

# AJWS REPORTS

Spring 07

## Girl Power... Goes Global

AMERICAN  
JEWISH  
WORLD  
SERVICE

Pursuing Global Justice  
Through Grassroots Change



## Dear Friend,

As I sit down to write this letter for the Spring 2007 issue of *AJWS Reports*, there is so much to share that it is hard to know where to begin.

Firstly, the exciting news that on June 13 AJWS is honoring Former President Bill Clinton at an evening in New York City. Both AJWS and the Clinton Foundation are dedicated to the fight against HIV/AIDS, and we are delighted to have an opportunity to celebrate our joint commitment to this cause. We will also be premiering a video about our international development work.

Secondly, unbelievable as it might sound, the crisis in Darfur has entered its fifth year. Unable to stand by while the violence continues, AJWS recently endorsed targeted divestment from Sudan and, in the process, became the first national Jewish organization to take this step. For more information on taking action at the city, state or national level, or how to examine your own investments, please see page seven.

Next, a few words about our volunteers. Whether they travel alone, in couples, or as part of a group, their energy and devotion never cease to amaze and inspire me. Not only do our volunteers help maximize our grants of financial support, on their return they act as ambassadors for our shared work of pursuing global justice through grassroots change.

Finally, each time I speak on behalf of AJWS, people ask me how they can help. Here's a simple idea: instead of recycling this issue of *AJWS Reports*, please pass it on to a friend or family member who you think might be interested in our work. If you've donated to us, volunteered, or taken action with us in the past, tell them why you support AJWS. Then let us know how your conversation went by e-mailing us at [editors@ajws.org](mailto:editors@ajws.org). We promise to respond to everyone who takes the time to write.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ruth Messinger". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "M".

Ruth Messinger  
President

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Girls in Nigeria at an HIV education presentation, International Women's Communication Centre, Nigeria / M. Emry

# Girl Power... Goes Global

## Changing the world, one girl at a time

**G**irls from the massive slums outside Nairobi, Kenya, who become accomplished peer educators: teaching boys and other girls about sexual and reproductive health...

**Girls from rural Ethiopia**, where walking long distances to school puts them at risk of abduction and rape: graduating from high school and becoming mentors to younger girls...

**Girls in Tamil Nadu, India**, whose families lost everything in the tsunami: developing professional tailoring skills to earn a living wage...

### Introduction

All over the developing world, AJWS partner organizations are implementing programs especially for girls. These education and empowerment programs do more than simply ameliorate suffering: they harness and cultivate the amazing potential that girls possess. And, more often than not, girls who are given the opportunity to participate in these programs ultimately become agents of change and development for entire communities. Girl power is here to stay, and it brings with it the promise of real and lasting change.

## The Challenges of Being a Girl

Girls face serious challenges because of their gender: sexual violence; early marriage; female genital cutting; sexism. As children, they must rely on the adult world for protection, and they have little recourse when their rights are violated or their needs are not met.

## Strategies and Solutions

The following descriptions and stories illustrate how AJWS partner organizations in Ethiopia and Kenya are working to address the impact of violations of girls' rights in various sectors. These projects were funded with support from the Nike Foundation's Grassroots Girls Initiative (GGI) which focuses on, "reaching, mobilizing and inspiring the world's most disadvantaged girls." AJWS is one of six recipients of the GGI grant, along with EMPOWER, Firelight Foundation, Global Fund for Children, Global Fund for Women and Mama Cash. With GGI's support, AJWS is expanding support in India, as well as in Ethiopia and Kenya, for programs that are working with girls to make exciting and meaningful changes in their own lives – and in the lives of their families, communities and nations.

## Education in Ethiopia

By the time young people reach the age of 10, gender biases are already well established: UNICEF reports that worldwide more than 115 million children of primary school age do not attend school. Girls account for over 56 percent of this figure<sup>1</sup>. As they get older, the divergence between boys and girls deepens: throughout the developing world, only 43 percent of girls attend secondary school.

In Ethiopia girls comprise more than 60 percent of the estimated five million school-aged children

who do not attend school<sup>2</sup>. Many families do not consider the education of girls to be a worthwhile investment – instead they are relied upon for household chores, family caretaking and farm labor. Young girls, sometimes victims of violence, are often forced into marriage to alleviate their families' poverty.

AJWS partner Rift Valley Children and Women Development Association (RCWDA) creates non-formal education centers that offer basic education to out-of-school children, eventually facilitating their entrance into the formal school system. Recently, RCWDA piloted a new program component that creates opportunities for older girls, who have managed to graduate from high school, to provide academic tutoring and health education to younger girls. This program has a dual impact: it encourages the younger girls to remain in school by providing them with positive role models, and it offers the

**“While I was a little girl my parents sent to school my brothers [who are] younger than me and my sister,”** says 18-year-old Alemnesh of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. **“They refused to send me and my older sister because we are girls.”**

older girls meaningful ways to put their education to use in rural communities where there are few job opportunities.

Meanwhile, in peri-urban areas around Addis Ababa, Sike Women Development Association (SWDA) focuses on reaching girls living in female-headed households. Alemnesh (quoted above) actively participates in a girls' self-help club that SWDA established in her school. The club serves as an informal support group for girls facing enormous

1 UNESCO, Gender and Education for All: The Leap for Equality, Global Monitoring Report 2003/4 [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=23023&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23023&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

2 UNICEF, Ethiopian Students Conduct Child to Child Survey to Get All Children in School [http://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/ET\\_real\\_survey.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/ET_real_survey.pdf)

pressure to drop out of school to help their families. Through club activities the girls also get to make visible and lasting contributions to community development programs.

## Health in Kenya

Access to education is not the only challenge that girls face. A study by the World Health Organization estimated that 223 million children under the age of 18 experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of physical and sexual violence in 2002: more than two-thirds of them were girls. Worldwide, nearly 4,000 girls and women between the ages of 15–24 are infected daily with HIV<sup>3</sup>. Over half a million women, most of them young, die of childbirth and pregnancy-related causes annually. And perhaps most shocking of all is the fact that these figures are thought to be gross under-representations of the true numbers. In Kenya, as in many other African countries, HIV prevalence is higher among young women than among their male peers. An estimated 4.9 percent of women and girls between the ages of 15–24 are infected with HIV, compared with 0.9 percent of men and boys of the same age group<sup>4</sup>.

Fortress of Hope Empowerment Program (FOHEP), a new AJWS partner, was founded by a group of young women who realized that of the 30 youth organizations focusing on reproductive health

3 USAID: Women and AIDS, Responding Globally [http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/global\\_health/aids/TechAreas/women/index.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/aids/TechAreas/women/index.html)

4 UNAIDS Kenya Country Situation Analysis [http://www.unaids.org/en/Regions\\_Countries/Countries/kenya.asp](http://www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/Countries/kenya.asp)

services in their slum in Nairobi, few were actually reaching the adolescent girls who were in desperate need of their services. Nearly half of the girls in the neighborhood were AIDS orphans and many girls were married – but they were not targeted for either reproductive health services or educational outreach. Today, with AJWS support, FOHEP is training 50 girls as peer educators in reproductive health and HIV/AIDS, as well as home-based care and life skills.

**Z**abiba, 13 years old, is a member of the Binti Pamoja [“Daughters United”] Center, one of the first AJWS partners in Kenya to focus on girls’ rights and development. She writes: “I decided to participate in Binti Pamoja because I knew that it would help me, as a young woman, to become responsible. When I was a little girl, I was seeing many children being raped. So I said to myself: ‘I need to join a project that will help me learn more on how to protect myself from being raped.’ Since I joined this project I have seen changes in my life. My participation has enabled me to become a very confident peer educator. I can talk to my peers and elders about anything...”

## Conclusion

Development and human rights programs often ignore the needs and potential contributions of young people overall, but especially those of girls. A 2006 study by the Population Council, entitled *Girls Left Behind*, documents that most traditional development programs do not have positive “trickle-down” effects for girls. But when they do, the results can be tremendous. Long-term AJWS partner, the Binti Pamoja Center in

Kenya, has reached an estimated 2,000 girls as well as countless family members and community leaders through a comprehensive empowerment strategy that includes photography, drama, writing, community service and a peer education program.

AJWS is working to help girls at the grassroots level as they strive for economic self-sufficiency, access to education, improved healthcare, stronger social support and safety and security. Girls are a leading force for social change, and by targeting and empowering girls we acknowledge their voices, their dignity and – most fundamentally – their human rights. ●



Rally for Darfur, September 2006, New York City / R. Clark

# Stopping the Genocide

## Divestment for Darfur

**W**ith the rallying cry of “never again,” the American Jewish community is at the forefront of the movement to stop the genocide in Darfur. Unwilling to stand idly by, thousands of people have contacted their members of Congress and called the White House, demanding meaningful action to end the violence.

Thanks to this groundswell of activism, few can say that they are unaware of the murder, rape and destruction that the people of Darfur endure on a daily basis. But

what people may not know is that their tax dollars or personal investments may be helping to fund the Sudanese government’s genocidal campaign.

The United States enacted sanctions prohibiting trade with Sudan in 1997, and U.S.-based companies are currently prevented from doing business in the country. However, billions of American dollars are pouring through a loophole – and into the pockets of the government of Sudan.

Through investments in foreign companies, many individuals and institutions – including you, your workplace, synagogue, JCC, college, city or state – are helping to finance the Sudanese government's military and arm the *Janjaweed* militias that continue to terrorize the people of Darfur. Foreign investment, particularly in the oil industry, has created ever-growing revenues for the Sudanese government. An estimated 70 percent of these funds have been used to purchase military equipment like the bombers that continue to destroy Darfur villages.

In November 2006, AJWS endorsed targeted divestment from Sudan, becoming the first national Jewish organization to take this step. We are now engaged in a multi-state grassroots campaign to promote divestment nationwide, with the goal of sending a message to our elected officials and the Sudanese government that the murder, violence and displacement must stop. Thanks in part to the involvement of AJWS supporters, as of mid-May 2007, targeted divestment legislation has already passed in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, New Jersey, Oregon and Vermont.

There are many ways for individuals to get involved in this new initiative. Locally, you can urge your city council members or state legislators to join the growing national movement by passing targeted divestment legislation. Ask your senators to endorse federal divestment legislation that would protect the right of states to divest. Educate your workplace or synagogue and encourage them to enact a divestment policy. Examine your personal investments and contact your money manager to ensure that they are Sudan-free, or join campaigns targeting major investment firms.

While divestment is not an end in itself, it is a powerful new tactic in the AJWS campaign to stop the atrocities in Darfur. We urge you to support this initiative as we work together to make the phrase “never again” a reality.

Find targeted divestment resources and ways to take action on the AJWS Web site at [www.ajws.org/darfur](http://www.ajws.org/darfur). ●



International aid doctor inspecting the arm of a child in a camp, Darfur / M. Emry



AJWS Volunteer Corps participant Joshua Berman teaching a youth group about blogging, Ghana / H. Max

# A Volunteering Honeymoon

## Traveling with AJWS teaches tolerance

**O**ur work on the “labor lines,” as the palm-lined neighborhoods of plantation row-houses are called, begins at four in the afternoon when the tea workers come home from the fields and factory. My wife, Tay, our two Indian translators, and I are usually invited into someone’s home (to drink tea of course) before spending the next three hours interviewing worker families about their diets, health, recent deaths and what (if any) relief services they are receiving from the government. As the most disenfranchised of India’s organized labor force, West Bengal tea workers have suffered more than any other part of the industry in the recent plantation closure crisis, with reports of starvation deaths in the hundreds.

The last rainy days of our three-month assignment in this far-flung corner of the subcontinent coincide with other events of closure, change, and renewal, including the damp finale of the monsoon, preparations for *Durga Puja* (the most renowned and raucous *puja* celebrations in India) and, from afar, Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. As my own family gathers to celebrate far away in New York, Tay and I eat egg curry and rice with our fingers—as we do two or three times a day—with our Indian counterparts, sitting on the floor of the small apartment the four of us share. For dessert, we teach our friends the Jewish custom of dipping apples in honey to usher in a sweet New Year.

This is our first assignment as members of the AJWS Volunteer Corps, a program which places Jewish professionals (and in our case, their non-Jewish spouses) with grassroots organizations in Africa, the Americas, and Asia to provide skills training to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This emphasis on technical assistance through skills training helps NGOs work toward their overall mission in a way that continues after the volunteer has moved on (assignments are usually three to 12 months long).

Tay is a registered nurse and public health worker who has worked on a range of issues during her time as a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa and as a nurse in downtown Baltimore. I am a freelance writer who has worked as a researcher in the U.S. Park Service and also as an environmental educator during my Peace Corps service in Nicaragua. Our skills mesh perfectly to carry out this malnutrition survey in India. Tay develops the questions and assesses the data, I write it up, and we are able to teach a great deal to our work counterparts—though we probably learn even more, as they are savvy and experienced labor organizers from Calcutta.

The AJWS Volunteer Corps is a great opportunity for us, a chance to work together as newlyweds. We agree to two more assignments, in Sri Lanka and Ghana, as we continue our extended honeymoon around the world. Our experience volunteering overseas and our accrued professional skills make finding our places within each of these organizations easier, but every assignment is unique and carries its own set of challenges.

## Alternative Breaks and Beyond

One of the goals of AJWS service programs is nothing less than to create a new generation of compassionate, volunteer-minded Jews who choose to dedicate their lives to social justice work around the globe. So it is no surprise that many of the organization's volunteer opportunities are aimed at students and young adults. My first experience with AJWS was to accompany 15 ditch-digging undergraduates to Honduras as their group leader. There, on a coffee-carpeted ridge, I was

astounded by their commitment to the task at hand (building a school alongside our village hosts). Their levels of religious observance ranged from secular to orthodox but they were completely united in their openness to the experience, their ability to adapt to the conditions, and their eagerness to learn as much as they could—from me, from each other, and from our Honduran hosts.

Since then, I have led more AJWS Alternative Breaks (AB) trips, in which undergraduates use their spring and winter vacations to travel to sites throughout Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean. It is a chance for them to experience grassroots sustainable development and to focus on the connections among social justice, service, and Judaism. Many students go on to join the AJWS Volunteer Summer, in which they spend seven weeks in Africa, the Americas, or Asia, and then continue with a year-long domestic component, or with the World Partners Fellowship, AJWS' program for recent college graduates.

## Healing the World

During my previous years of community service (from soup kitchen field trips in high school to AmeriCorps and Peace Corps tours after college), I'd been told that helping others was a "good" thing to do, the "right" thing to do, sometimes even a "Christian" thing to do. But it was AJWS that told me, for the first time in my life, that helping others (no matter their religion or nationality) was a "Jewish thing to do."

However, AJWS does not proselytize or preach Judaism—neither to the less observant participants in their programs nor to the host country nationals with whom it works. AJWS provides opportunities for members of the Jewish community "to explore social justice and human rights issues as they relate to Judaism." For me, during my travels with AJWS, this has meant learning that *tikkun olam*, the Jewish mandate to "heal the world," is a concept shared by many faiths.

"Buddha teaches that from the day you are born there is suffering in the world," Tay and I were told in northern India.

“So Buddhism is simple. It is to be aware of suffering and try to overcome it.”

This reminded me of the words of Jose “Chencho” Alas during the first night of an AB trip to El Salvador. Chencho, a 70-year-old Catholic ex-priest with a brilliant halo of white hair and smiling eyes, told our group, “Your presence, your solidarity, your understanding of the importance of interchange between people—that is beautiful. Yes. That is something I will call a blessing from God.”

Later in the week, standing in the chapel where Chencho’s friend, Archbishop Oscar Romero, was slain for helping the poor, he told us that the universal wisdom of any religion was defined by the ability “to think of the other.” If little is the same between the far-flung assignments, it is this commitment—from all kinds and colors of people—to think of the other.

## A Final Blessing

AJWS is far more than its service programs. The organization also supports more than 300 grassroots groups and NGOs in 36 countries around the world and is currently spearheading an extraordinary advocacy and education campaign to stop the genocide in Darfur. Today, walking back from our last day of field work on the tea plantation, Tay and I pass a Hindu shrine to Sunni, or “Saturn.” A long-haired, shirtless priest is performing a *puja* in front of a small gathering of villagers, and we stop to watch. He mixes water, flower petals, and spices in a cup made of folded leaves and, with his fingers, flings droplets into the crowd. We lower our heads as we see everyone else do, and feel the cool drops land on our necks. ●

*Joshua Berman is a freelance writer and award-winning guidebook author who has been an AJWS group leader since 2001. His Web site is [www.joshuaberman.net](http://www.joshuaberman.net). This article first appeared in *Transitions Abroad* magazine.*

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### AJWS Volunteer Programs

AJWS offers a variety of international volunteer opportunities for adults, college students and teens.

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### SEND US YOUR COMMENTS

What would you like to see in future issues of AJWS Reports? Let us know by e-mailing [editors@ajws.org](mailto:editors@ajws.org). Please include your name and contact information along with your comments. We look forward to hearing from you.

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As you think about your philanthropic and estate planning goals, please consider helping AJWS to advance hope and peace for those who need it most. The following opportunities may also provide you with significant tax advantages:

- Donating gifts of appreciated securities (stocks, bonds and mutual fund shares);
- Naming AJWS as a beneficiary of a will, life insurance policy or retirement plan;
- Establishing a trust or annuity that will provide you with income and subsequently support the work of AJWS.

To learn more about these and other planned giving opportunities, please contact Riva Silverman, Director of Development, at 212.792.2809 or [rsilverman@ajws.org](mailto:rsilverman@ajws.org).