



EMPOWERING WOMEN

key to achieving MDGs

"I believe in the need to empower women and educate girls. I also believe in promoting men valuing women and looking for different ways of achieving this. When traditions change, lifestyles change. Men can become very disempowered and that causes more problems."
Maureen Sexton RSM, Kiunga, PNG

In September this year, world leaders will gather in New York to renew a commitment they made in 2000 to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and halve world poverty by 2015. With only five years to go, can we still meet that deadline? Cathy Solano RSM, Mercy Works Inc.'s Community Education Officer, believes a crucial factor in realising all the MDGs is to realise MDG3 – to promote gender equality and empower women.

In September 2000, 189 world leaders dared to dream that the suffering of billions brought about by extreme poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination, especially against women, could be alleviated by 2015. These leaders signed the Millennium Declaration which was translated into a road map setting out eight goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Progress has been made towards achieving some of the MDGs in the last decade. However, UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon is frank when he claims that most of the targets set for 2015 will not be reached, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. In fact, the weakened world economy and steep rises in food prices threaten to reverse some of the progress already made.

One crucial factor that has become apparent is the vital role that women and girls play in making these dreams a reality. On International Women's Day this year, Ban Ki-moon said: "Until women and girls are liberated from poverty and injustice, all our goals – peace, security, sustainable development – stand in jeopardy".

Women in developing countries face incredible barriers to the liberation to which Ban Ki-moon refers. The facts are readily at hand: the majority of the world's poor are women; women perform 66% of the world's work, produce 50% of the food, but earn 10% of the income and own 1% of the property; two-thirds of people who are illiterate are female; of the millions of school age children not in school, the majority are girls; and today, HIV-AIDS is rapidly becoming a woman's disease.

At the same time, studies have shown that when women are empowered and allowed to thrive, society benefits. Families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, communities become more resilient.

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, adds further weight to these facts when it highlights the importance of eradicating illiteracy: "Literacy is at the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy".

Maureen Sexton RSM/Mercy Works PNG/
Anila Isaac RSM/Gaye Lennon RSM



"Empowering women, providing opportunities for further education, even short-term courses, provides women with greater choices – choices they can make for themselves and their children."
Helen Nolen RSM,
Fohorem, Timor Leste



"Having worked with women, I have seen their potential. Women are careful in their jobs and know how best to look after their families. They can do as well as men if they are given equal opportunities in education and management roles."
Maryanne Kolkia RSM,
Goroka, PNG



"In Pakistan, the literacy rate along with the school attendance of females remains the lowest in Asia. Marriage and not education is viewed as the main goal for females."
Margaret Madden RSM,
Karachi, Pakistan

However, it is not only women's 'thrival' that is at risk, but their very survival. Too many women today continue to be subjected to various forms of physical and sexual violence, emotional harm, and political, cultural, economic and religious discrimination.

Even in so-called developed societies, the scourge of violence against women is staggering: at least one out of every three women world-wide has experienced violence in her lifetime – often at the hands of an intimate partner! This has far-reaching consequences such as permanent physical injury, loss of livelihood, forced displacement and the constant terrifying fear and insecurity of future attacks. All of these atrocities obviously impact on children and society.

Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, understood clearly the links between the lack of progress in society and the role of women in furthering its development. Long before the world leaders of 2000 dreamed their dream, Catherine McAuley had put into practice a similar vision.

In the 1820s, Catherine built a "House of Mercy" that would alleviate the suffering of some of Dublin's poorest women and children. She took in young women and girls and taught them skills so they could fend for themselves. She began to educate the children of the poorer classes because she understood that education was the only real way of lifting people up and out of poverty.

The many women who were attracted to joining her in these ministries would have often heard her say: "The sisters shall feel convinced that no work of charity can be more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor, than the careful instruction of women since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence".

In 2010, Mercy Works Inc. is continuing Catherine McAuley's vision by supporting initiatives that alleviate the suffering of people, especially women, in some of the world's most impoverished communities. We believe that by promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls, we will go a long way to reducing poverty for the whole community.

But for Mercy Works Inc. to continue this crucial work of helping women and their communities to break free from the chains of poverty, we need your support.

And when world leaders gather later this year in New York to renew their commitment to the MDGs and the task of halving global poverty by 2015, they need our collective support. You might think that achieving all the MDGs by 2015 is the responsibility of governments and that there is little that we can do to help. Nothing could be further from the truth. Everyone needs to work together and make sure the goals become a reality.

We can do it... let's MAKE POVERTY HISTORY. ■