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Work Remains to Fix Gender Imbalance

By Zack Gross

I was visiting a village in Central America back about ten years ago. The organization I worked with was building a relationship with a community development network that helped villages like this one to improve their lives through agricultural programs. After a brief "meet and greet" with the village leaders – seemingly all men – and a walk around the community, we sat in an outdoor meeting area under a grove of trees.

We were now going to talk about what our Canadian group could offer this village and what the village had identified as its needs. There were six of us Manitobans, three women and three men. We were a doctor, a home economist, two farmers and two development workers. "Where are the women?" we asked. "Oh, they'll be along with lunch soon," came the answer. "Okay then," we responded, "We'll wait."

It is this inequality of opportunity, of education, of power and of wealth among women worldwide that has led Canada to be a strong advocate of gender rights in its international development programs. Part of this advocacy is the declaration, by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the federal government's foreign aid branch, that International Development Week, February 4th to 10th, 2007 will focus on gender issues.

Gender imbalance takes many forms. In one country, an auto mechanics training program only accepts male students. It is felt that it "wouldn't be appropriate" to enroll girls and would upset the community involved. In another country, while young girls toil in their families' fields under the hot sun, their brothers attend school. It is thought that boys will need an education to go into business or become professionals, but the girls' role will never be more than keeping house, raising a garden and small livestock, and nurturing children.

More than 110 million of the world's children, two-thirds of them female, are not in school today. One of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals is to halve that number by 2015. Development projects sponsored by CIDA funds must show that women are involved in, and benefit from, these efforts as much as men. And, it is paying off! Projects I have visited in East Africa have women learning how to fix cars and machinery and to run small businesses, such as salons, stores and cafes.

Women's health is another area where an imbalance needs to be righted. Sub-Saharan Africa has very high infection rates of HIV/AIDS and 58% of those infected are women. In the world today, one out of three women is a victim of some form of gender-based violence. Women don't always have a prerogative when a man "asks" for sex and are often ignored when they ask that a condom be used. 80% of the world's 35 million

refugees are women and children and in conflict and disaster situations, they have even less power than normally.

Canadian organizations are working with their Third World partners to educate women on their rights and men on their responsibilities. When a country educates its girls, as well as its boys, statistics show that economic productivity rises, maternal and infant mortality rates fall, fertility rates decline, and the prospects for the lives of the next generation to live better socially, economically and environmentally are improved.

Canada does not escape the gender imbalance. Women in our country earn on average only 77% of what men do. In Canada, on average, parliamentary seats are split 80% for men and 20% for women. In the developing world, women hold about 10% of parliamentary seats. However, over the past year, Chile and Liberia (as well as Germany) have all elected their first female presidents. In Peru's recent election, one-third of the candidates were female and, ultimately, 17% of the seats went to women.

The Grameen Bank recently won the Nobel Peace Prize. This well-known "bank" is a community economic development fund that has supported thousands of small businesses in Bangladesh and whose structure and methods have been copied by other organizations around the world. The vast majority of the Grameen Bank's loans have gone to women and their small-scale, grassroots economic efforts.

One celebrated instance of our province's local to global connections and progress in gender and development is the Minnedosa Café in the Mwanza district of northwestern Tanzania. Backed by a female development activist from the Minnedosa area of Manitoba, a young African woman was able to open her own business thousands of kilometres away. In honour of her benefactor, she chose her business' name. Not every initiative like this will survive the trials that it will face, but women worldwide and their supporters will persist.

There is much more to be done, and Canadian international development agencies pride themselves on taking a lead in the effort to support gender equality around the world.

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