

AJWS REPORTS 2013



Women in Action:
Promoting the human rights of women and girls worldwide

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DEAR FRIENDS:

In early 2013, AJWS grantees from around the world came to New York City for a meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. With so many exceptional women activists convened near AJWS's headquarters, we had the chance to talk to them about the problems they're facing and their goals for overcoming them.

Over and over, women from places as diverse as rural Haiti and urban Mumbai reported roughly the same things: Appalling rates of sexual violence and rape. Sky-high incidence of HIV among women and girls. Exclusion of women from leadership in their homes and in their communities. The overall picture is of a world in which women are brutalized, discriminated against and denied protections and resources that would enable them to escape the cycle of poverty and injustice.

But our grantees also told stories of change and hope, particularly in the fight against sexual violence, which has been on our minds at AJWS in the wake of several tragic rapes in India this year that led to mass protests across the country.

For one, Tina Musuya, director of the Ugandan organization CEDOVIP, spoke about her work to combat violence by raising awareness. She explained that the organization's programs had dramatically curbed rape and slowed the spread of HIV in the communities where it works. The staff of Beyond Borders, a women's organization in Haiti, talked about their project to engage local clergy to preach about gender equality, which they report has helped reduce violence against local women. Agnes Leina, of the indigenous women's organization Il'laramatak Community Concerns, in Kenya, presented a resolution to the UN with other women's groups urging global leaders to commit to ending the epidemic of violence against women, girls and sexual minorities worldwide.

These women—and the many others whose work is described in the pages of this magazine—are living examples of what it means to pursue global justice and support lasting change. Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, we strive to help them make their visions of justice a reality. AJWS's new campaign will focus on some of the most critical issues facing women and girls. Stay tuned for updates on the campaign in the coming months.

Your support of AJWS has been critical in making all this happen. Thank you for being our partner in working to build a better world.

Ruth W. Messinger
President

Kathleen Levin
Chair of the Board

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Advancing the Rights of **WOMEN AND GIRLS** *Is the Key to* **CHANGE**

By LEAH KAPLAN ROBINS

What do a woman farmer from Mexico, a lesbian in Sri Lanka and a 14-year-old Kenyan girl have in common?

It's not just that they're female. All of these women live in places where their rights are not respected—by their governments, by their societies and often even by their families. It's hard enough living in a community where the average family income is measured in tens of dollars a month, but if you're a woman or a sexual minority in the developing world, odds are that the challenges are significantly greater.

Women, girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI)

people often face rampant discrimination, oppression, violence and other violations of their human rights that make suffering a part of daily life. In many communities they are denied the autonomy to make decisions about their bodies and their lives, making them vulnerable to forced early marriage, violence, HIV and AIDS and poverty. And without laws that protect their rights—or in places where laws are not enforced—women, girls and LGBTI people often feel alone in their struggles for equality and justice.

Imagine a girl like Kate, a teen who grew up in Kenya's Dandora slum. Like many girls her age in the community, she dropped out of school in order to help her family earn a living. She also lives with constant fear of sexual or domestic abuse, because this kind of violence afflicts nearly half of all women in Dandora at some point in their lives.

In Sri Lanka, there are women like Maya, who must hide her identity as a lesbian because if word got out she could be fired, ostracized by her friends

and family and even experience physical abuse at home and in her community. The Sri Lankan government legitimizes the threats against lesbian women, because harsh laws make it illegal for anyone to have sex with someone of the same gender. The law also prevents community organizations from openly providing services to LGBTI people, so it's hard for women like Maya to access health care or advocate for their rights.

In Mexico, you might meet Elsa, an indigenous woman who grows food on communal land that has been cultivated by her community for decades. When the majority of the men in her village left Mexico in search of jobs in the United States, corporations began to lay claim to the farmland of indigenous people, exploiting the men's absence and citing local laws that stipulate that only men can own land. Without their land, Elsa and women like her can't feed their families.

Behind every story like this is a woman or girl with infinite potential, whose desires and dreams are cut short by discrimination or violence. Without these impediments, they could be transforming the world, rather than struggling to avoid violence, overcome unfair obstacles to economic security and gain equal treatment by people and the law.

This is why AJWS believes in supporting both grassroots and larger social justice organizations that promote equality for women, girls, and people of all sexual orientations and gender identities—so that they can live with the same rights, freedom and dignity that we all want for ourselves and that every person deserves.

AJWS's grantees around the world are working hard to overcome the challenges faced by people like Kate, Maya and Elsa. For example, in Kenya, AJWS grantee Fortress of Hope is helping girls develop leadership skills and implement their own strategies to stop violence. It works to help them stay in school, avoid domestic abuse and prevent unwanted pregnancy or infection with HIV.

In Sri Lanka, AJWS grantee Equal Ground works to stop the rampant bigotry, hatred and violence against



TOP As Liberia recovers from its decades of violence, WIPNET works to ensure that women are educated, empowered and integral to the political and peacemaking process. *Photograph by Cathe Kobacker*

BOTTOM Shan Youth Power talks about safe sex with a group of young women and men who live in a refugee camp along the Thailand-Burma border, where the incidence of HIV is high. *Photograph by James Robert Fuller*


OPPOSITE PAGE UCIZONI helps women indigenous farmers in Mexico gain access to land, defend their land rights and sell goods for a fair price in local markets. *Photograph by Evan Abramson*

LGBTI people and to give individuals the counseling and support they need to cope and lead confident, healthy lives. They are giving lesbian women hope that they may some day live and love openly

without fear or repercussions.

In Mexico, an organization called UCIZONI works to protest land grabs, reform laws that deny women legal ownership of the land they depend on

for survival and advocate for women to have more control over decision-making in their communities.

The photographs on these pages illustrate some of the most critical challenges facing women, girls and LGBTI people worldwide and document the change that can happen when people are empowered to overcome obstacles and become changemakers. 

1. In Liberia, women led the peace movement that brought an end to the country's civil war, thanks to the efforts of organizations and movements like Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET).

Photograph by Pewee Flomoku 2. Heshima Kenya, in Nairobi, gives refugee girls the skills, education and confidence to recover from trauma and live independent, successful lives. **Photograph by Ava Shapiro** 3. Shan Youth Power, working on the Thailand-Burma border, teaches girls to know their rights, understand their bodies, and make informed choices about sex, marriage and their futures.

Photograph by James Robert Fuller

4. Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya works to build a country-wide movement to overturn Kenya's sodomy law and stop stigma, discrimination and violence against LGBTI people. **Photograph by Evan Abramson** 5. Girls from Fortress of Hope, Kenya, perform dances to educate their communities about stopping violence against women and girls.

Photograph by Evan Abramson



After the rape of a 23-year-old woman on a bus in Delhi, AJWS grantee SANGRAM organizes a protest as part of the largest public outcry against rape in India's history. *Photograph courtesy of SANGRAM*



A Call Against Violence **HEARD AROUND THE WORLD**

Three grassroots organizations say “no” to rape and abuse.

By **LEAH KAPLAN ROBINS** and **SASHA FELDSTEIN**

On December 16, 2012, the world learned what every Delhi-born girl and woman already knows: that even in the capital of India, being female comes with mortal risks. On that day, 23-year-old Jyoti Singh Pandey boarded what appeared to be a public bus and was raped by six men and then left for dead. Tragically, she succumbed to her injuries, but her story inspired a wave of protests that rocked India and brought women and their allies worldwide to their feet to stand up against violence.

Many AJWS grantees were involved in these protests—the largest public outcry about rape in India (and perhaps anywhere in the world) to date. For years they have been doing inspirational work to break the silence and put an end to this epidemic of violence.

Over the past decade, AJWS has provided over 100 grants to grassroots organizations in India—and many more around the world—whose mission is to end violence against women, girls and LGBTI people. AJWS's grantmaking is part of a larger global effort by multiple funders, rooted in decades of collaborative work, to make violence and rape simply unacceptable on a global basis.

Turn the page to read about AJWS grantees contributing to this historic effort.



Fortress of Hope's program director, Felistah Mbithe, talks to girls about stopping violence.
Photograph by Evan Abramson

INDIA

Awaaz-e-Niswaan

Empowering girls to escape domestic violence and pursue brighter futures

AJWS grantee Awaaz-e-Niswaan (“Voices of Women”—AEN for short) was among the grassroots groups that organized protests after the rape case in India last December. It has worked since 1985 in Mumbai, where Muslim women, in particular, face poverty and violence. Traditional gender roles deprive women of status and power within their households; girls are often prevented from going to school or learning skills to earn a living; and many are forced to wed in their teens, often to older strangers. This tradition has taken a tragic toll: research shows that adolescent brides are more likely to be abused, suffer from health problems, live in poverty and die young.

Although there are laws intended to protect girls and women, such as the Indian Protection for Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005, AEN staff report that the government and police don't adequately enforce the laws, especially in marginalized communities



like India's minority Muslim population.

A statement after the high profile rape in Delhi signed by 150 human rights organizations—including many AJWS grantees—pointed out that rapists are only convicted in 26 percent of cases in India, indicating that most perpetrators are allowed to go free. Countless others are never tried for their crimes at all.

To help girls escape this cycle of poverty and violence, AEN provides a haven where they can meet peers and learn to understand and defend their rights.

In groups led by older girls, they learn self defense skills and ways to avoid sexual harassment. Those who refuse arranged marriages or want to leave violent situations can get legal support and assistance from AEN, which helps them negotiate with their families and file reports with the police. AEN provides girls with college scholarships, vocational training and assistance in finding jobs. This support helps them gain financial independence and enables them to have greater choice in whether or not to marry and to leave abusive situations.

The organization understands that the problems girls face in India—from crushing poverty to gender discrimination to rape—are so interconnected that they must be addressed together. Many girls

who come to AEN looking for education or a supportive peer group end up gaining so much more: self esteem, leadership skills and critical knowledge about gender issues, sexual and reproductive health, and their legal rights. Educated and confident, AEN's alumni are now some of the key players working to reverse poverty, inequality, violence and discrimination in India.

KENYA

Fortress of Hope Africa *Fighting rape with rhythm*

Sexual assault and rape are daily threats in the Dandora slum of Nairobi, where families live in tiny tin shacks, lack running water and sanitation facilities, and often struggle to earn enough money to buy food each day. AJWS grantee Fortress of Hope Africa (FOHA), which works to empower young women in this community, says that nearly half of girls in Dandora are forced into their first sexual experience and many suffer terrible injuries or contract HIV as a result of rape.

Part of what's so devastating about this epidemic of sexual violence is the silence surrounding it. Thousands of rapes go unreported every year and perpetrators are not brought to justice. According to FOHA staff, police and medical facilities often accuse girls of

promiscuity if they seek help after an assault. Faced with the prospect of being shamed by their families and communities, most girls choose to suffer silently.

But one group of local girls—many of them rape survivors—have come up with an innovative way to break the silence about violence in the community and to teach other girls to protect themselves. Their solution involves an unlikely medium: hip hop.

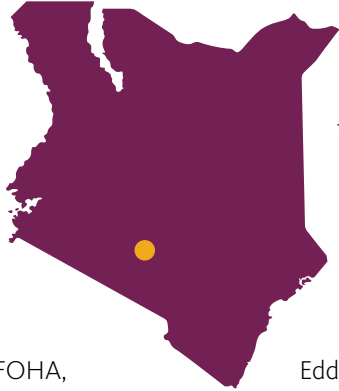
Encouraged by FOHA, the girls formed a hip hop dance troupe and began to perform around their neighborhood with a powerful message: “We refuse to be victims.” Through music and dance, they spread practical information about preventing and recovering from violence and urge men in the community to do their part to stop it. The troupe has grown wildly popular in Dandora and its members have even performed on Kenya’s version of the television show “America’s Got Talent.” The girls have gained the attention of local leaders, and they are advocating for the government to increase protections and services for women in the community.

NICARAGUA

Grupo Safo

Bringing violent hate crimes to justice

In early 2012 in León, Nicaragua, three brothers murdered their younger brother, Eddie, because he was gay. The police had been warned repeatedly that Eddie was being threatened by his family and Eddie’s partner had called the precinct five times during the attack—but got no response. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated case; violence against LGBTI people is very common in Nicaragua. According to advocates, police often turn a blind eye and most



incidents go unpunished because of weak implementation of the few laws that protect LGBTI people’s rights.

After Eddie’s murder, AJWS grantee Grupo Safo—a collective of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women—worked in collaboration with other Nicaraguan LGBTI organizations (including AJWS grantee Asociación Nicaraguense de Transgeneras) to make sure that the tragedy wasn’t covered up or forgotten. They organized the lesbian community to denounce the incident through marches and press conferences and made sure that the case was brought to trial.

As a result of their advocacy, Eddie’s became the first LGBTI case in Nicaragua’s history to be officially addressed as a “hate crime” by the courts. Two of the perpetrators have already been sentenced and the increased public pressure and media attention has persuaded the Nicaraguan government to consider a proposal to establish a national gender identity law, which would provide specific protections for LGBTI people against violence and discrimination.

Grupo Safo is so successful because it empowers LGBTI people to organize and advocate for themselves. It provides trainings, legal aid and assistance so that people who formerly considered themselves powerless are now able to stand up and organize their communities, seek justice in the courts, demand services from the government, and gain a voice in politics. As a result, LGBTI Nicaraguans are beginning to see themselves as leaders and are not afraid to speak out against violence and defend their rights. 



A member of Grupo Safo is empowered to stand up for her rights. *Photograph by Stefanie Rubin*



ALL TOGETHER NOW!

International Women's Day 2013

By SASHA FELDSTEIN

For the past century, women around the world have come together on March 8th to celebrate International Women's Day, pressing for advances like the right to vote, earn fair pay and live free from violence. As part of this global celebration in 2013, AJWS grantees organized rallies, public debates and days of learning and activism. Together, their efforts demonstrated a profound commitment to celebrate women's achievements and realize women's rights throughout the world.

AMERICAS

GUATEMALA

INCIDEJOVEN, a youth network, organized a rally calling for stopping violence against women and promoting women's access to health services and education.



"Father, grandfather, uncle, brother, boyfriend, professor, friend, companion: What privileges are you willing to give up so that society will treat me as your equal?" *Image from Incidejovent Facebook Page, International Women's Day*

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Movimiento De Mujeres Dominicano Haitiana (MUDHA) visited local schools to share a powerful message about gender equality and stopping violence. The poster reads: "She is your mother, sister, daughter, companion, friend. Don't kill her. Don't violate her."



Photograph courtesy of MUDHA

U.S.

NEW YORK CITY

During the week of International Women's Day, women leaders and activists from around the world (including 16 AJWS grantees!) convened at the United Nations' 57th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

Here's what they had to say:

"I am proud of the fact that women are now beginning to understand that they have rights and they can demand these rights at all levels."

—Agnes Leina, *Il'laramatak Community Concerns, Kenya*



Agnes Leina (above right), Il'laramatak Community Concern, Kenya.

Photograph courtesy of CSW

"[We want to encourage] men to take up responsibility and become allies in ending gender-based violence."

—Lena Cummings, *WANEP/WIPNET*

"[At the CSW] I hope to solicit strong solidarity from the American public and government donors with Congolese civil society, especially with women's organizations... [Together we can work to] eliminate gender-based violence and the resulting incidences of HIV/AIDS."

—Chantal Adjelani Kakozy, *SOFIBEF, DR Congo*



AJWS priority countries

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
The League for Congolese Solidarity organized a “community exchange and reflection” where men and women proposed strategies for ending sexual violence caused by the ongoing conflict in their country.



Photograph courtesy of *The League for Congolese Solidarity*

INDIA

800 girls marched for women’s rights with **Mohammad Bazar Backward Class Development (MBBCD)** as part of a celebration including music, plays and lectures.



“We girls have now united, we will change the country!”



“Don’t let this [life] end before it even begins.”
Photographs courtesy of MBBCDS

THAILAND

Hundreds of women refugees on the Thai-Burma border rallied and learned advocacy skills at the **MAP Foundation’s** 12th annual “Women Exchange Get Together.”



Photograph by *Toom Mawk Harn* for *MAP Foundation*

AFRICA

ASIA

SOUTH AFRICA

450 people joined **African Solutions to African Problems** to hear inspirational community leaders discuss strategies for stopping violence against women and girls.



Photograph courtesy of *African Solutions to African Problems*

WOMEN WATER WARRIORS

*Photographs of a community
defending its way of life*

By **LEAH KAPLAN ROBINS**
Photographs by **EVAN ABRAMSON**



When Bernardo Vasquez was killed in 2012, his mother, Rufina Sanchez, thought she had lost everything—both the land that Bernardo died trying to defend and the beloved son that she now mourned. But then she realized that the way to honor his memory was to fight for the cause he died for.

Rufina's indigenous Zapotec community in southwestern Mexico has been working for several years to shut down a silver mining company that has been drilling on its land. The local people say that the harsh chemicals used in the mine are ruining the soil and poisoning the water supply, making it impossible to farm and causing a rise in disease and miscarriages. The community believes that Bernardo was murdered by supporters of the mine in their effort to squash dissent.

Since her son's death, this tragedy has fueled Rufina's fight to protect the only home she has ever known. A mural painted on the side of her house reads: "If you love life, fight against the mine."

Rufina is one of many indigenous Mexicans who are risking everything to protect the land that they love. They are standing up against powerful companies that have been

granted permission by the Mexican government to mine and develop land that indigenous people have farmed for generations. Small-scale farmers in this region are also grappling with the rise in industrial agriculture, which has sapped the local water table, exacerbating the results of recent drought. Scarcity has led to a struggle over who has a right to use what little water remains. Indigenous communities report that the government is restricting water use for poor farmers while giving free reign to nearby wealthier residents and industrial farms.

In response to these threats, indigenous groups throughout the country are standing up for their rights—and in many cases they are led by women like Rufina. In Mexico, women play a primary role in agricultural production and have emerged as powerful leaders of this cause.

On a recent trip to Mexico with AJWS, photojournalist Evan Abramson visited several communities that AJWS supports in the region. Through his images, we can see a story of women bravely responding to the human and environmental threats to their land and lives.



"If you love life, fight against the mine."—A mural outside the home of Rufina Sanchez, the mother of murdered anti-mine activist Bernardo Vasquez.

WOMEN LEADERS ORGANIZE TO PROTECT THEIR LAND

In 2006 the Canadian company Fortuna Silver Mines, Inc. began mining for silver and gold in San Jose del Progreso, a small town in Oaxaca that is home to Mexico's indigenous Zapotec community. Many of the local residents strongly oppose the mine because it is rapidly depleting the town's water and contaminating the land and water for miles around. Although Fortuna Silver's project was endorsed by the Oaxacan municipal authorities, it is in violation of the International Labour Organization's Convention 169, which requires that companies first obtain informed consent from the indigenous people who occupy the land.

The townspeople organized peaceful protests which have, tragically, been met with violence—including the murders of Bernardo Vaquez and another outspoken local activist in 2012. Through intimidation, the government and Fortuna Silver have succeeded in dividing the community—pitting those who protest the company against those who support it out of fear that they will be harmed if they don't.

Activists in San Jose del Progreso hope to force Fortuna Silver to stop mining and take responsibility for the loss of land, livelihood and life.





ABOVE A caravan of local people, international journalists and human rights organizations organized by AJWS grantees Flor y Canto, Colectivo Oaxaqueño, Ser Mixe and UNOSJO sets out to survey the impact of the mine. The survey revealed extensive damage to the land and trauma to the community.

RIGHT Grisela Mendez Gonzalez attests that her father, Bernardo Mendez, was murdered by supporters of the mine in January 2012 while protesting the construction of a water pipe that townspeople believed was diverting the town's water supply to the mine.





Ester Porres (pictured with her children) reports that since the drilling began, more than 24 women (out of a total population of less than 300 women) in her village near San Jose have experienced late-term miscarriages, which they believe were caused by contaminated water from the mine.

Carmen Santiago Alonso, coordinator of Flor y Canto, presents a report to the Oaxacan state government documenting numerous land rights violations, death threats and the murders of two anti-mining activists.

FEMALE FARMERS DEFEND WATER AND LIFE

In Mexico's Asunción Ocotlán Valley, wells have dried up from frequent droughts, putting this year's crops at risk. Indigenous farmers in the region believe that their natural water woes are exacerbated by discrimination. They accuse the government of restricting the indigenous community's access to water while providing plenty of water for commercial farms, businesses, the tourist industry and newly built middle class housing.

Since 1996, AJWS grantee Flor y Canto has been working to help indigenous farmers in the region—particularly women, who do much of the farming—advocate for their water rights. Flor y Canto is also helping small-scale farmers learn techniques to conserve water so that they can continue to grow food during dry periods.

In rural communities across Mexico, women are taking the lead in efforts to revitalize local agriculture and ensure that indigenous people can survive and thrive off the land despite the challenges they face. AJWS grantees are also helping women achieve greater access to communal leadership roles that are traditionally held by men. For many of these women, running successful agriculture businesses both ensures that there is enough food for their families and earns them respect and recognition as leaders in their communities.



Irene Martinez Gonzalez is committed to fighting for her water rights in Santiago Apostol, even though a recent water shortage has forced many of her neighbors to migrate to the United States in search of jobs. With training from Flor y Canto, she has learned to farm using far less water than she had using conventional methods.

Damiana Vasquez Garcia and her husband Nereo claim that the Mexican national water service is charging them 10 or 20 times what it charges commercial farms next door. With help from Flor y Canto, their community in San Antonio has persuaded the government that indigenous people must play a role in managing the water distribution system to ensure that all residents are treated equally.



RIGHT Farming is a gateway to leadership and income for Lucia, Agustina and Emma Lopez in El Zapote. With support from AJWS grantee UCIZONI they are running a successful livestock business. In 2012, indigenous farmers working with UCIZONI produced 10,000 tons of food, ensuring that local families can sustain their way of life.



CELEBRATING MOTHERS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

By **RUTH MESSINGER**, AJWS President

A version of this article was originally published on Women's eNews, Thursday, May 9, 2013

I have tremendous gratitude for my mother—the most influential person in my life—and pride in my children who made motherhood a reality for me. So I am overcome with awe and sadness when I think about some of the most marginalized mothers around the world, whose stories are seldom told.

As president of American Jewish World Service I have the privilege of working with extraordinary female activists in Africa, Asia and the Americas who are transforming their own communities. Many of these women are mothers. Knowing their stories means understanding that they have endured relentless hardship. But despite the oppression they face, these mothers are resilient women who define their own lives and effect critical change within their communities.

Since advocates for human rights in their countries are constantly at risk of violent reprisals, these mothers have asked not to be identified with their real names. Let me tell you about them.

Grace

Grace is the mother of seven children. Her family is Pygmy, an ethnic group indigenous to Central Africa, and they live in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, a country rife with ethnic conflict. Living in the region of Mubambiro, where the local population depends on farming and agriculture for its livelihood, Grace and other Pygmies are considered second-class citizens. They experience acute stigma and discrimination from the neighboring Bantu tribe. Pygmy community members are frequently denied access to farmland

and are often arrested or assaulted for gathering food in local forests.

“Like many other Pygmy families, my family does not have land to farm,” Grace told me. “My children hardly ever go to school, and we do not have access to medical services. So, we are very vulnerable and live in dire poverty.”

To support her children, Grace works as a porter, carrying goods for local community members, a job that yields only a few pennies each week. “Sometimes I venture into a nearby park to earn additional money collecting wood, but that’s very dangerous,” Grace said. “I can be arrested or I can be mugged by robbers and other bandits. Women are often sexually assaulted when they go to the park, so I need to be careful.”

Fortunately, Grace and other Pygmy mothers are mobilizing to fight for their right to land, education and medical services. In partnership with an organization called Hope for Indigenous People, which AJWS supports, Grace is facilitating dialogues between Pygmy leaders and Bantu leaders in order to promote peaceful coexistence. “It is going to take time for us to break barriers,” Grace said. “But we want to control our own destiny and support our children—just like other mothers.”

Nimala

Nimala is a Tamil woman who lives in eastern Sri Lanka. In 2008 during the Sri Lankan Civil War, Nimala’s husband, a local carpenter, mysteriously disappeared and tragically never returned, leaving her to raise two children on her own.

Without an income to put food on the table, Nimala began doing daily wage labor as a farmer. The work took her far from her home and made her

vulnerable to exploitation. What’s more, she began to experience the stigma of being a Tamil “war widow,” facing ongoing interrogation, harassment and violence by security forces. Neighbors spread rumors about her husband’s disappearance. Community members who had been Nimala’s friends refused to associate with her. Socially isolated and with a weekly income of only a few dollars, Nimala felt ill-equipped to care for her children. She considered sending them away to be cared for by Roman Catholic nuns.

With the help of a Sri Lankan organization and AJWS grantee called the Center for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, Nimala soon met other war widows in her community. Their husbands had disappeared under similar circumstances and now, as single mothers, they faced comparable challenges to keep their families afloat. Motivated to turn their lives around, these women decided to establish their own farming collective. They saved enough money to lease community farmland where they now cultivate onions to sell in local markets.

Today, Nimala’s income far exceeds what she had earned before. What’s more, her success is changing the Tamil community’s perceptions of war widows and of women’s economic power. “Earlier we felt ourselves to be laborers,” Nimala said. “Now, we feel we are the owners of production. We’re proud of our work, and we are proud to support our children independently.”

Grace and Nimala represent the ideals of motherhood that I hold dear: tenacity, strength and dignity. Their stories remind me how important it is to listen to mothers in the developing world, share their stories and be a partner in their struggles for human rights.

STITCHING TOGETHER A MOVEMENT

Cambodian garment workers organize for labor rights.

By **LEAH KAPLAN ROBINS**

At the very edge of Phnom Penh, there is a universe inhabited largely by women. We are all connected to what's happening there, though most of us never step into this world ourselves. This is where the clothes in our closet get their start—in the hands of female garment workers who labor in Cambodia's factories.

I found myself walking these unfamiliar streets last summer, on a trip to Cambodia with several of my AJWS colleagues. Our van drove past the rows of shiny hotels, restaurants and Buddhist temples of the city's center and eventually arrived in a dusty neighborhood of low-slung factories and blocks of run-down apartments hemmed with chain-link fence. Cows wandered past and children played in the alleys as dusk fell.

We entered a one-room house where a dozen young women sat on the floor. I settled down on the cool tiles and returned their bows of welcome, hands pressed together in the traditional Cambodian greeting.

They looked like school mates, laughing and joking with each other—but all had been forced to drop out at a young age to work in a garment factory. Most had left parents, husbands and even children behind in villages throughout the country and were living in Phnom Penh alone—sending home whatever money they could.

Through our translator, I listened to them speak of 14-hour days in sweltering, airless warehouses; of slave wages and of the severe limits to their personal freedom. They were given just one holiday off a year—and taking a single

sick day usually meant a pink slip.

Of course, most of us are aware that behind the labels on our shirts are stories like these—and worse. The collapse of a factory in Bangladesh in April, which killed more than 1,000 garment workers, was a harsh reminder that our clothing comes at a tremendous cost. We know about the terrible conditions in factories overseas, but most of us never meet the people who work there.

As the young garment workers spoke, I watched their hands, imagining them working the machines hour after hour for \$2 a day. I fingered the hi-tech wicking fabric in my shirt and silently calculated its human cost: from head to toe I was wearing more than two months' earnings.

But the women drew me back to the conversation with their optimism, becoming animated as they described their efforts to unionize. All had been recruited as leaders by Worker's Information Centre (WIC), an AJWS grantee that provided them with information, resources and support and was helping them build a local movement. With WIC's help, they told us, they had convinced more than a thousand of their peers to join the new union in just seven months and, together, staged a strike that made progress on 11 of their 16 demands of the owners.

My colleagues and I peppered them with questions about their progress until after dark, when they took us to see where they lived. My heart caught in my throat as we stood in one airless, 10×10 garret along a maze of narrow mud alleys where four women slept each night side-by-side on the concrete floor in the same space where they cooked



Photograph by Leah Kaplan Robins

“Working with WIC gave me the confidence to speak out.”



“How does it make you feel to see this?”

and ate. Hangar-like, with high walls that reached only half-way to the ceiling, you could hear the noise of hundreds of other garment workers going about their evening routines, and I imagined what it was like to try to sleep here.

The silence broke when the room’s occupant challenged: “how does it make you feel to see this?”

One of my colleagues spoke eloquently about how proud AJWS is of what they’d accomplished and how we hoped they would soon secure increased wages and sufficient income to rent their own apartments. But I think this young woman wanted to hear a darker truth: that in the small, hot room, I felt shame for all that I have and take for granted, and for the things that fill my closet without concern for those who sacrificed to sew each seam.

Part of my discomfort lay in the knowledge that even if I were to scrupulously avoid “Made in Cambodia” tags it won’t solve the problem. This isn’t the only country where people work under inhumane conditions or where companies exploit the labor of the vulnerable. And the fact is, these women desperately need these jobs.

Since returning from Cambodia, I’ve come to realize that the most productive action is to support the efforts that garment workers themselves are making to advocate for a more just labor system.

They want to work, but they deserve to earn a greater percent of the profits reaped by the corporations that sell these clothes. They need safe conditions, longer breaks, sick pay, parental leave, and more than just one day off each year.

Shortly after my trip, news broke of another group of Phnom Penh garment workers who staged a protest against their factory, which manufactured clothes for Walmart and H&M. After reducing wages for months, the Kingsland factory closed suddenly in January 2013, firing workers without severance pay or the wages owed to them. With support from WIC and another AJWS grantee called Community Legal Education Center, the women launched a two-month demonstration—sleeping in front of the factory, protesting in front of the U.S. embassy and government offices, blocking removal of machinery and going on a hunger strike. On March 3, the workers won a \$200,000 settlement—a landmark victory that will hopefully set a precedent for future cases throughout Cambodia.

These women—and those I met last summer—are fighting for the same rights that Jewish garment workers in New York City fought for—and won—more than a century ago. This Passover marked 102 years since the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, a disaster that opened our nation’s eyes to labor rights

and prompted American factory workers to organize. But disasters like the one in Bangladesh, and ongoing poor conditions and lack of rights in places like Cambodia, remind us that the fight that our grandmothers and great grandmothers won here in the U.S. is far from over around the world.

By funding organizations like WIC, AJWS is helping Cambodian women fight their fight. The process has certainly made a difference in the individual lives of the women that WIC supports.

Sitting around the circle that night in Phnom Penh, one of the garment workers told me: “Working with WIC gave me the confidence to speak out, to go up against the factory owners, to organize other women into the union. Before, I was silent; but now I’m defending my rights.”

By supporting their struggle, WIC and AJWS are working to bring the moment closer when every woman and worker gains the rights she so deserves.



Organizations like WIC mobilized garment workers to protest the Kingsland factory in Phnom Penh, earning a precedent-setting settlement in favor of workers’ rights. **Photograph by Heather Stilwell**

There are many ways in which Judaism speaks strongly to the themes of service and justice, but to me, there is none stronger than our own experience of slavery: Once we were slaves in Egypt, and now we are free. Distilled in this line, the sentiment is clear. Our tradition and history compel us to give back to our society, make the world a better place, and ensure freedom for all.

This intimate connection between Judaism and social justice is why throughout American history the Jewish community—our community—has been a vocal advocate for the values of freedom and equality that make the United States the great country that it is. As a Jewish woman and a member of the U.S. Congress, I strive to bring that connection to bear on my work every day. We are all obligated to make those connections in our own way.

This year, I am particularly focused on the rights of women and girls, both in our own backyard and around the world. The Talmud teaches that the optimism and initiative of Jewish women ensured our redemption from slavery in Egypt. And today, women are often still the catalysts for change and liberation. Yet, too many women around the world are still enslaved and oppressed—including the victims of rape and violence, those who are denied an education and those coerced into sex trafficking.

The specter of violence against women looms large today. Millions of women in war-torn countries like Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda don't move freely from place to place for fear of being raped—a fear created and exacerbated by soldiers who purposefully and disgracefully turn women's bodies into casualties of war.

Denying girls the education they need undermines their freedom as well. Let's be clear: meaningful freedom for women and girls will never be possible without the ability to access education and the social tools necessary to build a fruitful life. But barriers to girls' education are enormous worldwide. Women activists like the brave Mukhtar Mai of Pakistan receive death threats almost weekly for striving against the odds to educate young girls.

until these women too, are free.

President Obama has said: "Promoting gender equality and advancing the status of all women and girls around the world remains one of the greatest unmet challenges of our time, and one that is vital to achieving our overall foreign policy objectives." We believe that all who understand that the story of gaining freedom continues to this day will support these goals. For women to be free, we must ratify the Convention on

FREEDOM FOR WOMEN = FREEDOM FOR ALL

By CONGRESSWOMAN DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ, D-FL

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; pass the International Violence Against Women Act; and work tirelessly wherever we can to support global health, education, political participation,

and women's empowerment.

Only when women everywhere can stand tall and strong together in peace and security can we confidently say: *Once we were slaves, and now we are free.*

American Jewish World Service embodies the natural harmony between Jewish faith and action, putting these values into practice every day. Working to protect the health and safety of women and girls is a vital part of our community's drive to make the world a better place. As Jews, our fundamental belief in freedom, justice and human rights requires that we work tirelessly to end the scourge of violence against women, defeat those who would block girls who need and want to go to school and stop the practice of coerced sex trafficking.

Going forward, as we work together to bolster their sexual health and rights, we must not only protect, but empower, women and girls everywhere. By working together, we can ensure that the future we leave to our children is one of inclusion, equity, security, hope and freedom. ■



Photograph from Wikimedia Commons

Sex trafficking is a global pandemic in parts of the world, and in Southeast Asia alone, 250,000 women are trafficked every year. Traffickers prey on women and their families who are vulnerable because they are forced to grapple with the grim daily realities of life in poverty. These women are bound by modern slavery and lack the freedoms and protections they deserve.

We must fight to liberate these women and girls from the shackles of bondage—both physical and figurative—that keep them from freedom. As our tradition reminds us, we must not rest

Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz represents Florida's 23rd Congressional district. She is a member of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, a bipartisan Members' organization dedicated to promoting women's economic, health, legal and educational interests.

Q & A TRAVELS and TRANSFORMATIONS

Marcella Kanfer Rolnick, a member of AJWS's board of trustees, recently joined an AJWS Study Tour to Guatemala. The trip provided new insight into AJWS's work and deepened Kanfer Rolnick's commitment to global justice.

What inspired you most in Guatemala?

One organization we visited is InceJoven, which empowers Guatemalan youth. The young people we met are activists for youth's rights—particularly around issues of health and sexuality. They told us how they grew up not understanding that they were entitled to certain basic rights, not believing that their bodies were their own, not thinking that they could decide whom to marry or what kind of lives they want for themselves.

When they came to InceJoven, they were opened up to a whole different world view. They now feel empowered to choose whether or not to have a boyfriend, whether to have sex or to say no, and what kind of career to pursue.

I was amazed when they told us about their advocacy work. These young people sit at the table with national-level government officials to campaign for laws and resources that support and protect their rights. Recently, they were helping the Guatemalan government develop a curriculum on sexual health to teach in schools—something that wouldn't

have happened without their activism. Not only did these teenagers overcome tremendous obstacles to gain access to a place at the table to share their views with policymakers, they also had developed significant expertise on their subject matter, making them valuable partners in developing solutions.

We could tell that their experience with InceJoven gives them tremendous confidence. They are taking control of their lives and helping bring about cultural and institutional changes necessary to make it happen for others. I was moved as much by their personal journeys as by the greater change they were helping to effect. Judaism tells us that saving one life is like saving the world. So it's deeply meaningful to both see changes at the macro socio-political level, and to see real and positive differences in individuals' lives.

Were you prepared for what you saw?

Before we went, AJWS gave us background on Guatemala's history, geography and natural resources. Once we were there, this information came to life: all the natural and human-made traumas are still being lived by people every day. The killing and devastation that occurred during the Guatemalan genocide decades ago shapes the lives of people today. I met the people who are doing grassroots work on this long arc of history that's hopefully bending toward justice. They are working to undo decades of bad policy and the actions of unprincipled leaders.

How did the trip change your perspective on AJWS?

I was already so passionate about AJWS's work beforehand, but there's nothing like seeing it in the field. As a member

of the board, I have been intimately involved in developing AJWS's strategy, and my experience in Guatemala allowed me to witness everything we deliberate on and plan in the office happening on the ground. It was incredibly gratifying. I believe that AJWS is a shining star in terms of being an organization that can discern smart strategies and then execute them with excellence.

What about AJWS's strategy speaks to you most?

I'm inspired by AJWS's focus on disadvantaged populations—women, indigenous groups, people who have been disenfranchised politically. There is no justice in society if the most at-risk people aren't given the same rights as everyone else. This focus is not just important; it's also practical. For instance, there's overwhelming evidence that helping women master their own lives has an exponential positive ripple effect. When women are educated and earn an income, it changes the lives of their children and it changes the economic system around them.

Why do you support global justice work?

Supporting justice in the U.S. and around the world will always be in my philanthropic portfolio. It's an obligation that I am committed to upholding. And I feel a bit more human when I give financial support to AJWS and give of my time by serving on the board.

This work is a living testament of our Jewish values, in particular *"btzelem elohim"*—understanding that all people are created in the Divine image and acting accordingly. This means confronting when and where this value isn't alive and well and trying to change that. In this way, AJWS is doing sacred work. ▣



Kanfer Rolnick with Guatemalan activists.
Photograph by Stuart Schear

CATCHING THE SPIRIT OF CHANGE: INSIGHTS FROM EL SALVADOR

By **NICOLE AUERBACH**

AJWS Rabbinical Students' Delegation to El Salvador, January 2013

This past January, I found myself in a field in rural El Salvador, attempting to use a pick-axe as a group of young girls looked on, curious and justifiably amused at the sight of a group of Americans who were unaccustomed to manual labor digging an irrigation ditch on a farm.

I asked the girls what they wanted to do when they grew up. "I want to be a doctor!" said one of our young companions. "Me, too!" said her cousin. "I want to be a teacher," said their friend.



Salvadoran girls share hopes about their careers. **Photograph by Nicole Auerbach**

If you are inclined to see the glass as half-empty, there is reason to be pessimistic, if not heart-broken, about the actual prospects of these girls. In El Salvador's Bajo Lempa region, which I was visiting as part of AJWS's Rabbinical Students' Delegation—a program to inspire future Jewish leaders to become advocates for global justice—we learned that it is not uncommon for girls to start having children at 13 or 14, which puts an end to their schooling. And for those who do finish school, going to college often depends on money sent from family

members who work in the United States. For most rural Salvadorans, university is simply out of reach.

But during our visit, we were inspired by how hard local women are working to change this reality. At a women's cooperative, the *Asociación Cooperativa Maria Gonzales (ACAMG)*, we spoke to women who had dropped out after fourth or eighth grade—or, in one case, never attended school at all. Today, they are administering a micro-credit program that allows local women to buy and care for livestock and learn leadership skills. This not only means additional income for their families—to buy school supplies and uniforms or to enable children to stay in school rather than working themselves—but also gives these women increased stature in their homes and communities.

The leaders of ACAMG explained that when the cooperative started, there had been resistance from the local men to the idea of women taking on the non-traditional role of owning livestock. But when the men saw how the additional income benefitted the community and participated in workshops about gender equality, they came around. Speaking to these women, it was clear that greater financial independence had meant a great deal, as had the support they had received from AJWS.

Women have also played a remarkable role in the community organizing efforts of *Asociación Mangle*, a grassroots organization and social movement that AJWS funded in El Salvador until 2011 and that continues to host AJWS's leadership delegations.

Over the past 20 years, *Asociación Mangle* has supported local women to address some of the critical agricultural and environmental problems facing this community, such as overuse of pesticide that has poisoned the groundwater, and yearly storms that flood farms. The organization works to implement more sustainable farming and fishing practices, provide potable water, protect the local environment and create flood warning systems.

Women are not only active in the organization, but have also been empowered by it to take on important leadership roles in their communities. In fact, a female member of *Asociación Mangle*, Estela Hernandez, is now representing her community in El Salvador's national legislature.



During my visit to El Salvador, the other rabbinical students and I read a Torah portion in which God tells Moses to deliver a message to the Israelites that they will soon be freed from bondage in Egypt and delivered to their promised land. But, as the story is told, when Moses speaks, the people do not listen. We are told that they are prevented from hearing his message because their "spirits have been constricted" by the experience of bondage. Paralyzed in this way, they are unable to see the possibility of redemption.



Nicole Auerbach (right) planting a fruit tree in a local farmer's field in El Salvador. **Photograph by Michael Harvey**


In contrast, the people we met in El Salvador were not paralyzed; they were working to realize their vision for their community. Faced with devastating realities—floods that regularly wipe out their crops, poisoned groundwater that has left an entire generation with kidney disease, a dearth of educational opportunities, specifically for local girls—they nevertheless see the potential for change fueled by their own collective action. ACAMG is empowering women to take control of their own destinies. And Asociación Mangle has built a network of 86 communities in which some 60 percent of the population is actively engaged in its efforts to create positive and lasting change in the region.

My trip to El Salvador came at a critical moment in my own thinking about what it means to be a leader and a rabbi. I had just spent a semester learning about community organizing that fundamentally changed my understanding of power and leadership. I learned that power was not something to be feared, but simply the ability to get something done; that leadership did not have to mean being a charismatic

figurehead, but could instead mean cultivating personal relationships to identify common issues, and empowering others to take action and create change.

In El Salvador with AJWS, I saw this model of power and leadership in action as the members of the community worked together to solve the problems they faced—and saw that it worked. Not only had it produced remarkable, tangible results, it had also created a sense of power among the people we met that prevented them from being constricted or paralyzed by their circumstances.

To see a community work together with such determination to achieve profound changes left me in awe and strengthened my commitment to make advocacy for global justice a part of my future job as a rabbi.

I left El Salvador believing the glass was half full, and that there was ample reason to hold out hope for those girls on the farm. They aspired to become doctors and teachers. With support from communities who believe in them, they can be. 

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