

EMPOWERING WOMEN

A Wise Investment

Emily Sollie

For many women around the world, and especially those in rural areas, “an all-too-common cycle” of poverty, illiteracy, and oppressive cultural norms and traditions makes it difficult for them “to fully participate and thrive in society,” says the author. At one time, this was the case for women in Burkina Faso’s rural Boulgou region. But with new technologies and practical business advice from Lutheran World Relief and its local partner organization DAKUPA, the women of Boulgou are tapping into the global market for karité butter. Today, they are enjoying steady incomes and new-found confidence in their ability to successfully manage a community project.

Emily Sollie is manager of media relations and editorial services for Lutheran World Relief, a nongovernmental organization based in Baltimore, Maryland, that was founded in 1945 to respond to the needs of communities devastated by World War II. Since then, it has evolved from a relief agency shipping material resources to war-torn Europe into an agency that works with partners in 50 countries to help people grow food, improve health, strengthen communities, end conflict, build livelihoods, and recover from disasters.

Seventy percent of the world’s poor are women and children. This sad fact means that women suffer disproportionately in conflicts. It means that they commonly lack access to education, credit, land ownership, and participation in family and community decision making. And it suggests that transforming the lives of women may be a key to eradicating poverty and building a more just and peaceful world.

In their roles as caregivers, breadwinners, and community members, women are critical to the social and economic development of their families, their societies, and their nations. But women around the world, particularly those in rural areas, face a chronic struggle against discrimination. An all-too-common cycle of poverty, illiteracy, oppressive cultural norms and traditions, and a lack of knowledge about basic human rights makes it difficult for women to fully participate and thrive in society.

OPENING UP OPPORTUNITIES

Lutheran World Relief (LWR) and other non-governmental organizations help build connections and respectful relationships with people who suffer from oppression and poverty. By focusing much of our energies on women, we have seen time and again, in every area where we work, newly empowered women become catalysts for change within their families and their communities. Through women, LWR has found ways to change oppressive traditions and cultural norms that deprive people of their dignity.

Even before the United Nations identified women’s empowerment as one of the Millennium Development Goals, LWR recognized the powerful impact that women can have on their communities when given the right opportunities, and we at LWR have adopted gender equity as a cross-cutting theme through all of our work, encouraging the active participation of both men and women in all aspects of decision-making processes.

In Africa, LWR and its partner development groups enable women to increase their incomes by teaching them marketable skills and providing loans and training to start small businesses. In Asia, we work to educate women, particularly those from marginalized communities, about their legal rights and how to advocate for their rights at the local and national levels. In Latin America, we respond to the widening gap between rich and poor by helping families increase their incomes through more productive and sustainable farming methods, ensuring that both men and women benefit from our projects. In the United States, we advocate for greater sensitivity to gender equity in the policies of our own government, the policies of multilateral institutions, the business community, and civil society.

Our work with women is easily illustrated by the stories of the projects we undertake with local partners in the communities where we work. These are stories of amazing, resilient women and the benefits that they realize when they are given a chance to lift themselves out of long-term poverty. One such story takes place in Burkina Faso, one of the world’s poorest nations.



Women in Boulgou process and sell karité (shea) butter as part of a Lutheran World Relief project. Their small business gives them a way to support their families and participate in their communities.

S. Colney/IRDC/CREDI

CHALLENGES AND STRUGGLES

Women in the rural Boulgou region of Burkina Faso wake up each morning to warm weather and a beautiful landscape of brown grasses and scattered green trees. They also wake up to a host of challenges: rampant illiteracy, food insecurity, little money to buy clothes or medicine, poor access to potable water, and often very limited health care.

Both poverty and local tradition prevent most women from attending school and gaining skills they could use to earn an income. They struggle to participate in household and community decision making. They seldom learn techniques that can prevent common diseases like diarrhea and cholera. Most families in Boulgou rely on agriculture for food and livelihoods, using out-of-date techniques that leach nutrients from the soil and produce fewer and fewer crops each year.

The compound effect of these issues is a daily struggle for women—a struggle to feed their families, to stay healthy, to participate in decisions that affect their lives, and to earn enough money to purchase basic necessities. But there is hope for these women—hope in their hearts and in the green trees that dot the landscape.

Those trees—karité trees—represent a valuable natural resource. They produce fruit whose nuts can be processed into a variety of products, including karité butter (shea butter), a common ingredient in cosmetic products such as body lotion and sunscreen. Women in Boulgou already processed the nuts by hand, using them to make cooking oil, body cream, and soap for household use. They also used the nutshells as fuel for fires, which creates a natural mosquito repellent—a lifesaving side effect in a region where malaria kills thousands of people a year.

MARKETING AND MECHANIZATION

But to capitalize on the global market for karité butter and earn a steady income, the women needed to process very large quantities of nuts. They needed motorized presses to process higher volumes of nuts more quickly and produce more butter to sell to companies for a bigger profit. Lutheran World Relief and its local partner organization, DAKUPA, bought motorized presses for two women's groups in the region. DAKUPA trained the women in the operation and maintenance of the presses and in making production schedules, managing finances, and keeping good records of expenses and profits. After the training, the women received small loans to buy large quantities of nuts from other women who specialize in picking the fruit from the trees.

Before, the women would grind the nuts by hand, walk several miles to another village to press them, then walk back home to boil and filter the oil. Because this was such hard work and reaped little profit, many women simply sold the nuts whole for a very low price. But now, selling the oil and butter, they can command four times the price they used to get for whole nuts. In addition, they can rent the pressing machines to people from other villages when they aren't using them, which gives them another source of income.

Now that the women are successfully processing the karité butter, LWR and DAKUPA are helping them to market their product. The women have a contract with a cosmetics company in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital city, and plan to diversify their market outlets to take advantage of the international market for karité butter.

This project has helped women in Boulgou take control of their lives. Now they earn enough money to

buy clothes and medicine, and they have an enterprise that is entirely their own. The men in their villages are taking them more seriously and starting to include them in community decision making. And now that they aren't grinding the nuts by hand or walking long distances to sell them, they have more time for other activities like small trade, making thread for sewing, and preparing the land for planting crops. Their karité business has given them confidence and camaraderie, and they have learned how to successfully manage a community project.

This is just one example of what women can do when they have opportunities. One of the greatest legacies Lutheran World Relief can leave with communities is empowered women—and men engaged in ways that enable them to understand this as a positive change. This

can lead to people taking on new roles, allowing both men and women to better fulfill their potential. LWR considers its work with women to be a moral imperative. It also happens to be a very wise investment in reducing poverty and building healthy families and communities. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

PROMOTING WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS IN BENIN

Alima, a schoolgirl from a Peulh family of northern Benin, was betrothed immediately after her birth, according to tradition, to her mother's cousin. Enrolled in school by her parents, she finished primary school when she was 13 years old and was planning to start secondary school. Unfortunately, in the meantime, Alima's parents had received a dowry and other presents from her "fiancé."

When school re-opened in October 2004 after the summer break, Alima was planning to resume classes at a local secondary school. However, her fiancé chose at that moment to claim his bride. Even though Alima wanted to continue her studies, her fiancé did not want to hear about it. The case was referred to the Association of Pupils' Mothers (AME) of the area, and they convinced Alima's parents to let her continue studying at least up to the eighth grade.

Subsequently, Alima was enrolled in a high school for girls in Parakou. She stayed with a host family during Christmas vacation to prevent a possible kidnapping by her fiancé. But three days after school reopened after the holiday, the headmistress of the school reported that Alima had disappeared. Her parents were told she had left for an unknown destination allegedly because she thought her return to the girls' residence could result in her death. However, her father is convinced that she had been bewitched. This is just a typical example of how a young girl's future can be thwarted by retrograde traditions.

ABSENCE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The greatest barriers to the empowerment of women in Benin are customary law and traditional practices that deny women and girls the most basic of human rights. In these traditional societies, women are defined by their relationships to men, and there is strong resistance to the idea of women's equality with men. Customary practices such as forced or early marriages, child exchange, levirate marriages (in which a widow is forced to marry her dead husband's brother or son), polygamy, widowhood ceremonies (in which

widows are obliged to cease their activities for months), barriers to women's inheritance of property and land, domestic violence, and female genital mutilation condone violence against women and increase their poverty. These practices thwart democracy and slow Benin's economic and political development because they ensure that most women in Benin are illiterate, are financially dependent on their husbands, and are not encouraged to participate in political decision making.

To correct this situation, some women decided to get together to strategize about how to improve their living and working conditions. The Association of Women Lawyers of Benin (AFJB), a nonprofit organization, was born in January 1990 for the promotion of human rights, especially women's rights. The AFJB, in collaboration with Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF-Benin) and other organizations, worked hard for the initiation and development of new legislation. The government of Benin advanced in 1990 a draft Personal and Family Code of Law. After it was made compliant with Benin's constitution, it was voted on June 14, 2004, and signed by the president of the republic on August 24, 2004.

This new law marks a watershed in the history of Benin's legal environment. Whereas old laws were hostile to the recognition and protection of women's rights and interests, men and women now jointly share responsibility for bringing up their children. Polygamy, levirate marriage, and forced marriage are now prohibited. A dowry is now only symbolic and cannot be claimed in case of divorce. Children born outside of wedlock have the same rights as legitimate children, while women now have the same rights to inheritance as men.

THE STRUGGLE FOR ENFORCEMENT

Unfortunately, Benin's Personal and Family Code is still largely unknown by much of the public and is not fully enforced. Through ignorance or defiance,

magistrates and judges continue to apply customary law—even though new laws have been passed. There is widespread lack of knowledge about and resistance to applying principles that uphold women's rights. The government has not even established decrees to ensure that the law is enforced and that legal duality has come to an end.

AFJB's founder and former president, Judge Clotilde Médégan-Nougbodé, now chairs Benin's High Court of Justice and is a member of the Constitutional Court. During a presentation on the new code as part of an International Women's Day celebration, Médégan-Nougbodé stated that the Personal and Family Code is a tool for the development and promotion of family that concerns the human person, both man and woman, throughout life from the moment of birth. She cited the need to raise the awareness of all citizens on the new code.

WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Office of Women in Development, since 2002 has worked with Chemonics, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), to advance the legal, civil, property, and human rights of women through USAID's Women's Legal Rights Initiative (WLR). Benin is one of the focus countries. WLR-Benin is working closely with the USAID mission in Benin and the gender subcommittee to integrate women's legal rights program activities into the mission's portfolio of activities.

To identify obstacles to the full guarantee and enjoyment of women's legal rights in Benin and determine what should be done about them, the WLR-Benin team met and talked extensively with internal USAID/Benin teams, with ministries, with

NGOs, and with judges, lawyers, and international donors. WLR's activities to overcome the resistance of customary law focus on education and training about women's legal rights. They include public awareness campaigns, paralegal training, developing manuals and brochures for legal professionals on the new Personal and Family Code, adult education centers, social promotion centers, workshops for community leaders, and continuing education for judges and intermediate-level actors in the judicial system.

WLR-Benin officially launched the training and awareness-raising tools in March 2005, at a ceremony attended by representatives of the government of Benin and of various institutions and NGOs, each of whom received sets of manuals and brochures. The package of materials comprise training manuals and illustrated awareness-raising brochures edited in French and in four local languages—Fon, Adja, Batonou, and Dendi.

WLR-Benin also organized reading sessions in several regions of the country when the code was presented to the populations in their native language. According to the participants, these sessions have been very useful in raising the awareness on the new law throughout the populace. ■

Source: U.S. Agency for International Development, prepared by Sandrine Dossou-Yovo, USAID/Benin.

CAMBODIAN WOMEN RUNNING FOR PEACE

Ung Vathana, a former vegetable grower and seller, is now chief of her province in Kompong Cham, Cambodia. One of more than 12,000 women who placed their names on the ballot in Cambodia's 2002 communal elections, Vathana and others like her set the stage for the 2003 National Assembly elections in which more than 900 women representatives were elected—an increase of 8,900 percent over the 10 women who had served on the assembly in previous years. Two-thirds of the women elected had participated in training sessions offered by Women for Prosperity, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and based in Phnom Penh.

USAID has supported Women for Prosperity's decade-long effort to promote voter education and the participation of women in government. Working with politicians, voters, and the media to advocate for the greater inclusion of women at all levels of government, Women for Prosperity publishes a magazine encouraging women's leadership, democratic reforms, and nonviolence. The organization also has trained more than 5,500 women to run for and hold political office.

Three decades of violence had prevented strong democratic institutions from taking root in Cambodia. Political factions had created a climate of unrest and instability that excluded large portions of the population from decision making, thereby limiting the government's ability to address their needs. Under the Khmer Rouge—the Communist Party of Cambodia—so many men were killed that 28 percent of Cambodia's women are now widows and 56 percent of the population is female. Consequently, women have been forced to assume new roles in business and in the family. Some have even had to take on more than one job in order to support their families.

However, before the most recent elections, women were excluded from participating in Cambodia's governing process. As a result, women were not visible in the halls of government, and issues of concern to women did not figure prominently in local and national elections.

Women for Prosperity is working toward correcting this inequity, as well as promoting awareness about the importance of gender in the country's development. As the organization prepares qualified women to step into politics, it also works toward developing a politically savvy female voter base that can be mobilized into action.

Women for Prosperity conducts training for future leaders, encouraging men to participate along with women. Women for Prosperity trains men and women together so that men become aware of gender concerns and recognize that women must be involved in the country's decision making and development. The organization hopes this sense of cooperation will carry over into the men's work on the governing councils.

From an initial group of 80 women and men trainees from Cambodia's three major political parties, 59 were chosen to become "graduate trainers." The graduate trainers returned to their respective provinces to stage additional workshops. Of the more than 5,500 women who were trained through this process, 60 percent registered as candidates in the 2002 elections. The women came from 24 provinces and 208 districts; more than 60 percent had only a primary-level education, and they represented a wide range of ages, from 25 to 62 years.

Workshop sessions concentrate on eight lessons: women and politics, gender, leadership, management and preparation, standing for election, decentralization, election law, and the role of commune councils. Often, both men and women candidates have little knowledge of decentralization going into the training, and the sessions prepare them for the ways in which power over commune affairs is being shifted away from the national government and instead being put in the hands of the commune councils.

To ensure that the trainings sessions are practical, accessible to people with varied levels of education, and address critical issues in the country, the group often uses role playing. In a workshop on leadership styles, for example, some trainees assume roles as democratic leaders, while others pose as authoritarian figures in order to present the audiences with more realistic



Cambodian women participate in a training of trainers for women activists in Kampot in July 2004. The participants attended a three-day course on recruiting new members and then, on the fourth day, organized their own outreach event.

NDI/Cambodia

scenarios. These future policy makers quickly see that decisions and policies made with citizen involvement are more sound and sustainable than those arrived at without democratic participation.

With the support of USAID, Women for Prosperity now focuses on women formerly associated with the Khmer Rouge, integrating their concerns into local civil society initiatives. For example, the organization has successfully lobbied the government to ensure that political party lists for the National Assembly include more women. Moreover, through the organization's successful legislative initiatives, a new law mandating the creation of women's and children's committees in local governing councils is changing the way these councils work and is influencing the issues, priorities, and agendas they address.

As Women for Prosperity gains more experience, it is taking its message around the countryside. Since televisions and tape recorders can be found in even the poorest and most remote villages, the organization produces video and cassette tapes on voter education, covering topics from "What is an election?" to "Why should women be elected?" It distributes videos and cassettes to temples, an important focus of community life in most rural areas. In addition, women and NGO activists have spent many hours pedaling their bicycles

around rural communities and townships with battery-operated cassette players and public address systems, broadcasting the cassette messages to all those within earshot.

This massive effort has paid off, and female commune representatives are now finding their voices and speaking out strongly on such issues as women's health needs and development of the canals that are so vital for trade and transportation in Cambodia. The women want to participate in their local governments because they believe that it is women themselves who are best able to understand the problems of other women. As Keang Siphon, the deputy chief of the Sambourmeas commune says, "I decided to stand for election because I want to help women in my villages, especially widows. Thirty percent of our people are widows. If I'm elected, I will help them to help themselves without depending on men."

A neighbor of Keang Siphon agrees. "We want more Khmer women to be candidates because women don't solve problems by force and gunpoint. Women are the world's mothers." ■

Source: U.S. Agency for International Development, prepared by the Bureau for Asia and the Near East.