

Promoting Women's Voices: Episcopal Relief & Development's Support for Women's Empowerment

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Women's stories have not been told. And without stories, there is no articulation of experience. Without stories, a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions in her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strength, to comprehend her pain. Without stories, she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and the world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. The experience of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known.

- Carol P. Christ¹

For almost half a century, the international community has increasingly recognized the large extent to which women's voices have been marginalized from national economic and social development programs. To correct this situation, governments, non-profit organizations, women's religious groups, the Church, and many others have joined efforts to combat discrimination against women in public and private life and ensure women's access to employment, health care, and education. These efforts have been motivated by both the compassionate realization that women deserve to be included in development programs and by the understanding that equality between men and women is a prerequisite for sustainable development.

Despite this increased understanding that women's empowerment is essential to development, countless inequalities persist that prevent women from experiencing the empowerment they've been promised by development program designers and implementers. Violence against women continues and in some

¹ Christ, Carol. *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on a Spiritual Quest*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1980.

cases increases and discriminatory laws that govern marriage, property, and inheritance continue to hurt millions of women every day. These inequalities will likely continue-- and perhaps worsen-- as long as women remain marginalized from determining development priorities and are ill-equipped with the social, legislative, and economic support to alter development outcomes.

There is now extensive evidence that promoting women's empowerment supports the achievement of many development outcomes, including decreased child mortality; increased children's access to health care and education; and more rapid economic recovery after disasters. Conversely, denying women the opportunity to help shape development processes stunts the international community's ability to cut extreme global poverty and will thereby compromise efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

EPISCOPAL RELIEF & DEVELOPMENT'S COMMITMENT TO SUPPORTING MATERNAL HEALTH

Episcopal Relief & Development is committed to promoting women's empowerment through the development and disaster relief programs we support around the world. Episcopal Relief & Development's commitment is rooted in our belief that women deserve the same opportunities as men to shape the future of their communities and countries. Our commitment to women's empowerment is also coupled with our pledge to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals ("MDGs"), particularly MDGs 3 and 5 which aim to promote gender equality, empower women and improve maternal health.

Episcopal Relief & Development does not support women's empowerment by merely ensuring that women *receive* development services. Rather, we provide women with the *resources* to alter their personal well-being and that of their families, communities, and countries. To ensure that gains for women's empowerment are sustainable, Episcopal Relief & Development believes that development programs must address the underlying causes of discrimination that work against women's involvement in development programs, namely cultural beliefs in the inferiority and subordination of women, and assumptions about women's roles in society.

Episcopal Relief & Development's programs have highlighted the need for empowerment programming to:

- Challenge women's social isolation and promote their participation and leadership in community organizations and groups
- Support diverse economic opportunities for women, including education and training
- Institutionalize women's rights to access credit and inherit and own land
- Improve resources for women's health
- Involve men and boys in the process of changing gender relations

- Ensure that women can exercise their right to make decisions without social repercussions or domestic violence

In addition to supporting these efforts, Episcopal Relief & Development works with communities, Anglican Churches, and ecumenical partners around the world to learn the particular obstructions women face in putting their voices and visions into action. We are proud that these programs support the empowerment of women around the world each day.

EPISCOPAL RELIEF & DEVELOPMENT'S PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Episcopal Relief & Development supports many women's empowerment programs throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and approximately 80% of the people who benefit from our programs overall are women. The following program overviews provide a brief snapshot of the types of efforts Episcopal Relief & Development and its partners take each day to promote women's empowerment around the world.

Women's Development Fund

With an initial gift of \$1 million, Episcopal Relief & Development launched the Women's Development Fund (WDF) in 2007. The WDF supports strategies that promote the empowerment of women in all of Episcopal Relief & Development's programs, which range from responding to disasters and emergencies, to fighting hunger and ensuring safe drinking water, to providing basic health care and eradicating malaria. Episcopal Relief & Development is committed to supporting women's empowerment strategies through the WDF for many years to come and encourages those interested in women's empowerment to contact Episcopal Relief & Development about how to get involved.

Burundi

Episcopal Relief & Development is partnering with the Province of the Church of Burundi to support a micro-finance program for HIV-positive men and women. The program grants loans to groups of between 25 and 60 men and women with HIV/AIDS to pursue small scale commerce. While the program includes both male and female participants, the majority of participants are HIV-positive widowed heads of household who have lost their husbands to war or HIV/AIDS. The program has been highly successful in increasing social participation and the sense of self-worth among participants and has resulted in greater economic freedom for women. It has also enhanced cooperative gender relations between women and men and increased the influence of women in their lives and communities. The program's support for the empowerment of women with HIV/AIDS in Burundi is vital, as a 2002 national study confirmed that women are

more vulnerable to the threat of HIV, with gender-correlated HIV prevalence far higher in women than in men.

An example of the program's vital support for women's empowerment is visible through the experience of Viola, a participant in the Eglise Anglicane du Burundi's provincial micro-credit association program. Viola had been infected with HIV by her husband and became emotionally estranged from him once she tested positive for HIV. She was also ostracized by her community once her HIV positive status became known.

Viola obtained a USD\$500 micro-credit loan to open a small food store in her neighborhood. Her store is a success and Viola is now a vibrant role model in her community. In response to the community's increased respect, Viola and her husband have reduced prices in their store so their community might be able to purchase critical food supplies. Viola remarked that the most salient benefits of the loan were often not monetary. Viola and her husband have embraced the opportunity to develop a cooperative relationship in which they were both—as man and woman—supporting their family and community.

Participation in the micro-credit associations demonstrated to the community that women *can* influence the direction of their communities, and indeed already *do*. Participation in these associations is also an investment in the future since many of the participants, both male and female, are now more equipped to develop leadership positions within their communities. Before participating in the program, HIV positive women were unable to support their families and contribute to their communities due to social stigmatization regarding their HIV positive status and other poverty-related obstacles. The program has increased women's self-esteem, fostered community involvement, encouraged enterprise and increased their ability to purchase the food and medicine their families require. Other reported benefits for women include:

- De-stigmatization and improved wellbeing
- Renewed purpose in life
- Increased incomes
- Increased number of children attending school
- Improved diet
- Reduced opportunistic infections
- Increased antiretroviral treatments for HIV/AIDS

This program has also supported Episcopal Relief & Development's commitment to achieving the following MDGs:

MDG 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

MDG 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

MDG 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other communicable diseases

North India

The December 2004 tsunami killed more than 3,513 people in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. With Episcopal Relief & Development's support, the Church of North India (CNI) has been one of the major respondents in the area. After providing initial emergency assistance, Episcopal Relief & Development and CNI have implemented an integrated community development program in a protected tribal area by working directly with the local governing authority, the Tribal Council. Since 2005 the program has supported women's empowerment through the creation of women-owned shops in the Nicobar Islands and women's backyard poultry farms in the North Andaman Islands. These Episcopal Relief & Development-supported projects have had a strong impact on women's self-esteem and agency within the community and have demonstrated the essential role women's empowerment plays in economic recovery after disasters.

Nicobar Islands

Before the 2004 tsunami, most basic goods and household products were brought to the remote Nicobar Islands by non-tribal groups. The local community had little control over the type or price of goods available to their people. In an effort to empower tribal women and stimulate the local economy, the Tribal Council saw this situation as an opportunity to revive the traditional Mothers' Union, a church-based women's organization. Together, the Tribal Council and the Mothers' Union recruited 234 women to establish and manage shops in 15 villages. These women were subsequently trained on (1) cooperative formation; (2) management; (3) and marketing. After the women were successfully trained, CNI, the Tribal Council, the Mothers' Union and the village women's cooperatives worked collaboratively to (1) secure land; (2) construct store buildings; (3) open bank accounts for the cooperatives; and (4) procure goods from the mainland for sale in the Nicobar Islands.

Between 2005 and 2007 stores were established in each of the 15 villages, run by a management group consisting of three women. The cooperatives have since implemented effective store management systems and regularly monitor income. Profits are used to provide needed income to the three managers and replenish the store's stock. In addition to the financial success of the cooperatives, these new women entrepreneurs have demonstrated that they have also grown emotionally and socially. The impact of the program is best told by the women themselves, and below is a story of three women cooperative managers from the village of Arong. The Church of North India provided the story which was adapted by Episcopal Relief & Development.

Emily, Rosa, and Magdalene have been managing the shop in Arong since May 2005. Like the majority of Nicobarese women of their generation, they had little contact with outsiders or the world of business.

After receiving training from CNI, these three women opened the shop in Arong. Having a shop in the village saves time and the trouble of traveling ten kilometers for essential provisions. Typically this task fell to women, and involved taking the 8:00 am bus into town, and waiting all day to return on the bus at 4:00 pm lugging sacks of their family's ration of rice and sugar.

Today Emily, Rosa and Magdalene speak confidently with everyone—and they keep meticulous records of sales. With this shop, all the basic household needs are available in the village. The best-selling item? A popular brand of chips. The store managers joke about needing more of these snacks to sell! The second captain of the village, Gidion Lawson, is happy with the shop. But more than that, he is happy with the change it has brought into these women. “Now, they are earning something. It has done wonders to their confidence,” he says.

As this story illustrates, not only did the cooperatives provide these women with the opportunity to earn an income, but it also increased their self esteem and enabled them to make positive contributions to their community when the community needed it most.

There are currently four to five shops operated by non-community members in each of the 15 villages. It is the goal of the program to build the capacity of the cooperative stores by 2009 to replace the services currently provided by the other businesses. Indeed, any continued growth of the cooperatives will further enable women to help shape their futures and the futures of their communities.

North Andaman Islands

After the 2004 tsunami, communities in the North Andaman Islands asked CNI to provide support to families whose livelihoods had been destroyed by the disaster. After a series of discussions, it was determined that an effective program would be to help women establish backyard poultry farms in five local villages. After meetings with the leaders in each of the villages, 60 women were recruited to participate in the program.

Between 2005 and 2007, 60 backyard poultry farms were constructed and the participants were trained in (1) the formation of women's groups; (2) poultry management; (3) finance management and; (4) sales and marketing. In addition to increasing the skills among the women participants, the program benefited each of the women participants emotionally. Similarly to the program in the Nicobar Islands, the impact on the lives of the women is best captured by the people who have experienced the changes first-hand. Below is a story of a family who benefited from a poultry farm in the village of Talbagen, provided to Episcopal Relief & Development by CNI:

Families in Talbagan were accustomed to the men leaving the village early in the morning, making the short walk to the naali (drainage canal) to get into their dingy, and heading for the sea. They would come back with a decent catch of fish, not just to feed the family, but also to sell in order to make a small profit.

The tsunami radically changed their lives—the naali no longer fills with water, making it difficult to get to the sea as frequently as before. On this small island, this means a significant loss of a regular source of food and income.

Anima's family was directly affected by this change brought by the tsunami. She desperately needed to find an alternate source of income to support her family of seven, since her husband and sons could not rely on the sea to make a living.

CNI's backyard poultry program gave Anima such an opportunity. She received a few hens and training. In just a month's time, the hens were laying eggs, almost covering the entire expense of the feed. Soon after, she was making a small profit.

Anima comes to the hatch three times in a day to feed the hens, usually accompanied by her grandson. "I feel good that I can do something to contribute to the family income," she says.

This story illustrates that the program not only provided women with the opportunity to earn an income, but it enabled them to increase their skills and support their families in wake of the disaster. This program and the program in the Nicobar Islands clearly illustrate the vital contribution women's empowerment makes in revitalizing economies—and communities—after disasters.

This program has also supported Episcopal Relief & Development's commitment to achieving the following MDGs:

MDG 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

MDG 2: Achieve universal primary education

MDG 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

MDG 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

CONCLUSION

As the stories of the women in Burundi and North India illustrate, programs that aim to promote women's empowerment have a stronger chance of success when they promote women as active agents in the development process. Episcopal

Relief & Development has encountered many women like Viola, Emily Benedict, Rosa Evangelis, Magdalene Nun, and Anima Sarkar in the programs we have supported throughout the years, and we are committed to supporting women's empowerment through our programs for many years to come.