

WOMEN AND POVERTY

EDITORIAL

This newsletter tells of “the feminine face of poverty.” It is argued that women are often the most afflicted by poverty because of factors such as their lack of economic power, skills and status and the need to care for their families. Yet, as a recent report has made clear, World Bank strategies to combat poverty often fail to incorporate the views of women or target policies that will help them. Poverty statistics are not differentiated by gender and “women’s voices have hardly been sought and have definitely not been heard.”*

Women’s voices are heard in this newsletter. In Zambia, the struggle against poverty is likened to a war; in Bangladesh and other countries, including some in the developed world, articles tell how poverty traps some women into prostitution. In USA and Canada, the poverty of women and children seems to be on the increase, despite their societies’ general affluence.

Poverty does not just affect the women. Malnourished women are more likely to have babies who are at risk. In Africa, more than 10 million babies die every year.

**Failing women, sustaining poverty: Gender in Poverty* Joint Report by Christian Aid and the UK’s Gender and Development Network.

In the UK, a Non-Governmental Organisation – the Zacchaeus Trust 2000 – and the Institute for Brain Chemistry and Human Nutrition have highlighted concern at the clear relationship between poor maternal nutrition, inadequate incomes and low birth weight. The incidence of low birth weight is rising in the UK and in some inner-city regions is similar to that of developing nations. The consequences of poor maternal nutrition, before and during pregnancy, are becoming clearer: low birth weights result in associated physical and mental ill health, and an expert at the National Institute of Health in USA now considers that improper maternal nutrition is a key factor in the sharp rise in mental ill health among young people.

Some of the articles point out the political dimension to poverty. *The Global Call for Action Against Poverty*, launched by several women’s organisations and development agencies, is a worldwide alliance committed to pressuring world leaders to fulfil their promises to implement the *Beijing Platform for Action*, the landmark document which promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women. Hundreds of civil society organisations from all over the world – including women’s groups, trade unions, faith groups and human rights organisations – are joining together to work toward shifts in national and international policies to end poverty. At

the recent meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the UN Observer for the Anglican Consultative Council, whose delegation comprised 41 Anglican women from 27 Provinces, identified poverty of women as one the four most urgent issues that should be addressed by the governments of the world. Basic to the elimination of women and children living in poverty is the economic empowerment of women. This was pointed out by the Secretary General Kofi Annan, in his opening address. The delegate from Ireland (a man) stated that the economic health of his country could be directly tied to an increase of women entering the workforce over the past five years; “Gender equality equals economic well-being.” Awareness of the extent and repercussions of the poverty of women is crucial for the whole of the Anglican Communion. Churches are urged to do their part to understand and work to combat “the feminine face of poverty.”

Editorial note

This editorial has been jointly written by Canon Alice Medcof, Co-ordinator of the International Anglican Women’s Network and Dr Sally Thompson, Co-ordinator of IAFN.

More information on the *Global Action against Poverty* initiative can be found at: <http://www.whiteband.org>

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

- invite women to strengthen themselves through examples of ethical qualities;
- teach women about projects of small firms such as micro-credit for those who want to do business, sewing work or breeding chickens.

With these initiatives we will achieve our objectives in order to fight against the poverty that affects our province and our homes.

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CANADA

In the 1990s the Government of Canada identified the issue of Children Living in Poverty as one of immediate and urgent concern. Campaign 2000 was inaugurated: it was hoped that all facets of government and civil society would set in motion programmes that would reduce the number of such children. But by year 2000 many more children were living in poverty and by year 2005 the number had increased again – substantially.

Setting goals does not equate with success.

Most of the children live with mothers who are poor; hence the problem to be addressed is that of the feminine face of poverty. In 2002, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 51.6% of single mothers were living below the poverty line. The National Council of Welfare in their report *Welfare Incomes 2003* noted that welfare incomes are far below the poverty line in all provinces and territories, and concluded that welfare incomes which reach only one-fifth or one-third of the poverty line are unacceptably low and should be raised at the earliest possible date. Rates this low cannot be described as anything other than punitive and cruel.

Government leaders could well heed the analysis that has come out of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, March 2005. (See *the Editorial*.)

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prostitute themselves in order to gain more money to keep the family alive. It is in this way that AIDS is spread and lots of children are on the street.

There are many Non-Governmental Organisations working for the benefit of the population. Unfortunately, most of them are concentrated in urban areas and most people living in the periphery are unaware of them. Our Diocese is one of those working for the restoration of our communities. We have done some research in our parishes in the periphery. The results were terrible. Women living in these areas are violated in their own homes in the name of culture. These women are living in pain and bodily suffering. They know nothing of women's rights, they have never heard of it.

Woman being the source of human life, she is also the earth that contains life. That is why the Mothers' Union of Katanga Diocese has taken a commitment to:-

- make women participate in the work of social development;
- provide necessary information on peace education, good government and the transformation of the conflicts, the rights and duties of women;
- undertake to research the situation on woman and children's needs as they are the victims of conflicts, HIV/AIDS, violence and discrimination in order to promote women's emergence so that they can be different at any level of social life;

Poverty is found everywhere in Africa. Nearly half the population live on less than one dollar per day. In my country, the political situation since 1996 has left people living in a culture of hatred, vengeance, violence and war. It is difficult to develop if there is no peace. So poverty affects a great part of human life.

Congolese families do not have reserves of food, and many are malnourished. People live from day to day; the whole National territory is affected by poverty. No social class is spared: that is why very many women have no resistance when they give birth and many die. Poverty affects also the area where resources of wealth are exploited and the State remains poor, despite the mining sector. During the colonial period, all the mine workers received rations of maize, sugar and meat depending on the number of children. So they had large families, but now no one takes care of the Gecamines' workers' big families and the women struggle to feed and look after them.

The Government does not make any effort to pay workers and there is a lot of corruption by those in power. Factories are closed and most people are jobless and leave all responsibilities on the back of their wives.

Women being without means, they must work hard to make the family survive. She must leave home early to take her goods to the market and come back home late in the night; meanwhile children are alone at home with no one caring for them. The husband plays cards or watches television until his wife returns. Consequently, some women

BRAZIL

groups of women from the favela are being sponsored to participate. For these three days they can hear God's word, take a step back from their lives, and review where they are going and what God is saying. The transformation in their lives afterwards is incredible. Many have joined together weekly in prayer for their community; several are now being trained up as potential leaders for the church.

Following requests for help by the health workers within the favela, a weekly group for pregnant women was recently initiated. This group aims to empower and value women, support them with health issues, and encourage them spiritually. 48 pregnant women have attended this four-month course, which includes a Biblical talk, health talk and refreshments. The team of volunteers helping with the practical organisation includes several women from the favela community. At present the greatest dilemma for this project is space. The small crèche building also hosts both the church and pregnancy group. A church building and more meeting rooms are desperately needed. Theft and damage to the property is also a continual battle.

The mother church in Piedade has a relatively wealthier membership and there is a natural desire to provide material assistance to the women and children of Carolinas favela. A team of volunteers raise funds for food donations and also assist with job seeking. Women who complete the pregnancy course are given a starter pack of baby equipment and nappies. However, we are anxious not to create material dependency and in so doing disempower the very women we hope to empower. Therefore we are continually reassessing the necessities and methods of providing material assistance. Whereas previously the project has 'existed' in the favela, it is only recently that the community members themselves have started to 'participate' and take ownership and leadership within the project. This seems to be directly related to the spiritual growth of the women involved. Developing leadership from within the community is essential for the long-term sustainability and development of this work.

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these poorer communities, leaving large numbers of disempowered woman struggling alone to raise their families.

Casa de Esperança is a social and evangelistic project founded by the Episcopal Church; Igreja de Espirito Santo in Piedade, Recife. This project aims to support and empower the women and children of Carolinas favela (slum). Firstly, a need was seen for affordable day-care crèche facilities to enable women to work, pay their bills and feed their families. The crèche now has 50 day places, freeing mothers up to work, with the peace of mind that their children are being well looked after. There have been work-training programmes in sewing, waitressing, cooking and computing. Whilst social action helps on the surface to improve the quality of life for these women, it is the healing power of Christ which can bring true freedom and joy into the labyrinth of social problems they face daily.

A church has been planted, with between 100-200 children coming for Sunday school and with around 50 women and some men coming for the adult Bible study and worship. The mother church in Piedade has a well established three-day evangelistic course (Cursilho), and small

"I am the mother of Maria Louiz and Joso Vitor. My name is Cicera Margarida. After I gained a place for my children at the crèche my life improved a lot. Best of all I quickly found a job, praise God." House of Hope (crèche).

"My name is Maria Jose. After I started to participate in the services and know about the truth of God and learn how to be content and thankful, primarily to God for having shown me how good it is to be a sister in Christ Jesus and have a family in faith. In addition to this, today I have peace, joy, slightly better health, basic food and even a house."

Brazil is the tenth largest economy in the world – yet it is a country of great disparity, with nearly 44 million people living below the poverty line and facing hunger. Recife is a metropolis city in the north-east of Brazil with a population of two million people and life here for women of lower socio-economic class is a constant daily battle for survival. Many families have arrived from the interior in hope of work and a better life, only to find their hopes unfulfilled, and their circumstances worse. Alcoholism, infidelity, violence and abuse are rife in

ZAMBIA

Life has become increasingly difficult for more Zambians, especially women. This is because of the combination of the economic, political, social, cultural and environmental factors. Social factors such as violence against women touches the lives of many women. The result is that they live in constant fear of being harassed or killed both inside and outside their homes.

The population of Zambia is 10.8 million and over 50% are female. Despite being in the majority, cultural and traditional practices have continued to reinforce women's second-class status. Lobola (bride price) is still paid, widows are frequently dispossessed of their property and customary law upholds the notion that a married woman is a minor under the guardianship of her husband.

Women in rural areas continue to carry out most work especially in the agricultural sector. They produce up to 80% of food consumed. Women work longer hours; they also form the majority of subsistence farmers. In our liberalised market economy, price subsidies have been removed increasing the costs; earnings from farm produce have been reduced and for a woman to qualify for credit to start farming or any other activity is almost impossible.

Furthermore, there are "cultural" difficulties women face in getting title deeds to land, as property acquired by the wife is considered a husband's.

Women in rural areas are mostly affected and so are peri-urban women. Urban poverty has many implications for households. Subsidies removed have resulted in high prices of basic food stuffs. Women spend hours searching for additional incomes such as petty trading.

Poverty among young women is particularly intense, they have less education and fewer chances to skills-training and better paid work. Some unfortunately resort to sex work. HIV/AIDS prevalence is alarming amongst girls between 16-19 years. Fortunately it has dropped from 25% to 16% but it is still serious.

With the introduction of user fees in clinics and hospitals, poorer women in society are particularly vulnerable. Owing to women's multi-roles in reproduction and health provision for the family, they are the main recipients of health care. Thus Health Services are vital and a human right.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), especially women's NGOs, are focussing on alleviating poverty among some of the most vulnerable groups, particularly

women. These have been targeted by promoting self-employment and small enterprise development. The women have always been active in agricultural production and small-scale trading, but the desperate situation has led to some women going into new income-generating ventures. In many cases, the economic niche women and girls occupy has prevented them from increasing their incomes. The increasing formal sector makes it necessary for women to access 'seed' money and explore innovative methods. Moreover, the traditional skills such as sewing, knitting, crocheting have proven to be unprofitable, as the market is saturated with cheaper second-hand clothes that come from abroad.

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Regardless of Zambia being a land-locked country with more than 72 ethnic groups, the country is widely known as a peace-loving nation, caring for other people from neighbouring countries who seek asylum in Zambia, with refugee camps nearly all over the country.

Alas, this peace is fully enjoyed by only a minority of Zambians who have wealth, though Zambia as a country has never experienced physical war. There is another war which has affected the majority of women country-wide and this war has been brought about by:-

1. Political upheavals and urbanisation which have destroyed the traditional social net of the extended family, resulting in the majority of women living in absolute poverty with no one coming to their aid.
2. HIV/AIDS scourge which has led to the increase in the number of orphans and widows with no source of any form of income or proper shelter.
3. Economic decline leading to an increasingly high rate of unemployment which threatens the lives of young people – more especially girls – who after completing school have very little or no hope for gainful employment, as they in turn look after their parents according to Zambia's traditional way of life.

One of the challenges which befalls married women is being forced (or willingly) to follow their husbands who keep moving from one town to another, from rural area to urban area looking for a greener pasture which is hard to come by or non-existent. This makes it very difficult for women to improve their livelihood. These women are unable to control their children as they are out of school and can't be fully supported and are no longer comfortable in the hands of their parents.

The Government has tried to reduce the high rate of poverty by encouraging the

formation of co-operatives and women have come up with a policy allowing girls who are pregnant, or have had children, to go back to school to help them secure a better future. They have re-introduced literacy classes to cut down the extent of illiteracy among women. The Government is also encouraging women to form women's clubs; give them training on how to grow certain crops. The groups are given seeds and fertiliser and do the hard work of tilling the land themselves.

The war (against poverty) is so severe that others have come in. The first lady Mrs Maureen Mwanawasa goes around the country assisting women's groups in whatever they are doing in a particular community. Other organisations have joined the fight, for example the Non-Governmental Organisations. Some are partly Christian organisations and they give training to women counsellors; some

give credit loans after a series of training programmes on how to manage small-scale businesses.

Challenges:

- As the first lady, the wife of the current Zambia's President goes around assisting women's groups. Is there a future for the said groups once this term of office comes to an end?
- Groups or organisations like the Christian Enterprise Trust of Zambia (CETZAM) have been giving credit loans to hundreds of women's groups country-wide asking for weekly payments. In case of adversity in a group member's family, a majority of women have lost belongings in replacement for the loans, leaving them poorer than before.

The way forward

The only hope for women and poverty is

the Church. More and more Church organisations are coming up with programmes to challenge the poverty, though some denominations confine themselves within the perimeters of their Church members. Our Mothers' Union in the Diocese of Central Zambia, having built a hall in Ndola, is trying to empower women by giving them life skills through training them for six months in designing and tailoring. This Margaret School of Tailoring is expensive to run and we are handicapped through lack of funds despite help from supporters. Some of the women have set up their own small-scale tailoring shops and others look for employment in clothes-making industries which are very few. Our biggest task is to lobby the Government for assistance.

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ZAMBIA**

UGANDA

helpless. They are valuable members of society who can do something to improve their lives. They can acquire skills which may help them to overcome poverty and become financially independent.

The centre comes under the umbrella of the Mothers' Union and is part of the Diocese of South Rwenzori. We employ local teachers and our cookery teacher is herself a former student. Masika Enid, aged 22, attended an introductory course and, showing promise, was then invited to work as assistant to the Church Mission Society worker who was teaching cookery. Later, she was appointed to take over the teacher's role.

Introductory courses at the centre last for three months and aim to reach as many women as possible. Afterwards, some students, having gained confidence, go on to further studies and some find employment with local businesses or become self-employed. However, the problem of poverty remains and even though skills can be learned, setting up a small business requires capital which most do not have.

But what these women all have is the desire to see their lives and the lives of their families improved. Masika Sylvia, now on Stage Two, sums it up very well, "I want to say 'no' to sufferings as a woman of Africa. These classes will help me be bright in mind and achieve a bright future. I want to be an example to other women who have dropped out of school."

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"Madam, can I get a pill for pimples?" This question was put to me by one of my students at Kasese Women's Learning Centre and I realised that young women the world over have the same concerns. We are (or have been!) all concerned with how we appear to others. Are we attractive, or are there things about us which spoil how we look? And in fact the question goes so much further than skin deep. Do I have worth or value? This is the real question we ponder deep down.

Women are so often undervalued by society and consequently suffer from low self-esteem. Traditionally in Uganda, it is the women who carry the load as far as domestic work is concerned. Their daily duties are many – necessitating early rising and working long after dark. So

here in Kasese, Western Uganda, parents in the past have often not considered it necessary to send girls to school when they will only be digging and doing domestic chores in later life. That attitude has now changed but, even where they appreciate the value of educating their daughters, if money is short it is the girls who miss out.

So Kasese Women's Learning Centre aims to give young women another opportunity if they have been unable to complete their secondary education. We combine literacy with practical skills such as cookery, tailoring and computer. The curriculum also covers life skills and basic aspects of health and nutrition. We strive to build up the confidence of these young women and to show them they are not

BURMA

Nothing and no one is ever quite as you expect. Four-year-old Poe Kwa is angry, intelligent, charming. "A handful" as parents would say affectionately. Except that Poe Kwa's father tried to sell him to the local Thai villagers in return for drugs. When the father came to reclaim him, the little boy opted to stay put with the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), an organisation without which his life – if he had one – would be unimaginably harsh.

Poe Kwa's women rescuers brought him to Mae La refugee camp in Thailand. This is a huge encampment of bamboo huts, the size of a small town (population 49,043). When I met him, Poe Kwa was playing with a little girl, Beeko, 5, half-paralysed, mentally-retarded, and wonderfully cheerful; she had been abandoned by her parents. The children were inseparable, both from each other and from the Karen Woman Organisation's volunteer looking after them.

When the Burmese army began its infamous "four cuts policy" in the 1990s to starve the Karen National Liberation Army of support by Karen rice farmers, the Karen refugee camps swelled out of all proportion. The army has so far burned down 2,500 villages, and 526,000 so-called International Displaced Persons (IDPs) are hiding deep in the jungle. Karen women are often taken for forced labour; at night they suffer routine rape by Burmese soldiers.

All too often, women in Burma have been culturally conditioned to suffer injustice in silence. Many who have suffered rape then have to endure rejection by their husband and the consequent shame within their community. The Karen Women's Organisation introduced a system which they call "Women's Exchange Meetings" to help draw the sting of isolation, to share the pain and find healing through doing so.

Burma, which the junta has renamed Myanmar, is the subject of international embargos and endless condemnation – so far to little avail. Following the popular uprising of 1988, when 10,000 are said to have died, elections were held in 1990 which were, astonishingly, free and more or less fair. Aung San Suu Kyi, the remarkable woman elected to lead this country and her National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide 84% of the vote, with an overwhelming majority even in military districts. But no government was ever allowed to form. NLD members were hounded by Military Intelligence and either fled, or were imprisoned or terrified into silence. She,

a Nobel Peace Prize winner, is under house arrest in Rangoon (re-named Yangon).

For ordinary people, life in the refugee camps along the Thai border with Burma is a better option than hiding in the forests or living in the notorious relocation centres in Karen State. But Thailand has made it clear it would like to be shot of refugees and is imposing tighter and tighter restrictions; there are always fears of forcible repatriation, and sometimes cross-border raids by the Burmese army. As with most of the camps, Mae La is in an isolated area, surrounded by barbed wire. It is forbidden to go out without a pass or to work. Visitors are forbidden or severely restricted. There is no electricity.

It is both unsurprising and inescapable that the Karen Women's Organisation has "political" aims, in the sense of hoping for an end to war, and for a democratic federal system in Burma which would respect the differences between more than 100 different ethnic peoples. Meanwhile, one of the KWO's aims is simply to ensure women have the skills they need to survive and live in a more normal society one day.

With no less than 30,000 volunteers, KWO cares for the most vulnerable, but also builds and runs libraries, nursery

schools, community gardens, cultural competitions, and sports for women in the camps. A central aim is to build women's confidence by giving training in computer and leadership skills, as well as income-generating projects such as weaving.

Burma's civil war has raged for 55 years now, and it is remarkable how much hope still shines. This surely has much to do with faith. Many of the Karen people are Christians, mostly Baptists, though the camp has several Anglican churches. A Bible college is the nearest the camp comes to further education. "Though we are hemmed in on all sides, we are expanding upwards," the principal said cheerfully.

Projects to Support Refugees from Burma, founded 10 years ago, is proud to support the KWO, however modestly, and to encourage the extraordinary work it is doing in such difficult circumstances. The project is funded by the three Anglican churches in Brussels, by the Tokyo Union Church, and by many individual donors and supporters.

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SOUTH AFRICA

For me, poverty is closely related with abuse. I am saying this because it starts from childhood when a baby girl is taken as a minor at birth. She has to do everything for her brother e.g washing his clothes, his plates and sometimes even carrying him on her back. For me that is the start of abuse. This little girl cannot decide for herself what she wants to do with her life; always she has to be told. She even has a husband chosen for her and when she is married the husband takes charge of her life.

Women then become vulnerable in that they have little or no skills at all for anything. Mostly, men die earlier and leave these poor women with nothing but lots of children to raise. Most of the women are illiterate because going to school is a privilege for boys. They need to be educated from nothing.

The other challenge we were faced with was the relocation of families because of violence, which made people leave the land where they could till for survival and crowd into big cities. Women don't run away from their responsibilities like men do. With men, once it becomes tough, they run away. It is easier to train women because they are keen to give food to their children and share evenly amongst them.

The Church and the Government are working so hard to empower women to be self-sufficient. A lot of women take their children to school but unfortunately they die from AIDS even before they can help their parents out of poverty. It is a vicious cycle.

The Mothers' Union provides literacy classes, garden projects, sewing classes, bead work lessons, baking lessons,

poultry farming. They are taught that a person can live from the soil. We want to provide what Christ had promised us, and we feel it is our duty as the Church to do that. We also teach parenting skills so that children are brought up properly to become responsible Christians and to get life in its fullness.

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In response to the challenges of poverty, women in the Anglican Church in Southern Africa have opted for positive initiatives and asked themselves the question: "What would Jesus have done in this situation?"

Here are some of their practical responses:

- Awareness-raising programmes on the role of women promoting family life have been conducted through running conferences at Diocesan and Provincial levels.
- Skills audits are done at parish level and trainings conducted to empower women and to encourage sharing of skills. Leadership and financial skills-training is done to ensure sustainability of the projects.
- Adult basic education and training classes are conducted by trained women and this benefits many women and girls with low literacy.
- Church buildings are used to run soup kitchens for destitute and street children. In some areas, members of the Mothers' Union

have creatively fund-raised for their projects by donating R10.00 per year, per member, and saving this for five years or until enough capital has been raised to build a structure. These then become centres of training in the community, 'drop in centres' for orphans and vulnerable children, a small factory for income-generating projects like sewing traditional outfits. It is fashionable to wear a proudly South African product.

- Food production initiatives have been started in partnership with members of the Anglican Women's Fellowship and other community-based organisations. All Dioceses have promoted a vegetable garden project in home areas, church grounds and on sections of land donated by the municipalities or chiefs. In some areas, women have been so active that after feeding families and the needy, they have started vegetable markets to generate income with the surplus.

The passion in which these initiatives are conducted is amazing. All those involved take their God-given responsibility of caring for families seriously. Women have felt very fulfilled and empowered. The outcome of their efforts is visible and the feeling of being the feet, the hands and the eyes of Jesus on earth gives tremendous satisfaction.

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INDIA

The Dalits total 250 million of India's total population of 1 billion. (Dalits are also found in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and possibly elsewhere in South Asia.). They are probably descendants of India's indigenous peoples, and like indigenous peoples throughout the world, they are 'a nation within a nation'. But their 'nationhood' is characterised by entrenched poverty and wicked exploitation and in India the plight of the Dalits is the direct consequence of the caste system, a social order peculiar to India.

The Indian caste system is very complex and has been in place for at least 2500 years. The whole of society is divided into four castes – and the Dalits. They are outcasts – outside the caste system. Because a person is born into a caste which cannot be changed, the discrimination against the Dalits remains.

India's Constitution and successive laws have banned discrimination on the grounds of caste, but very little has changed and certainly not in India's vast rural areas.

The word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit, an ancient language of India, and means "crushed" and "down-trodden". Dalits are known as the "untouchables" or "unclean" by the castes (in spite of Mahatma Gandhi renaming them Harijans – children of God) and they live on the edges of towns and villages, and indeed on the edge of Indian society. Their touch, and even their shadow, is considered polluting. They are deliberately excluded from access to education, medical facilities, use of public wells, and often places of worship. Traditionally, Dalits have the worst jobs: street cleaners, cleaners of public toilets, digging graves, agricultural work. They have the poorest housing and own very little.

The Dalits' stigmatised untouchable identity means that they are constantly despised and excluded. This is hardly surprising, as the caste system is perpetuated through religious myths. So Dalits believe and internalise the imposed identities, and suffer from low self-esteem, shame and subservient behaviour. And it is Dalit women who are arguably the most oppressed of all Dalit people. They are there to bear children (preferably sons—and as many as possible), to work inside the home and outside on building construction sites, in brick kilns, laying roads. In addition they are bonded, abused and sexually exploited. Dalit children, with few exceptions, follow in the footsteps of their oppressed parents with all that that entails ...and so the cycle continues.

Over the last 25 years, there has been a growing consciousness of the predicament of Dalits. Overseas churches and international agencies like Christian Aid and Oxfam have enabled the articulation of this consciousness through various educational and social welfare programmes. Not unexpectedly, the mainstream churches in India have been painfully slow in confronting this terrible evil in their midst.

Those who call themselves Dalit (and there are many who don't – "why bring more suffering on ourselves?") have taken the trouble to understand the causes that underlie their oppression. They are patiently angry and committed to a struggle for a just and humane social order. St Augustine would be proud of them. It was this North African Saint who said HOPE had two beautiful daughters. One is anger – at the way things are; and the other is courage ie, the resolve to change things. The Dalit movement is a movement of hope.

Contact Person: Canon Kenneth David, C/o Network Office

movement against poverty and hunger when they founded Lunch Break. To aid those struggling to provide the bare necessities for their families, Lunch Break began serving daily hot lunches. The project now serves approximately 100 meals every weekday, regularly distributes between 30-40 grocery baskets to families and provides 800 families with clean, warm clothing. No one is turned away and all are treated with dignity. Octogenarian and 20-year Director of Lunch Break, Norma Todd, sets the tone for how Lunch Break operates at all levels.

"Everyone, regardless of monetary status, education, or age, must be treated with dignity and must treat others with dignity." To the working mother whose husband has been imprisoned, the family with seven children, and the retired school employee – all struggling to make ends meet – Lunch Break offers free food, clothing, and auxiliary social and medical services. By making dignity the linchpin of its work, here – unlike in so much of America – poverty is not an issue of one's immorality, but of one's humanity. All persons are seen as children of God in need of care, mercy, acknowledgement and opportunity.

Although Lunch Break maintains a strict 'no questions asked' policy for individuals to acquire services, for many of the women entering the doors of Lunch Break the need can be particularly acute. According to Kay, President of Lunch Break's Board of Trustees, "Single mothers come in and once they know they will get a good nutritious meal for their children and enough groceries to help their families get on their feet, they can begin applying for and obtaining sustainable employment." The project also serves as a support for women. Inice's involvement with Lunch Break began over 15 years ago when she was a working single mother raising three children. "Lunch Break helped me out many times with food and clothes," she remarks. Today, as a member of the Board of Trustees, and a regular volunteer in the food pantry and clothing-distribution centre, she is clear that when women come to Lunch Break they benefit from the encouragement they get from one another. "Women are the support system of Lunch Break. I often see women who have eaten a meal then turn around and say, "How can I help? What can I do for others here?"—Whether we are in need or not, we help each other."

Lunch Break also works because it is a community effort. With daily volunteers from St. Leo's Catholic Church, high school volunteers and court-appointed community service workers, as well as the clients who themselves volunteer their time, it is a place where the community meets to eat, work, and tackle the many aspects of poverty in America. Even with these efforts, this scourge of poverty has persisted. But Norma, the founder of the project, remains equally persistent. Whether a Democratic or Republican administration is in power, Lunch Break intends to be there, on the frontlines, affirming the dignity of every person it encounters and vibrantly demonstrating that another way is not only possible but also thriving.

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For more details of the Lunch Break project see: www.lunchbreak.org

ISRAEL

Lakiya – The Negev Weaving project

Many of us are familiar with images of the nomadic Bedouin lifestyle with woven tents, rugs, belts and other domestic items, but it comes as a welcome surprise to find in the St Andrew's Church of Scotland gift shop in Jerusalem, which promotes Palestinian crafts, samples of rugs and bags woven by women in the Negev Desert. They now produce top quality rugs and cushions for the commercial market both in Israel and overseas.

When I first visited Lakiya village twelve years ago, the Negev Weaving Project was small, based in one or two houses and sheds established with help from a British NGO as an income-generating project for Palestinian Bedouin women. There were many obstacles to be overcome such as the consistency of weaving, dyeing and sizing as well as the problems of language and marketing. On my return last month, I was delighted to find that they had made enormous advances. It is an inspiring story of how women from one of the most economically and socially disadvantaged societies in the Middle East have been able to develop new prospects by developing their traditional skills.

Lakiya's contemporary ethnic rugs are handwoven from pure handspun wool by Bedouin women in villages and homesteads in the Negev. Due to the lack of water, the wool from the hardy desert sheep is good only for rugs. Lakiya purchases a large amount of its yarn from shepherdesses who spin the fleece of these local Awassi sheep on drop spindles. The shepherdesses hang a bag containing carded fleece on their backs and pull the fleece over their shoulder to spin as they tend their flocks in remote areas of the Negev Desert. The spun wool is wrapped into balls, two strands skeined together, dyed and mothproofed, hung in the sun to dry, reballed and plied together on a larger spindle. The yarn is then ready for weaving.

Warface ground looms are constructed

from stones, ropes, sticks and cans. Traditionally the width of a loom was measured by hand spans, and the length by circumference of the head. Few women knew how to set looms and the loom-setter was usually a woman of high social esteem who was often also the community midwife and herbalist. Today, all of Lakiya's weavers enjoy the special status of independent loom setters and independent earners.

The Weaving Project now falls within the Sedreh Organisation (the Sedreh is a strong desert tree with a wide span of shade believed by the Bedouin to have medicinal properties for women). Sedreh is working to advance the Arab Bedouin women in the Negev and to strengthen their status by operating a variety of projects for personal, social and economic empowerment.

The new showroom was packed with rugs of traditional and modern designs in a multitude of colours. An Israeli woman was buying for her store in New York; in the office, negotiations were underway on other shipments. Behind the showroom huge cauldrons were bubbling away dyeing yarn to a customer's specific requirements. Hadera, the Bedouin manager, says that they have six full-time salaried staff and 150 piece-workers and weavers. Not only have they learned the intricacies of the weaving and rug-making process, many are now computer literate. They can do bookkeeping, sales and marketing. Some have learned to drive. Some have learned English as well as Hebrew. Of course the empowerment of the women has inevitably aroused resentment among some of the men. Local instances of theft and abuse may reflect tensions caused when traditional relationships are upset. But overall it is an exciting success story.

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USA

Working women and their children constitute the overwhelming majority of people living in poverty in the United States, representing over 32 million of the nearly 35 million Americans living in poverty today. This is clearly a crisis. But the Federal Government is not working to make poverty eradication a chief part of its agenda; in fact, quite the opposite seems to be happening. With poverty levels rising for the past three years and the proposed budget for 2006 seeking to severely cut 150 social service programmes, the current

Bush administration seems headed toward a shattering elimination of the social safety net. This has been gradually on the decline since it was established over 70 years ago, with the most recent assault on America's poorest beginning in earnest during the trickle-down economics era of President Ronald Reagan.

It was in this context of a rising rate of homelessness and corporate layoffs that in 1983 in the town of Red Bank, New Jersey, an ecumenical group of 35 concerned people formed a vibrant resistance

BANGLADESH

The Church of Bangladesh is a tiny church of around 15,000 members in an Islamic nation of 140 million, but it has a large vision. Through its development arm, the Church of Bangladesh Social Development Programme (CBSDP), it plays a significant part in transforming society.

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world, and its large population has had to bear an unfair burden of problems; such as being ranked the most corrupt nation in the world, as well as periodic natural disasters of cyclones and floods. Women suffer disproportionately, due to a second-class status. For within Bengali society, a woman's status traditionally derives from her position and role within the family. Within this system, the father – or in his absence the next male kin – is the head of the household. So both decision-making power and economic control are vested in the hands of men. Wives are expected to be obedient, faithful and fertile. If they fail in any regard, they are easily divorced. Polygamy, domestic abuse and mistreatment are common and women rarely have access to any form of legal or community redress.

However the CBSDP seeks to follow Christ's teachings, in particular His statement in Nazareth, "The spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me. He has sent me to announce good news to the poor and to set the captive free" (Luke 4:18). In Bangladesh, women – especially those divorced or widowed – are among the poorest in society, while in terms of human rights, dignity or ability to economically sustain themselves, they are held captive by the constraints of religion, culture and male-dominated politics.

CBSDP has now for over ten years centred its work round a framework of micro-credit. Poor and vulnerable women are formed into groups; group members take a small loan of around US\$40 – US\$100 and invest it in various ways: buying livestock or poultry to breed or produce eggs to feed the family or to sell; starting a shop; or even investing in welding equipment to hire out. The women pay back very low interest of 12% – of which only 6% is service charge. The rest is put into savings and is owned by the group for future loans and investment.

On the weekly day for interest collection, there is also a group meeting in which a CBSDP fieldworker conducts training on a variety of issues such as: gender rights, the outlawing of dowry, how to start a kitchen garden (to improve family nutrition), literacy, business skills and environmental awareness. A condition of the loan is that they invest in a (subsidised) sanitary latrine. The groups are also involved in community politics as within a village they are federated into 'Group Organisations', which gives them the ability to lobby and raise women's issues with community leaders and government officials.

Initially, husbands and conservative Muslims

leaders are suspicious and resist the CBSDP coming into their villages, but after the men see the increased health of families, appreciate the new source of income and benefit as a community from women's empowerment, they are enthusiastically favourable. Women have gained respect from the men around them, have more freedom to travel alone (such as to market), are more involved in household decision-making and can improve their children's prospects through better health and being able to afford schooling. It really is a win-win situation for both men and women, and the CBSDP's groups presently contain a staggering 17,000 women who are all benefiting from the large vision of a small church.

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Faridah.

"I don't want handouts. I want help to start a business and earn money. My crazy husband probably won't let me get a job outside. But I can perhaps have a little grocery shop in my house and it'd be ok for me because I won't have to go out. Or if I am trained, I can also make handicrafts at home." *Faridah*

Faridah's story.

Faridah is a housewife who went to India when told by a woman she could buy plates and cups cheaply there to then sell on her return to Bangladesh. On following the woman across the border, she was imprisoned in a brothel and forced to do the household work. She eventually escaped and paid an agent to take her to Bangladesh. Faridah was accepted back in her village, but her husband was reluctant and abusive. He was cruel to her before, and now is more oppressive and violent.

Sabina

"I'm the eldest in the family. We're very poor because my father had two wives. There are altogether eight of us. All of us never went to school. I stayed at home to help my mother.

We went from house to house to do house-cleaning in exchange for food.

When I was 12 or 13 years old, an Indian lady used to come to visit us. We were really poor and she always told me, "See, nobody can feed you here. If you come with me, I'd give you a better job. So come with me, but don't tell anyone." I didn't really know her but I was tempted by the idea of having a job. She promised that I could get a job hawking steel cooking pots in India.

One day, I told my parents that I'm just going out with this auntie and I'll be back very soon. I didn't take anything with me, I just left with her. I still remembered that when I left, I was thinking of the money I'd get, that if I can get a job, I can save money and even marry someone really good in India.

I felt good that I was going to get a job but I was feeling a bit scared because I was going to a new place and I wouldn't know anyone. Also, I'm totally illiterate – I can't read or write – so I can't read anything to know where I am.

The lady then sold me to a house and I had to listen to another lady. The second lady locked me in a house for seven days. I tried to escape but the door was locked and there were no windows. They gave me food once a day, a bit of rice and dahl or chapatti.

During those seven days, they tortured me two, three times a day. There were 10 to 15 men every day and they did all kinds of things to me. When I protested, they tied me with rope and beat me. I thought, I'm almost dead. I wanted to die.

I used to do all the housework at the house and sometimes I also worked outside, selling pots and pans. But at night, I had to do a lot of work that was really bad. I had to give company to the men who came at night. I was used and tortured very meanly."

Sabina managed to escape, with the help of another woman. She eventually returned home where, although welcomed by her family, she was shunned by the community. Her parents arranged a marriage for her, with the husband believing he would get a dowry. But he divorced her as she had been in India and was pregnant. She now stays with her parents and helps to harvest rice and vegetables from the fields to get money. Her one wish is to get some land for her son and send him to school so that he does not end up like her.

CMS is running a campaign "setting captives free" in support of the work of the Church of Bangladesh, and two mission partners are working with victims of trafficking in Bangladesh and North India. Please support and pray for the work of this campaign.

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UK

There is a clear link between gender and poverty in the UK today, where there are high rates of poverty amongst female-headed households. Much of women's poverty is hidden. In poor households, women often deny themselves basics such as food in order to protect their families from the consequences of poverty even in a relatively wealthy country such as the UK.

The Women's National Commission (WNC) is the official independent advisory body giving the views of women throughout England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to the UK Government. It has over 400 partner organisations and individual partners drawn from women's voluntary and community groups and organisations, professional associations, trade unions and faith groups, including the Mothers' Union. The Mothers' Union contributed to a recent statement by WNC to the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in March. It highlighted some serious and major barriers that women in the UK considered must be addressed in order for their lives, and those of other women around the world, to improve. One of the most pressing tasks is to address the very real poverty that women in the UK experience. Some of the women most affected are lone mothers and single pensioners, primarily due to caring responsibilities, which means they either cannot work or work part-

time – often in low paid sectors. According to some statistics, of all lone parent households, 53% are poor, and older women, if single, have a 24% chance of living in poverty. Almost two-thirds of pensioners are women and their average pension is half the income of retired men. This is because they have not had opportunity, often because of their caring roles, to earn enough for a reasonable pension. The combination of racism and sexism makes Black and Minority Ethnic women particularly vulnerable to poverty.

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BRISTOL

"Dear God, please let a punter pick her up soon." It was winter and bitterly cold as the city braced itself for snow. Walking onto the square I saw the girl in her early 20s standing on the street corner in a mini skirt, wet through, shaking with the cold – and determined to get picked up by a punter. She probably had not eaten that day, but however cold it got and however long it took, I knew she would not walk away. So I found myself praying this. Understand, having worked amongst young and adult women involved in street prostitution for three years, I have found it to be wholly abusive, exploitative and to exact an immense cost to those women who are involved in it. But at that moment my pat-

theology and convenient answers ran out.

At any one time around 200 women will be working in street prostitution in Bristol – getting picked up from the street and giving sex in exchange for money, drugs, or a place to stay. If we understand poverty as not simply a lack of money and material possessions, but a lack of choice, then these women are amongst the poorest in Europe. What's more, if you live or work in any city in the UK, you probably pass them every day without a moment's thought. I did.

Some believe that these women choose to enter prostitution, make their money and care little for the consequences. The truth is that all of the women I met slid into prostitution without ever meaning to, and then found it almost impossible to climb out of the pit they were in. 99% of female sex workers in Bristol are addicted to crack cocaine or heroin, often both. It is money to feed these all-consuming addictions that fuels street prostitution. Many of the women begin using drugs as teenagers, often to escape from the abuse they are subjected to or to cope with broken family lives, or poverty. They drop out of school, and leave home without any expectations of themselves. Their self-worth is on the floor. From here in it is easy to accept any relationship that comes along. It is easy to cover up the way you feel about your lifestyle with heroin that melts your fears away, or crack that makes you feel like a

god. It is easy to pick up a drug habit, but very difficult to free yourself from one.

Women become deeply entrenched in a cycle of drug addiction and prostitution. Every day, however you feel, you have to get up and stand on the street, offering yourself to a stranger. You could be raped, violently attacked, robbed or pick up a sexually transmitted infection. You don't always have time to eat or find somewhere decent to sleep, so you quickly get sick. Your family find it too painful to know you. Any children you have are likely to be taken into local authority care as you are unable to look after them. You use more drugs to cover up the pain of your spiralling life.

But hope has moved into the neighbourhood. The One25 Project works amongst these women, providing essential health, food, information and support services through its van outreach programme. The project's drop-in centre provides a raft of support services, and gives the women respect and dignity. The staff and volunteers also provide individual support to women at home, in court, in hospital, in prison. Quietly, and in the everyday events of life, One25 is saying, "Wait, it doesn't have to be like this". Through their core values of relationship with the women, and love, they gently challenge the lack of choice, the abject poverty that the women have come to accept as their lot. And it works. Slowly, women break the cycle and lead a new life. There is nothing extraordinary about the One25 team. The staff team and 80 volunteers who support the project are simply local women who want to make a difference. Often, as in my lost prayer in the cold, they sense only their own poverty and powerlessness. But the difference is the extraordinary God who works with them and through and around them because they take seriously His challenge to all forms of poverty, "I have come that you might have life and have it to the full".

**Contact Person: Isla Horton,
One 25 Project, C/o Network
Office**

SCOTLAND

A Community House was founded in 1999 at a council house in Alloa, Scotland, and because of the increased need and the rising numbers wishing to attend, the project has now moved into a block of four flats which have been renovated into a new large purpose-built Community House.

The Community House is situated in one of the most deprived areas of Scotland. We serve an area with many economical and social problems. There is, and has

been, long-term unemployment in the area for some time. The young people we work with come from predominately female lone-parent families. The poverty experienced by the women has a major impact on their children. There is also a significantly high level of drug/alcohol dependency in the area and families suffer from the associated problems. Juvenile and adult criminal activity, together with domestic and child abuse, mean that young people's social and emotional needs and spiritual well-being are not being met. We at the Community House offer a positive alternative to the current drink and drugs culture and aim to develop a holistic approach with a variety of activities each week. All our activities and mealtimes are free to the community and we rely on funding and donations from outside sources.

The Community House is a Christian-based project which welcomes people of all faiths and of none. The facility is not just for young people but extends to all members of the family using activities like Praise time, parent and toddler group, craft sessions, meal times and an over 50s' lunch club. Other activities include a homework club, role playing, music and drama, use of computers and teaching basic healthy cooking. On a Saturday evening there is a Youth Club.

The Parent and Toddler Group is a time where young mums or dads can come to play with their children. Many of the young parents we work with find it extremely difficult to interact with their children; we try to encourage them to listen and have fun together.

The Over 50s' Lunch Club is another popular session. We have a regular group who meet together weekly to enjoy a nourishing bowl of homemade soup and a pudding before leaving us to go onto another organisation to play bingo. This is a very friendly chatty group who regularly put the world to rights!

The Cooking Club came about when a young single mum with five children informed us that she fed her children from a local burger van and other fast food shops. She had never learnt to cook even the most basic meal. She was encouraged to come along and our staff and volunteers taught her to make cheap, simple and nourishing meals for her family. This was a complete success; I will never forget the day when she made her first pot of home-made soup, I have never seen anyone so pleased with themselves! All this young woman needed was for someone to spend a little time with her, encouraging and believing in her.

Self-esteem is built up and socialisation skills learned along with conflict resolution. The Community House is a

unique local facility for children, young people and adults to meet and share. We are not institutionally-based and the activities are informal and person-centred. No other local facility uses this approach. The family atmosphere fostered in the Community House provides a safe listening place for all.

Throughout our work we are seed-scattering, planting seeds of God's love by our words and more importantly through our actions. It is a well known fact that actions do speak louder than words. We trust that these seeds will land on fertile soil and grow to become fruitful. We are in that place because we firmly believe in following Christ's message and we believe that is where Christ is leading us.

**Contact Person: Elaine
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PRAYER

God of all justice and compassion:

We thank you for the countless opportunities you give for women and men to live together in harmony, with understanding, and in trust;

Accept our pain and profound concern for women and girls in poverty, across the world, who are disregarded, overburdened and exploited – and so become demoralised, weakened and exhausted;

Grant to women in poverty the courage to have hope; empower your Church to work for social attitudes to change; enable our sisters so ensnared to be touched by the liberation of your grace, and to receive the blessing of enrichment in body, mind and spirit, and in circumstance of life;

through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen

Revd John Bradford

**THE NEXT FAMILY
NETWORK NEWSLETTER**
The next IAFN newsletter,
to be published in the
Trinity Anglican World,
is to be on the theme of
HEALTH AND THE FAMILY

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