

<https://www.sparkblue.org/wpsrecovery/discussion/role-women-post-conflict-economic-decision-making>

Role of women in post-conflict economic decision making

“Gender equality is critical to the development of peace of every nation”. “There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women”. Kofi Annan (August 2018)

I am writing on behalf of Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) which has Special Status with United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This enables Soroptimists to use their voice at UN meetings and of particular importance is the annual Commission for the Status of Women.

Within SIGBI, there are Soroptimist clubs in 20 countries in the UK, Asia, Malta and the Caribbean. This reflects a diversity of countries, races and cultures, as well as a range of communities from urban, semi urban to rural. As volunteers, our members work with their communities, support, them and advocate for them.

SIGBI is not an organisation which specialises in the area of post conflict, however as an organisation our members have experience of working with women and girls in many different countries and situations. Our mission and vision are to transform the lives of women and girls, from local to global, and in so doing we align our work to the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

Economic reconstruction

Post-conflict peacebuilding processes present major opportunities for advancing women’s rights and gender equality particularly with respect to education, employment, economic empowerment, political representation and rights to land, property and inheritance.

Although not in a post conflict area the Meru Women’s Garden Project (MWGP) in Kenya provides an example of how women can be leaders in regenerating their community. For three years (2017 – 2019) SIGBI supported the MWGP. This woman lead initiative was designed by the Women of Meru. It was developed to create sustainable gardening techniques and provide training for women to become mentors and pioneers of agricultural sustainability within the community. The project also provided education for the girls on their rights, empowering them to stand up to damaging cultural practices like Female Genital Mutilation.

The project was run in conjunction with CIFORD Kenya, a community-based organisation. This was crucial to its success as was the involvement of the elders and men of the community. Young men were invited to attend a seminar on empowerment, designed to encourage them to grow as responsible adults. This was also seen as a success; it was well attended despite men/boys thinking that seminars are for girls and women.

Women should not be seen as passive recipients; this fails to recognise their contributions and contributes to their marginalisation.

By providing economic opportunities and education to women, girls and men, the MWGP will achieve long term change by strengthening entire communities; improving the lives and opportunities for women and generations to come.

Women's perspective

Soroptimist International (SI) Chennai, India has been working in an impoverished locality where a lack of education and job skills leads to unemployment and dependence on others, resulting in loss of self-esteem and abuse.

Chennai is one of the largest industrial and commercial cities in India, which contributes to its economic stature. However, with large populous urban cities, comes the slums. More often than not, the impoverished are found living in the slums of the cities they are connected to. Many people move to the city in hopes of finding jobs; however, when they don't, they have trouble surviving and may ultimately end up in the slums of the city. Slums develop from rapid rural-to-urban migration, economic stagnation and depression, high unemployment, poverty, informal economy, forced or manipulated ghettoization, poor planning, politics, natural disasters and conflicts. Projects such as the vocational training centre set up by the Soroptimists shows the importance of listening to, working with and gaining the trust of the local women helps them make decisions about their future and help them move out of the slums.

The Soroptimist club set up an after-school club and sponsorship programme for children. As a result of this, the women of the area approached the club and appealed to them to help develop an income generation scheme. Members spent time with the women finding out what sort of income generation scheme they wanted. After discussion with the women, it was decided that starting a vocational training program would be a good way of helping the women become economically independent. The club sought the help of a Non-Government Organisation (NGO), Shine Trust which was operating in the area. Training alone was insufficient to improve the circumstances of the women therefore wholesalers were approached, who agreed to source out some of their basic stitching jobs to the women providing longer term employment and enriching the community.

Another example is The Sangamith Centre in Sri Lanka (built between 2006 and 2009), the result of work by Soroptimist International (SI) Ormskirk, SI Bootle and District and SI Lancashire. In 2009, the 26 years of civil war in Sri Lanka, came to an end. Many women in the war-affected regions have had to deal with multiple long-term impacts of the violent conflict such as injuries; loss of lives, property, income sources and livelihood activities; multiple displacements; and trauma, amongst other impacts, which have placed many households in a precarious situation when trying to rebuild their lives.

Sri Lanka was one of the countries struck by the tsunami resulting from the Indian Ocean earthquake on December 26, 2004. On January 3, 2005, Sri Lankan authorities reported 30,000+ confirmed deaths. After years of civil war in the county and natural disaster it could be argued that the devastation following the tsunami cannot be understated and the community needed to rebuild itself. Here we see women taking on key roles.

The centre provides a meeting place for the community. There are clinics and health workshops, educational classes, a lending library and accommodation for remote schools on educational trips. The Soroptimists wanted the women in the community to play a bigger part in the community; the Sangamith Women's Society was formed. The day to day running of the centre is shared by the Women's Society and the Council of the Temple.

Time for change

Now is the time to consider what we have learnt from the Covid 19 Pandemic, how men and women react and deal with crisis and how women can, more effectively, be engaged in decision making going forward. We must look to do things differently. It is an opportunity to be more inclusive and bring women to the forefront, include them in policy and decision making at all levels in society.

We have seen that women leaders are highly represented in countries managing the Corona crisis well including; Angela Merkel in Germany, Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, Mette Frederiksen in Denmark and Silveira Jacobs Prime Minister of Sint Maarten among others. There is a view that resilience, pragmatism, benevolence, trust, mutual aid and humility are common features of the success of these women leaders. Greater involvement of women results in a broader perspective on the crisis, and paves the way for the deployment of richer and more complete solutions than if they had been imagined by a homogeneous group. We know that women tend to work collaboratively and engage everyone, but what's equally important is support and trust; for women and men to work together. If people are invested in the decision making, the initiative (whether it be running a project, company or government) is more likely to succeed.

We need to encourage the visibility of women leaders; we need more female role models.

"No country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of half of its citizens" Michelle Obama.

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