to be careful that we are not imposing our values on other societies, but international conventions and agreements about people's basic rights do exist. Yet in so many countries of the world women are not able to access rights enshrined in conventions, or even in international laws. There will still be dilemmas about what we do and how we do it, but using basic human rights for women gives Oxfam and our partners in the field a sound platform on which to build.

Gender and organisations

Organisations need to show they are serious about gender by setting out their policies and providing leadership. There is often an apparent contradiction between setting up a special unit to champion gender issues and mainstreaming gender across the organisation. There are dangers in seeing these as opposing strategies. It is very easy to pigeon-hole gender into a separate unit and assume 'they' are doing it. Equally, mainstreaming can mean disappearance, and little getting done if gender is just 'added on' to people's jobs.

Oxfam has tried various mixes in its time. For twelve years, 1984–96, it had a gender and development unit, which dramatically moved the organisation forward, so that Oxfam was known as a leading institution in gender and development. The unit was eventually closed because it was felt it had become isolated and was not developing the whole organisation. Recently, we have undertaken a gender review and realised that again we have to put increased leadership and effort into achieving gender equality. Our current strategy is to ensure that gender specialists are spread throughout the organisation, with support from centrally-based advisers and, crucially, from managers at every level.

Most development agencies are now strongly aware of gender issues and try to build them into programmes. Some of the best known development work has also empowered women, from micro-credit schemes to give women more economic control, or support to women's organisations so they can fight for their rights, through to legal change and changing attitudes. But we can hardly feel proud of what we have achieved when we also have continuing exposure of sexual abuse issues in humanitarian situations in which staff of aid agencies have been implicated.

Development work has to be considered in the light of gender inequality.

We all have to ensure that we have basic codes of conduct in place so that all staff know what is and is not expected of them, and that beneficiaries know this too, so that they know where to go if things go wrong. We have to go further though. We have to build in ways of working that reduce the possibility of abuse in humanitarian responses – for example, by ensuring that women can exercise control in food distribution, and staff members monitor the situation. It is hard to imagine anything more devastating than having to give your own or your young daughter's body to get the meagre rations to keep your family alive and to which you are entitled.

That is the worst case of aid agencies' behaviour around gender, and I am looking forward to experimenting with new approaches to peer review across agencies so that we can become much more accountable to beneficiaries, our donors, and the wider public – before our reputations are tarnished forever.

Change in power relations

Beyond getting our own houses in order, we do have to do more thinking about how change can be brought about in power relations. In Oxfam we are planning to do more on advocacy and campaigning issues, alongside our programme work. For example, we are leading a public campaign on violence against women in South Asia. Of course we are undertaking, with partners, work on the ground in communities, but we think we will need to move to change hearts and minds more widely if we are going to make a difference. In many countries, we are lobbying governments to change laws and to build gender issues into national planning, for example into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.

It is wonderful to visit programmes across the world and feel that women have grown in confidence as a result of economic or social empowerment. My personal best moment was in Lima when I was talking to a formidable group of women who run the community kitchens on the teeming shantytown hillsides. Their mutual solidarity had given them such confidence that they had stood outside the town hall until the corrupt local mayor had agreed to stand down. Women's resourcefulness and women's strength can be formidable.

PHOTO BY KAREN HOMER

Gender and men

But there is one more area where we must pay serious attention, and that concerns gender and men. Gender is not only about women – it is also about gender relations and the different roles that men and women play. I am very concerned that empowering women is sometimes seen as disempowering men, as if it is a zero-sum game for poor people. It is not – it is about achieving equality and justice for the benefit of all people. Also, I am very concerned if, for example, we encourage women to build irrigation channels or roads, without changes to their existing work in the household and in the fields. Women's empowerment is about supporting their ability to negotiate and achieve more justice and equality in their daily lives, freeing them up to take on new opportunities.

Women's empowerment is about supporting their ability to negotiate.

We do have to attend to the roles of men and women, and if women are to be major economic players in poor households, then men's roles must also change. The most warming example I saw of this was in talking to a small group in a village in the Indian Rajasthan Desert. One man shamefacedly admitted that he now collected the wood for fires because his wife had become a weaver. It was brave of him to do it, and even braver of him to confess to it in front of his male peers.

We need to applaud and encourage men to work more widely for gender equality. We have a much greater chance of achieving women's basic rights if we attend to the changes needed in men's work and roles too. And we have to ensure that all staff, especially men in our own organisations, are committed to gender equality, and feel confident and able to make their own contribution to achieving it. ■

Barbara Stocking is Director of Oxfam GB.

Challenges to progress

Fatuma Hashi

WITH THE CLOSE of the 47th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) it is clear that political will is waning, partly due to the increasingly politicised climate that currently prevails throughout the UN system, along with troubling questions regarding the efficacy of some of the bodies involved. Furthermore, a widespread sense of 'World Summit fatigue' has left many NGOs wondering whether UN conferences and commissions are the best avenues for pursuing a global human rights agenda.

So the question remains as to how governments and NGOs can best press for the elimination of discrimination, exploitation and violence against women. As a faith-based agency, World Vision believes that this question is critical and urgent. Jesus Christ responded to women in the realities of their situations, on occasion pointing out the hypocrisy of those around them. World Vision now implements a Gender in Development Policy, has endorsed the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and advocates for the universal ratification and implementation of all human rights treaties.

When World Vision looks at the question of how to address the complacency and inaction that exist, we recognise that some progress has been made. There is now a Joint Work Plan by the CSW and the Commission on Human Rights, and a streamlining of reports to the Committee on CEDAW.

There are also, however, many significant challenges that impede real progress. Failure to realise universal ratification of CEDAW gives some indication that while states generally recognise the importance of women's human rights, they are not prepared to undertake legal reform or allocate resources for implementation. Indeed, women's human rights violations are excused on the grounds of culture or religion.

Emerging issues include the increasing disparity between the North and South in women's access and participation in information and communications technology (ICT), and problems in achieving the elimination of violence against women .

Joanne Sandler, Deputy Director of UNIFEM, has pointed to four key areas requiring a concerted effort to redress the issue of violence against women: greater implementation and allocation of resources; increasing and improving the collection of data and statistics, especially for prevalence, cost and changes; strengthening mechanisms of accountability; and increasing partnerships, in particular boosting men's leadership and support for women's human rights issues.

As we move beyond the 47th session of the CSW, the need for governments to invest heavily at the national level in promoting women's human rights is critical. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that the burden of responsibility for promoting rights must now be taken up by governments at the national level in the form of concrete actions that demonstrate their commitment to improving laws to protect women's human rights. The focus should remain on implementation and no new text should be opened to negotiation as it would open up the possibility of losing ground on past successes through the rolling back of previous commitments.

One strategy proposed to help hold governments to account would be for the CSW to appoint a Special Rapporteur on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Women. Indeed, a more nuanced examination of the multi-faceted and complex forms of discrimination and exploitation faced by women and girls will help promote the universality and indivisibility of women's human rights. ■

Fatuma Hashi is Director for Gender and Development with World Vision.

PHOTO BY WINNIE OGANA

Fatuma Hashi (left) with a young patient at Fistula Hospital in Ethiopia.

Carrying the burden

Kelly Currah

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

LIKE THE SAMARITAN woman who drew water from the well in biblical times, the tradition of women fetching water for the family continues today. This simple yet essential task is just one role undertaken by women and girl children in developing countries.

Lack of basic services in poor countries is an indicator of the level of a country's development, but is also an impediment to development itself. Water, electricity, health and education are the mainstays of ensuring an educated, healthy and productive community. However, the policies of governments and the international community are undermining the provision of these services to the poor. And it is the women and girl children who bear the burden of this lack of supply, since it perpetuates inequality between men and women.

Fetching clean water is often an onerous task, involving walking many miles in all kinds of weather. The lack of clean water in communities was recognised as one of the main obstacles to sustainable development at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg last year. Polluted water is one of the main killers of children under five in many developing countries. According to the Women's Environment and Development Organization, the lack of clean water also affects women's ability to produce food for the family.

Privatising services

Despite the agreement that the number of people without basic sanitation be halved by 2015, countries are struggling to tackle the problem. Much of the difficulty comes from privatisation of essential services, such as water, that is being undertaken in many developing countries. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund have been incorporating such policies into their lending conditionality. While reducing state budgets by placing the supply of services in the hands of the private sector may make good accounting sense, it is not the way to address the problem of a lack of water supply. Perhaps ironically many countries also feel obliged to include water privatisation in their new 'Poverty Reduction Strategy' required by the Bank and Fund.

A recent report published by Public Services International to coincide with the World Water Forum revealed that many of the largest multinational water companies are planning to reduce their investment in some of the most deprived countries. Some companies are concentrating on more economically viable projects in the developed world. Companies have even walked away from contracts to supply water in some countries, complaining that they were not economically viable.

Privatisation also affects women in other ways. A joint World Bank – civil society research, Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International, found that privatisation of services like electricity created more burdens on women. In Latin America, increased prices for electricity following privatisation meant families had to reduce their use of electricity, forcing women to undertake more household duties. Where there is no electricity, women are responsible for cooking on open fires, which involves enormous time in collecting wood and other fuels to burn, and creates health problems from inhaling smoke for long periods.

The current policy of international financial institutions forcing developing countries to introduce user fees for many essential services again targets women and girl children. Charging user fees for education often means girls are excluded from education. Access to health services, often vital to women during pregnancy, are no longer affordable. Privatisation and the introduction of fees are forcing families to make economic decisions they cannot afford.

Until the international community and governments tackle the problem of supplying basic services like education and water to the whole of their population, women will continue to struggle to provide these services to their family, stunting their development. Women's lack of education and the ability to become economic actors in their own right is an urgent issue to be addressed. Relying on policies of privatisation and cost recovery of basic services needs to be assessed with regard to the uneven impact on women and girl children. The economics of basic services are intrinsically linked to the role of women and the development of communities. ■

Kelly Currah is Senior Policy Adviser on Economic Issues and Corporations with World Vision.

Promoting girls' participation in development

Sara Austin

CHILDREN'S participation in all matters that affect them is absolutely critical – indeed it is a fundamental human right. Yet the participation of children continues to be one of the least prioritised areas of development programming, and is generally treated as an 'add-on' or specialised/sectoral issue.

Furthermore, in cases where children's participation is integrated into programmes, the participation of girls is not promoted consistently, and the strategic engagement of girls throughout the entire programme cycle is largely neglected. While individual initiatives have provided excellent models for mainstreaming gender-sensitive children's participation, more often than not the focus remains on developing children's potential to be future community and world leaders, overlooking their incapacity to contribute to present-day life in their families, communities and nations.

In many cases girls see their participation as a privilege, a rare opportunity to be on an equal footing with boys, and a chance to exercise their right to express their views and share in decision-making processes. For many girls, especially those in rural settings, the opportunity to participate in family discussions and contribute to planning a local initiative is a fairly new concept that may conflict with or challenge local cultures and customs. This highlights the need to engage not only girls, but also their parents, siblings, and indeed the entire community, in a process of recognising the value of girls as individuals, and identifying the tremendous contribution they can make to family and community life.

The participation of boys and girls in development programmes has proven to increase the efficacy and sustainability of programmes. Moreover, research in World Vision's Area Development Programmes has indicated there is a clear link between children's capacity to participate and their capacity to protect themselves from exploitation: when children understand their rights and responsibilities, they are empowered to speak up and take action when their rights are violated. This finding has particular importance for girls, who are typically the most marginalised and exploited members of their communities. Promoting the participation of girls helps to uncover situations in the community requiring greater prevention and protection measures, thus improving the quality of life not only for girls but also for the entire community.

Overcoming barriers

Creating opportunities for girls' participation should not, as some might think, be promoted at the expense of or to the exclusion of boys, but it must be seen as a means for establishing a level playing field. In Guatemala, World Vision's programme *Sembradores de Esperanza* (Sowers of Hope) works in indigenous communities, seeking to develop the abilities of boys and girls to advocate together for children's rights, and address violence against children and youth. Ramirita, a 78 year-old community volunteer in one of these communities, commented to World Vision staff that 'we must train boys and give them the opportunity to accept girls as leaders.' It is only through fostering an environment where boys and men value girls that girls will ever be able to fully realise and exercise their rights.

Overcoming the barrier of parental attitudes is one of the greatest challenges girls face in exercising their right to participate in family and community life. Creating opportunities for girls to participate in all spheres of life can be a major challenge, but has been proven to have a significant positive impact on the community.

There are additional challenges to developing effective programmes for boys and girls to engage with people of influence, such as policy makers, yet there are many examples to draw hope from. Liridona, age 13, is involved in World Vision Kosovo's Kids For Peace programme as a group leader, mobilising children to be peacemakers and overcome ethnic divisions. She says that 'before, we [girls] did not have conditions or experience for participation–maybe in the family we were not given the right to participate, or even in the community or my country. And there were no big changes in the family, but now my opinion counts, and I am very happy that I have the right to participate.'

The challenge for the future is to move from promoting children's participation and gender transition as sectoral issues, to a place where they are integral components of development programming. In so doing, girls and boys will begin to see their opportunity to participate as a means of excercising their rights as equal citizens of their communities and nations, rather than as a special privilege. ■

Sara Austin is a Policy Officer with World Vision Canada.

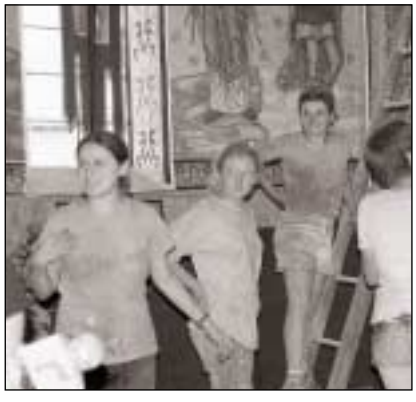


PHOTO BY CRISTINA STIHI

Painting a church as part of an art class in Romania.

Women carry half of heaven

Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul

THE CHINESE PROVERB puts it in a nutshell: Women earn much of the family income, care for the children, the old and the sick, and often shoulder more than half of the family's responsibilities. In times of crises, women mobilise resources, master challenges, and develop survival strategies. Without women 'the heavens' would seem to fall apart.

But if women shoulder half or more of the family's duties, that is not to say they get half of the rights. On the contrary: all too often women's rights are abused, and their work and efforts are rarely appreciated.

Discrimination affects all

To rectify this situation, we have declared gender equality to be one of the fundamental principles of German development policy. However, a transformation in gender relations is a lengthy process. Hence, gender equality programmes must be long-term in nature and integrated into all aspects of life.

The discrimination and injustice affecting women are not just obstacles to sustained development, but often constitute an abuse of human rights and human dignity. One example is the practice of female genital mutilation in many African and some Asian countries. Another is the failure to give 'equal pay for equal work', which constitutes a disregard of human dignity. In Latin America the gross national product would increase if women received equal wages for the same work as men. Consequently the German government has mandated itself to support the introduction of international work standards in developing countries.

Another case of discrimination is the absence of female suffrage and political empowerment. That's why our development co-operation gives priority to women's participation in the political process.

But in order to help women to exercise their rights, special projects for women are also needed. In Zimbabwe, for example, 30-minute radio programmes in various vernaculars have been broadcast to inform women about their rights and to motivate them to claim these rights.

These endeavours alone are not enough. Our 'top down' approach of urging governments in partner countries to improve women's rights is complemented by our 'grassroots' approach of co-operation with local NGOs to bring structural changes for women and girls. Public campaigns and political lobbying are funded to sensitise government and policy makers.

Needless to say, Germany is not alone in pursuing this kind of gender-oriented development co-operation. In the UN Millennium Declaration, through which the world community committed itself to halve the number of people living in poverty before the year 2015, support for women plays an essential role. It is a goal of the Declaration to eliminate all gender discrimination by the year 2015.

Inequality and poverty

Germany has followed up the action points of this UN Declaration through the German '*Aktionsprogramm* 2015.' In this programme, gender inequality is considered a cause of poverty. All activities are aligned to take into consideration the dissimilar needs of men and women, respectively. One aspect deals with the empowerment of women: We shall play our part to give women and girls equal access to basic education, to combat trafficking of women and children, and to support women's networks which seek to enhance female participation in the political process. Last but not least, we are supporting initiatives of partner countries aiming to design their state budgets in a gender-specific way. What this means is not a separate 'women's budget', but that when it comes to government revenues and government spending, different population groups are carefully taken into consideration.

When discussing sustainable poverty reduction, one must also speak about crisis management and conflict prevention, for they are among the most pressing problems of the 21st century. Women in particular are actively and passionately advocating for peace. Admirably, they have abandoned their role as victims in order to make a vital contribution to the reconciliation of rival groups and to rebuild conflict-ridden societies.

The rights and responsibilities of women and men are interdependent.

The rights and responsibilities of women and men are interdependent. That means both have to co-operate if gender-related discrimination is to be overcome. For these development activities to produce positive results, women and men should benefit equally and have equal power and influence. Only in this way will we be able to substantially reduce global poverty by the year 2015 and meet our responsibility for our one world. ■

Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul is German Minister for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Can churches empower women?

Jennifer Butler

CHURCH LEADERS from all over the world participated in the global conferences of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985). Denominations and ecumenical organisations sent representatives to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 held in Beijing. They also produced educational resources for congregations to explore issues addressed at these conferences.

In the wake of the Beijing conference, churches have continued to advocate that governments implement the commitments they made. Churches have worked to reform their own institutions as well. Inspired by the UN Decade for Women, women's groups in the churches encouraged the World Council of Churches to hold an Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988–1998). During that decade, the churches were called to respond to the challenges to move forward in their commitments to women.

Churches have a unique contribution to make in the struggle to advance the status of women. Today one of the greatest challenges to realising women's empowerment is the persistence of cultural beliefs that denigrate women. Religion plays a strong hand in shaping culture. If church leaders preach and teach that women are created in God's image, they can help change negative cultural beliefs about women.

How can the church do this? Nontando Hadebe, a church leader from South Africa, leads Bible studies to empower women to claim leadership in addressing the AIDS pandemic in a country where one out of every four people is infected. In Nontando's community, women have been at the forefront of addressing AIDS, a trend

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

seen all over Africa. While women in Africa are bravely educating people about AIDS and caring for the sick, their right to teach, to access financial resources – for example, to own land – or to challenge authorities is often limited or curtailed by law or cultural belief.

Nontando's women's group studied Numbers 27:1-9. In this passage, the daughters of Zelophehad are about to lose their family land. Their father had died and had no sons, and women were not allowed to inherit land. The women went to Moses and requested that the inheritance pass into their hands. Moses asked God and God said, 'The daughters of Zelophehad are right.' For the South African women, who themselves were barred from owning land, this story was earth-shattering. They said to Nontando, 'No one told us God saw us like that!' The women had been deciding whether or not to challenge the local pastor to educate the community on AIDS. After reading the Bible passage, they ran out the door to speak with the pastor. The Bible had spoken straight to their hearts and inspired immediate and courageous action.

A minister in a small American town tells a similar story. Churches in the United States in the eighties worked hard to raise concerns about domestic violence. The work remains often painstakingly slow. Bible passages like Ephesians 5:22 ('Wives, be subject to your husbands') are often misinterpreted as encouraging women to remain silent about abuse. In many instances, pastors have advised women to submit to their abusive husbands or have suggested that the women must have asked for the abuse in some way. Reverend Abel, a pastor in America, decided one Sunday to preach on domestic violence as a sin. After her sermon, several people came to her to complain about the topic of the sermon – they didn't think such topics should be discussed in church. However, privately, four members of her congregation came forward to ask for help in dealing with a violent situation.

To highlight what church leaders are doing to empower women, a coalition of denominational and ecumenical offices at the UN called Ecumenical Women 2000+ has been holding educational events during UN conferences. The group also developed a website to publish such information (www.ew2000plus.org). EW2000+ brings church leaders like Nontando Hadebe to speak with UN staff, government delegates, and NGO leaders to explore ways religious leaders can effect change.

Churches are often unwittingly influenced by the negative cultural values that justify women's low status in society. By lifting up the Gospel of Christ, Christians live out our calling: 'In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). ■

The Reverend Jennifer Butler is the Presbyterian Church representative to the United Nations, where she has served for six years.

Rape: Does it rate in the hierarchy of horror?

Brenda Fitzpatrick

TIME AND AGAIN in recent decades, I have been confronted by the illogicality of a frequently expressed hierarchy of horrors. This is never more so than when gender and issues for girls and women are raised.

In quiet times many multilateral and development agencies develop guidelines for protecting women in complex emergencies, but these are not always implemented when a complex emergency occurs. A UN colleague working with women refugees was told, 'Don't bother me with gender guidelines now. I have an emergency on my hands.'

There is often an attitude that such concerns are somehow peripheral to the real work of responding to need. No one argues the relative merits of food or shelter or medical care. Yet the cross-cutting need to ensure that women and children do not experience a second level of suffering may be neglected.

'Rape in war? Not an issue. Men are being killed.' This comment from an experienced worker with a major humanitarian agency highlights one of the most serious instances of deciding when one horror is worse than another horror. Rape can be a form of genocide, yet it has seldom been named as such. Key elements of the text of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide are issues of defining and identifying the perpetrators, the targeted victims, the nature of the acts, the intent behind those acts, and the responsibility to prosecute.

Rape and genocide

The decade of the 1990s saw heightened awareness of rape as a weapon of war rather than a more limited notion of it as a by-product of unruly troops engaged in conflict. In 1993, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) expressed outrage at rape being used as a weapon of war, and in 1994 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1994/205 expressed alarm at the 'the continuing use of rape as a weapon of war.' A link had been made between rape and genocide.

It is as important to understand the nature of rape and genocide as it is important to understand the nature of killing and genocide, if the international community is to have any chance of prohibiting, preventing, recognising, responding to, prosecuting, and punishing these practices.

Rapes in the 1990s in Rwanda and in the Balkans conflicts (especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina) could be deemed genocidal in that they were elements of genocidal campaigns. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) ruled that rape and sexual violence constituted genocide in the same way as any other act, as long as they were committed with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or part, a particular group targeted as such. In the Balkans, where many rapes targeted women who were then left alive, rape would seem to have been a parallel campaign in which rape on its own could be defined as genocidal. In Rwanda, rapes, which were most often the precursor to killing, were also genoci-

Rape can be a form of genocide, yet it has seldom been named as such.

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dal because they were part of one integrated genocidal campaign.

By December 1994, in the former Yugoslavia, there were approximately 1,100 reported cases of rape and sexual assault. About 800 victims had been named or were known to the submitting source; about 1,800 victims had been specifically referred to but not named or identified sufficiently by the reporting witness; witness reports through approximations referred to a possible further 10,000 victims. The European Council report from an Investigative Mission in January 1993 accepted the possibility of speaking in terms of many thousands. Estimates varied widely, ranging from 10,000 to as many as 60,000. The most reasoned estimates suggested to the Mission placed the number of victims at around 20,000.

There was an acknowledged reluctance by many women to report rapes. Reasons for this reluctance included fear of reprisals for themselves and family members; shame and fear of ostracisation; many women just wanting to get on with their lives; many women not having a place to report the assaults of rapes; and refugees having an increasing scepticism about the response of the international community.

In the case of Rwanda, histories of the genocide make clear that there was a systematic use of rape. The exact number of women raped will never be known, but testimonies from survivors confirm that thousands of women and girls were individually raped, raped with objects such as gun-barrels, held in sexual slavery either collectively or through forced 'marriage,' or sexually mutilated.

Reasons for Rwandan women not always reporting rape were noted as similar to those of women in the Balkans. Women knew that their suffering may not be recognised, that they may be blamed in some way, that for much of the world, rape does not matter too much.

Long-term impact

Yet, rape contributes to mass killing and causes serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction and to prevent births within the group.

Deaths have resulted from children being abandoned or from infanticide. These children are referred to as 'pregnancies of the war,' 'children of hate,' '*enfants non-désirés*' (unwanted children) or '*enfants mauvais souvenirs*' (children of bad memories).

In patriarchal societies such as Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, children are recognised as belonging to the group of the father. Not only are the children of the rapes seen as not part of the mother's group, they are often the cause of family divisions when mothers try to raise them. Many women are rejected by communities, or suffer feelings of guilt for having survived after the rape.

Additionally, there is the long-term impact on a group when many of its women suffer physical and psychological injuries, and encounter economic difficulties when deprived of traditional support of husbands and community – who may ostracise victims or blame or suspect them of complicity with the enemy. There are clear grounds for admitting rape as a potentially genocidal act.

Both in Rwanda and in the Balkans rapes were perpetrated by, and targeted, identifiable groups.

There is evidence of destruction 'in part or in whole of a group' as such and there is clear evidence of intent.

Naming a series of acts as genocide brings with it a responsibility to prosecute. The difficulties in prosecuting those guilty of genocide are acknowledged. But difficulty in implementing prosecution should not be equated with any logical or ethical reason to avoid acknowledging, naming, and increasing awareness of genocide. This is true of genocide by direct slaying or genocide by rape, which has the same outcome.

Naming a series of acts as genocide brings with it a responsibility to prosecute.

Given the lack of interest in prosecuting crimes of sexual violence against women, it is possible that genocide by rape could go unnoticed, uncondemned, unprosecuted, or unpunished, and that few resources would be allocated to proactive strategies of prevention.

Somehow genocide by rape has been relegated to a lower position in the hierarchy of horrors. This must change. ■

Brenda Fitzpatrick has investigated and written on many issues relating to women and children. She has worked with international humanitarian and advocacy agencies (including World Vision), and in many areas of conflict. She is currently a senior executive with a global youth organisation.

Worse for women: AIDS exacerbates gender disparities

Nigel Marsh

MORE THAN FOUR years ago, Gugu Dlamini was stoned to death in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, after speaking out about her HIV-positive status. Despite commendable work by those concerned with the inter-relationship of gender and AIDS, things haven't improved much for most African women today.

The HIV pandemic is a horror story of its own, but also has an extraordinary capacity to expose pre-existing inequalities and injustices in a glaring light. Issues of poverty, culture, sexuality, health provision, education, racism – AIDS gives us something new to say about all of it.

And so with gender, and specifically the extra price that girls and women are paying for the world's lamentable response to the greatest cause of human suffering in our generation.

Women and HIV/AIDS

From an African perspective, HIV causes unacceptable hardship for all, but more so for women. It holds up to scrutiny the cultural, social, and economic inequalities that render females more susceptible, both to transmission and to the spin-off consequences of HIV/AIDS. If there is hope here, it is this: by improving domestic, legal and social conditions for women, and in particular by giving all women more say in how and when they will have sex, a dramatic change could be made in HIV prevalence.

Globally, half of all infected adults are women, but in Africa the proportion is higher, and rising.[1] Teenage girls and young women in their twenties are five to seven times more likely to be infected with HIV than boys and young men of the same age.

Where the pandemic is spread mainly by heterosexual sex, as it is believed to be in sub-Saharan Africa, there are biological reasons why women are more susceptible, but that is only part of the story.

Cultural attitudes to women's position play some part. Much of African tradition is protective of women and their pivotal role in the family, but some aspects have proven to be dangerous in the age of AIDS. In some places a single man in the clan is ceremonially responsible for initiating all the young girls into sex, helping the wives of infertile men to conceive, and 'cleansing' widows through intercourse. In a few places, good hospitality can include a man offering one of his wives to visitors for the night. Girls are often married so young that they aren't capable of having sex without sustaining damage – and the age seems to get lower wherever poverty is most pronounced.

The withering effect of poverty overshadows and distorts everything. In a continent where 70% of the people live on less than US$2 a day, no behaviour is 'normal' any more. As food security across Africa gets worse, girls are more easily coerced into sex to get food. Commercial sex workers are obliged to consent to more dangerous practices, including 'dry sex' (which amounts to simulated rape), and in these conditions condoms may easily tear.

Underlying the sexual transmission of HIV is the social question of whether a woman has control of her own body. A wife may find it impossible to refuse her husband sex, even if she discovers he sleeps with other women and if he refuses to use a condom. Many girls in Africa are brought up to believe that decisions about money, property and sex are not theirs.

It is not just in the relative risk of infection that women can get a raw deal, especially where extreme conditions undermine Africa's normally strongly-held sense of fair play, respect, and social order.

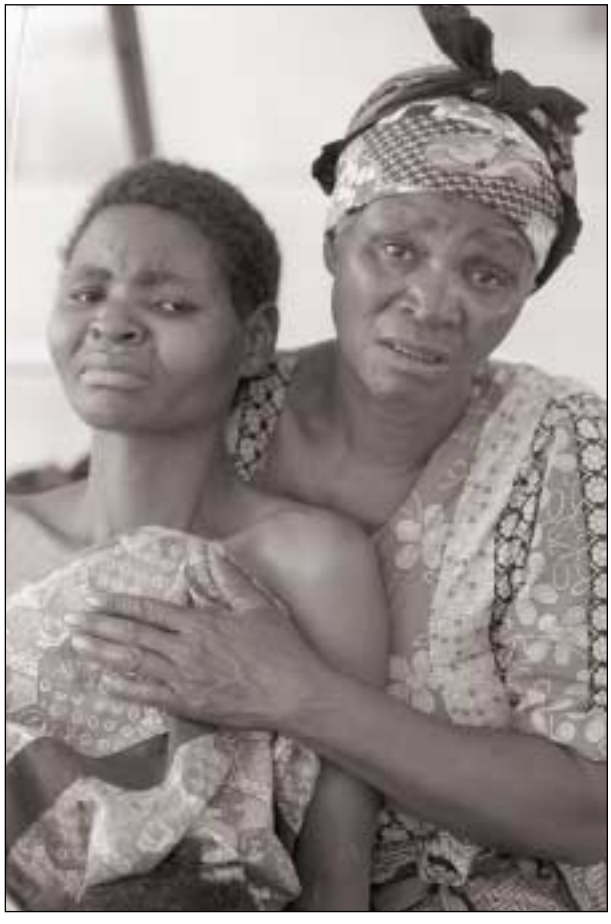

PHOTO BY JON WARREN

In Malawi, Catherine Paluta (right) cares for her daughter, Beatrice Chimwanga.

Among two sick partners, the husband is more likely to control the money, so women have less access to limited and costly health services. In caring for orphans, the burden falls hard on grandmothers. Should a wife survive her husband who has died of AIDS, his family may try to seize the family home, citing tradition. Amid violence and war, of which Africa has more than its share, women are raped as a weapon of fear and symbol of victory. When resources are scarce – in a food crisis, in displacement camps, where unemployment is high – the struggle to feed the family falls largely on mothers. If a child must be withdrawn from school due to lack of fees or to replace the labour of a lost adult, a daughter will usually be taken out before a son.

HIV/AIDS has an extraordinary capacity to expose pre-existing inequalities.

This threatens the continent's future economic stability, because Africa is run on women's unpaid, and often unregarded, labour. When a household suffers economic hardship, increasingly because of sickness and death due to AIDS, one study suggests that in more than three quarters of cases it is women who suffer the reversal.[2]

Make it real

Solutions begin with frank discussion of the problems. Groups in rural African settings derive great advantage from grappling with the concept of transformed relationships between men and women, and are never short of ideas. Development workers tackling HIV/AIDS need to realise that men and women have different roles and needs, and that good interventions can most positively influence the health of both when they treat each as special.

Ultimately the most successful approaches to changing mind-sets seem to involve group work, helping women and men to identify the problems that lead to HIV prevalence, and resolving them in community. Where this also involves local leadership, such renewed thinking becomes binding on local social behaviour. This is an asset in African culture, empowering not just the individuals but society itself.

It is not enough to try to change this conditioning by re-educating women alone. It's one thing to be taught it's your legal right to stay in your home after your husband has died; quite another to be protected from the husband's kin who want to throw you out. Girls don't only need to be told schooling is their right; they need to be free to go to school. Health interventions should be intelligently channelled to the part of the population that normally finds itself caring for the sick – usually women.

Nor should we trick ourselves into believing that a technological solution to the spread of HIV among women – female condoms and microbicides – is anything but a short-term fix. Ultimately the answer to our questions is a change in social perspectives that accords women proper respect, and an assault on the aspects of poverty that have conspired to make life so miserable for so many.

The good news is that AIDS is forcing communities to re-evaluate the roles of men and women. Now local leaders must get active and do something. Governments must give meaningful legal protection to women's rights. Development work needs to be refocused to give meaning to talk of empowerment. And we have to make it real, because at the moment there are a lot more words than action at every level. ■

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1 Globally, 18.5 million of the 37 million adults (aged 15 to 49); the proportion in Africa is 55% – *Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic 2002*, UNAIDS, July 2002

2 UNIFEM pilot study in Zimbabwe, quoted at www.unifem.undp.org/human_rights/facts.html

Women, peace and security: Acting on UN Resolution 1325

Ancil Adrian-Paul

FOR MANY YEARS and throughout the world, women's roles in war and other types of violent conflict were perceived as marginal. Accounts of war tended to cast men as the doers and women as passive, innocent victims. Through time and the experiences of different women, the ways in which they live through wars – as fighters, community leaders, social organisers, workers, farmers, traders, and other roles – have become clearer.

Women are crossing the divide and engaging in peacebuilding activities.

While it is acknowledged that women are disproportionately affected by violent conflict, they are not simply passive victims. In many cases, at the local, national, regional, and international levels, women from Colombia to Papua New Guinea, from Nepal to Northern Ireland, and from Mexico to Macedonia are crossing the divide and engaging in peacebuilding activities.

However, for the most part, women's role in peace processes has been constrained by their exclusion from the highest levels of decision-making and initiatives for good governance, as well as by the gender-blindness of international and national policies. Women are still excluded from peace negotiations, and in peace and security circles at the global and national levels there is still a visible absence of the voices, views, and actions of women. In Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burundi, the DRC, Casamance (Senegal), and other areas of Africa, women's livelihoods are affected by security issues. Women's day-to-day activities are affected by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons such as landmines, whilst their ability to gather firewood and engage in agricultural activities is curtailed. A similar scenario exists in Asia, Latin America, and other regions.

A step forward

A vibrant women's movement has flourished since the Fourth World Conference on Women, which resulted in the seminal Beijing Platform for Action (1995), and has mobilised to encourage the international community to adhere to commitments it made in 1995. In response, some steps have been taken to ensure that women's concerns are mainstreamed across global institutions, agencies and policies, culminating with the United Nations Resolution 1325 that was unanimously adopted on 31 October 2000 (Adrian-Paul, 'Women, Peace and Security,' unpublished work, 2002)

The unprecedented unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is a great coup for women and women's groups that have been fighting for women's inclusion at all levels of decision-making and political participation for over twenty years. The Resolution reiterates the importance of bringing gender perspectives in all UN peacemaking, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. In so doing, the Resolution provides a number of operational mandates with implications both for individual Member States and the UN system (www.un.org/womenwatch/).

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

Undoubtedly, Resolution 1325 is a step forward for women and for their past and continued agency on the issues it encapsulates that have been highlighted by women's activism everywhere. It is a tool that can be used for political negotiations, quiet diplomacy, and the mobilisation of women and their organisations as well as UN agencies and other constituencies. Most importantly, it is a tool for leveraging, advocacy, and for demanding accountability.[1] Yet the binding nature of the tool is undermined by the weakness of the language in which it is written. The use of words such as 'encourages' and 'requests' is a dilution of the forceful language presented in the draft text by the NGOWG to the members of the Security Council.

The Resolution also has a number of weaknesses and gaps that need to be addressed. These include:

First, *early warning and early response* mechanisms, though a crucial aspect of the UN's work, are not addressed. There should be the development of gender-specific and early warning indicators, as well as the collection of disaggregated data to facilitate a better understanding of the impact of conflict on different sectors in society. Attention to this issue can enhance the planning of peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions.

Second, there is no overt mention of *mechanisms, benchmarks or success indicators* that can be used to ensure state accountability. Moreover, no such mechanisms have been developed for effective accountability and discipline of peacekeepers who exploit and violate women, girls and young boys in local populations where there are peacekeeping missions.

Third, there is a need for *developing a database* of the names and credentials of experienced women recommended to the Secretary-General by NGOs and governments as candidates to fill high-level positions in various UN agencies and departments, as well as positions in peacekeeping and other field missions.

PHOTO BY BRIAN JONSON

Fourth, there are no mechanisms to ensure the *peace and security of women living in unrecognised states*. For example, what should be done about the issues affecting women's peace and security in territories such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (South Caucasus) and the New/South Sudan in the Horn of Africa, among others?

Last, there is a lack of *any reference to justice* – widely accepted as an integral prerequisite for sustainable peace and reconciliation.

International Alert takes Resolution 1325 as the focus for its Gender and Peacebuilding programme, which is comprised of two interlinked and inter-related programmes: a global policy advocacy project and a gender peace audit. Together these programmes employ a two-way advocacy approach that works to inform practitioners at the local level of the existence of the global policy, consults with them on issues affecting women's peace and security, and links these realities to the Resolution. In the process the programme elicits women's perspectives on how the tool addresses these issues and the relevance of the Resolution for women's peacebuilding work in context-specific situations, identifies gaps that need to be addressed, and works with women to develop recommendations for policy makers as to how the Resolution could be implemented to better support women and their peacebuilding activities. The findings and recommendations of these consultations are then used to inform policy papers that programme disseminates widely, and which underpin informed and persistent dialogue with policy makers.

The programme works with UN agencies, other interested NGOs, and relevant institutions to ensure that the Resolution is widely publicised and that a gender perspective is incorporated, thus translating policy into practice and locating the policy formally in local realities. ■

Ancil Adrian-Paul is the Programme Manager for the Gender and Peacebuilding Programme of International Alert. For more information see www.womenbuildingpeace.org.

[1] Speech made by the UNIFEM Regional Advisor, Uganda , March 2002.

Helping the girl child

Saisuree Chutikul

PROBLEMS FOR GIRL children are today better known than a decade ago. Solutions can, however, be elusive and steps must be taken to bring positive change. Why should we be so concerned?

First, there is the issue of discrimination. Gender discrimination is manifested in many ways, such as conferring more affection on a son or, in extreme cases, abandonment, and female infanticide. As girls grow up, many of them will be subjected to early marriages leading to early pregnancies. This has negative effects on their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, as well as on the well-being of their infants.

Second, there are problems related to health and education. Studies have shown that in some countries girls' mortality rates are higher; food allocation for girls is less than boys; girls are breast-fed less frequently; and more boys receive vaccinations. As for education, even where primary schooling has full coverage, girls usually do not have equal opportunity to attend secondary or tertiary levels.

Third, there are also problems related to working and employment. Generally girls enter the work force at a younger age than boys, and with fewer opportunities.

Fourth, there are issues of vulnerability to sexual abuse, prostitution and HIV/AIDS. Girls are at risk of being prostituted, trafficked and abused. Girls are biologically and psychosocially more vulnerable to HIV infection. The number of children who have been orphaned by AIDS is also on the increase, with orphan girls frequently looking after their siblings.

Finally, girls are also particularly at risk from violence. Violence against girl children includes extreme neglect, corporal punishment, maltreatment, beating, battering, molestation, incest, rape, and other forms of physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Consequences range from suffering physical pain, to having psychosocial problems, to trauma. Some may have difficult interpersonal relationships based on feelings of mistrust, being unloved, and a lack of self-esteem.

To address these problems urgent action is needed, including:

1. Girl child policies. Although governments may adopt policies to promote the well-being of the family, children, and women, few develop comprehensive policy initiatives for the girl child.
2. Gender- and age-disaggregated data and information in surveys, and research and development of indicators. This will help our knowledge and assist in planning, programming, monitoring and evaluation.
3. Focusing on attitudinal change as well as changes in values and behaviour towards girl children. The basic causes of gender discrimination must be tackled, both *de jure* and *de facto*, as well as the processes of socialisation and cultural learning.
4. Specific advocacy programmes are needed. This includes awareness-raising campaigns, programmes that stress education and health, and pressure on governments to address trafficking, abuse and violence.
5. Empowering the girl child and increasing her active participation. Capacity building and empowering girl children can be done through training, offering basic services, special programmes on self-protection and self-discovery, leadership training and opportunities to actively participate in activities and decision-making processes.
6. Incorporating girl children into comprehensive child protection policies and programmes. This can be done at the national and local levels as well as at organisational and institutional levels.
7. Involving more actors and networking. This includes parents, teachers, religious leaders, community leaders and organisations, government agencies, NGOs, the private sector, professional organisations, academics, planners, and international communities and organisations. Multi-disciplinary approaches, collaboration, coordination and sustainable networking are important to make the whole effort 'work'.
8. Using child rights and women's rights as a foundation. Child rights covers four general principles (in the Convention on the Rights of the Child): elimination of discrimination, development to full potential, the best interests of the child, and child participation. Women's rights include equality, development, and participation. These perspectives must be taken into consideration when dealing with girl children.
9. Involving boys and men to promote gender equality. Boys' and men's active participation are important so they will become more gender-sensitive. Such behavioural change will help solve many problems that occur today.
10. Mobilisation and sharing of resources for girl child programmes. This includes financial, human and technical resources. Sharing innovative or diverse approaches can assist in better results. ■

Dr Saisuree Chutikul is a member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and a member of the Board of Directors of World Vision International.

Gender and environment: Policy and reality

Haidy Ear-Dupuy

PHOTO BY JAMES EAST

Nepali women carrying firewood home after a long trek.

'**IF THE MEN** were to work as hard as the women, there's no telling where Cambodia can go from here,' a male environmental worker commented in 1997. In rural and urban settings, women collect water and fuelwood for cooking, farm the land, process fish, work in flower and garment factories, and manage their family's overall health. Rural women face environmental challenges such as where to collect clean water, edible plants, and wood for cooking in resource-scarce areas. Urban women face equally difficult decisions to work in manufacturing plants where poor air quality threatens their respiratory health, or to work in flower and agricultural production where pesticides and chemicals used can enter their skin. The well-being of the family, particularly unborn babies and children, often rests on women's decisions.

Recognising women as important resource users and decision makers, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro took steps to affirm women's position as environmental managers. Agenda 21 urges governments to eliminate obstacles that would hinder women's participation in decision-making processes. Furthering their commitments to women, policy makers at UNCED dedicated chapter 24 of Agenda 21 to 'The Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development.' Chapter 24 proposes objectives for national governments to implement the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women,[1] urges governments to empower women by providing educational opportunities, access to better health care and recognition of women's rights as land and property owners, and to banish all forms of discrimination against women.[2]

One decade after Agenda 21, has policy managed to connect with the reality of life for the millions of women living in poverty? WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organisations), an international advocacy network, conducted a survey of 20 cities in 16 countries worldwide and found that there are still gaps. Governments have yet to address barriers such as the lack of consciousness by both sexes on how gender issues affect environmental issues, cultural norms, and gender and institutional bias.

Though there is more awareness of gender issues and their connection to the environment, availability of gender-specific data is still a problem. Clear identification of the challenges facing sustainable development with respect to gender can help create effective programmes and projects. A USAID and ECOGEN (Ecology, Community Organisation and Gender) project in the Rift Valley of Kenya illustrates different environmental usages by both genders. While men focus on macro issues such as infrastructure construction, women are more concerned with immediate needs – such as firewood and water. The men's activity impacts the environment through cutting trees for roads, while women's activity can deplete the availability of fuelwood. Understanding how each gender utilises resources is important to formulating effective environmental policy and projects.

On many levels, women still face an uphill battle to receive societal recognition as decision makers and managers. The ECOGEN project also illustrates each gender's concerns. Due to power inequality between men and women in Kenyan society, the women's points were not addressed until project planners realised the power dynamic and validated the legitimacy of the women's concerns. Planners then organised workshops and capacity-building sessions to strengthen women's bargaining power. The project also illustrates the gender bias pointed out by WEDO as one of the barriers to advancement of Agenda 21. Through education, training and opportunities, women can obtain the tools necessary to carve out their political space.

Governments must also work to eliminate structural and institutional barriers if they are to meet the Agenda 21 goals. Policy makers need to recognise that the many roles of women as mother, wife, and employee can be time-consuming, leaving little room for women's active participation in the public sphere. To take steps towards meeting Agenda 21, governments should work towards eliminating obstacles to women's participation in the decision-making processes. ■

Haidy Ear-Dupuy is Macroeconomic Policy Adviser for World Vision in Washington, D.C.

[1] Strategies called for governments to involve women in national and international ecosystem management, as well as implementation of conventions such as CEDAW, and ILO and UNESCO conventions to end gender-based discriminations.

[2] Agenda 21, Chapter 24, UNCED in Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

Girls are not commodities

June Kane

WHEN IS A WOMAN not a woman? In some traditions, a female human being is considered to be a woman when she marries, regardless of her age. In certain communities, first menstruation is taken as a sign of womanhood. In other societies, the age when childhood ends shifts with changes in fashion, pop culture, and sexual imagery.

There are other thresholds too, enshrined in national laws relating to the age of marriage, of sexual consent, and of legal responsibility. These differ among countries and within countries, so that a 17-year-old in some countries may be old enough to marry, but not old enough to buy alcohol or take out a mortgage.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) gives us a benchmark for when childhood ends: all people under the age of 18 are children. This is not to deny 17-year-old females their right to be considered and to be called 'women' if they wish. It does not suggest that the group often labelled 'adolescents' or 'teenagers' or 'young people' is immature. It is a way to remind ourselves that anyone under the age of 18, regardless of other thresholds and labels, has a right to special protection.

This is particularly important in relation to children and sexual activity. No one would argue that a 19-year-old man is breaking the law when he has sex with his 17-year-old wife (presuming laws on the age of marriage are complied with). On the other hand, this man would be in contravention of international law if he offered his 17-year-old spouse/partner to others for sexual purposes.

Regardless of the age of sexual consent/marriage, under international law (CRC, Article 34) a person under the age of 18 cannot be exploited for

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

Young Cambodian sex workers

sexual purposes. Even where the under-18-year-old is cited as being 'willing', or when the person might be said to have entered into sexual commerce 'voluntarily', this remains true.

Yet, all over the world, under-18-year-olds are indeed exploited for sexual purposes. If someone profits from this, through money, gifts, or favours, then we say that the child is commercially sexually exploited. They are, quite literally, sold for sex.

It is the fault of you and me if we turn a blind eye to prostitution.

We read regularly about children under the age of puberty who are abused by paedophiles; we hear much less often, though, about those children who are on the threshold of adulthood – between boy and man, girl and woman – whose bodies are bought by non-paedophiles for sexual pleasure.

When we do, we most commonly hear the children being called 'child prostitutes'. This is an unfortunate term that makes it too easy to forget that, first and foremost, this person is a child. While all human beings have rights, this person has special rights.

Adolescent girls far outnumber adolescent boys as victims of commercial sexual exploitation, for a number of reasons. One is the persisting belief that men/boys 'need' sex while women/girls should ideally be passively compliant with this. This reinforces the idea that it is OK for a man to buy sex, and it is tacitly accepted that women should supply what the man needs.

In fact, we now know that most commercial sexual exploitation of girls occurs as an extension of the sex trade more generally. Most of the male clients are not stereotypical 'child sex abusers' but regular prostitute-users who buy sex from an under-18-year-old.

The commercial sexual exploitation of girls, in particular, is the result of the behaviour of 'normal' men – our brothers, husbands, cousins and fathers – who think that it is acceptable to buy sex from a child.

It is also a result of societies that tacitly accept the early sexualisation of children, and hope that 'it' will happen to other kids, not our own. It involves parents who do not help their children to think through sexual responsibility, and who accept aggressive sexual behaviour by boys 'because they're boys'.

It is the fault of you and me if we turn a blind eye to the prostitution of under-18-year-olds because it's too difficult to deal with, and somehow stopping paedophile sex tourists seems much easier. In short, we all have some responsibility for the commercial sexual exploitation of children and for doing something about it. It is not only the responsibility of governments, NGOs, UN agencies, social services or the police. Everyone has a role to play. ■

Dr June Kane is a child rights consultant and Technical Expert to the European Commission's Daphne Programme to combat violence against children.

Protecting refugee women

Mary Diaz

REFUGEE WOMEN face a myriad of protection problems, no matter where they live or seek shelter. They face grave threats to their safety and security, as well as problems with their registration and documentation.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has a mandate to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. But UNHCR confronts tremendous challenges in fulfilling its mandate. An example drawn from recent interviews in the field illustrates these concerns.

Marie, a Congolese refugee, was living in an urban area with her children. A widow, she was struggling to provide her family with food and shelter. She went to a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and asked for assistance. The NGO staff noticed she was pregnant, and she confessed that she had had to trade sex in order to survive. Aid workers discussed her case and determined that her problem was that she had too many children and she should stop having children. They failed to recognise her situation as a protection problem. She had requested assistance with shelter and food, and explained her circumstances were urgent and dire, yet the protection risks she faced were not considered.

Assistance and protection are intrinsically related, and this has a major impact on the safety and security of refugee women. UNHCR and member states have developed guidelines, policies and training to address these issues. Foremost is the Policy on Refugee Women and Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women, developed in 1990 and 1991.

Last year marked the tenth anniversary of the UNHCR Guidelines, and the Women's Commission, partnering with UNHCR, the US and Canada, undertook an assessment to consider whether and how the Guidelines have been implemented. It found that the policy and guidelines have helped raise awareness, assisted staff in programming, and helped prompt the development of other tools.

However, the assessment also found that there are still major gaps in applying the guidelines, including in relation to sexual exploitation. Cases of violence go unreported because in most refugee settings there is little awareness about the problem.

Meanwhile refugee women bear great responsibilities for keeping their families alive. This means they have less time to spend on income generation, literacy projects, or other programmes. While they may be highly motivated to participate, the reality of their lives as wives, mothers and caretakers may make it impossible.

The Guidelines address problems in delivery of assistance and outline ways that these problems can be addressed. They ask whether women are involved in food distribution. They urge that women be involved in camp management structures, and assist in planning and implementation of programmes. They note that latrines and water points placed far from shelters put women and girls at risk of attack and abuse. They point out that women and girls are often responsible for firewood collection, but walking long distances to obtain wood can put them in grave danger.

It is important that refugee women have access to their own ration cards as well as access to other documentation critical to their freedom of movement, family unity, and access to essential services.

There have been positive examples of protection activities implemented by UNHCR, NGOs, host governments and others. Examples include more vigorous use of national laws for enforcing protection and human rights, increased enrolment of girls in schools, measures to organise refugee women and include them in camp management, incentives to employ more female staff in health and education programs, and wider availability of reproductive health services.

But these are more *ad hoc* than consistent, and the obstacles to implementation are many. While laws, policies and guidelines exist, there is difficulty translating them into practical measures in the field. In some places, domestic laws do not meet international standards. Or in some places there are laws affording equal rights to women and girls, but when a refugee woman is raped, or a young girl is sold into marriage, the government is unwilling or unable to provide protection.

Also, lack of resources is an obvious barrier that has been the focus of much discussion and debate. It is important to take a close look and analyse how funding decisions are made and priorities are set. ■

Mary Diaz is Executive Director of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

A stony road to equality: Women's rights in Chile

Patricio Cuevas

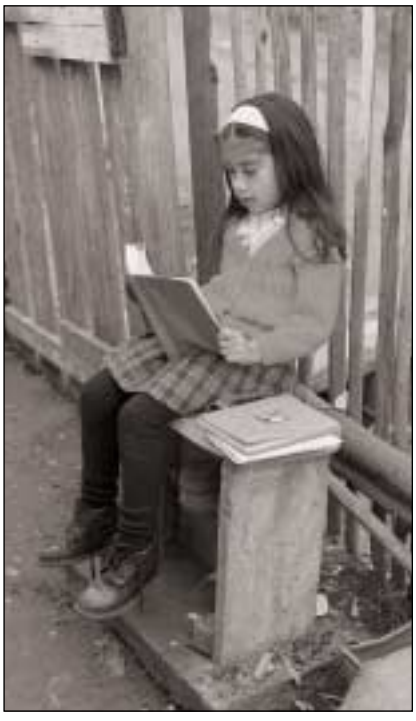

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

CHILEAN WOMEN ACHIEVED full citizenship in 1940, and the right to vote in 1952. In 1999, they were granted equal opportunities, thus ending, at least on paper, all forms of discrimination based on gender. In 2000, President Lagos elevated to public office the largest number of women ever in Chilean history. This effectively meant that the participation of women in public positions rose from 10% to 30% overnight.

Nevertheless, barriers to participation are still very evident when it comes to popularly-elected positions, such as senators, members of Congress and mayors. Despite the fact that 52% of the electorate is female, women are only 15% of those elected as members of Congress, 5% of senators, and 11% of mayors. The Minister for Women believes this problem is directly related to the dual nomination system that does not allow women to gain the necessary number of votes.

Signs of progress should not lead to over-optimism.

Studies carried out by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) show that the percentage of women who occupy ministerial roles within the region varies between 4.1% and 28.6%. There are 11 countries where there are no female ministers at all.

Progress in politics is reflected by some signs of hope in the workplace. The latest National Socioeconomic Survey (CASEM) showed that the incorporation of women into the labour force has increased by 7% since 1990. In total, 39.3% of the workforce in Chile is now female, 10% below the average for Latin America. Even so, behind these figures lies a significant under-utilisation of resources.

There is a similar story to be found in the social and cultural fields. Discrimination in terms of pay is a case in point where differences continue to be very apparent. The difference in salary between a man and a woman who have an equivalent of three years' schooling stands at 18.6%, while amongst the higher educated – 13 years of schooling – the difference rises to 51.5%, hitting professional women or those in directorship positions especially hard.

Signs of progress should not lead to over-optimism. Despite the advances women are making in the workplace, they often still face terrifying problems at home. The last study to be carried out in Chile on domestic violence (2001) showed that 50.3% of Chilean women had suffered violence at the hands of their partner, and 14.9% had been victims of sexual violence, including situations where the women had not identified it as such. Furthermore, 20% of the women who had suffered severe violence had been threatened with weapons. Violence cut across all socioeconomic strata, affecting 38% of women from the upper class, 44.8% from the middle class, and 59.4% from the lower class.

Women who have been abused point to the lack of effective legislation and law enforcement policies to protect them. One such woman commented that there is still a generalised acceptance that violence is something that ought to be resolved within the private sphere of the family and not through the justice or legal systems. 'Many women even defend their aggressors. I was a victim of violence at the hands of my father, my mother, and my brothers. But I have changed and no longer am an object that can be struck.'

In 1994, the government issued the Law on Intra-family Violence. In spite of the progress that this represented, there are a number of problems that make it hard to apply effectively: the difficulty of getting the complaints made by victims to reach the judicial authorities; limitations in issuing protective measures; and the fact that a judge cannot establish maintenance payments during the same legal process. To try and remedy this situation, in 2001, the government sent draft legislation to Congress that would amend the current law.

This revised legislation should most likely be approved before the end of 2003. Chile not only may have a new law that can better protect the thousands of women who are victims of domestic violence, but also will have taken another significant step in the right direction – towards women´s rights becoming a reality. ■

Patricio Cuevas is Communications Officer for World Vision Chile.

Trade liberalisation and poverty reduction

Ritu Sharma

POVERTY REDUCTION and improving the lives of the world's poor have long been the central goals of relief and development organisations. However, many in relief and development have not considered the influence that global economic policies can play in creating, shifting and/or reducing poverty among their beneficiaries.

Global economic policy initiatives – structural adjustment, trade liberalisation, privatisation, currency devaluation, and foreign investment – require shifts in the strategies used to achieve poverty reduction. Trade liberalisation, in particular, can be directly linked to the dynamics of poverty and increasingly affects the work of those focused on human development.

According to USAID, 'broad-based economic growth is the most effective means of bringing poor, disadvantaged and marginalised groups into the mainstream of an economy' (www.usaid.gov/economic_growth/). Other national governments and international agencies also widely prescribe trade liberalisation as an engine to drive economic growth and reduce poverty.

However, trade agreements are currently negotiated and implemented with no systematic effort to learn about the potential impacts on the poor – the purported target population to benefit from trade and economic growth. Women, who make up the majority of the poorest people in the world, have been especially overlooked, even though they have the most to win – and lose – from trade agreements.

Trade impact review

To shed light on the links between trade, women, and poverty, Women's Edge developed the Trade Impact Review (TIReview), a tool to assess potential positive and negative impacts caused by trade agreements. By conducting the TIReview, trade negotiators, policy makers and development practitioners can see how trade will affect the poor, enabling better decision-making. The TIReview is the centrepiece of the Women's Edge Look FIRST (Full Impact Review and Screening of Trade) Campaign, which aims for legislation to be passed requiring the US Government to conduct the TIReview.

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

The TIReview gathers research from experts from around the world representing every perspective on trade, collects data, and runs computer models to forecast trade's possible effects, including in-depth social analyses, and involves a wide array of stakeholders in an open and transparent process. The tool examines agriculture, manufacturing, services, informal and home-based sectors, foreign investment, intellectual property rights, domestic laws and regulations, labor standards, human rights, and social protections for the poor.

Trade agreements also have various consequences that are unplanned, but not unforeseeable. Conducting a Review helps policy makers discover these effects and preserve the good, while eliminating the bad. For example, trade liberalisation opened up one African country's clothing sector to Asian imports. The local garment industry collapsed since cheaper clothing was being imported. Its workforce, the vast majority of whom were women, lost their jobs and many fell into poverty.

'Adjustments' like these are common under trade agreements and can be predicted. Several solutions are then possible – certain industries where low-income people are concentrated can be exposed to foreign competition more slowly while employees get access to retraining.

In most cases a Review would also uncover areas where the poor stand to gain if their interests could be negotiated into the trade agreements. For example, the North American Free Trade Agreement required additional paperwork and taxes for Mexican craftswomen to export their products – barriers they could not overcome with their limited education and income. One of the goals of the Free Trade Area of the Americas Agreement (FTAA), which is currently under negotiation, could be to remove these requirements on local craftspeople, making it much easier for them to access the gains from trade.

These types of obstacles and opportunities for the poor are likely to remain undiscovered without the Trade Impact Review.

It is important to know that trade in and of itself is not bad. But if trade's goal is to reduce poverty, then it is crucial to conduct proper analyses to forecast how trade will affect the poor, especially poor women. ■

Ritu Sharma is Co-Founder and Executive Director of Women's Edge, a coalition of more than 75 organisations that advocates for international economic policies and human rights to support poor women. Visit www.womensedge.org to learn more about the coalition and the initiatives mentioned above.

Millennium progress for the world's women?

Noeleen Heyzer

GOVERNMENTS' commitments to women's rights and gender equality, agreed in numerous global forums and in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, were reaffirmed by the world's nations at the Millennium Summit and incorporated into its Millennium Development Goals in 2000. The Millennium Declaration asserts that gender equality is not only a goal in its own right, but is critical to attaining all of the development goals. It resolves 'to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable'.

Any assessment of progress towards gender equality requires an understanding of the major factors that currently shape our world – with critical consequences for women's lives: economic globalisation; national fragmentation and/or conflict; and what I will call problems without borders. The financial crises in Asia and Latin America and WTO negotiations have highlighted the inequalities that attend globalisation. While many women have benefited from new opportunities, others have experienced new or deepening inequality, as globalisation has failed to generate secure employment and has shifted their work to the informal and casual sectors.

A parallel process of fragmentation along ethnic, language and religious lines is evident in the unprecedented numbers of intra-state conflicts. Gender-based violence, including rape, forced pregnancy and deliberate infection with HIV, has become a horrifying feature of conflict. Over 250,000 women were systematically raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, as just one example. Refugee and displaced women, who number hundreds of thousands, are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Accompanying these trends is a rise in problems that know no borders, including global criminal networks, trafficking in women and children, drugs and arms trades, and HIV/AIDS, a disease that increasingly affects women and is decimating families and communities.

A new opportunity

Against this background, including women's empowerment and gender equality as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals represents a new opportunity to hold governments accountable for their commitments to women. It also signals a new determination to collect the gender-specific data needed to monitor implementation of these commitments.

On three dimensions selected to measure progress towards this goal – educational enrolment, paid employment and political representation – progress is uneven. Based on internationally compatible data, only seven countries, all in Europe, achieved target levels on all three indicators, while three more, all in the developing world, are very close.[1] The biggest deficits for women in education and non-agricultural wage employment tend to be in the poorest countries, while women's share of parliamentary seats – which depends less on economic strength than on political will – is highest where affirmative measures such as quotas exist.

Barriers to women's employment outside the home have lessened significantly since 1990, with women comprising nearly half the paid labour force in many countries. But labour markets remain strongly segregated: women are overwhelmingly confined to 'female jobs' with low status – often insecure, unsafe and poorly paid – and are typically paid 20–30% less than men, even for similar work. Women also have suffered disproportionately from the global economic slowdown in terms of job losses, more precarious forms of employment, and lower wages. And women remain the majority of the world's poor.

Balancing work with family/community responsibilities is increasingly difficult, especially in HIV/AIDS-affected areas. Care for the ill and dying typically falls to women who do most of the unpaid household work, leaving little time for farming or food preparation and threatening family food security in many countries. The impact on women is particularly acute in conflict and post-conflict situations, as health and legal systems crumble and economic disruption forces women to trade sex for money, food or shelter.

Women are still largely absent from parliaments, comprising an average 14% of members in 2002. Only 11 countries, all of which have adopted quotas, had achieved the 30% target. Interestingly, women's representation in many developing countries exceeds that of some rich countries.

Finally, gender equality depends upon ending violence against women. While laws prohibiting domestic violence now exist or are being drafted in nearly 60 countries, this remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations worldwide. In 2002, a WHO study found that about one in three women can expect to be beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime.

This record signals an urgent need for greater commitment and resources by the entire international community. Progress on the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment is essential to meeting all the other goals. ■

Noeleen Heyzer is Executive Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

[1] See *Progress of the World's Women 2002*, UNIFEM 2003, forthcoming. For statistics on all MDG goals, see www.milleniumindicators.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_goals.asp

Universal secondary education for girls in Africa

Ruth Kahurananga

IN ORDER FOR AFRICA to achieve the goal of Education for All, the gender disparity in secondary education must be closed. According to UNICEF, two-thirds of all children without access to education are girls.[1] There has been some progress, but where and how are girls going to further their education?

UNESCO has reported that in Africa there is a 10% difference between girls and boys in enrolment in primary education, but there have been improvements in eastern and southern Africa.[2] In 1999, during the meeting for African Ministers of Education under the auspices of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), it was apparent that there have been excellent lessons learned in Africa both on girl child education (GCE) and on education as a whole.

The challenge to translate projects into policy change and achieve implementation of best practices is most stark in relation to higher education. The gender disparity in secondary education is due to several socio-economic factors. These include early marriage and cultural stereotypes such as that girls are underachievers. Other factors include teenage pregnancy, the heavier burden of household chores that falls on girls, and the view of girls as an economic asset when parents receive dowry. Research also suggests that education problems are caused by sexual harassment or exploitation both in and out of school.

It is essential to break the vicious cycle of uneducated, unemployed and disillusioned girls – many of whom complete their primary education but have nowhere to continue. Education for girls leads to the overall goal of poverty alleviation through better health care, improved family economic status, and reduced fertility.[3]

The way forward may well lie with the ability of governments to learn from best practice. It's crucial to take these examples from being individual short-term projects into national education policies. This may require a public expenditure review process so that more money is spent on primary and secondary education, as opposed to debt servicing and arms. Such reviews should happen under the auspices of national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper processes.

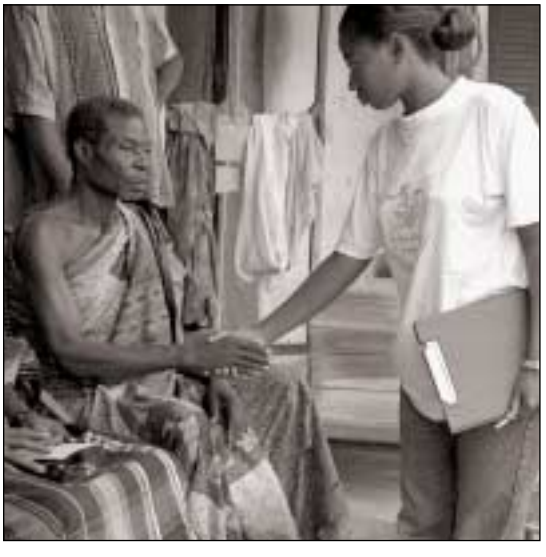

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

Particular attention must be paid to the problem of girls achieving good grades in primary school but not being financially able to continue their education. The positive lessons from Uganda's universal primary education (UPE) campaign, including reforms in teacher capacity building, school curriculum, examination system, and national monitoring and evaluation, are exemplary and should be expanded to secondary schools. Furthermore, UPE campaigns in Tanzania closed the gender gap and now there is a 50/50 distribution in access to primary education.[4]

Lessons on community participation in a range of education issues can also be gleaned from the experiences of Madagascar and Burundi. The pilot projects may not have brought the teacher/student ratio to a satisfactory level, but enrolment increased. African government leaders need to empower community members to be involved in improving GCE at the secondary level.

Giving girls a voice will also enable them to discuss and suggest solutions to barriers that hinder their education such as sexual harassment or exploitation, quality of teachers, and their views of a conducive learning environment. In Benin, a project known as 'Equity in the Classroom' monitors gender-sensitive teaching methods. This may deal with some of the negative sociocultural barriers that girls face.

When ministers of education address the issue of GCE, the emphasis should be on access, quality and retention in primary and secondary levels. Some of the best practices and lessons learned from different African countries could be used to reform education policies. UPE will work if there is USE (universal secondary education). Governmental will, commitment and ability to turn policy into practice is crucial. A vision of USE should lead the way, with an emphasis on bridging the gender gap. ■

Ruth Kahurananga is Child Rights Policy Officer with World Vision in New York.

1 www.unicef.org/girlsed/

2 Proceedings of the ADEA Biennial Meeting, *What Works & What's New in Education: Africa Speaks*, Johannesburg, 1999

3 Millennium Report, *We the Peoples*, The Role of the UN in the 21st Century 2000, Kofi Annan

4 ADEA 2001 Biennial Meeting, Arusha

Specific protection of women's human rights

Isabel Torres

WHY DO WE TALK about the rights of women? Let us review human rights doctrine. It affirms that every person, by virtue of their being so, has rights irrespective of their age, race, sex, nationality or social class. These rights are:

- **universal** to all persons under any political, economic and cultural system;
- **inalienable**: they cannot be renounced or lost to other persons;
- **interdependent and indivisible**: they make up a whole, and one right cannot be sacrificed for any other; and
- **legally binding**: their acknowledgement by States in international and national legislation renders them enforceable.

That is what the doctrine says. But there is a big gap between norm and practice. Laws of social order respond to sociocultural patterns, and human rights were initially conceived and applied from a male perspective.

Let's remember that for a long time women benefited from some rights by extension – as spouses of male citizens – and were denied others, such as the right to vote. This historical exclusion of women meant 'invisibilisation' of the diversity, specificities and needs of half the human population.

Human rights doctrine has continually evolved and has been greatly influenced by the movement for women's rights. A culmination was the Declaration and Plan of Action of the Human Rights World Conference (Vienna, 1993), which clearly points out that 'women's and girls' human rights are an inalienable and indivisible part of universal human rights'; and that women's full participation under equal conditions in political, economic, social and cultural life, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination based on sex, are priority objectives of the international community.

The main international instrument specifically referring to the rights of women is the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN in 1979 and currently ratified by 170 States. CEDAW makes explicit the urgency of modifying the traditional roles of men and women in society and the family by defining discrimination and establishing a distinction between nominal and real equality. It includes a balancing of rights, extending its focus from the public to the private sphere, to the heart of family relations. And it establishes States' commitment to adopt legal and public policy measures to eliminate discrimination.

PHOTO: WORLD VISION

In the Americas, we have the Inter-American Convention for the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (known as the *Belém do Pará* Convention), approved in 1994 and ratified by 31 States. This Convention establishes violence against women as a violation of human rights, and the complementarity of rights in the public and private lives of women.

Article 7 enshrines States Parties' obligations to 'work diligently' to prevent, punish and eradicate violence against women – including violent practices by agents of the State – through provisions in domestic legislation; abolishing any existing regulations that perpetuate violence against women or tolerance of it; and establishing fair and efficient legal and judicial procedures to ensure justice for both victims and offenders. Importantly, the Convention also has Inter-American protection mechanisms.

Towards fairer societies

Significant advances were made in the 20th century in building fairer and more egalitarian societies for women and men. There was a good deal of change in political, economic and sociocultural maps, including the differentiated and unequal social constructs around female and male roles. Women gained the vote and access to education, joined labour and professional forces and burst into the public sphere. Gender equality and equity became part of the agenda of international and national law, of States' commitments to citizens.

Yet a retrospective analysis reveals that there is still a long way to go to attain genuine equality. Human rights have not been thoroughly instilled in culture, neither conceptually nor in practice. ■

Isabel Torres is Women's Human Rights Programme Officer with the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights.

Female or male – all alike called to serve

Alan Whaites

JESUS SOUGHT TO INCLUDE women not just as passive participants within his ministry – for example the recipients of healing, food and teaching – but also as actors in events and discourses. Women are recorded as examples in relation to their faith, such as Mary Magdalene, and also in relation to their receptivity to the message of Christ, such as Mary the sister of Martha.

Jesus used dialogues with women as ways in which to underline his willingness to break through traditional convention, perhaps most famously through the conversation at the well with a Samaritan woman. We should also remember that when Jesus broke up the mob intent on stoning a woman who had been caught in adultery, he was giving short shrift to cultural mores that tended to view male and female actions unequally.

The church and women

Jesus' inclusion of women within his ministry is an important reminder that in Christian teaching there is neither male nor female, but only individuals – individuals who are called by Christ to love God and to love their neighbours. In living out that call in relation to the issue of gender in development, Christians and the church must constantly re-affirm the need for women to be active participants at the very centre of the process of development. The church has sometimes fallen into cultural traps of ignoring the potential that women can play in the life of the community, and has sometimes forgotten that as actors in the Christian story women also have the ability to change the world through their own decision to follow the call of Christ.

Women who have made dramatic impacts on the lives of the poor and rich alike by their commitment to following Christ and loving their neighbours include some of the most important social reformers and civil society pioneers of the last two centuries. More broadly, women have continually transformed the world in which we live, and the story of development has shown this taking place from grass roots communities to global institutions and justice campaigns.

For Christians the need to constantly challenge any remaining complacency on gender in development is not only an imperative of biblical teaching, but also of practical experience. ■

In Christian teaching there is neither male nor female, but only individuals.

Alan Whaites is Director for International Policy and Advocacy with World Vision.

WORLD VISION is a Christian relief and development partnership that serves more than 85 million people in nearly 100 countries. World Vision seeks to follow Christ's example by working with the poor and oppressed in the pursuit of justice and human transformation.

Children are often most vulnerable to the effects of poverty. World Vision works with each partner community to ensure that children are able to enjoy improved nutrition, health and education. Where children live in especially difficult circumstances, surviving on the streets, suffering in exploitative labour, or exposed to the abuse and trauma of conflict, World Vision works to restore hope and to bring justice.

World Vision recognises that poverty is not inevitable. Our Mission Statement calls us to challenge those unjust structures that constrain the poor in a world of false priorities, gross inequalities and distorted values. World Vision desires that all people be able to reach their God-given potential, and thus works for a world that no longer tolerates poverty. ■

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