



Didactic Booklet

Booklet n°6 December 2005

Women and Poverty

*« Understand
the causes of
women's
poverty »*

I. Introduction

Women and Poverty, Acknowledgement, Figures, a Reality

Today,

70% of the people who live below the poverty line are women; 2/3 of the adults who cannot read are women; 66% of the children not provided with schooling are girls.

Women working in rural areas produce half of the world's food production but possess less than 1% of the arable land.

As far as payment is concerned, women and girls accomplish 2/3 of the work, but they receive only 1/10th of the world's income.

As to politics, less than 15 % of the nationally elected people are women...

These figures are not the result of chance. Women suffer more than men from the various forms of poverty, since they are the victims of flagrant inequalities: unequal access to education, health, means of production,

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ownership and position of political responsibility, inequality of the salaries. Even if some progress has been accomplished in promoting equality between women and men, there is not to this day any society where women benefit from the same chances as men. Thus, for example, in many a country, women are not allowed to be owners and cannot borrow money. Only men have the right to possess the land. In case of divorce or widowhood, women sink into precariousness. In poor families, priority is often given to boys' education and professional training. However, an educated woman will be more autonomous, more respected, she will be able to give her children balanced food, she will see to them being vaccinated and will send them to school.

The feminization of poverty affects directly the whole of society. Yet, to give women the possibility to become emancipated, to develop their capacities and exercise them make the fight against poverty progress more rapidly and more thoroughly.

As you will read in this Cahier, the **AIC, 250.000** volunteers strong, most of them women, **is particularly sensitive to women's poverty**. In the 17th century already, it was women who responded to Saint Vincent's call for the service of the poor. The last annual report presented to the Delegates' Assembly in 2005 showed once more that women are at the centre of the AIC activities. Numerous projects initiated by the volunteers aim at promoting women; 80% of the beneficiaries of our projects are women.

The AIC is also particularly attentive to the issue of violence towards women; for several years it has been launching actions of prevention and awareness. Domestic violence, which is found everywhere in the world, is in fact one of the causes of women's poverty. As a matter of fact, even if this scourge does not only concern families in situation of poverty, violence towards women can drag them into poverty and social exclusion.

Beyond concrete actions at grass-root level, it is also important to direct one's effort towards **"more politically oriented" actions** in order to warrant women's rights and help equality between men and women progress. Today **the AIC** decided to send out, in the course of each meeting it attends, **a common message** which would define the **AIC** through an important aspect of its action: "the awareness of women's poverty". On the other hand, the **AIC** has to be aware of, present at and **committed to international events, notably such as the Women World March, the Millennium Goals, the follow-up of the World Conference on Women in Peking.**

We think that it is essential to integrate the **notion of "gender"** in our actions as well as in the way we analyze reality and in all our reports; this will allow us to take a "fresh look" at our appraisal of the place of women in the fight against the different types of poverty.

To finish with, we should be aware that, when implemented in isolation, these different strategies will not have a real impact on women's lives. A multidimensional approach is necessary to deal with the problem and concentrate our full attention on women. The problem has to be tackled from different angles, starting with actions at

a personal level, then at group level, and finally actions aiming at the structures.

The procedure to be implemented has to take into account other aspects, such as, for example:

- ▶ Carry out preventive actions.
- ▶ Target competent institutions, the public ones as well as the private ones, in order to provide women with the necessary medical, psychological, legal, etc. support.
- ▶ Encourage the participation of poor women in the formulation, completion and evaluation of the projects we are initiating and likewise, their participation in public policies.
- ▶ Promote the creation and maintenance of women's networks which encourage the mutual support and the well-being of all women.
- ▶ Develop political actions in favor of women and turn these projects into actions.
- ▶ Fight for women to enable them to demand their rights.

The path suggested in this Cahier has to be pursued not only with the awareness of the notion of gender, but also with respect to social matters, starting from the notion of citizenship in a civil society which recognizes, as well as reflects upon, its rights and duties. The AIC, acting at the individual and community levels as well as on the structures, wants to "co-help" in the construction of new social relations. The pivoting point of all our endeavors has to be a better acknowledgement of women as fully fledged subjects endowed with rights, in order for them to be listened to and stop them from being victims of discrimination due to gender and other forms of xenophobia, resulting from lack of understanding and ignorance of their cultural practices and religious convictions.

Account of the President of the AIC Madagascar, in the course of a training visit in July 2005 in the South of the island

Here is the story of a teenage girl from the South of Madagascar. Like almost all the girls generally, her parents do not intend for her to study since the boys have priority. At the age of 12, she is betrothed to anyone who will give a castrated goat, a maximum number of head of zebus and other outward signs of richness. The higher the dowry, the more the girl will suffer from it. Whatever it is, whenever he decides to repudiate her later on, he will only have to give a small sum of money. The "husband" has the power of life and death over his wife as soon as he has "bought" her. She will only eat when he has satisfied his appetite, but since she thinks of her children first, very often, she will only eat the leftovers of the whole family.

Impossible for her to get any kind of income. If she obtains a micro-credit, her husband will soon put the money into his pocket in order to buy a new head of goat; since the more he has, the more he is considered as "rich". Any kind of resistance to

this type of marriage forced by the girl's own parents is impossible to envisage because she would then find herself excluded from the family circle, she would be banned.

Then we advise her to leave in order to try somewhere else, but the family and ancestral ascendancy is such that this solution, even if it seems possible, will always come down to the same ritual: to let oneself being swapped against a dowry, etc. We will not mention here the usual harassments, the daily violence that she endures without balking: she simply has to put up with this situation. Does she even know that there are other ways? The fact that one or even several rivals are living next to her, with whom she has to share her husband, is also another problem.

In the face of the AIDS threat, these girls prove to be incredulous. We perceive them to be so naive and unaware. We are perplexed, because we hardly find any solution to these dilemmas. How can the AIC reasonably fight against these inequalities, these ancestral secular customs, most deeply rooted in their lives? With what means? Starting with education most certainly, but reality goes beyond all understanding...

This Cahier aims at helping us overcome a sentiment of powerlessness in the face of such a difficult reality. It suggests paths of actions and encourages us, once again, to become **creative protagonists in transforming the society.**



II. Women and Poverty: a Priority for the AIC

II.1 1617: Women Respond to St Vincent's Call

Sunday, August 20th 1617

A situation of great poverty

At the beginning of the month Vincent de Paul took on the parish of Chatillon les Dombes, near Lyon; he is a 36 years old priest; he is getting ready to celebrate mass when a woman parishioner comes to tell him that a whole family is dying of illness and misery in a house isolated from the others, 2 kilometres away from there.

To react to the news:

Moved, Vincent finds the words to alert the congregation; in the afternoon, after vespers, he goes himself to the place and is dumbfounded to see on the path some women *"in groups"*; let us listen to him:

"I was the priest of a small parish, however unworthy. Someone came to tell me that there was a poor man, ill and very badly accommodated in a poor shed, and this, as I was about to go and preach. Someone told me of his ill and his poverty, so that, moved by a great compassion, I commended him strongly (to their prayers) and with so much sentiment that all the ladies were moved. More than 50 came out of town, and I did like the rest, I visited the man and found him in such a state that I deemed fit to confess him; and as I was taking the Blessed Sacrament to him, I met some women in a troop and God gave me this thought: "Could not one gather these good ladies and exhort them to give themselves to God to serve the poor and ill people?"..

I suggested to all these good persons whom charity had motivated to go there and contribute, each one a day, not merely for these poor people, but for those who might also need help later on; and this is the first instance when Charity has been established" Coste IX 244.



To Organise a Well Thought-Out and Durable Solidarity:

As early as August 23rd, he gathers all these women and suggests to them the first draft of an association and its regulations. After having received the approval of the bishop of Lyon, on the 8th December 1617, our Lady's day, the first Charity comes into being. We admire the great detail of this regulation which can still be found in Chatillon, in the house of the Filles de la Charity: *"We will not gather more than a score of servants of the poor, so that confusion does not creep into the brotherhood through multitude", as well as details given on how to serve the poor, ... as our masters and lords. "Visit those who are by themselves last, in order to be able to stay with them longer."*

To propose a ministry of Charity in the Church:

Vincent becomes aware of the importance and the place of the laity in the life of the Church and wants to give them a responsibility: the ministry of Charity. We can detect here the influence of St François of Sales. He pays attention to the contribution of lay-women. In this way, they are the ones who suggest to him his first foundation and, in the course of the years, his spiritual vision becomes richer with the experience of faith of the women that he mixes with (Louise of Marillac, the ladies or girls of Charity).

Why Women?

It was women, as we saw, who answered Saint Vincent's call. Therefore it was women that St Vincent gathered in the first Charity "for the service of the poor and ill". He used to tell them: *"For 800 years women have not had any use in the Church... And now Providence is speaking to you today"*

There used to be mixed Charities in Joigny and Montmirail, but Saint Vincent relates: *"Men and women together do not agree as far as administration is concerned; These ones [the men] want it all to themselves and those ones [the women] cannot bear it".* He gives his preference to women and to their qualities of mothers of the poor.

1617-2006

In St Vincent's lifetime, Charities spread out very quickly throughout France and Europe, Italy, Poland, with the help of the "Pères de la Mission" and the "Filles de la Charité". They diversified their actions, responding to the most acute forms of poverty their contemporaries were suffering from: as beggars, galley slaves, as abandoned children, and as populations afflicted by war.

In the course of the centuries, Charities evolve, adapt their work to new forms of poverty and remain closely interlinked with each other. Today, the AIC counts 250.000 volunteers, essentially female, in 50 countries.

II.2 Women at the centre of the AIC activities

The 250.000 volunteers, to be found on the 5 continents in the world, unite their commitments, their charity, their charisma to accompany the most destitute and above all the women suffering financially and morally because they are poor and because they are women. The support for destitute women is a priority for the AIC; 80% of the beneficiaries are women, the many projects having as objectives the promotion of women are projects of education, technical training, access to employment, training in management, in knowledge of their rights and duties. All this aims at improving their quality of life, in order for them to become true agents in their homes, in their societies, in the working world, but also in the political sphere where they will be able, one day, to obtain the power to decide as much as the men; to summarise it all, to have their places in society.

Some concrete examples ...

Empowerment of a family of the AIC Madagascar

This family had come to us, all dirty, flies flying around the mother who had just gone through a difficult child-birth. The 4 children, all dirty as well from top to toe, had never been to school and were clinging to their mother. What would we do if this woman died? Where would we put up these children? How to heal this woman? How to relieve this family?

1 Project “First, a roof above the head”.

- ▶ The challenge for women wandering through the streets or at the town market with children trailing behind them, of regaining one’s dignity in having a hut, a shelter.
- ▶ The pride of possessing a key, of being able to welcome friends and parents.
- ▶ The first step to get out of poverty.

2 Project “nutrition – schooling and registering at the registry office”

- ▶ To be entitled to receive food before registering the children at the registry office and sending them to school.
- ▶ To be entitled to medical care.
- ▶ The fact that the children are accommodated at the shelter is the starting point for mothers to gain more freedom and opportunities to think of their own development.

3 Projects of empowerment for the mothers

- ▶ Training in the rights and duties of a fully-fledged citizen in society, so that they are able to take part in the life of the community.
- ▶ Teaching in reading and writing, sums, management.
- ▶ Training for small jobs, agriculture, handicraft, wickerwork and creation of selling points for manufactured goods.
- ▶ Training in baking to supply the small restaurants in their areas.
- ▶ Project of teaching reading and writing.
- ▶ Micro-credit and management of small businesses generating some income.
- ▶ Spiritual training and training in values for the mothers themselves in order to let them transmit what they have learned to others.

Insertion of foreign women by the AIC France

The social services have alerted us on the situation of young women newly arrived in France and very isolated: they do not speak French, do not dare going out of their houses. What could we do? We then had to open courses in reading and writing for women in the afternoon and organise a form of child-minding for their children who were not going to school.

These young foreign women come from all over the world: Africa, Asia, Latin-America, etc. and have very divers levels of training, they understanding French a little, but they cannot read nor write it.

1 Project for teaching reading and writing

- ▶ Organise 3 times a week, during school time, lessons for groups of about 15 women.
- ▶ Child-mind their children below school age, but leave them under their responsibility.
- ▶ Find a venue having at least 2 rooms.
- ▶ Train the volunteers who will become “teachers”.
- ▶ Work in partnership with the social services which propose the project to women, motivate them and regularly come and ensure a training in social life and family economy.

2 Positive results of the project

These women are learning French and this contributes to the fact that they become more autonomous.

It is also important for them to meet in groups, to create friendly relationships between themselves and with the volunteers.

And finally acquire a positive image of themselves.

True group dynamics favour the exchange of knowledge; at their request, we organise with them cultural outings, for they wish to know about French culture and help their children understand it.

Work in partnership is being put in place, among them (the more advanced ones helping the ones who understand less) and with them (they inform us of the topics which they would like to have covered).

Their children progressively learn to be away from them, and they from their children; staying at the day-nursery prepares the children to start going to school; it is often the only place where they hear French being spoken.

Can we not say that the volunteers relate to their pupils, all women, as equals who are equally concerned about their children's education?

In 2003, the AIC France had been invited by a TV channel to present its main activities. Among the volunteers present on the set, there was a pupil from a reading and writing course, a young woman from Morocco, S., and her "teacher", an AIC volunteer. As the presenter asked S. to speak, she said that, thanks to the course she had been taking for a year, with the AIC France, she could now speak directly with the doctor when her child was ill!

What a feeling of pride for her to be directly responsible for her child!

What a feeling of pride for her child to see that his mother does not need an intermediary any more!

What a feeling of pride for us due to this success!

All these projects complement each other in order to form a whole and unite in the support they give to destitute women; they lead towards the women's own empowerment and the reduction of their suffering.



Empowerment? Miracle? Social co-responsibility above all. Moreover, a lot of patience, a superhuman patience from the part of all the volunteers. Maybe this is the love mentioned in the Gospel. But the result was palpable only at the end of a very long tunnel that lasted for almost 10 years.



Therefore let us be patient in the face of all the difficulties which crop up.

Numerous women have been supported and accompanied by the AIC in the various associations. Each association is proud to show examples of these destitute women, beaten, victims of the customs, without any support, overcome by the trials and tribulations of life, but who, after a few years in our centres, have become go-getter women, proud to speak in public, lauding their rights and testifying about their successes in front of their fellow creatures who are still experiencing hardships, but whom they are ready to train in turn. **Are these not glimpses of hope?**

II.3 The AIC against violence towards women

Domestic violence, to be found everywhere in the world, is one of the causes of women's poverty. For, even if this scourge does not only affect families in situation of poverty, violence towards women can lead them into poverty and social exclusion.

For centuries, violence towards women, and more particularly domestic violence has been a "private affair"; one knew about it but one rarely spoke about it... Women suffered in silence.

Since the platform in Peking (1995), deep changes appeared. There are declarations and conventions against violence, documents, books and campaigns of awareness. Internet lists more than 10.000 sites dealing with the subject "Women and violence". This is now a public debate and many a state have laws to protect women. There are programs to prevent violence and shelters for beaten women who ask for help. **Domestic violence has become a notorious problem and more women dare speak about their suffering in public.**

Domestic violence has become a notorious problem and more women dare speak about their suffering in public.

But in spite of all that, ... domestic violence still exists. Declarations do not mean much to the women victims of violence; if laws exist, women often do not know them or they do not have the financial means to pay for a doctor or a lawyer who could prove the violations. They rarely have access to modern means of communication. They've never heard of the Conference in Peking. Beyond physical suffering, emotional and psychological suffering leave behind women who have lost their self-confidence, who have forgotten the meaning of self-respect and dignity. They feel abandoned and hopeless .

Since 1997, the AIC has entered a long-term process of fighting against violence towards women: campaigns of training the volunteers, campaigns of awareness and prevention. It is important to carry on committing ourselves year after year for mentalities evolve very slowly.

In the course of their campaigning, the AIC volunteers are often confronted with the serious problems that many a destitute woman they get to know encounters in this area. As agents of proximity, they are in the foreground for identifying the signs of violence. In many countries, groups of volunteers have organised concrete projects to accommodate and assist the women victims of violence (accommodation centres, shelters), organise meeting places where victims can find a sympathetic ear, or more, offer an accompaniment to the ones who wish to overcome this situation.

Two training seminars have been organised in Europe and in Latin America. After these seminars, the participants have passed on, in their own associations, the training they received by organising meetings, national seminars, local workshops and publishing articles in their bulletins. The volunteers have gathered information on public and private initiatives existing in their countries in order to have a better knowledge of the national laws, existing shelters and specialised services as well as the national campaigns of awareness.

A Manifesto of intentions has also been adopted and largely spread within the associations and the public. Moreover, since the Assembly in 2002, the volunteers



It is important to carry on committing ourselves year after year for mentalities evolve very slowly.



have committed themselves to realising each year concrete preventive actions, on the occasion of the international day for the eradication of violence towards women on November 25th.

The AIC is convinced that a prevention policy is an essential component of an efficient fight against violence.

Since 2003, the Prize “Jean Delva” finances innovative projects in the fight against violence towards women. The Prize Jean Delva is an appeal for projects, created thanks to the generosity of Claire Delva, former international president, who followed, in doing so, the wish of her late husband Jean Delva.

In this context, the AIC-Panama, for example, trained 140 young adolescents to become agents who bring about change in the prevention of violence. The association of Madagascar organised a photographic competition, open to the public, illustrating the problem created by the fathers abandoning the family home. The originality of this project lies in the fact that it made men aware of their share of responsibilities in the problem of violence towards women. The Madagascan volunteers also wrote and adopted a manifesto under the title “For a responsible fatherhood”.

This year, the AIC, through the person of Anne Sturm (past president), has been very active in the workgroup “Women and Violence” resulting from the International Catholic Organisations (OIC) Conference. The workgroup drew up a didactic document for all the men and women who work with the most vulnerable Women: the poorest women, the ones who cannot read nor write, the ones who are totally isolated, who suffer from a handicap, the migrants and especially the illegal migrants without protection. This document is not meant for specialists, but for volunteers, Filles de la Charité, teachers... who commit themselves through self-promotion and empowerment of the most vulnerable to find solutions which are adapted to their reality. It will soon be available on the Internet site of the AIC.

In spite of cultural differences, the suffering of women victims of violence remains the same, whether the suffering is tolerated, sanctioned or publicly admitted. Violence is never “normal” for the women who are subjected to it. Some of them have resigned themselves, but each woman deeply feels that she has the right to live without humiliation, without fear, in dignity and in peace.

AIC MANIFESTO AGAINST THE VIOLENCE SUFFERED BY WOMEN ALL OVER THE WORLD

WE, women members of the “Association Internationale des Charités”, gathered in Fortaleza, capital city of the State of Ceará (Brazil), from October 18th to October 21st 2001, to study the problem of violence towards women in our countries;

AWARE that for many among us, there exists a permanent situation of personal and social danger caused by various forms of violence, which, for centuries, have been turning us into victims on the cultural level;

NOTICING that the emotional and material damage caused by violence towards women have consequences for the families, societies, countries and the whole of humanity;

PERSUADED that it is necessary to continue our commitment in this area aiming at raising the awareness of a growing number of people in our respective countries;

DECIDE to commit ourselves further to the fight against violence towards women, to work on preventing it and to provide help for abused women;

AGREE that violence is unacceptable in the places and countries where there is a national association of the AIC;

COMMIT OURSELVES to enter partnerships in order to fight against this scourge, to persuade the social means of communication to take on our cause and plead in favour of public measures which defend and put forward the values of life, of a worthy life for all women;

INVITE all Women to say “THIS IS ENOUGH” of this perverse reality and fight, with us all and for our children, in order to rid our world of all types of violence;

This manifesto has been signed in October 2001 by:

Patricia P. de Nava, Past International President of the AIC

The members of her Executive Bureau and

The Presidents of national Associations of the AIC in Latin America and in Europe.



II.4 "Women and poverty": the common message of the AIC

Today, the AIC decided to send out a common message which defines the AIC through an important aspect of its campaign, "the awareness of women's poverty".

In the course of each meeting, performance, every time campaigns are being worked out, it is important to ask oneself the following questions:

- ▶ Does the action we are undertaking take into account the poorest women?
- ▶ Will it have an impact on these women?
- ▶ Have their opinions been canvassed?

Why such a common message?

The AIC, 250 000 volunteers strong, women in majority, present in more than 50 countries in the world, fight together with other women in difficulty, victims of injustice, of violence of all sorts, women suffering under the weight of cultures and traditions; these are obstacles which, in many countries, prevent women from being fully integrated into social, political and economical life.

The AIC is aware that often women are marginalised for two reasons, on the one hand because they are women and on the other because they are poor.

The AIC, taking their problems and their needs into account, has made it its mission to draw the attention of all, be it at a local, national or international level, and aims at promoting the awareness of the institutions and provoking efficient and quick answers.

AIC
=
The
awareness
of
women's
poverty



III. International awareness and political commitments

Beyond concrete actions at grass-root level, it is also important to commit oneself to actions which are closer to the “political” level in order to warrant women their rights and improve equality between men and women. The AIC has to be aware of, present at, and committed to international events, in particular such as the follow-up of the world Conference on women, the Women World March, the Millennium Goals. Moreover we as volunteers, can get information on these key-steps which mark out the path toward equality between men and women (there are numerous Internet sites). At the local level, we can question the public representatives about the implementation of women’s rights in the political decisions they take.

Do you know that the states taking part in large international conferences (therefore yours as well) are bound to submit follow-up and evaluation reports regularly? Why not tackle these questions during team meetings?

Fourth World Conference on Women, Peking 1995

(www.un.org/french/events/womenfr)

The platform in Peking 1995 – 2005, 10 years of commitment!

In 1995, the World Conference on Women in Peking reasserts that equality between men and women is a fundamental right. Both a Declaration which reflects the commitment of the international community and a Programme of targeted actions on 12 priority subjects have been passed. Representatives of the AIC were present in Peking and the AIC wrote a preliminary document of opinion on the project of the Action Platform.

This year, Solange Choppin de Janvry, AIC representative, also took part in the International Conference “Peking + 10”. In her report, she shares with us the following information. At the beginning of this follow-up meeting mitigated results were reported. In spite of the fact that some positive advances have been made (the increased number of ministries and units for women, the vote of some laws and legal reforms in their favour, the intensification of work in networks), the political will of considering women’s cause a priority matter is lacking.

For the AIC, the subjects which held our attention, apart from girls’ education and women’s rights are:

HIV/AIDS: in sub-Saharan Africa, 76% of the infected people between 15 and 24 are young women.

Widows and tradition: in patriarchal societies, women’s social status is determined according to their husbands’ status; in her husband’s absence, a woman does not socially exist and she is submitted to degrading customs.

Women and migration: they constitute half of the migrants. They often live cut off

from the world. They often have difficulties accessing health services. When a woman does not herself have the personal status of a migrant but depends on her husband's, she may be more vulnerable to domestic violence. More and more migrant women become the prey of prostitution networks.

Women and prostitution: prostitution is an international criminal activity which is rapidly expanding, the third one after drugs and arms trade. Approximately two million women and children are being sold to the sex industry each year.

Women and violence: conjugal violence and violence towards women in wartime.

Do we know the 12 priority themes of the Action Programme of Peking adopted by the states which signed the final Declaration in 1995? How do the policies of equality between men and women evolve in our countries? What changes have taken place during the last 10 years?

The development of the Millennium Goals (ODM)

www.un.org/french/millenniumgoals

A common framework of reference for development policies

In 2000, the 189 states present at the general Assembly of the United Nations committed themselves, by means of 8 goals, to making development progress and reducing poverty between now and 2015.

1. Reduce extreme poverty and hunger
2. Ensure primary education for all
3. **Promote gender equality and women's autonomy**
4. Reduce the mortality of children younger than 5
5. Improve mothers' health
6. Fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria and other illnesses
7. Ensure a durable environment
8. Set up a world partnership for development.

For the first time in History, there is a true consensus denouncing poverty as the greatest world problem. The Millennium Goals, of course, are not complete, but their merit is to exist. They constitute a strong political commitment. Eight goals, 18 particular targets and 48 control indicators of the progress accomplished till 2015. This is an immense but realisable challenge which, evidently, can only progress if the citizens prove to be attentive to the expression in concrete terms of the eight defined goals.

Are we checking that our countries keep on respecting the 8 goals? Do we have, in our areas, meetings or seminars aiming at heightening the awareness of civil society in order to understand better the issue of the Millennium Declaration? Have we already taken part in one of them?

Women World March

www.marchemondialesdesfemmes.org

Women set off marching again, against poverty and violence against Women

Why a walk? The idea of organising a Women World March in the year 2000 was born following the Women March against poverty which took place in 1995 in Québec (Canada).

The World Forum of Peking, in the same year, confirmed that everywhere in the world Women are more than ever determined to fight for equality, development and peace. During this forum the idea of a World March was launched.

Being a world-wide network of actions to fight poverty and violence against women, the “Women World March” collected in 2000 the support of nearly 6000 groups in 163 countries and territories. From 2003 onwards, a World Chart has been written. It includes 5 fundamental values: equality, freedom, solidarity, justice and peace.

In 2005, women from all over the world started marching again to spread this Chart. Additionally to a great number of national actions, on October 17th 2005, at noon, Women from each time zone have joined forces to show their support for the Women World Chart in favour of humanity and for its values.

Do we know what happened in our countries, in our towns, in the course of the day on October 17th during the Women World March? Could we take part in the one or the other manifestation? Have we met there some partner organisations close to our association, also working with destitute women?

We suggest that you also visit the site of the PNUD (United Nations Programme for development): www.faireequipecontrelapauvret.org

This site is very didactic; under the heading “Act, how and with whom” in particular, you can find numerous ideas of actions like some simple gestures to be made which drive back poverty - and therefore women’s poverty. It presents a questionnaire on poverty, the Quiz, which could be used in team meetings. It explains the Millennium Goals, etc. A must-consult!

IV. Apply the analysis of *gender* in the AIC projects...

More and more often, the AIC actions are presented in the shape of projects. This is a good sign! This proves, on the one hand, that we adopt a method which avoids improvising and wasting resources (time, energy, and money) in actions aiming at fighting against poverty which are hardly efficient. On the other hand, this allows us to transform in the most efficient way possible the situations of injustice at the root of a problem. Last but not least, project work enables us to target the concrete need(s) of distressed people better and to support them better in their search for autonomy and dignity (as advocated by one of the AIC guidelines: the empowerment).

If we reread the story of the young Madagascan girl (see the beginning of this Cahier), we realise that she meets many obstacles which prevent her from taking her own decision as far as her life is concerned and from having the means to be autonomous. According to the rules of the society she lives in, she must remain forever submitted to a kind of slavery.

However, the AIC volunteers must not stop at the question "How can we reasonably fight these inequalities, these age-old ancestral customs, most deeply rooted in their lives?" Even if, effectively, reality sometimes goes beyond our understanding, let us try, as volunteers, to overcome our fear to "swim against the flow" and aim at more justice.

In order to do so, the best way is first, to learn new concepts, such as "gender", which help us understand better this reality and then, to apply these concepts in our projects.

But what does the notion of "gender" mean?

Whether we are a man or a woman, there is an obvious biological difference! But when a woman has to eat after all the members of her family, it is a cultural difference.

These two examples show the difference between the notion of sex, which refers to biological characteristics, and the concept of "gender" which refers to men's and women's relationship and social roles, determined by the economic, social, political and cultural context in which they live.

Unlike the biological differences, these roles and relations change according to the social and cultural organisation, time and space. They are not universal and can evolve and be modified.

If, as a matter of fact, the distribution of the roles varies from one culture to the next, in the majority of societies, women have a more restricted access to resources, their chances are more limited and they have less possibilities to be part of the decision making process.

Our aim is to modify this situation when it presents itself concretely, to achieve that men and women take an equal part in the process of development and equally benefit from its profits.

The analysis of “gender” in the case of the young Madagascan girl:

It seems obvious to us that one of the structural causes of the violence the young girl is submitted to takes its origin in the distribution of the roles between men and women in the society where she lives. We can see that, according to the local custom (and it is also so in the rest of the country), the parents sell their daughters. One can even assert further that it is the father who sells his daughter, since he is the one who becomes richer through this exchange and not his wife. Apparently, in the community, it is the husband who gets and disposes of the family money, even if it is the woman who generates the income. In the same way, this custom also imposes on women to be the last one to eat, after her husband and her sons.

How can we intervene to change this unfair situation? If we think about it, we quickly realise that neither a reception centre for these women, nor a project to make up for their lack of food will resolve the problem. What should we do then?

To start with, although the situation of the young Madagascan girl is similar to the situation of girls in other countries or continents, there are always some particularities specific to each region, sometimes the customs also vary from village to village. Moreover even if her situation seems very far from a European girl's, the inequalities between men and women do exist indeed in the North as much as in the South, but they take on different forms. Therefore there is no easy answer nor any ready-made solution for that. But, before suggesting an action, one has to analyse all the problems in depth, and especially the ones resulting from the distribution of the roles between men and women in a given community.

Then, let us dare believe that culture can evolve with time, as proven by history: the right to vote, to elect or be elected for women; female company directors, etc. These cultural beliefs have evolved in many countries. Consequently, let us not be afraid of proposing different roles.

Here, in our example, the violence endured by the young Madagascan girl clearly has a cultural origin. But, it is not always that easy to detect whether the difficulties for a given group are generated by the distribution of the roles or by the social, economic or political context. This is the reason why we suggest some avenues for you to explore and some questions for you to study before working out a project. This is essential in order to highlight some aspects of reality which are often invisible.

The more we visualise these aspects, the better we understand the concept of *gender and the more we realise that the fight against poverty is possible only if we can establish men's and women's effective contributions and if the power of the most destitute is reinforced.*

We have to aim at a reduction of the unfair political and economical differences between the genders. This is an important element of the *empowerment of the community.*

In order to do this, we first have to:



- ▶ Get information on the community: Which values, attitudes and conceptualisations are being shared by the members of the community/target-group? Why? Where do the rules come from, which are imposed on members of the community?
- ▶ Differentiate between the men and the women (the girls and the boys) of the target-group:
- ▶ Systematically count the number of women and men (girls and boys) in our target-group. If it is made up of men or women only, we should ask ourselves why.
- ▶ In the course of the day, which are the occupations of the men, the occupations of the women? What is the consequence of this distribution of roles and responsibilities on the autonomy of each group? Who has more spare time? Who manages the household resources?
- ▶ What is the decision-making process like in the household/the community for which a project is proposed?
- ▶ Who controls money in the household?
- ▶ Analyse in what ways the problems (malnutrition, lack of reading and writing skills, illnesses, unemployment, violence, etc.) affect women and men differently:
- ▶ Consult the women on their problems and opinions.
- ▶ Understand what their practical needs are, for example: food, clothes, money or any other material need susceptible of improving their quality of life;
- ▶ Understand which are their strategic needs, for example: more participation in the process of decision-making which determine their every day life; more access to resources and opportunities; diminish their work load; or everything which can allow the women to assume a new role in their communities and, in doing so, develop their empowerment.

Do the unequal relations of power prevent the development of the target-group?

- ▶ Analyse the statistics of the region/community (if they are available), as far as the targeted problems are concerned, and break them down according to the sexes:
- ▶ What is the incidence rate of illnesses (AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, etc) in men and in women?
- ▶ What is the men's rate of malnutrition, and the women's?
- ▶ What is the men's rate of lack of reading and writing skills, and the women's?



And then...

Once these facts have been established, let us analyse which are the possible risks that the access to and control of the resources are unequal for the target-group. Do the unequal relations of power prevent the development of the target-group?

Strategies of action for the elaboration and the realisation of the project:

- ▶ Consult the target-group before proposing a project. As we have learned in the course of several training sessions, listening to the people is very important at the AIC: it makes it possible for us not to substitute ourselves to people in difficulty but to be able to accompany them and support them in their participation in the project.
- ▶ This is even more important in the case of inequalities between men and women. For only the people in difficulty themselves can tell us what they really feel and need.
- ▶ Make sure that the benefits of the project effectively reach the target-group and are divided according to its members' participation and power, while simultaneously trying to compensate for the lack of power, so that the people in difficulty become able to overcome the problems they are faced with.
- ▶ Identify in advance the impact that our actions could have on inequalities and, should we fail, be ready to make up for the consequences of these actions that could arise.
- ▶ Plan the projects according to the facts that you have observed and make sure that their realisation takes into account the goals of *empowerment*.

V. Conclusion

Women help women!

How, as we are confronted with different types of poverty experienced by women, not to refer to Jean Paul's II texts which are still so much up to date; here is what he wrote in his message for the World Peace Day, on January 1st 1995:

"Many women, because of their social and cultural backgrounds ... or because they are victims of a materialistic and hedonistic mentality, do not reach the full awareness of their dignity:

Women should help women discover their own interior richness, ... their irreplaceable role of teachers of peace in society..."

We, AIC volunteers, aware of our commitment and of our mission, know that in the socio-economic context where we live, the development of a country will be achieved only with the effective participation of women; we also know that this participation will be for them a mainspring for their empowerment and their decision-making power.

Although some women strengthen their position in terms of education, employment, leadership, this participation still is of secondary importance for the majority of the women. The need to increase women's representation at the local, national and international levels is urgent. Each one, whether man or woman, has a specific role to play in society, each one has his own particular charisma.

As soon as, as it is often the case, women's role is restricted to being mere "maid-servant" and carrying out male or parental orders, the whole of society loses a part of women's intelligence.

It is therefore essential to favour girls' and women's education since this is where the key to development lies:

- ▶ Motivate the ones who are about to succeed (for example, through giving them grants to study).
- ▶ Insist on the creation of infrastructures to alleviate women's work (water conveyance, public drinking fountains...).
- ▶ Increase micro-finance agencies and facilitate women's access to them.

"But what can we say about the obstacles which, in many countries, still prevent women from fully integrating in social, political and economic life?" (Pope JP II).

This quotation is closely akin with the general theme chosen for the next Delegates' Assembly in 2007 and spurs us on to commit ourselves further in women's favour. The reflections that we hope to develop at the Assembly and that we already ask you to reflect upon are as follows:

understand to which extent, and in which circumstances the values, the traditions and the cultural institutions present in a society, have an influence on the roles of women and men. In which way can these roles be an obstacle to women's development and which are the best means for overcoming this cause of women's poverty?

Our motto: "Against the different types of poverty, act together", pushes us to join all the existing forces in society, following Pope Jean Paul's II appeal, *"a pressing appeal so that all, in particular the states and the international Institutions, do what needs to be done to give back to the women the full respect of their dignity and of their role"*



A mainly women's association organized
at world level, including
more than 150,000 volunteers
in 6,000 local teams in 50 countries.

Founded by St. Vincent de Paul in 1617
to fight any forms of poverty and
injustice and to give women an active
social and recognized role,
in a spirit of solidarity

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