

Gender

It starts with education – or the lack of it. For 65 million girls in this world currently don't make it to school, even if their brothers do. And the inequality between the two sexes just goes on from there.



Steve Morgan/ActionAid UK

Early marriage? It imprisons the girls concerned. Violence against women? It is still universal. A political voice? Women are barely heard in public life. HIV/AIDS? Ninety per cent of the caring is done by women; over 18 million of them are themselves carrying the virus.

The idea that women have distinct rights and separate needs is not exactly new. But the question of gender is absolutely central to the wider issue of world poverty and it's odd that the issue has been so little

reported or explored. Women in developing countries work an average of 60 to 90 hours per week. They are often the sole breadwinner in a family. They account for 70% of the world's population living in poverty. To get some perspective on this, consider those 65 million girls denied any form of education. That's as many as all the school-age girls in the whole of North America and Europe!

Literacy = empowerment

ActionAid International's *Reflect* adult literacy programme and the *Access* programme, which makes basic education available to poor children, both prioritise the rights of girls and women. Imagine the joy of a mother of five children learning to read and write. ActionAid International's case files are full of such stories – where literacy gives women the confidence to plan the farm work ahead, to deal with the middlemen, to speak at village meetings. This really is empowerment.

So, too, is the support given to women in financial matters. The woman may be sole guardian and breadwinner, but she rarely has any

financial status. Indeed, in many countries she will be legally barred from owning land or securing credit. ActionAid International has supported over 23,000 women in Vietnam in micro-credit programmes. In Haiti, women have been supported in setting up a dress-making business, in buying goats, in buying land. In Nepal, the chairperson of another savings and credit group, a grandmother, has also become leader of a local women's group, lobbying for political rights as well as piped drinking water and a clean sewerage system. More empowerment.

HIV and power

The spread of HIV/AIDS through southern Africa has underlined the extent to which women are subservient and powerless in society. They often have little say over their sexual lives. Indeed, HIV-positive women are less likely to get support from their families and communities than men. In some cases they can be accused of prostitution, even when infected by their husbands. And they stand to lose any inheritance rights if, as sometimes happens, they are driven from their family home.

Thankfully, individual women have begun to speak out. Especially women who have been through the

Howard Baker/ActionAid UK



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Jane Bennett/ActionAid UK



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suffering themselves, living with HIV (18 million of them, remember), losing husbands and children as the years pass. Prisca Mholo from Zimbabwe has been HIV-positive for at least twelve years now. She has lost her husband, two of her three children and, in one terrible month in 2000, a sister and two of her brothers – all to AIDS-related illnesses. Prisca, however, is fighting on. She now spends all her time speaking out against AIDS – in churches, schools and in villages.

Community-wide benefits

There are many like her in Africa, and ActionAid International helps identify them and embolden them to campaign for whatever is necessary to improve poor lives. Women are confronted by real challenges and ActionAid International is driven by the need to support them. Gender has become central to everything we say and do. No campaign against poverty can be truly honest if it does not ensure that the rights, voices and choices of women are heard, promoted and protected.

You see, women represent a social resource in many poor countries that has long been ignored. Unleashing that resource must be an exciting and radical process. And, yes, a highly practical one; in Kenya local women set up a water users' association and brought drinkable water within two kilometres of the village; it had previously been an eleven kilometre walk. A programme of disaster preparedness training in Bangladesh gave women

first-aid tuition – and many of them proved capable of offering primary health care to their neighbours. ActionAid International can quote hundreds of examples where a specific role for women has led to immense benefit for whole communities.

ActionAid International's gender policy is implemented with energy and with imagination, permeating all our work. It does not say that women are more important than men; it does sensibly infer that they have a very special role indeed in the fight against poverty. For they, like men, have rights and needs. But, yes, they tend to be different.



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Steve Morgan/ActionAid UK

ActionAid International is a unique partnership of people who are fighting for a better world – a world without poverty.

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