

# AJWS REPORTS

Spring 2011

## Women Bring Change

### INSIDE:

Women on the Frontlines of Development  
Empowering Girls to End Violence  
Interview with Ambassador Meryl Frank

AMERICAN  
JEWISH  
WORLD  
SERVICE



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*Dear Friends—*

This past October, at AJWS’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in New York, we honored 18 of our grassroots grantees for their extraordinary achievements in social justice. As the directors of these organizations joined us onstage—representing indigenous communities, peasant groups, refugee populations, sexual minorities, persecuted ethnic groups and more—we were struck by how many of these incredible activists were women.

An old Chinese proverb says that “women hold up half the sky.” In our experience at AJWS, women hold up much more than half, even though they have access to much less than half of their share of resources in most of the world. Women educate the next generation despite being denied schooling themselves; they grow food despite not having the right in many communities to own land; and they see to the health of their families despite not having access to quality health care themselves.

The women activists that AJWS supports are “holding up” human rights movements worldwide. They have been working quietly in the trenches for years, waging struggles for equality, self-determination and freedom from poverty and oppression. Many of the women profiled in this issue of AJWS Reports are responsible for local and international achievements, but many of them got where they are by conquering tremendous adversity—pursuing education and ambitious justice agendas despite many voices that said they couldn’t or wouldn’t succeed. Rather than simply holding up the sky, they have reached for it, and are teaching women everywhere to do the same.

They are proof of what empowered women can accomplish. We hope that you will join us in supporting their work and in recognizing the importance of supporting women around the world to join them.

Sincerely,

**Ruth W. Messinger**  
President

**Barbara Dobkin**  
Chair of the Board

*AJWS is grateful to the Nike Foundation for its support of our work with women and girls, and of the Grassroots Girls Initiative, of which two organizations featured in this issue, Awaaz-e-Niswaan and Shaheen Resource Center for Women, are members.*

AJWS Reports was printed on paper that was produced locally and contains 30% post-consumer recycled content material. This issue saved two tons of wood, 11 million BTUs of energy, required 5,000 fewer gallons of water, eliminated 2,400 lbs. of CO2 from greenhouse gas production and prevented 700 lbs. of solid waste from entering landfills. These estimates were made using the Environmental Defense Paper Calculator. For more information, please visit [www.papercalculator.org](http://www.papercalculator.org).



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**COVER** At just 18 years old, this young Ethiopian woman fled to Nairobi in 2008 to escape ethnic persecution. She found refuge at AJWS grantee Heshima Kenya, where she and other refugee girls earn a living selling hand-made textiles. *Article page 16.*  
NICOLE GRAHAM-LUSHER

**FACING PAGE** Schoolgirls in India hope to improve their academic achievement by attending an educational camp in Dharampur, Gujarat. LILY HAMBURGER

**ABOVE TOP** A young Ethiopian girl affiliated with AJWS grantee JeCCDO, an indigenous-rights NGO that works with orphans and abandoned children. DAVID ROTBARD

**ABOVE RIGHT** Niero, a young mother living with HIV (whose name means “laughter” in her language), founded “Positively HIV,” a union of HIV positive individuals in Uganda. MELISSA SOBIN

# Women Bring Change

By Leah-Kaplan Robins



Women shoulder poverty's heaviest burdens. In countries around the world, they are far more likely than men to be poor, malnourished and illiterate. They face disproportionate levels of HIV infection and lack of access to medical care. Discriminatory laws and cultural norms often prohibit them from owning land or opening lines of credit. And despite their role in educating the next generation, women in developing countries, on average, have fewer educational opportunities than their brothers, spouses or sons.<sup>1</sup> The truth is that as many as 70 percent of the global poor are women,<sup>2</sup> and their poverty is exacerbated by alarming levels of violence, disease and discrimination.

Yet despite these hurdles, women are society's most effective agents of change. In his address to 'Women 2000,' a special session of the UN General Assembly, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said:

"Study after study has confirmed that there is no development strategy more beneficial to society as a whole—women and men alike—than one which involves women as central players."<sup>3</sup>

In many cases, what prevents women from assuming this role is their lack of access to resources—whether it's concrete things like funding, supplies and land, or intangibles like education and access to decision-making power. But when women have the tools, materials and know-how, they are extraordinarily effective organizers.

Women are behind some of the most successful movements for human rights worldwide. They have overturned discriminatory laws, built schools and support networks, and used the soil in their own backyards to feed their communities. And when women are able to access their rights, attain education and health care and live their lives without violence, they pass these freedoms on to the next generation.

Because empowering women and girls has such a ripple effect, AJWS puts special emphasis on funding grassroots organizations that prioritize women. This year, 259 of our 458 grantees support programs that tackle some of the most difficult issues facing women and girls today.

In El Salvador, for example, where women farmers face discrimination in the marketplace and a lack of land and capital, an organization called ACAMG (Asociación Cooperativa "Marta González") gives micro-loans to hundreds of women to buy, raise and breed livestock and start independent local farms. In Liberia, still reeling in the aftermath of its 1999 – 2003 civil war, WIPSEN (Women Peace and Security Network Africa) promotes women's involvement and leadership in peacebuilding. In Bolivia, where indigenous women often experience dual discrimination for both their ethnicity

and their gender, Colectivo Rebeldía (“Rebellion Collective”), organizes women to play an active role in social change efforts and confront deeply held and discriminatory gender norms.

Thanks to efforts like these, women’s leadership is on the rise. Women are orchestrating social change in every sector and at every level. They are defending water rights, land rights and labor rights; promoting disaster relief, conflict resolution and peacebuilding; demanding better education, health care and social services; and advocating for equality for indigenous people, sexual minorities and refugees. And they are doing these things not only on behalf of women, but on behalf of their entire communities.

Fourteen-year-old Iddrisu Rahinatu, a student at RAINS, a Ghana-based organization that works with adolescent girls, sums up the power of women as changemakers: “If the life of women in the community is improved, the whole community stands to benefit.”

This principle has been proved in practice again and again in development efforts around the world. When women are empowered to reject abuse and to pursue their rights, they pave the way for change in other realms—fighting poverty, disease and violence and advancing human rights for everyone. Thus, in order to combat the challenges facing so many communities in the developing world, we must first confront the inequalities that keep half the

population from realizing their potential. Only then will change come. ■■■

1-4 Footnotes: [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports)



**OPPOSITE** Women are working to rebuild their lives at a female-only refugee camp in Haiti.

**THIS PAGE** Indigenous girls from the Achuar community of Peru may someday be the next leaders in their community’s struggle for land rights.

PHOTO EVAN ABRAMSON

# Women on the Frontlines of Development

Meet eight amazing women activists who are fearlessly pursuing justice. From aiding survivors in disaster zones to risking their own lives in defense of human rights, these intrepid women are changing the world. **By Leah Kaplan Robins**

## Earthquake Relief

Marisol Baez, Haiti



PHOTO EVAN ABRAMSON

When the earthquake struck Haiti last January, Marisol Baez left her family behind in the Dominican Republic and crossed the border into the afflicted country. She helped lead her organization, Movement of Dominican-Haitian Women (MUDHA), to organize an ambulance caravan of 120 doctors

and volunteers—all of them Dominicans of Haitian descent or Haitian immigrants—who spent weeks traveling the countryside treating wounds and saving lives.

But unlike many of the aid workers who flocked to Haiti during the height of the catastrophe, Baez never left. She has stayed these past 15 months to coordinate MUDHA's work in Léogâne, a town not far from the earthquake's epicenter. She teaches leadership and income-generating skills to women living in the IDP camps and empowers local peasant groups to lead their own rehabilitation efforts.

Just 23 years ago, Baez was a beneficiary of MUDHA, making use of its services to the impoverished Haitian-Dominican community. Today she is one of its most passionate leaders. To the women she supports now in Haiti, she is living proof that their current situation doesn't have to define their lives for the future.

*"We always tell the people: because you're poor, the last things to lose in your life are your dignity and hope. We tell them to be brave, because they can't let foreigners come and do everything for them. If they don't have tents yet, we tell them to do their best to find a tarp or something so they can have a shelter. We tell them they're not obliged to beg or to sell their bodies as women. They can do some marketing so they can survive. Dignity is a beautiful thing."<sup>5</sup>*

## Educating Adolescent Girls

Zertihun Tefera, Ethiopia

Zertihun Tefera knows how hard it is to be a young woman struggling to support a family with few resources. Years ago, when her husband abandoned her and their two young children, Tefera had no financial support and little education. She marshaled all of her strength to care for her family and simultaneously earn a university degree that would be their key to economic security.

Strengthened by her ordeal, she vowed to help other women overcome similar hardships. She formed a small self-help group for women from a nearby village, and from this humble beginning, eventually founded Siiqqee Women Development Association (SWDA), an organization that today supports 10,500 women and girls.

Tefera's impact on adolescent girls, in particular, is jaw-dropping. She pioneered a combination of empowerment activities and financial support in order to boost girls' self esteem, improve their academic performance and enable them to go to college. Today, Siiqqee's adolescent girls' program boasts a university enrollment rate of 100 percent among its graduates—astonishing in a country where only 36 percent of adults can read.<sup>6</sup>

*"I observed how the neighboring women, my own mother and I have suffered because of the negative attitude towards women, the harmful traditional practices and patriarchal life style in our country. I committed myself to bring change for the well-being of my fellow women."*



PHOTO DEBBI COOPER

## Refugee Rights

Zipporah Sein, Burma

Zipporah Sein was born into a conflict that has shaped her life and inspired her activism. Growing up a member of the Karen ethnic minority in Burma, she witnessed atrocities inflicted on her people by the military government. During decades of fighting, Sein's family moved constantly, seeking safety in the jungles of eastern Burma and in a Thai refugee camp. As an adult, she has transformed these obstacles into hope for tens of thousands of Burmese women.

Sein has spent most of her career leading Karen Women's Organization (KWO), which has provided humanitarian aid, health care and education to IDP and refugee communities on the Thailand-Burma border. It has also documented the effects of war on women and engaged women's participation in the struggle for freedom, democracy and equality. KWO's 2004 report, "Shattering Silences," generated international attention for its

accounts of the Burmese army's use of rape as a weapon of war.

Sein recently became the first woman to hold a position of senior leadership in the Karen National Union, and in 2005, she was one of the 1,000 "Women for Peace" nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.



PHOTO JAMES ROBERT FULLER

## LGBTI Rights

Rosanna Flamer-Caldera, Sri Lanka

It's easy to understand why many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people stay closeted in Sri Lanka, where homosexuality is technically illegal and violence against LGBTI people is commonplace. Most LGBTI organizations operate with similar secrecy, disguising their missions as "AIDS work" or "women's advocacy."

Rosanna Flamer-Caldera, however, refuses to work in hiding. Instead, she wages a courageous, public battle against bigotry and hate. In 2004, this former leader of the International Lesbian and Gay Association founded Equal Ground, an organization that openly proclaims its support for the human rights of all LGBTI people.

Despite repeated death threats and a government that refuses to allow an organization with an LGBTI mission to legally register as an NGO, Equal Ground publicly responds to hate speech and other attacks. It also offers counseling, workshops, and support to LGBTI people, and educates those in other sectors about LGBTI rights. For long-isolated LGBTI Sri Lankans, the haven that Flamer-Caldera has created offers them optimism that a different future is possible.



PHOTO INDU BANDARA

*"Human rights and equality for all is non-negotiable and it is our job to ensure that everyone on this planet understands this."*

## Indigenous Land Rights

Oranuch Phonphinyo, Thailand

In February, Oranuch Phonphinyo led 200 peasant farmers on a 500 km march from their villages to Bangkok, to insist that the Prime Minister resolve a 30-year dispute with the Forest Industry Organization over their right to ancestral land. The National Human Rights Commission concluded in the villagers' favor in 2007, but the Thai government has yet to recognize the community's claim.

This gutsy demonstration is characteristic of the 39-year-old land rights activist, who is head of the Eco-Cultural Study and Restoration Center of Petchaboon Mountain Range Communities (ECSRC). Phonphinyo was first sensitized to this cause as a young volunteer, when she saw state authorities abuse their power in order to force villagers off lands that they had lived on and worked for generations. She has since made it her life's work to protest such land grabs, and to protect the natural resources of Thailand.

By instigating actions like the February protest march, she shows villagers that their voices matter. Her deep commitment inspires them to learn more about their rights and persevere in continuing their struggle.



PHOTO SANGARON THAITAE

## Peacemaking

Seynabou Male Cissé, *Senegal*

Twenty-eight years of armed conflict in Casamance, Senegal, have left many women feeling powerless: powerless to stop the frequent deadly bursts of guerilla violence; powerless to feed and educate their children in the midst of the chaos of conflict. But Seynabou Male Cissé saw the futility in this collective paralysis and recognized that the women of her community possessed an innate strength that could be used to help solve her country's problems.

In 1999 she co-founded USOFORAL ("let's join hands"), a grassroots organization that makes use of Senegalese women's traditional role as mediators. USOFORAL sets up local women's peace committees, promotes peace education and helps strengthen rural women's organizations. Male Cissé's courage has inspired many women to protest the seemingly never-ending violence in their midst.

In 2007, she was recognized as an ambassador for peace by the Universal Peace Federation. She is now the vice chair of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, and in February, 2010, led a delegation of 50 women leaders to the World Social Forum in Dakar, where USOFORAL advocated for collective peacekeeping and led a panel about women's leadership in conflict settings.



PHOTO USOFORAL

## Land and Water Rights

Tatiana Roa Avendaño, *Colombia*

How does an engineer for an oil company come to be one of the most fervent spokespeople for the indigenous movement against petroleum extraction? Tatiana Roa Avendaño decided in 1991 that she could no longer stand by as her employer, ECOPELROL, destroyed Amazonian ecosystems and threatened

the lives and livelihoods of indigenous Colombians.

She quit her job and began a new life as an activist, knocking on doors to talk with women farmers about the importance of water. In 1997, she co-founded CENSAT (Asociación Centro Nacional Salud Ambiente y Trabajo Censat Agua Viva) to support indigenous Colombians' resistance to oil

and gas extraction, which pollutes their territory, dries up their water and threatens to displace communities.

Roa Avendaño has recently taken on the struggle against proliferation of agrofuel farming in Colombia, which led to forced displacement of indigenous communities in 2004 and has driven up local food prices. In 2007 she collaborated with the National Movement of Afro-Colombian Communities to launch "Filling up the Tanks and Empty Territories," a campaign that raises awareness about the disastrous impact of agrofuel crops. That year she was also one of the main proponents of the national referendum on water as a constitutional and fundamental right.



PHOTO ANGELA MARTINEZ

## Afro-Peruvian Rights

Monica Carrillo, *Peru*

At 21, Monica Carrillo knew that she wanted to change things in her country. As a member of Peru's marginalized Afro-descendent community, she faced unrelenting discrimination and racism, from every-day harassment in the street to formidable barriers to education and employment. Her government offered few protections.

In 2001 she founded a grassroots organization called LUNDU, hoping to combat these assaults on her community and deepen local pride in Afro-descendant cultural heritage. Under Carrillo's leadership, LUNDU has achieved significant advances, including the inclusion in Peruvian law of the right of minority populations to equal access to education, health services and employment. In 2009, LUNDU mobilized over 4,000 people to participate in an anti-racism campaign that led to a government apology for the abuse, exclusion and discrimination historically perpetrated against Afro-Peruvians.

In a twist on traditional activism, LUNDU uses art as a tool for social change. It runs a radio series that has brought the voices of Afro-descendants to public radio for the first time and it organized a collective photography exhibition that was part of UNESCO's initiative, "The Route of the Slave." Carrillo's impact is visible in the vibrant youth-driven Afro-Peruvian human rights and cultural movement that is emerging.



PHOTO ANGELA MARTINEZ



# A Woman Empowered, Who Can Find?

By Rabbi Lauren Kurland

To offer some respite from the glaring sun, Magdalena invited our AJWS delegation of young North American rabbis to stand beneath the shade of a *chaya* tree in her lush garden in Muchucuxcah, Mexico. Her husband, standing at her side, beamed at the bounty of their field and the fruits of his wife's vision and labor.

Only a few years before, the terrain behind Magdalena's house was rock-studded and barren. Inspired by community education efforts offered by the local cooperative and AJWS partner El Hombre Sobre La Tierra ("Humankind on Earth") to use the land as a resource for better nutrition and a source of livelihood, Magdalena asked her husband's permission—as land in Muchucuxcah is traditionally owned by men—to work the family's plot. Her husband agreed, and now he learns from and works with Magdalena, tending to and harvesting the rainbow of fruits and vegetables that grow in their backyard garden.

Now recognized as a community leader, she teaches other women how to make their home gardens flourish, and she is thankful that her children, who work alongside her, will always have a skill upon which they can base their own livelihoods.

By many measures—financial, nutritional and entrepreneurial—Magdalena is a success, and an anomaly. Of the 1.5 billion people in the world living on one dollar a day or less, the majority are women.<sup>8</sup> Often denied access to decision making at home and in their communities, as well as to critical resources such as credit, land and inheritance, women labor without reward or recognition, and thus become subject to the increasing feminization of poverty.

However, as Magdalena's story indicates, empowering women by giving them access to land and the right to control their own decisions frees them—and their children—from the cycle of poverty and hunger.

Now responsible for defining and controlling her own food sources, Magdalena plants crops native to the regional ecosystem using methods informed by traditional agricultural norms and practices. Significantly, these practices benefit not only her own family, but also increase her community's food security and food sovereignty, and promote environmental sustainability in the region.

Magdalena's story calls to mind *Eshet Chayil*,<sup>9</sup> a passage from the book of Proverbs traditionally recited by husbands to their wives on Shabbat evening. Beginning with "A woman of valor, who can find?"—the passage lauds a wife for selflessly supporting her husband and household through her domestic work:

*She is like a merchant fleet,  
Bringing her food from afar.  
She rises while it is still night,  
And supplies provisions for her household.*

*She sets her mind on an estate and  
acquires it;  
She plants a vineyard by her own labors.  
She girds herself with strength,  
And performs her tasks with vigor.*

*She makes cloth and sells it,  
And offers a girdle to the merchant.  
She is clothed with strength and splendor;  
She looks to the future cheerfully.*

Some in the Jewish community resist *Eshet Chayil*, arguing that it praises women only for their domestic labor and fails to encourage them to play an active public leadership role. In light of Magdalena's story, however, the text—and its subtext on the value of labor—can be read differently. Magdalena's agricultural work does not limit the respect that she receives from her family and community; rather, it empowers her.



PHOTO VERED HARRIS

Using her hands, back and brow, Magdalena has broken free of the cycle of poverty, transforming a rocky yard into a flourishing garden, a traditional marriage into an authentic partnership, and a family once subject to malnutrition into one that is nourished and self-sufficient. Now a respected leader and teacher, Magdalena—like the woman described in *Eshet Chayil*—"looks to the future cheerfully," knowing that she has had a hand in shaping a better future for herself and her community.

Magdalena's garden gives her the power to harvest success, influence and joy—and most significantly, the freedom to pursue untold future possibilities. As *Eshet Chayil*, "A Woman of Valor"—which might in this context be translated as "a woman empowered"—says: "Extol her for the fruit of her hand / And let her works praise her in the gates." ■

8-9 Footnotes: [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports)

## JEWISH AND GLOBAL

AJWS is building our resources and expanding our outreach to engage more American Jews to think and act globally—stay tuned!



## Ambassador Meryl Frank wants A Place at the Table for Women

Interview by Leah Kaplan Robins

**A**mbassador Meryl Frank wants more women present at decision-making tables worldwide. As a delegate to the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and an advocate for women's leadership, she has worked to make this possible. In February, just prior to the CSW's 55<sup>th</sup> session, she spoke with me about the inner workings of the UN, her vision for women's empowerment, and her reasons for supporting AJWS as both a donor and a proud parent of AJWS service volunteers.

### WHAT'S ON THE CSW'S AGENDA THIS YEAR?

The 2011 policy issue is training and educating women and girls, an issue that's personally relevant to me. When the CSW isn't in session, I have been traveling around the world training women in Afghanistan, Kenya, Malawi and other developing countries to run for office. Following the CSW session this year, I will be returning to Afghanistan and Jordan

to work with the women who won their elections last year.

### WHY IS WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION SO IMPORTANT?

We can talk about pressing issues like maternal mortality rates, child brides, violence and rape as a weapon of war, but if there aren't women at the table making decisions, change is not going to happen. There are so many worthy issues, but we need women at the decision-making level to bring them up and ensure we're dealing with them. I work with women who are interested in pursuing change—as activists, through elected office, appointed office or through the power of their position. Women have a unique understanding and are key to the vast majority of development issues.

### WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?

Women are most often closer to the family, closer to dealing with health issues, closer to feeding and educating their children. And so if women are empowered

through education and can earn a living, we're ensuring that their children will benefit as well.

### IN KENYA YOU TAUGHT LEADERSHIP SKILLS TO LOCAL WOMEN TO HELP THEM EFFECT CHANGE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES. WHAT ARE THEIR CHALLENGES?

Whether they are basket weavers or members of parliament, women around the world deal with many of the same issues. They lack confidence and the ability to speak in public. They lack the resources necessary to wage a campaign for office or a campaign for change. Even some of the most outstanding local women leaders don't see themselves as leaders. I help them understand that the everyday work they do as women *is* leadership, and help them apply these skills outside their homes.

### DOES THE CSW LISTEN TO VOICES FROM LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS?

The meeting of the CSW is, from what I understand, the largest annual meeting of NGOs at the UN. Thousands of women activists attend and meet with delegates. Last year, I attended three meetings with NGOs and the Department of State, where they advised us on their positions on some of the things we'd be voting on. The CSW is an opportunity for their voices to be heard, and they do a very good job of making sure that the delegates hear them. I think it's really important for us to have a sense of what's happening on the ground.

### WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT UN WOMEN, THE COMPOSITE ORGANIZATION ESTABLISHED IN JANUARY 2011 TO CONSOLIDATE THE UN'S WOMEN'S AGENCIES?

I'm very excited about it. By combining all of the UN's work with women and girls into one strong agency, there will be an unprecedented focus and hopefully a more effective response to the needs of women worldwide. I had the opportunity to meet Michelle Bachelet, the former President of Chile, last week in Ethiopia. She is the perfect choice for the director of UN Women. Many women around the world have great confidence in her leadership, and in her ability to make lasting change.

*HAVE YOU BEEN IMPRESSED WITH THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF WOMEN?*

One of the President's first acts in office was to reverse President Bush's ban on funding for family-planning clinics around the world. From President Obama to Secretary of State Clinton to U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, there is a real emphasis on the advancement of women and an understanding of their importance in development.

*DURING NATURAL DISASTERS LIKE THE HAITI EARTHQUAKE, AJWS FREQUENTLY FUNDS ORGANIZATIONS THAT FOCUS ON WOMEN'S NEEDS THAT ARE OFTEN NEGLECTED BY HUMANITARIAN AID. WHY DO RELIEF EFFORTS FAIL TO PRIORITIZE WOMEN AND HOW CAN WE MAKE SURE THAT IT DOESN'T HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE?*

I think that's changing. You can see that even at USAID there's a real shift in priorities. And that's to the credit of this administration, that there's finally a focus on women in disasters.

*IS THIS EMPHASIS ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION REFLECTED IN THE UN ITSELF?*

There are fewer women represented than I would like. In fact, I spoke before the General Assembly last year, reporting on 15 years of progress for women since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The other five presenters were men. At least the United States had the foresight to send a woman to talk about progress that has been made in women's rights.



*AND WHAT PROGRESS HAS THERE BEEN?*

I think there's a window now for real change. The world is finally focusing on these issues, and there seems to be a new understanding that women are key to development, to effective governing and to peacekeeping.

*WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS DO?*

I think you start at home. The keys to change are basically the same around the world: have confidence, see yourself as a leader, build coalitions with other women. You could support organizations working with women, work on women's campaigns. We know that when women are involved in politics, change happens. I think you should step in where your passion is, and in my case it's getting women prepared to speak for themselves and to demand change.

*YOU'RE AN AJWS DONOR. WHAT DREW YOU TO US?*

At first it was because AJWS speaks to my Jewish values. But then I spent time looking at the programs themselves. AJWS takes very seriously the idea that *tzedakah* is more "justice" than "charity." AJWS is all about respect for the people it serves, and this is what development is all about.

*IS THIS WHY YOU'VE SENT YOUR CHILDREN ON AJWS'S VOLUNTEER SUMMER PROGRAM?*

Yes. Their summers in Guatemala and Uganda have given them more of a sense of what the world is like and where they fit into it as Americans and as Jews. These experiences changed them as people. It did much more than a lecture on poverty from "Mom" ever could. They learned the sort of Jewish and international values about development that are right on target and will last them a lifetime. I think sending our kids with AJWS was one of the best gifts we've ever given them, and I think that they would agree.

*DO YOU SEE YOUR CAREER AS A REFLECTION OF YOUR JEWISH IDENTITY?*

Absolutely. I always felt that I had a responsibility to fix the world. This imperative is not an easy legacy for Jews though. It's a big world and there are a lot of problems, and it can be very painful sometimes to realize that we alone are not going to fix all of them. But we do have a responsibility to do our part. ■■■



**AJWS GRASSROOTS GRANTEES AT THE UN!**

These NGOs made their voices heard at the CSW's 2011 session:

- **Asociación LGTB Arcoiris, Honduras**
- **Baobab for Women's Human Rights, Nigeria**
- **Center for Domestic Violence Prevention, Uganda**
- **FONKOZE, Haiti**
- **Imani House, Liberia**
- **Karen Women's Organization, Burma**
- **Rozaria Memorial Trust, Zimbabwe**
- **Society for Women and AIDS in Zambia**
- **Union de Cooperativas de Produccion Agrícola Las Brumas, El Salvador**

# Graffiti Art and Grassroots Organizing: BOLIVIAN WOMEN BUILD A FEMINIST MOVEMENT

By Jordan Namerow

The phrase “We will not make Eve from Evo’s rib” is scrawled in thick, black paint on a concrete wall in downtown La Paz, Bolivia. The slogan—a play on the biblical story of how woman was created from the rib of man—refers, ironically, to Evo Morales, Bolivia’s president.

This graffiti art is just one public expression of Bolivian feminist discourse in a politically complex country. The conversation began in 1992 when a group that became known as *Mujeres Creando*—“women creating”—gathered together to address the needs of Bolivian women—needs that had been historically ignored.

Alarmed that Bolivia’s social, political and cultural leadership was dominated by men, *Mujeres Creando* sought to build an inclusive anti-racist feminist movement—no easy task in a country defined by sharp social class and cultural divisions. But members of *Mujeres Creando* quickly recognized that diversity was an asset—not a threat—in helping women build a feminist movement and improve women’s quality of life.

Knitting together a wide range of identities, causes and interests, *Mujeres Creando*’s work is as diverse as its members: lesbian and heterosexual; married, divorced and single; indigenous and mixed-race; young and old; domestic workers and sex workers; graffiti artists, filmmakers and radical activists.

In its 18-year history, *Mujeres Creando* has changed Bolivia’s political and cultural

landscape and pushed feminism into the mainstream through public art campaigns, education, innovative media and grassroots activism.

“We were tired of the traditional model of change in which everything was organized from the top down,” its leaders explained. “We didn’t want to be part of mainstream politics in which women only served tea or were nothing more than secretaries. We wanted to do something different to challenge the patriarchy and shift the balance of power.”

They set out to build programs that put women’s interests first. With AJWS’s support, *Mujeres Creando* established a public day care facility open to Bolivian women seeking a shared, safe space in which to raise their children and explore the cultural and social demands of motherhood. They launched a weekly radio program dedicated to reporting and analyzing incidents of gender-based violence against sex workers, domestic workers, lesbians and women in indigenous communities. They conducted outreach workshops in prisons and orphanages for women and girls who were victims of sexual assault. Using art as a vehicle for expression, workshop participants shared their own stories and self-knowledge to expose gender-based violence that would otherwise remain absent from media reporting.

They also launched *Mi Mamá Trabaja*—“my mother works”—a nursery and feminist pedagogical project designed for

mothers who work in the home or who support their families through sex work.

In 2005, *Mujeres Creando* opened a self-managed community center that provides accommodations for women who are victims of domestic abuse. The center has since become a nexus for feminist thought and for helping women launch income-generating projects by selling goods, and by hosting social and cultural events to bring feminism into the mainstream.

More recently, AJWS has supported *Mujeres Creando* to establish a free legal service called *Mujeres en Busca de Justicia*—“women seeking justice”—to aid women who are trying to escape the cycle of violence, but who are often overlooked by Bolivia’s traditional legal system. In its first year of operation, the service processed more than 800 cases.

*Mujeres Creando* is unique in Bolivia for providing such a comprehensive, grassroots approach to addressing women’s needs. Through its diverse programming the organization has reached many different communities of women and supported them in taking control of their lives.

By representing a strong voice for Bolivian women, *Mujeres Creando* sends a powerful message to society that women are rewriting their creation story. No longer content with being ‘Eves’ in service of Bolivia’s ‘Adams’, Bolivian women are being creators themselves—shaking up their country’s power structures in a way that people never thought possible. ■

# Empowering Girls to End Violence: ON-THE-GROUND LESSONS FROM INDIA

By Amanda Cary

**Z**eenat was only 17 years old, but she had already been divorced three times, all from marriages that were against her will. Like many of her peers, she was first married just after puberty to a man who abused her, an experience that was repeated in her following two marriages. She had never been to a doctor after being beaten, and was unaware that India's Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 should have legally protected her from abuse.

Zeenat's life changed when she came to Shaheen Resource Center for Women, an organization working in the slums of Hyderabad's Old City to help Muslim and Dalit\* women and girls combat gender discrimination and violence. Shaheen helped Zeenat negotiate an agreement with her parents acknowledging her legal right to be protected from early marriage and domestic violence. Its staff also referred her to a doctor to check for pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, and provided her with vocational training to enable her to become financially independent and therefore less likely to fall victim to a future abusive marriage.

If Zeenat does marry again, she will have the support of her family and the ability to leave if she chooses; the knowledge and resources to exercise her rights; and access to services to help her stay safe and healthy.

## Halting the Cycle of Violence

Zeenat's story is unfortunately common among poor adolescent girls in her community, her country and around the world. Violence keeps girls in poverty by rendering them physically or emotionally unable to earn an income. It also prevents

\* A self-designation for those traditionally regarded as the "untouchables" of India's caste system.



### BRIGHT FUTURES

Young girls in India can thrive if they escape the triad of early marriage, poverty and violence.

them from understanding and accessing their legal rights to education, healthcare, social services and freedom from abuse.

At the same time, poverty fuels more violence by limiting the resources that would enable girls like Zeenat to escape. They are utterly dependent on their abusers for everything from shelter to food to clothing. Laws that protect and support girls are needed to intervene and break the cycle. But even where they exist, such laws are too often weak, and frequently those who need them most either don't know about them or can't access their protections.

## The "One Stop Shop" Approach

Violence against adolescent girls and women is not only a gross human rights abuse and an affront to human dignity, it is also a major impediment to achieving global development goals. Violence is both a risk factor for and an effect of poverty, hunger and disease.

We know by now that investing in women and girls is the most effective way to reduce both, and that the causes are multiple and interconnected. Yet U.S. development funding provides few programs directed explicitly toward adolescent girls, and those that exist often operate in silos. Girls can access education from a program financed by one stream of funding, healthcare from another and vocational skills from yet another. Inflexible, single-sector solutions are inefficient and inaccessible to girls who do not have the time, money or freedom of movement to access disparate and distant support services.

The most effective programs, therefore, are those that offer a "one-stop shop," with an integrated set of tools and resources available to link together multiple sectors and support systems. Several AJWS grantees in India are finding success with this method. In each case, the organizations use a single entry point of support to connect girls to a broad network of interventions.

PHOTO: JOLIE SCHWAB

## Health

A health facility is often the first entry point to a social support system that brings an end to the violence in a girl's life. In too many cases, adolescent girls seek health services only after experiencing violence or rape, when they already have a range of immediate health and safety concerns as well as long-term needs that extend well beyond the health system. The integration of health and other services maximizes the likelihood that girls will be given choices that will keep them safe and healthy.

AJWS grantee Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA) addresses all of these interconnected issues. Its staff understand that a girl seeking medical care for violence also needs shelter in order to leave her abusive situation. She needs counseling and legal services, education and vocational training. SNEHA also recognizes that girls who access health services for reasons other than violence are still vulnerable to abuse. SNEHA can link them to services outside the health system that can reduce their vulnerability and support them if violence occurs.

*“We saw daily hospital reports of violence, yet... hospitals treated their physical conditions and then sent girls back to their abusive situations.”*

—Dr. Wasundhara Joshi, executive director of SNEHA

## Education and Economic Opportunity

Without job skills, young women in poverty often turn to risky employment in exchange for food or shelter, including sex work. This is especially true among marginalized populations such as the Muslim and Dalit communities in India, who often have particularly low school enrollment and retention rates because of their roles as caretakers and providers in the family and because of social and cultural norms that curtail their education after puberty.

Educating a girl and giving her the training she needs to secure economic opportunities is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty

and violence. Vocational skills training and access to technology have been shown to increase women's control over resources, broaden political awareness and ultimately reduce cases of domestic abuse.<sup>10</sup>

AJWS partner Awaaz-e-Niswaan (AEN) uses a college scholarship program as an entry point to offer vocational training, counseling and support for young women in crisis. It then uses these services as platforms for teaching them about human rights and advocacy more broadly. Many young girls who came to AEN for education and vocational training leave knowing how to access the tools—across many sectors—that they need to lead full and active lives free from violence.

*“If a woman is illiterate and then gets married, she is stuck. If her husband beats her, she can't leave because she has no options.”*

—A 21-year-old peer group leader at Awaaz-e-Niswaan

## Social Change

Prevention programs cannot ultimately be effective without addressing the underlying social norms that drive gender discrimination and violence.

This work is highly sensitive and involves challenging long-established practices and beliefs such as those promoting child marriage, dowry obligations, discriminatory divorce customs and unequal inheritance, as well as traditional concepts of masculinity, which often condone or encourage abuse of women and girls by men and boys.

AJWS grantee Girls Rise India\* helps girls gain the skills and confidence to challenge discriminatory attitudes, first in their families and then in their broader communities. It runs peer-led support groups that provide a safe space for girls to solve their own problems and then to work together to engage local leaders to create systemic, long-term change in both customs and laws.

\* The name of this organization has been changed to protect its members, who are operating in a highly sensitive environment.



**KNOWLEDGE IS POWER**

Girls at Awaaz-e-Niswaan learn their rights.

PHOTO AMANDA CARY

“The difference between the position I was in before and where I am now is like the difference between the ground and the sky.”  
—A 19-year-old peer group leader at Girls Rise India

## Legal Rights and Government Accountability

During the pivotal 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, governments worldwide declared that women’s rights are human rights, and that violence against women is an obstacle to achieving equality, development and peace. Yet, despite the existence of some progressive laws in many countries—such as India’s Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005—implementation remains weak, underfunded and ineffective.

SAHAYOG, an organization based in Lucknow, advocates for better implementation of the law, and Shaheen, SNEHA, AEN and Girls Rise India all offer women legal support to prosecute their cases. On a local, case-by-case level, these organizations are highly successful at holding perpetrators of violence accountable—be it formally through legal prosecution or informally through community pressure. Additionally, they organize public meetings, conferences, regional forums and media events to highlight problems with implementation of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act. In these ways, they leverage the impact of individual successes so that communities become more aware that violence against women and girls has consequences.

“Without knowing rights, we can’t change society.” —A 20-year-old peer group leader at Awaaz-e-Niswaan

## Empowering Girls to be Agents of Change

When girls are empowered, they have the freedom and confidence to access their



**THREE GENERATIONS**  
A family of activist women says ‘no’ to violence.

rights and the resources they need in order to lead lives free of violence. Empowerment comes with better access to health services, education and economic opportunities, and an adequate social safety net to support vulnerable populations. It comes with safe spaces to challenge social norms and gender discrimination. And it comes with the knowledge needed to exercise one’s rights and participate in the political process.

By comprehensively reversing the many ways adolescent girls are routinely disempowered and made vulnerable to violence, we can support them in forging new paths. Empowered girls grow up to be empowered women who can raise their children in a violence-free environment,

teach others about gender equality, contribute to raising the economic status of their families and communities, and hold their governments accountable for securing their rights. They become doctors, teachers, social workers, lawyers and community organizers. Most of all, they become agents of change for a new world—one that is free of violence—for the next generation of girls.

*This article is abstracted from an AJWS policy paper published in fall 2010. To read the original or to see other policy papers in our ongoing collection, visit [www.ajws.org/publications](http://www.ajws.org/publications).*

10 Footnotes: [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports)

### ► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The United States has recently increased its focus on gender issues, including violence, but still lacks the coordination, dedicated funding and multi-sectoral strategy required to comprehensively address the myriad factors that lead to violence against women and girls in the developing world. **AJWS urges our government to:**

1. Support local groups already doing this work, which are best placed to develop solutions that will succeed in their particular settings.
2. Provide flexible funding for a multi-sectoral, comprehensive approach.
3. Make stopping violence against women and girls a diplomatic priority, and encourage other countries to adopt anti-violence legislation and enforce human rights.

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# “We’re Going to be Okay”

*Refugee girls find hope through education and collective creativity.*

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**By Nicole Graham-Lusher,**  
*AJWS Volunteer Corps*

Despite the early hour, the classrooms and offices of Heshima Kenya are already buzzing noisily with the laughter of friends, the fussing of hungry babies, the clattering of breakfast dishes and the rush to prepare for the day. Upon entering the compound, each girl is welcomed into the warm fray with hugs, kisses and inquiries into the quality of her night. Hands are held, tea is poured and everyone settles into the security and safety inside the walls. If you didn’t know these girls and the painful pasts that lurk behind this sanguine

picture, you might think they were a group of typical carefree teenagers.

But their girlish laughter obscures heart-wrenching stories: The girls at this grassroots organization in Nairobi have fled from violence and unrest in countries like Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Sudan—places where rape is used as a weapon of war and where gender-based violence is endemic. Many escaped on foot as soldiers or rebels burned their villages. Some literally ran out of their countries, and continued to run until they reached Nairobi.

Most of the girls were trying to survive alone until they found Heshima Kenya, a community-based organization that became their refuge. It offers them group housing or shelter with host families,

provides counseling for their psychological trauma and advocacy support for their resettlement cases with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. It also offers an array of educational and vocational opportunities and the promise of a brighter future. In the shelter of these rooms, girls who have undergone unspeakable horrors make friends, teach each other the dances of their homelands, braid each other’s hair and laugh and giggle. In other words, they are—for the first time in their lives—safe to be teenagers.

When my husband and I decided to volunteer in Kenya with AJWS, I was presented with the opportunity to assist Heshima Kenya’s efforts in educating and empowering these refugee girls. With their problems so vast, I wondered what impact I—as an American educator—could make in their lives. I also felt hopelessly idealistic and quite naive as I tried to explain to my parents why I was quitting my job to move half-way around the world for a community I could only feel *might* need my help. But as we continued to make plans for our departure, a set of credible voices in international development provided me with evidence that the type of work I was going to be doing could make a difference. Nicholas Kristof and his wife Sheryl Wudunn’s book, *Half the Sky*, put into words everything I had been feeling in my heart. Their research confirmed that the foundation of any strategy to end the deprivation of women and girls in developing nations must be education.

*Half the Sky* echoes an emerging widespread belief in the international development community that educating girls and women could be the key to lifting communities—and maybe even whole nations—out of poverty. Girls with more schooling participate in greater numbers in the labor force, thereby earning more for their families and bolstering their contributions to society.<sup>11</sup> In addition to increasing their economic earning power, educating women has been shown to have a direct effect on the health of their children. Indeed, research shows that for every additional year of schooling that



**JUST ONE OF THE GIRLS**  
Graham-Lusher with Heshima  
Kenya girls in Nairobi

PHOTO NICOLE GRAHAM-LUSHER





#### PRACTICAL EDUCATION

Tailoring classes offer refugee girls new opportunities.

a mother attains, the infant mortality rate declines by five to 10 percent.<sup>12</sup> By providing educational opportunities to marginalized refugee girls, Heshima Kenya is working to ensure that this generation and the next will grow up healthier and better-educated.

It did not take long for me to experience the power of this work firsthand. Working with the brave women and girls of Heshima Kenya proved to me that knowledge has been the most effective antidote to the trauma of their pasts and uncertainty of their futures. If you ask any girl what she loves best about the organization, she will concur. These girls know that education is the ticket to a better life, a different life, a sustainable and independent life, a peaceful life.

One young woman quietly explained to me her desire to learn, saying: “Everyone in my family is gone. If I think about them I will get so sad I might die too. So I don’t think about them. Instead, I think about my English and my math homework.” In spite of this young woman’s tragedy, she told me, she had the strength and clarity of mind to recognize that an education is her surest path to stability and safety.

Heshima Kenya’s “Girls Empowerment Program”—whose curriculum I have helped revise—provides this route,

through a condensed introduction to skills in English, math and the local Kiswahili language, which enables the girls to begin to quickly navigate Kenyan society. It also teaches valuable life skills including financial literacy, HIV/AIDS prevention, child care and building self-esteem. And in addition to helping girls pursue formal educational paths, Heshima Kenya also offers a seven-month tailoring course, which, for many of the girls, is a key to economic independence, opening doors to owning small businesses and joining local women’s artisan collectives.

One such group, the Maisha Collective, was founded and operated by Heshima Kenya girls themselves. The members make tie-dyed scarves that they sell at local markets and stores throughout Nairobi. I spend part of each week with these lively girls, teaching them business practices like inventory and quality control. They are so passionate and intense about the creative aspects of their work that sometimes slowing them down to think about production details is a challenge. As I was explaining such matters in a recent meeting, one of the teenagers rolled her eyes at me and said: “Nicole, I’ll hire someone to do the boring stuff when I have my own business.” Her easy confidence and big dreams simply made me smile.

All of the girls at Heshima Kenya have lofty goals like these. But while their visions for the future are ambitious, they don’t forget to mark the many small victories along the way. On a recent afternoon one of the girls joined me on a visit to one of the boutiques selling the collective’s products. As we stood admiring the display, I saw tears slowly run down her face. After several moments, she collected herself, turned to me and said: “I am very proud of the Maisha scarves. I know I will be okay now. My baby will be okay now. I want to tell the other Maisha girls that we are going to be okay.”

While Heshima Kenya is still a fledgling organization (it was founded in 2007) and is still in the process of developing its own body of evidence to prove the merit of its programs, I have learned that the evidence of its success lies in the girls’ stories. Each girl who comes through Heshima Kenya’s security gate walks in with a story of trauma and pain, but as she spends more and more time in its cocoon of support, she slowly re-writes her story from tragedy to hope. Multiplied tens of times over, this evolution will transform their community.

Soon I will have to hug the girls goodbye. While I will miss working with them every day, I will take comfort knowing that I was not the first volunteer to give my time to Heshima Kenya’s girls, nor will I be the last. More than anything else, this experience has taught me that an investment made in a girl is a step toward healing the world. Heshima Kenya makes this investment every day, working hard to ensure that these young girls are able to live with “heshima”—Swahili for respect, honor and dignity. ■

*Nicole and her husband Ben are spending four months volunteering in Kenya as part of AJWS’s Volunteer Corps, and then traveling around the world. To follow their journey, check out their blog: [www.grahamandlusher.com](http://www.grahamandlusher.com).*

11-12 Footnotes: [www.ajws.org/ajwsreports](http://www.ajws.org/ajwsreports)

# It's the Youth's Responsibility to Uphold: Thoughts from a Teen Philanthropist

"I want to be part of a youth-driven philanthropic movement," explained 19-year-old Emma Tuttleman-Kriegler. "I want to be in community with people who share my passions."

Emma and a growing cohort of teens like her have redefined "philanthropy" in their own terms. Their vision of giving includes service and activism—and above all, building connections with others—as much as it does writing a check. When Emma traveled to Ghana as a participant in AJWS's Volunteer Summer program last year she began to explore this concept in a meaningful way.

"Before volunteering in Ghana, I viewed *tzedakah* as a top-down deed: *us* giving to *them*. While volunteering, I learned that I actually have a lot in common with people in Ghana. I also learned that disadvantaged communities don't only need our money; they need our trust and understanding. Through my volunteer service, I was able to give *tzedakah* a face, a name and a human connection—things that can be difficult to experience. I have begun to understand that *tzedakah* feels much more real when I have built relationships with the people who are benefiting from my financial support."

This feeling of connectedness is at the core of many young people's desire to serve. When Emma returned, she says, she "craved the connections I made with the people in Ghana and those on my trip. It was hard to find someone I could relate to who shared the same outlook on the world that I did." But now, studying international development and philosophy at Tulane University, she has found the community she sought in her classes and through Global Service League, a student group.

In addition to on-campus activism, Emma has helped promote more traditional giving. She recently raised money for AJWS by giving a presentation at the Jewish Community Foundation of San Diego, relating her volunteer experience to Jewish texts about *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*, and sharing reflections about what it was like to practice Judaism abroad.

She is also a donor herself, giving to organizations that foster sustainability (such as micro-credit lending) and that address problems facing women and girls. AJWS remains a favorite cause: "I really believe in AJWS's philosophy that partnership is key to sustainable development. I also think AJWS has an



PHOTOS JONATHAN STEINBERG

interesting perspective on philanthropy and what it means to participate responsibly in a global community."

Emma believes that a volunteer experience is imperative for any budding philanthropist, especially for people her age. She says that service "provides a stronger connection to the poverty in the developing world," and that having these experiences now will motivate young people to give more later in life.

"I think that is the deeper meaning behind service," she says. "If you are exposed to people or the issues of poverty, especially at a young age, you become a more empathetic, well-rounded individual. It is so important to preserve the humanity and value system that is the youth's responsibility to uphold." ■■■

—Jordan Namerow and Leah Kaplan Robins



#### COLLABORATION

Emma joins local efforts to build a community center in Ghana.

» Get together with others to promote global justice. To raise money for AJWS as an individual or team, set up a personal fundraising page at [www.ajws.org/fundraise](http://www.ajws.org/fundraise).



PHOTO: AVA SHAPIRO

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