

# Training Booklet

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## **AIC 2007 : Women & Poverty Diversity of Cultures**

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# Introduction

March 2007: AIC–Italy will host the International Assembly in Rome.

We expect about 350 delegates to attend, but the assembly involves all of AIC’s 250,000 members to whom we dedicate this booklet.

Convocation of the General Assembly is a statutory obligation; just as each one of our national associations must organize general assemblies, so must AIC: AIC statutes state, in Article 9, that this assembly “has full powers enabling it to fulfil AIC objectives. It meets, by law, every 2 years”.

But AIC wishes to go beyond the simple legal aspect of a statutory assembly. We have transformed this statutory international assembly, so rich in talent and goodwill, into a vital component in the life of our association – exchanging ideas, reflecting and planning for the future. Those who have had the privilege of attending such an assembly know that it is an opportunity to exchange and confront our experiences, to pray together and to work on the chosen theme. For the Rome Assembly, the theme will be:

## **“Women and Poverty – Diversity of Cultures”**

This theme fits in with our other AIC commitments, particularly that given in the message which emerged from the Santo Domingo Assembly “Women and Poverty” (see Book No 6, December 2005).

Many associations have returned the questionnaires that were sent out with the first preparatory letter. Analysis of these questionnaires enabled members of the Permanent Committee to plan a program which would meet the concerns of volunteers working in the field.

Assembly delegates will want to share their day-to-day experiences as working association members. When they return home, they will want to pass on to their colleagues what they have learned during the assembly.

All our members must work and must reflect on their work in order to improve the life of those who live in poverty,

## **AIC 2007: Women and Poverty – Diversity of Cultures**

The General Assembly planned for March 2007 in Rome will consist of two elements: a statutory one, which is necessary to evaluate the work of the last 2 years and plan the next two.

The second element will focus on the theme



### **“Women and poverty – Diversity of Cultures ”**

Although women have improved their standing in the fields of education, employment and leadership, the majority still plays secondary roles. Figures show an alarming increase in women’s poverty. Where women are too often dependent on men, and while they are reduced to following orders coming from fathers, husbands or sons, society as a whole loses some of these women’s creativity, adaptability and affectivity.

We at AIC, conscious of our commitment and mission, know that in the current socio-economic context, a country’s development can only be achieved through the effective participation of women; we also know that this participation will be crucial for the promotion and empowerment of these women.

Our actions and projects are adaptable and benefit from the richness inherent to AIC’s cultural differences. As an international organization we want to understand to what extent and in what circumstances cultural values, traditions and institutions influence the roles and the status of women and men, and create or exacerbate the problem that is women’s poverty.

In Rome, we shall have the opportunity to share our experiences, evaluate our actions and plan what we can do to support women who live in poverty and are marginalized. In addition, we are convinced that, although cultural factors are often part of the problem, they can also become essential blocks on which to build long-term development.

Another point to emphasize: improving the plight of women will not succeed if we confine ourselves to working with women alone. We cannot hope for a change in women's situation unless we get men involved as well.

You may wonder why this book introduces the new assembly, when only a few representatives from each country will be able to attend.

The reason is that the assembly is a time for training, not only for delegates but also for all volunteers. It is also a time to evaluate the quality of our services and our responses to the needs of the poor. Evaluation is a duty for all AIC members, not just associations or presidents. It is a duty to the poor who deserve efficient and up-to-date services, taking into account the evolving nature of their needs and of society.

In the fight against poverty, each association, each volunteer leaves an imprint that is unique; the AIC spirit of solidarity and co-responsibility with the excluded or marginalised is built on all these contributions.

# I. Women & Poverty

## 1. A situation with contrasts

Various types of poverty affect women. The most common are: discrimination and denial of their rights, illiteracy, violence, uncertain food supply, lack of access to education, to health services, to economic activity, ownership of property.

Statistics help us to know and understand better the obstacles to women's development.

- Out of 114 million children not in school, 60% are girls
- 876 million adults are illiterate, of which two thirds are women.
- Throughout the world, women occupy only 14% of all positions of responsibility and 10% of parliamentary seats.
- 15 million women have injuries, infections and other complications as a result of childbirth.
- Every minute a woman dies of complications related to pregnancy or childbirth (more than 500 000 women every year).
- 42 million people live with the AIDS virus, of which 39 million are in developing countries; today half of infected people are women, while only 10 years ago 30% of AIDS patients were women,
- 14 million children have lost one or two parents from AIDS. The number of "AIDS orphans" is expected to double by 2010.

**In Europe**, according to the EEC:

- 17% of women are affected by financial poverty, as against 14% of men.
- Only 55% of women (between 15–65) are employed
- 33% of active women work part time, only 6% of men do
- In 2003, the difference in salaries was 15% (20% in France, 25% in Cyprus)
- Female immigrants are subjected to double discrimination: gender and ethnic origin. In 2001 these female immigrants earn, on average, 10% less than women from the EU.
- Between 40 and 50% of employed women have encountered one form or another of sexual harassment, or unwanted sexual behavior, in the workplace.
- Each year almost 500,000 women enter Western Europe as part of the illegal trade in humans.
- 1 in 5 women suffers violence at the hands of their male partners; 95% of all violent acts against women happen in the home.
- 85% of single parent families are headed by women.

And yet **change is taking place**.

On almost all continents, women's political power is growing:

- In Rwanda, for example, 48% of members of parliament are women (a figure that is matched only by Scandinavian countries), 50% of judges are women, 50% of university graduates are women; in Afghanistan and Iraq, countries where democracy is still in its infancy, women already hold 27% and 25% respectively of parliamentary seats.

- Chile, Mozambique, Liberia, Sao Tome and Principe, South Africa , Zimbabwe have women presidents, heads of government or vice-presidents.
- In Europe 58% of women have a college degree and 41% of doctorate holders are women.

## 2. Culture and the evolution of the status of Women

The differences between men and women constitute a major problem for all cultures.

The small child discovers his/her sexual identity – I'm a boy, I'm a girl – and assimilates it during childhood through contacts with the parent couple and his/her environment. This process will enable him/her, in adult life, to accept the difference and feel attracted towards the opposite sex. In addition each culture offers children not only a vision of both genders and the various roles associated with age and marital status but also many principles regarding the relationships they have with each other. Nothing can replace this type of education acquired through attitudes, stories and myths. **The cultural interpretation of sexual distinctions is in the core of everyone's identity.**

The question of relations between the sexes has turned out to be one of the most sensitive issues in our profoundly changing world, all the more so because any change in that field will disturb the identity profiles of both sexes and thus the patterns of dominance (and therefore power). Consequently it affects not only the individual in his/her self-image, but also the social person and his/her power within the group.

In addition, in so far as gender identity is itself a relational phenomenon (men define themselves as such through their relations with women, and vice versa), **any change in the status of women in a given society will also affect the self-image of men in that society.** If men can no longer have with women the types of relations they have been familiar with since childhood, (in other words behave towards them “like their fathers did”), they will have a tendency to think that women are not “real women” any more and that they are no longer real men. All the arguments imaginable will not get rid of this impression, because the fundamental relationship between men and women is based on rituals and symbols.

However **change is inevitable in life, and new roles often change old habits.** The crucial points in this matter remain the need to preserve one’s identity, female or male, and the resulting ability to have harmonious relations between men and women.

Unfortunately it is a fact that cultures based on traditional laws or religious freedoms are more concerned with defending the privileges men have traditionally enjoyed than standing up for women’s rights. Do we know of even one case of law or code promoting women’s rights or privileges which is being vigorously defended in the name of cultural integrity?

### 3. Factors which are indispensable in achieving an improvement in the status of women.

*According to the Millennium Development Goals*

The 2000 Millennium Declaration includes the 8 Development Goals that 189 UN members committed to achieve by 2015. MDGs aim at reducing hunger, poverty, disease, illiteracy, environment degradation and discrimination against women. In fact, the declaration recognizes that the equality between men and women and the increase in women's power play an essential role in the development process.

Reminder: Millennium Development Objectives

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote genders equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Fight HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop global partnership for development

For several years we have been talking in AIC about MDG's and their importance – especially in the effort to improve the status of women. Today, more than a third of the time allocated to the implementation of the Development Goals has passed. Statistics do show some progress, especially in East Asia. However, in other countries, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, and wherever there is either AIDS or war, there is actually regression, for example the increase of shantytowns in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The question remains: “How do we reverse this process?”

Factors that slow down the implementation of MDGs are easy to identify and can be summarized in one sentence: **the lack of a firm political will** in both industrialized and developing countries. MDGs will never be implemented where there is no: stable peace, social co-responsibility of all citizens, reliable government, honest legal system, economic growth and balanced commercial relations, strong fight against corruption, sufficient public infrastructure and protection of the environment.

The importance of these factors is obvious in countries that benefit from some economic progress. It is easy to see that without transparency, justice, social co-responsibility, a fair labour market and a protected environment, progress favours only a small minority and leaves behind a large majority of the population. This is especially true in the post-communist countries of Europe and some African and Latin American countries. Women, people living outside urban centres and those who are unskilled, benefit little or not at all from economic development; their standard of living also falls.

It is obvious that without economic development, MDG's do not get implemented, but they have even less chance of being implemented without a social infrastructure based on values such as justice, respect for human dignity and gender equality. **That is the challenge for us AIC volunteers: educate public opinion, awake the social conscience of governments and authorities at all levels, bear witness, educate people and expose dishonesty.**

In this context we must emphasize that gender inequalities are not only harmful to women, but also to families, communities and countries. Promoting women's rights and strengthening their own ability to take action, promoting education and particularly the education of women, are essential elements in reducing poverty. The purpose is to support women and give them the means to be a part of lasting development and to make education accessible to women and girls. Their rights to ownership of land and economic resources (right to own land, capital and inheritance) must be promoted. They have a right to participate in political action and to access food and medical care. They must be informed on nutrition, on HIV/AIDS, legal rights and social assistance. Their unpaid, everyday social work such as caring for children and elderly must be acknowledged as well as their economic contribution.

### What needs to be done?

Achieving MDG's objectives will only be possible through the improvement of the status of women, their empowerment. AIC is trying to respond to that challenge. In Book No.6 – Women and Poverty – you can find pointers for your projects. For other suggestions, to achieve MDG objectives at association level, go to the following site of the UN's Program for Development:

[http://www.teamstoendpoverty.org/script/pnud.webquick.Surf/es/agir/comment\\_associations\\_femmes?langue=en](http://www.teamstoendpoverty.org/script/pnud.webquick.Surf/es/agir/comment_associations_femmes?langue=en)

There is also a UN initiative, the Millennium Campaign, which informs, inspires and encourages individual involvement in actions aimed at achieving MDG objectives. It supports citizens' efforts to make sure their governments keep their promises, signed at the Millennium Summit.

*Regarding Goal No.1: reducing extreme poverty and hunger.*

The Fianarantsoa AIC was recently selected by the government, with 30 other associations, to supervise 10 sites where the fight against childhood malnutrition was being carried out within a government program responding to MDO objective No.1: reducing extreme poverty and hunger.

What a great recognition from the government!

#### 4. Poverty of women encountered by AIC volunteers

We noticed, when working with and reflecting on the questionnaire responses in preparation of the 2007 International Assembly, the importance of having chosen "Women and Poverty" as the theme for the AIC as a whole and the **necessity** for this choice.

This conclusion was generated by analyses done by teams in the field. Its importance is more than obvious. We must take to heart our commitment to women, to defend them and to educate them to respect themselves. We must do all in our power to ensure that society looks on them with more respect and treats them with dignity.

We also saw the need to **consider women as women**, not only as mothers and spouses. The manner in which they are treated must come from the fact that they are women, and we have to plan activities to encourage that vision.

We also realized that women, mostly for cultural reasons, **interrupt their processes of training**, conviviality, apprenticeship etc. Men, on the other hand, do not interrupt them. This implies that women are always left behind; often they don't even take up where they left off in their interrupted development.

In gender relations, our teams noticed almost inevitable inequalities in opportunities, lack of education for girls, salary discrimination, and the fact that women are often abandoned by their husbands.

In many countries, females are still undervalued, their rights are ignored and the negative influence of the media does not enable women to reinforce their social and professional autonomy.

The phenomenon of single mothers continues to grow. In underprivileged regions and rural zones, there is a growing number of very young pregnant women and teenage mothers.

Another phenomenon is growing worldwide: family violence.

In Europe, like in the US, the risk of poverty has increased. Access to the work place is difficult for women in trouble, and work with temporary contracts offers no guarantee against an uncertain future. As for part time work, it does not generate enough income for single parent families (single mothers).

Women's extreme poverty generates psychological and mental fatigue that can drag them into social exclusion, solitude and isolation, psychological problems and alcoholism. In this respect, immigrants are very vulnerable.

We must encourage the recognition of women as "agents of change", which they are through their specific contribution to the progress of families, communities and humanity. We must help them so that their legitimate aspirations to participate fully in cultural, social, economic and church life are recognized.

Following this reality analysis generated by teams' responses, we are going to present in brief some actions in which AIC teams got involved to respond to women's poverty:

### **Immigrant and refugee women**

Problems arising from immigration exist in many countries. Cultural differences are obstacles to integration. AIC teams bring varied solutions to women who wish to get trained and prepare themselves to face life's challenges in all domains:

- workshops and classes to give access to culture; knowing the way of life and civilization of their new country enables them to integrate better and access its culture.
- professional orientation, legal help, administrative assistance, help to find lodgings and deposit for rentals, help in getting legal status, follow-up of families
- bring pressure to bear in situations where there are problems in regularizing the status of immigrant population.

### **Projects to support women's work and small loans:**

There are different forms of support:

- Training workshops and inexpensive classes, to prepare women in their search for jobs. In this field our teams have been very creative.
- information and welcome service, training workshops (cooking, sewing, literacy, care of elderly and sick, child schooling, computer, preparation of high school diploma)
- scholarships for work, follow-up of beneficiary when she has found work
- legal counseling
- complementary services (childcare, trips, socializing, etc)

All this training aims at getting women to obtain the minimum income necessary to look after their families. Example: examining the possibility of setting up businesses, making more micro credits available, establishing cooperatives.

*Concrete example: prevention of prostitution among deprived adolescents.*

These are girls from 10 to 16. In local cultures, because of extreme poverty, prostitution is a way to contribute to family income.

Volunteers organize various training activities so that the girls can give some financial support to their families through honest work, and learn skills leading to empowerment. These activities provide training scholarships and financial assistance in finding work.

## Violence

Domestic violence is on the increase, which is a concern. Home can be the most dangerous place for women, and it is often a place of cruelty and torture.

There are several house projects that welcome victims of violence or exploitation. They receive psychological support, help towards social reintegration through study or work, gradual and supported autonomy, with the added support of a network.

There are projects for prevention and education of the young in schools. Here social co-responsibility goes into action, through participation of all institutions and authorities, as well as the media.

## Questions

*Is your group active in any of the 6 fields below?*

- Educating girls to achieve autonomy
- Migrant women
- Women victims of AIDS and prevention of the disease
- Women victims of violence and prevention of same.
- Loneliness and the elderly
- Financial autonomy of women.

*AIC representatives in international organizations would like to hear the stories of people you have helped: their situation, what AIC has done for them, what their hopes are for the future.*

*You can either bring your testimonies to the assembly, or send them by email to AIC, specifying they are for the assembly.*



## II. Commitment of AIC

### 1. Spiritual Roots

When he entrusted the service of the poor to the first Ladies of Charity, St Vincent also gave them a treasure: the secret of his inner life, the spiritual dynamics which brought him to the heart of the Trinity, towards the person of Christ, source and model of all charity, and enabled him to **make the link from faith-to prayer-to contemplation-to action.**

We know that, in order to walk with St Vincent, we must let ourselves be transformed by his thinking; training booklets help us do that.

The assembly will also be a special time to reacquaint ourselves with the intensity of St Vincent's spiritual life; morning prayers and Eucharistic celebration will be moments of spiritual reflection, opportunities to put our work in the hands of God and deepen our faith in God who is Love, as Benedict XVI so felicitously expresses it in his encyclical letter.

### Questions

- *What qualities do our Vincentian roots bring to our team behaviour?*
- *What qualities do our Vincentian roots bring to our attitude in dealing with the poor?*

## 2. Evolving Guidelines

The original AIC was the “Charities” created by St Vincent de Paul in 1617.

Before the Vatican II Council, the President of the French Association was the de facto international president; there was no international structure per se. But Vatican II opened up a whole new vision of the world. Numerous texts dealt with the status of women and their responsibilities in the Church. AIC volunteers realised they had a role to play.

Thanks to the energy and competence of German, Belgian, French and particularly Italian volunteers and under the leadership of the Belgian Claire Delva, AIC was restructured. The first statutory meeting took place in Rome in October 1971. The new name and logo were used for the first time: Association Internationale des Charités – AIC. International headquarters and administration were transferred to Brussels.

Looking at the history of AIC enables us to understand how AIC developed the innovative proposals which are now the basis of our current work ethic.

### First stage: from accepting help to helping themselves

**1973, Rome (Italy):** First International Council

Promoting social justice, promote holistic women’s development

**1976, Mexico :** Second International Council

Fighting poverty, from assistance to participation

We must work not for the poor but with them

**1981, Madrid (Spain):** Statutory Assembly and Seminar

Publication of Basic Document: “Against Poverty, Acting Together”.

## Second stage: from Participation to Self-promotion

1985, Chantilly (France): “Towards a new solidarity, acting together”

Co-responsibility, fraternity and participation among volunteers and with the poor, explicitly became part of the thinking.

1990, Assisi (Italy): “Cultural Development, solidarity, self-promotion”

Two new concepts emerged: culture as a way of thinking and behaving, and self-promotion.

For the first time, delegations set up guidelines: self-promotion, solidarity, training and communication.

1994, Antigua (Guatemala) Guidelines: “ A cultural attitude – Solidarity and enhancing self-image “ as a means of combating both poverty and the serious violation of human rights.

1998, Queretaro (Mexico) Guidelines: “To be a transforming force in the Association and in society in the face of poverty.”

To help the poor, it is not enough to be with them, political actions are needed.

## Third Stage: from Self-Promotion to Co-Responsibility and Empowerment

2002, Nice (France): Guidelines “Social Co-Responsibility, Institutional Reinforcement, Empowerment”.

- Awareness that our specific way of working toward peace is to fight against the permanent sources of conflict – poverty and injustice,.
- Evaluation of our relations with others while recognising the individual’s right to personal development and decision making.
- Will to have more participation and solidarity within AIC.

2005, Santo Domingo: the same keywords apply: coherence, confidence, political action.

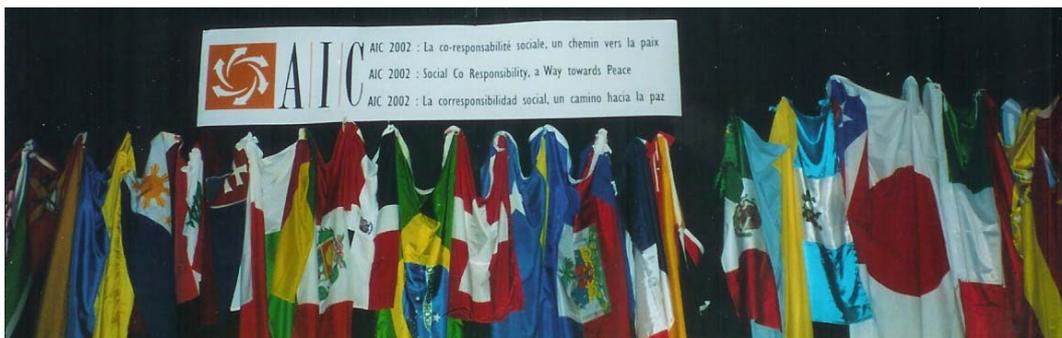
Political action to apply pressure was retained as an important element in the fight against the causes of poverty.

It can be seen how we have gone from offering help to empowerment; in addition the commitment to the advancement of women has been a constant concern for AIC.

## Questions

- *What are the guidelines that were voted in at the International Assembly in Nice in 2002? Which keywords were retained at the International Assembly of Santo Domingo in 2005?*
- *How has the application of guidelines voted in 2002 and 2005 caused your AIC actions to evolve?*

*PLEASE NOTE! These questions will be addressed in workshops at the International Assembly of 2007 in Rome.*



### 3. Constant Commitment to the Advancement of Women

Since 1975, **International Year of Women**, AIC has made major efforts to train their members, educate them and make them poverty-aware. This effort continued and expanded thanks to national, regional and international seminars and various documents, workshops and training books on this same theme.

- 1980: Armenia (Colombia)  
“Participation of AIC in promoting women in Latin America”
- 1984: San Jose (Costa Rica)  
“Women, Action, Communities, Development”
- 1988 Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic)  
“Participation, Women, Justice”

In the years that followed, injustice and violence against women were more and more strenuously denounced throughout the world. Direct contact with so many women who suffered poverty and violence brought AIC to react and take a stand against this violence. This motivated the association to work continuously to find solutions which offered more than mere palliative care.

Accordingly two regional seminars were organized:

1999: Escorial (Spain): European Seminar

“Women, Violence, Prevention”

2000: Fortaleza (Brazil), Latin American Seminar

“Violence against Women and Prevention”.

During these two seminars, AIC decided to initiate a vigorous denunciation of injustices, to battle against all forms of violence affecting women and to defend the rights of women. With this in mind, a manifesto denouncing violence against women was drawn up and distributed worldwide. The aim of the manifesto was to educate people and prevent further violence against women.

Since then AIC members have continued to support women and oppose violence. They have attended meetings and were represented on various civil and government bodies and international organisations

The latest meeting, the Beijing + 10 International Conference, took place in 2005. It is evident that in spite of good intentions and a few major changes, such as the creation of ministries and services for women, the passing of laws favouring women and numerous efforts of society networks, **poverty has changed only in statistics**; the political will to give priority to women's causes is still absent. Violence against women, in developed countries as well as poorer countries, is growing ever more rapidly. It is one of the most serious causes of poverty.

AIC continues its action: in 2005, AIC launched a common message “Women and Poverty”, a message that must be relayed to all associations at each local, regional and national meeting. Today we are preparing the 2007 International Assembly on the theme “Women and Poverty in Cultural Diversity.”

### **III. Volunteers tell their stories: participating in an assembly, an opportunity, a must !**

#### 1. Testimony of Rosalie Singai – AIC North Cameroon

I feel really satisfied at having taken part in the Nice Assembly. I was absolutely delighted to meet Delegates from other countries and it was a great joy to live with delegates from other races, get acquainted, spend time with them, work together, share the same opportunities, discuss the same objectives.

During this assembly, I followed presentations on various themes and participated in workshops.

I was impressed by a sentence spoken by our International President in her opening address: “Pilgrims, there is no road, we map out our own route as we move forward...” Similarly in her second presentation, another sentence: “take advantage of this time of dialogue and reflection to meet the challenges of the poor and meet our responsibilities with determination.” And here is another: “To be faithful to St Vincent’s charisma we must ask ourselves serious questions – not only why we do what we do, but also on how efficiently we do it”.

I also discovered the three guidelines:

- empowerment
- leadership
- co-responsibility

I attended the presentation on twinning within AIC and workshops.

This is a place to receive and to give, gather ideas share our experiences,

get training and information, start relationships and share cultures.

I passed on the formation and shared with my group: I report, especially on guidelines and twinning.

In the field I discovered that passing on the message is difficult. I had to find words adapted to the level of my listeners.

My wish is to participate in this delegate assembly again in order to strengthen my knowledge.

## 2. Testimony of Lydie Ramarozaka – AIC Madagascar

At the Nice Assembly in 2002, I was so surprised by the warmth of the welcome I received from AIC, our extensive and united family.

In spite of cultural differences, every one was full of joy – no doubt inspired by the spirit of St Vincent.

During our training, I was struck by AIC's ability to mobilize forces and values that can change the world and bring better living conditions to the poorest.

Back home, thanks to one of the experiences, we were able to see beneficiaries with a different eye and include them as partners in our work.

## 3. Interview of Marie des Neiges Meis – AIC France

*What did you discover about AIC at the Santo Domingo assembly?*

I really discovered a whole new world! Until I attended this assembly I did not really appreciate the nature of our worldwide AIC family. In Santo Domingo I met women from all over the world, all passionate about their missions, all sharing experiences. They were eager to learn and to share. I was so impressed by their strength, their faith, and their desire to give.

These are intelligent, generous women, who were trying to do more for other people – and do it better. Practical women who would find an original solution to each situation, in spite of often limited material means.

In Santo Domingo AIC had also organized a training seminar of several days, on the theme of Participatory Leadership. It was about showing presidents that a good leader moves her team towards a common objective, with shared passion. Each member of the team needs to be, at her level, co-responsible of the project.

*How did you pass it on when you got home?*

I wrote a report, in the AIC France review, to share my enthusiasm with my team members (“San Domingo, you were there too”, 2d trimester 2005, p.42)

As for the Training Seminar, which was run in Spanish, my first concern was to translate it into French, as best I could, from my notes. I produced 25 pages that I forwarded, on the one hand, to the AIC France Federation, and on the other, to AIC-Vietnam. I made a short summary for the Review: “Secrets to be a good leader” (4th Quater 2005, p. 14). On the other hand, the 25 pages report had been sent to Agnès de Rougé for her to present it during the AIC-France General Assembly, on March 21st, 2006. She summarized it very clearly and everyone really appreciated it.

## 4. Interview of Sumaia Sahade, AIC–Brazil

*What did the International Assembly teach you about AIC?*

That AIC is made up of women who know how to welcome people, and who make us feel like family.

That these women show us feats of organization, dynamism, seriousness, commitment and a wish to grow, without losing joy, affection or respect for people. The work ambience enables attending volunteers to fit in and participate.

*What did you pass on to the volunteers in your country who could not attend? What means did you use?*

I transmitted contents, topics discussed at the Assembly and the quality of the experience I had.

To do that we used :

- Training sessions in the five regions of Brazil
- Brazil's Newsletter
- Information sent by Email.

We tried to enable our volunteers relive what we ourselves had experienced at the Assembly.



## IV. Glossary

The theme of the Rome Assembly, “Women and Poverty Diversity of Cultures”, exposes us to words which we need to define in order to avoid misunderstandings; all the more so that translations in the various languages don’t always convey the same meanings.

### 1. Culture

Culture is a word everyone knows, but not everyone defines it in the same way. Yet, if we want this concept to help us make specific commitments, which will generate well thought out projects, we must know what we are talking about.

Globally, culture can be seen in two ways.

In its narrow meaning, the one that comes to mind right away, it evokes artistic creativity; we would speak of cultural activities such as museum visits or domains handled by Ministries of Culture. Or else it has to do with education: a cultured person has knowledge that is wide as well as internalized.

In its wider meaning, UNESCO (UN organization for education, science, culture and communication) defines culture thus: “the body of distinctive features, both spiritual and material, both intellectual and affective, which characterize a society or a social group. It comprises not only art and literature, but also ways to live together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

It is the wider definition that concerns AIC because it is tightly linked to notions of development, citizenship, rights, and identity... It is a large part of the self-reliance of women. Culture is our heritage passed from generation to generation; it enables young people to take roots and grow on the basis of

standards generally accepted in their social group.

However, culture is not intangible, like some would have us believe, because how could human communities ever adapt to the changes in their environments, changes that have happened over the years?

Societies are not isolated from one another: contacts have been made in the past, and new ones are established again and again, through commerce, wars, migrations or curiosity. Aspects of other cultures are borrowed and then assimilated, so that culture, while inherited, is the product of a constant mixing of ideas, techniques, words, and objects. Cultures adapt by choosing, from external influences, those that are compatible. Without this selection, it gets diluted and could disappear.

Transmission and adoption (selection, assimilation) are not enough, **culture is continuously recreated, reinvented** because the community that carries it is alive and undergoes continuous transformations – not quite what it was yesterday and not quite what it will be tomorrow.

These three aspects, transmission adoption and invention, are what makes **culture a source of dynamism and openness**; this helps human communities to meet the challenges they face. Culture must be respected, but it is not a sacred and untouchable icon.

### Questions

- *Do we take into account the concept of “culture” in our field actions?*
- *What attitudes shall we have to adopt regarding our own culture? Our beneficiaries’ culture? Give examples.*

## 2. Gender

Women, poverty, culture, these 3 keywords, which will be studied at the 2007 Assembly, refer to the “gender” concept. (Ref. Training Booklet AIC No 6 – 2005 “Women and Poverty”, p. 18 to 23)

The word gender refers to the relationships and social roles of men and women, determined by economic, social, political and cultural context, at any given time.

While sex generally refers to biological characteristics, gender takes into account roles and relationships that change according to the social and cultural organizations, within time and space. Thus gender is part of the social system. Just like social classes or age, it is an important factor which influences the way our families, societies and culture determine the roles, rights, activities, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men in a certain society.

Of course, distribution of roles varies according to culture. But we must observe that in most societies, women have less access to resources, their opportunities are more limited and they are less likely to take part in decision-making.

It is no coincidence that 80% of AIC projects’ beneficiaries are girls and women. Other statistics coming from international organizations such as the United Nations point at those disparities:

70% of the 1300 million people living in extreme poverty are women – 2/3 of the 876 million illiterate adults in the world are women, and the list goes on.

Volunteers come face to face with this reality. Gender differences are often at the base of discrimination in the access to education, health care, work, political participation and poverty.

## Gender for us AIC volunteers in the field

Understanding the concept of gender is useful in helping us to reach our objective of eradicating injustices encountered in communities where we work. Women and men must participate equally in the development process and benefit equally from its windfalls. Women and men are not biologically identical, but they have a right to equal opportunities.

Analyzing local reality through the use of the gender concept is indispensable to our action in our fight against poverty. This enables us to see how roles and expectations attributed to men and women are learned and can change in time and how culture can be a vehicle for change. As AIC volunteers we can:

- Make people aware of the differences in access on the basis of gender, to development resources,.
- Show that this discrimination is harmful to community development (for all, men and women)
- Work to encourage change and so foster development and ensure that the distribution of roles attributed to women and men in society is more equitable.

### Questions

- *Give examples, in your country, where the concept of gender is used to promote a particular point of view.*
- *Give examples, in our projects and actions, where gender difference significantly affects how we do things.*

# Conclusion

For those, the majority of you, who will not be at the Assembly, we hope that our AIC website will be able to give you day-to-day reports on our work. When the Assembly is over there will certainly be an account of the proceedings. So do check the site [www.aic-international.org](http://www.aic-international.org).

You will also be able to join us in prayer, each day, and more particularly on

- March 8th, International Day of Women – for Christians, a day of prayer for women.
- March 14th, the feast of St Louise de Marillac and a Day of Prayer for AIC.

*The prayers of all will support the Assembly.*

*We are counting on each other.*

We expect a lot from this assembly, to seek out and set up specific measures which will ensure the improvement of living conditions for so many women.



**AIC**  
**Association International of Charities**

A mainly women's association organized at world level, including more than 250 000 volunteers in 6000 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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