



Against Poverty, Acting Together

Training Booklet

June 2007 n°9

Special Edition

2007 AIC International Assembly

Proceedings

Women and Poverty – Diversity of Cultures

AIC INTERNATIONAL ASSEMBLY

9 – 14 March 2007 – Rome,
Italy

Women and Poverty – Diversity of Cultures

AIC
23 Rampe des Ardennais
B-1348 Louvain la Neuve
e-mail : contact@aic-international.org
www.aic-international.org

Supported by
Company of the Daughters of Charity; Congregation of the Fathers of the Mission;
Private donations;
UNESCO ; Foundation FMS ; UNITAS ASBL ; Frauenmissionswerk ; MISEREOR ;
RENOVABIS, UNESCO, ADVENIAT
et DGCD (Coopération belge au Développement)



Content

Chapter 1 Women And Poverty – Diversity Of Cultures	7
OPENING SESSION, <i>MARINA COSTA</i>	7
CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT AND THE DIGNITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL, <i>THIERRY VERHELST</i> ...	12
Chapter 2 Cultures, Causes of Poverty or Impulse for Change?	16
SEMINAR OUTLINE.....	16
PRÉSENTATION OF CULTURAL CORNERS EXHIBITION	17
POVERTY SITUATIONS AS LIVED BY WOMEN	18
CAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE CHANGE ?, <i>GOBALETCHE GEBRE</i>	26
PANEL, <i>MARIA CASELLA</i>	28
Chapter 3 Practical Means to Meet Poverty of Women.....	33
SEMINAR OUTLINE.....	33
FORUMS	34
WORKSHOPS	34
Chapter 4 Operational Guidelines and Poverty Of Women	35
SEMINAR OUTLINE.....	35
THE ROOTS OF VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY, <i>S. MARIA PILAR LOPEZ, DC</i>	36
INTRODUCTION TO OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES, <i>MARINA COSTA</i>	45
Chapter 5 Commitments	48
SEMINAR OUTLINE.....	48
2007 – 2009 OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES	49
CLOSING SPEECH, <i>MARINA COSTA</i>	50

Programme

AIC 2007: WOMEN AND POVERTY DIVERSITY OF CULTURES

Friday 9 March	Women and Poverty – Diversity of Cultures
-----------------------	--

- 09.00 Inaugural Session
- Opening of the Assembly *by M. Costa, International President*
 - Welcoming speech *by M.C. Cambiaggio, President AIC Italy*
 - Delegations Presentation
 - Presentation of AIC and theme of the Assembly *by M. Costa, International President*
- 15.00 Poverty situations as lived by women, *AIC Testimonies*
- 15.30 « Cultures, development and human dignity » *by Thierry Verhelst, Intercultural Relations Consultant*
- 17.30 Different views, a matriarchal traditional culture *by Video testimony*
- 18.15 Eucharist *by Father G.Gay, Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*

Saturday 10 March	Cultures, causes of poverty or impulse for change?
--------------------------	---

- 09.00 Spiritual breath
- Seminar outline – feedback *by Uca Agulló*
- Cultural Spaces Presentation
- 09.30 Women experiences of situations of poverty, *AIC Testimonies*
- 10.15 Methodology for Workshops *by Miriam Magnoni*
- 10.30 When culture is the cause of poverty - Workshop
- 15.00 « Can traditional culture evolve? » *by Bogalech Ghebre*
- 16.30 Panel debate *with Prof. Anna Casella Paltrinieri*
- 18.30 Eucharist

Sunday 11 March	Practical means to meet women poverty
------------------------	--

- 09.00 Spiritual breathing
Seminar outline – feedback *by Uca Agulló*
- Forums**
- Micro-credits
 - Systemic change
 - Community Health care program
 - Cooperatives
 - International representation and political action
 - Social integration
- 15.00 «The roots of St. Vincent’s spirituality inspire our path to meet poverty, especially women’s poverty» *S; M. Pilar.Lopez, DC*
- 16.00 Introduction to Operational Guidelines *M. Costa, International President*
- 16.30 Workshops about Operational Guidelines (1st part)
- 18.30 Eucharist
- Evening Cultural Spaces

Monday 12 March	Operational Guidelines and poverty of women
------------------------	--

- 09.00 Spiritual breathing
Seminar Outline – Feedback *by Uca Agulló*
- 09.30 Workshops about Operational Guidelines (2nd part)
- 15.00 Statutory Assembly (1st part) *by Christine Peeters*
- 18.30 Eucharist
- Evening Solidarity Bazaar

Tuesday 13 March Commitments
--

- 09.00 Spiritual breathing
 Seminar outline – feedback *by Uca Agulló*
- 09.30 Statutory Assembly (2nd part – Elections) *by Christine Peeters*
- 11.30 Presentation of Operational Guidelines *by M Costa, International President*
 Discussions in associations about Operational Guidelines
- 15.00 President regional meetings
 Workshops:
 – Work under project form
 – Search for funds
 – Communication – Improving visibility
 – Actions to prevent violence towards women
- 17.15 Voting for Operational Guidelines
 Closing speech
- 18.00 Closing Eucharist *by Father .M. Ginete, CM, AIC International Advisor, International
 Vincentian Family Delegate*
- Evening Italian Show

Chapter 1

Women and Poverty – Diversity of Cultures

OPENING SESSION

Marina Costa, AIC International President

Greetings and welcome to this, the inaugural session of our International Assembly

“AIC 2007: Women and Poverty – Diversity of Cultures.”

Thank you to the civil and religious authorities here with us today. We are honored and encouraged in our work by their presence and by their interest. Their collaboration and awareness are indispensable in helping us to achieve our vision of transforming society.

For those of you who are not familiar with AIC, I would like to describe, briefly, our Association.

In geographical terms: AIC is a fundamentally female, non-governmental organization (NGO), whose specific aims are to combat all forms of poverty and injustice and to tackle their root causes. AIC has some 250,000 volunteers in 51 countries. These volunteers work exclusively as teams; they respond to the needs of their own communities.

AIC, which stands for “Association Internationale des Charités”, was founded by St Vincent de Paul who organized and practiced “social work” before such work was recognized as an organized public service. Inspired by our founder, the work of AIC is motivated by the evangelical ethos.

The type of work carried out by AIC is determined by our motto “Acting Together Against Poverty”. The characteristics of our work are as follows:

- A personal relationship with those living in poverty, traveling with them on their journey towards self-help and autonomy.
- Working hand in hand with those we help, through integrated projects in real-life, local situations.
- Working through networks and together with public bodies - because we believe that every person in society has a responsible role to play in changing their society for the better.

The international dimension of AIC is shown in the links between all the AIC teams, in 51 countries, which make up a worldwide network fighting against poverty. AIC is recognized by, and is represented on, many international bodies, such as: the UN Economic and Social Council, the EU, the Council of Europe and UNESCO. AIC also works with several international networks, all this adds to the effectiveness of our communal efforts.

In 1971, the “Charities”, then working in 20 countries and under the direction of the French Lady President, went international. and took the name of AIC, International Association of Charities founded by Saint Vincent de Paul.

From the, the number of AIC members increased and in 2007, we have 51 members. AIC volunteers offered in 2007 53.998.856 hours of work and, for this Assembly, we identified 16.337 projects.

In 2006 we celebrated the 35th anniversary of this move onto the international stage. We published a new, updated edition of our Handbook, which had a particular focus on training. The handbook lays down the basic principles of our mission and of our work.

This Assembly, which we are today inaugurating, is entitled:

AIC 2007: Women and poverty – diversity of culture

A permanent, local presence is one of the basic principles of the work of St. Vincent. It is also an incontrovertible aspect of what we do. This caring presence allows us and to experience poverty, as a female phenomenon, in the most intimate way. Poverty affects not only women, but the whole of society.

A UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) report found that 1.3 billion people are today living in dire poverty. Of these:

- 70% are women
- 66% of illiterate adults are women
- 66% of non-school-going children are girls
- Women working in rural areas produce half of all the world's food but own less than 1% of the world's cultivated land.
- Women and girls do 66% of the work but earn only 10% of income generated.
- In many countries, women do not have the right to own property and cannot borrow money.

What AIC does

In the face of so many instances of serious injustice - often brought about by inequality, selfishness and a lack of social responsibility - our exasperation, instead of being smothered under indignation and negativity is expressed in terms of action and planning. We do not assume a theoretical, intellectual attitude but rather a participative and constructive role. This approach offers more effective action to women to these situations of poverty – not merely stopgap measures.

Starting in 1975, International Women's Year, we have worked very hard to train and make our members aware of this situation of serious poverty. This initial work has been followed up and expanded thanks to international, national and regional seminars as well as numerous theme-based documents, workshops and training booklets.

From 1997 onwards, AIC got involved in combating violence against women:

As part of the local community we are becoming more and more informed about the causes and the effects of violence against women. We have always been concerned about this problem and we have attended many meetings and discussions in civil, governmental and international arenas – all in the cause of combating violence against women.

At the same time we have initiated many different types of action – positive actions as well as protests and denunciation.

- Many **projects** involving the prevention of violence as well as supporting and taking care of victims
- **Training** and awareness of the problems for our volunteers
- An **International Campaign aimed at violence against women**: this was proposed by AIC and followed through by many national associations who instigated significant prevention and awareness programmes.
- The drawing-up and **adoption of a “Manifesto opposing violence against women”**, this was widely distributed and its aim was to make society aware of the problem and to denounce institutionalized violence against women.
- **Annual events all over the world on 25th November**, International Eradication of Violence Day. Public demonstrations and various actions denouncing violence, all aimed at publicly expressing our opposition to the ill treatment of women and to injustice and discrimination.
- The setting up of the **Ms Jean Delva Prix** with a view to encouraging volunteers and supporting them financially in their efforts to combat violence through innovative projects.
- The launching of a **common theme “Women and Poverty”** to all AIC members. Every member of our Association has been invited to convey this message to the institutions and to all the meetings in which we play a part. This measure is aimed at drawing the attention of society to the feminization of poverty and to exerting pressure in particular instances and on national and international bodies. It is hoped that these measures will promote social responsibility to help women who are poor.

This International Assembly, “Women and poverty across cultural diversity” which we are inaugurating on this day, is another powerful undertaking linked to the theme of poverty among women.

Our actions and projects are adapted to and are the result of the cultural differences which constitute the international nature of AIC. As an international association, we are deeply aware of the need to understand to what extent and in which circumstances the values, traditions and cultural institutions of a society influence the role of both men and women and thus are responsible for, or exacerbate, the extent of poverty among women.

A survey was conducted and the questionnaire distributed to each AIC association with the first batch of preparatory literature produced some extremely interesting answers which we have used in preparing this assembly. A big “Thank You” to all of you who returned the completed questionnaires. The following comments are based on **your answers**:

- Agreement on what causes poverty among women
- The genuine work being done with women in our associations
- Work to be done in the future

Specifically in connection with **what causes the poverty in which women live**

You have come to the conclusion that

- For those women living in severe poverty, the fact that they are women is a contributing factor; the devaluation of the female is virtually universally acknowledged.

- From birth, women are less valued than men; they have little access to education and because of this are not aware of their rights.
- Women are most often destined to live solely in the family environment, looking after the children and doing housework. They are fully exposed to the difficulties involved in this kind of work: violence, mistreatment, forced marriages, abandonment by their partner, girlhood pregnancies, and single motherhood. In the case of immigrant or indigenous women there are the added tribulations of racial discrimination and problems of social acceptance.
- These women have few qualifications; they have difficulty finding work, are subjected to salary inequalities as compared to men and have no access to credit with financial institutions.
- As a result of all these factors these women feel inferior and lack self-esteem. There is a fatalistic attitude –“ it has always been so.” There is, in addition, a physical and moral fatigue, which can lead to alcohol and drug dependence and prostitution.

You have also indicated **the local responses of our AIC associations**

You will have the opportunity, during this assembly, to hear about several experiences and you can browse through the Cultural Displays to glean and exchange ideas, therefore I will not give specific examples here. I will just point out two major trends which are to be found in AIC projects.

- The establishment of meeting places and facilities for dialogue, personal support so that women realize that they are not alone, that they can develop their personal talents. In addition there is the provision for family management training, education, literacy, small loan facilities, and self-confidence building.
- Several educational programmes have been established to allow: younger girls to complete their primary education, adolescents and women in difficulties to receive some kind of training (either professional or literacy training. Education is considered to be a necessary prerequisite to an improved lifestyle.

You have also pointed out some new measures which should be implemented in the future:

- At national level there is the need for law reform, to promote programmes of free education or to make training programmes widely available. On the bigger stage, you know the work being done by your representatives in various international organizations.
- The need to encourage all men and the whole of society to participate in the process of change, this means schools for fathers, and education programmes for youths. Some countries are already moving in this direction.
- The need to make the public aware, thus the importance of the media, in all its forms and the significant role they play.

These four working days will allow us to develop your suggestions, take stock of new ideas and exchange experiences and work methods and, in this way, direct the work of AIC over the coming years.

We are all concerned with this theme - even those AIC teams not directly involved in working for women and those who feel that this problem is not important. Our conclusions and our thinking, as well as the official declarations of major organizations like the EU, all agree that the feminization of poverty directly affects the whole of society. Inversely, giving women the opportunity to be free, to develop their talents and to exercise them, promotes a more rapid and a more profound progression in the battle against poverty.

We know that, in the socio-economic context in which we live, a country's development can be achieved only with the effective participation of women. This participation will act as a platform for the self-promotion and the empowerment of these women. Every person, man or woman, has a specific role to play in society, each one has a particular charisma and all must act together for the common good.

It is not simply a question of equality; it is a fundamental strategy in the combat against poverty and the fulfillment of the Millennium objectives. Society cannot afford to bypass the strength and intelligence which women can bring to the cause of the common good.

We are convinced, that if cultural considerations are frequently causes of poverty, they can also become challenges. We will undertake, during this conference, to seek out ways in which cultures will become departure points towards lasting development.

Our motto "Against poverty, acting together", encourages us to motivate all the existing forces in society to collaborate in order to give back to women all they deserve in terms of respect and dignity.

This is a daunting challenge. But challenges are an important ingredient of our commitment as volunteers; they keep our dedication fresh and living, reinforce our will and promote renewed enthusiasm on a daily basis.

Let us start the work of our Assembly in this spirit.

CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT AND THE DIGNITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Thierry Verhelst

I. A tool to determine the notion of culture

1. An attempt to define culture

There is a wide acceptance of culture. It is that wide acceptance that one should keep in mind when talking about culture in relation to development or in connection with citizenship and democracy.

« Culture is the complex array of resources which is inherited, adopted or invented by a human community, to help it face up to the challenges of its environment »

2. Culture, a complex array

Culture is a « complex array » or ensemble, which forms a seamless web, a whole that is indissociably linked together.

2.1. The symbolic dimension

Any culture is made up of cosmology, religion, spirituality, moral commitments, psychological traits, archetypes, legends and proverbs, myths and symbols... We are not always aware of this dimension of our culture, since it is an integral part of our own identity. Moreover, it is substantially immaterial, invisible and impossible to quantify. However, this symbolic universe in which we are steeped, has a profound influence on how we look at things and how we act. This dimension is often buried deep down and is sometimes even invisible. It is however no less tenacious or resistant to the changes that the outside world continually imposes upon us.

2.2. The social dimension

The various ways in which people organize themselves in society constitute a significant part of their culture.

2.3. The technical dimension

Every community has at its disposal knowledge, practical experience and know-how.

2.4. Artistic activity and cultural expression could also be cited as a fourth dimension or component, even though they are in fact already present in the three preceding ones.

2.5. These dimensions are only an aide-memoire

Culture is a seamless web, a whole made up of the various dimensions set out above: all is in everything. It is therefore incorrect to divide the culture of a community into « Various dimensions » as if they could be treated separately.

3. Heritage, adoption, invention

Human communities inherit, adopt and invent their culture. In this way, culture is present both as a heritage and a vision.

3.1. Inherit

Culture is in part inherited. It is nourished by the past. It is therefore, in part, made up of an inheritance, a patrimony handed down by previous generations.

3.2. Adopt

During the course of its history, every society has adopted cultural elements, which, in the beginning, were alien to them. In fact, all societies are subjected to a vast quantity of outside influences, such as ideas, images, objects, techniques etc. This mix is a positive element and has helped humanity to progress. On the other hand, a culture which is withdrawn into itself is in danger of becoming sclerotic.

However, there must be a minimum of balance between the various external contributions and the society's own identity, otherwise it is in danger of collapsing under the weight of outside influences.

3.3. Invent

The third verb in our definition is « invent ». In fact, culture is also auto-generated, invented, created. And this creative process is continual, as long as a culture is alive. It follows from this that no culture is static or immobile. Every living community creates and evolves.

4. Culture, a source of solutions to challenges

When speaking of culture as a resource for facing up to challenges, one is reminded of human inventiveness in finding solutions to problems, or living according to aspirations. Every human group is confronted by challenges and provides itself with the means to face up to them. Their culture is a driving force, a source of dynamism, which touches all aspects of life, both personal and collective.

II. The social functions of culture

1. The importance of culture

We have already emphasized the fundamental role of culture, namely to cope with the challenges with which we are confronted. But it is useful to know, more precisely, what is the purpose of culture, whether one is embarking on a cultural activity or supporting a cultural project. In other words, what are the social functions of culture? These are numerous and important.

1.1. Self-esteem

A healthy self-esteem is a sine qua non for any fulfillment, whether personal or collective. The individual remains inert and without a voice, both figuratively and even sometimes literally, if he does not have a minimum of awareness of the value of his own capacities and if he does not have a serene confidence in his own means and resources.

1.2.the ability to select

It is extremely important for any community to develop the capacity to choose among contributions inherited from the past and contributions from external influences and to make the proper selection.

Indeed, everything in a community's past is not necessarily either useful or positive. A healthy culture is one that is capable of making choices from the patrimony inherited from its ancestors.

As for external contributions, we are all bombarded with outside influences, whether in the form of images, techniques or diverse customs. Of course, one should be open, but only in such a way that this openness leads to enrichment and not to being trampled on. One has to know how to select. Every community must be able to choose freely what it judges to be good and useful and to reject what is superfluous or detrimental.

1.3. Resistance

Building on what has been stated above, an essential component of the harmonious development of any community is to be able to resist everything that is imposed from outside which is judged to be harmful and unacceptable. Having selected for adoption what is useful and having identified for rejection all that is harmful, it is then necessary to devise a strategy for resistance. Otherwise, the balance of power may rapidly result in invasion, followed by passive, or even unconscious, acceptance of what in fact was not desired.

1.4. Give some meaning

To give a meaning to what one does is vital. Development must have a meaning. In every process of social change, of economic transformation, of development in general, it is necessary to be able to keep one's course if one does not want to be carried away by events and pressures, to end up precisely where one did not want to go. It is vital to give oneself a direction, to stick to one's reference points and avoid disorientation. At all times life must have a meaning for those who are living it.

At the heart of the quest for meaning, there is spirituality. For the many peoples of the South, who are not yet « disenchanting » by straightforward materialism and the hyper-secular rationalism of the West, the meaning of what is sacred is a source of strength and joy. It is what Jean Ziegler observed with surprise: « The victory of the vanquished! ». It is they who have the « Cities of joy » and us the depression.

III. SEVERAL WARNINGS

1. Rule out simplistic conceptions

What emerges from this definition of culture is that it is important to go beyond a certain number of simplistic conceptions. One should both avoid indulging in an attachment to the past and its idealistic representation that can lead to fundamentalism, or in utopian or deterministic excesses and, last of all, in exaggerated generalizations.

1.1. Attachment to the past – idealization – fundamentalism

Among the simplistic conceptions that one should leave behind, is the one which consists of associating culture exclusively with the past, after having over-idealized it. A substantial part of the past belongs definitively to the past and, moreover, was generally not entirely ideal, or, in any case, not ideal for everyone...

If one should beware of all fundamentalisms, one should however be « fundamental » in one's quest for identity, human authenticity and spirituality.

1.2. Idealistic utopia and materialistic determinism

A pitfall to be avoided when dealing with culture, is to assess its role in society erroneously. One should neither give it an “absolute” or totalitarian role, as if it determined everything, nor should it be reduced to the level an incidental phenomenon.

Chapter 2

Cultures, causes of poverty or impulse for change?

SEMINAR OUTLINE

Uca Agullo

Yesterday, we debated the concept of culture, both an obstacle and a driving force for the development for women; we started by examining several concrete situations of poverty.

This morning, we are going to continue with further experiences of poverty among women, themselves voluntary workers for the AIC; all this, together with the lecture from Thierry Verhelst, will provide a good basis for a discussion, in Working Groups, on the relationship which exists not only between the poverty of women and some aspects of culture, but also on the weaknesses and the richness of our own culture (the culture of every one of us).

During the afternoon we will go a step further, when we will present the positive experiences of individuals who have managed to transform their situations, thus proving that change is possible.

Today's working session is a sort of panel. However, we will not listen to all the speeches in two hours, sitting round a table, but we will hear them at various moments throughout the day.

In one of these speeches, Bogaletch Ghebre will explain how a traditional culture can evolve.

Each one of the experiences presented during the day will part of the Panel, that will conclude by a final debate, this time round a table and involving all the contributors of the day.

PRESENTATION OF CULTURAL CORNERS EXHIBITION

Laurence de la Brosse

The cultural corners exhibition will be held on two consecutive evenings, on the Assembly theme:

“Women and poverty in cultural diversity”

This exhibit has two objectives:

- To open our minds to the cultures of different continents. Each continent chooses the theme which characterizes it best.
- To make us aware of the poverty situations in which women are living and the actions being taken by AIC and by governments of the countries involved.
- To promote exchanges between volunteers, thus allowing them to become more aware, to get new ideas and to exchange addresses.

Each delegation worked hard to present their continent to the best of their ability, describing their poverty situations and the way in which we are responding to them. The 800m² exposition space will allow the 300 participants to move from one continent to another in a friendly and festive atmosphere.

You will soon be able to access this information on the AIC website www.aic-international.org

POVERTY SITUATION AS LIVED BY WOMEN

AIC -DR Congo Testimony by Rose N'tumba, president

My heart is filled with joy as I make my modest contribution, to this General Assembly, “Women and poverty across cultures”, on the situation of women who have lost their husbands. Also, let me invite you to reflect on how we can help these widows to resume their lives, not as an onerous task, but as destined by God’s will.

My propositions will be based on three typical situations in the life of women. The first is the period of conviviality which the woman spends with her cherished, living spouse. The second is the time when the widow finds herself both mother and father of her family. The third and last period is like a conclusion, where the widow discovers a solution to finding a way forward in her life.

1. Man and Woman living together.

Life for a man living with his wife is a happy and also a difficult time. In the family situation, however, man and woman usually manage their problems by working with each other. The family is founded on the man and woman acting together. The immediate priority for the couple is the education of their children through nourishment and teaching. This is every family’s mission. The family, as a basic unit, is an entity whose principal objectives are peace as a bonding agent and the will to build a fulfilling living environment.

2. Widowhood.

Life as a widow is different from life lived with a husband. The woman embarks on a new life experience. She is confronted with the harsh reality of being left alone to face the many necessities of life. This is a burden which was shared by her husband but which she now must carry alone.

When the man dies, the woman is unspeakably violated. She finds herself grieving in an unfamiliar place. She sees herself deprived of everything she and her husband, and her husband’s family, had contributed to the family situation. The division is unilateral. I have learned, in my limited experience, that marriage is not simply a question of two people getting married. It is the two families – even the two clans – who manage the couple’s union.

When the man dies, the woman gives an account of all material goods to the family of the dearly deceased. She is then evicted, with the children, from the family abode. This is the start of a new life for her. The mother goes sorrowfully back to her parent’s home. She is psychologically devastated. She is demoralized, has little to say and is dedicated to the basic battle for the survival of her children. Survival takes over where previously education, learning and the provision of food were her priorities for her children. The children are often cut off from the immediate family. They find themselves in a new living environment – a totally a new lifestyle. Usually they leave school through lack of funding. They live in desperate circumstances. Uneducated, they live on the street. They soon become involved in undesirable ways. They are obviously disoriented and out of their environment.

Now let us look at the situation of the widow herself. In her everyday life, the widow who has grown-up children, is supported by them. They look after all aspects of her life. But the widow who does not have grown-up family carries a double burden: catering for herself and looking after her young children; she lives in a different world.

My final word is a heartfelt appeal to you, humanitarians, present here in this General Assembly whose role is to consider the objectives of AIC International Statute :

1. To combat injustice
2. To promote the cause of women
3. To fight social inequalities

Women must be seen in a genuinely new light, have an appropriate support system and be treated as equal with men. Let this be the new guideline for the promotion of women: the word is equality. Thank you.

AIC-Nigeria Testimony by Lady Nkiru Aronu, President

This is a story of one Mrs. Angela Ugwu (real name withheld), a widow in a rural village in Enugu State of Nigeria in Africa. She has five children of whom three are girls and two are boys. Two of the children are in the University, two in the secondary school and one in the primary school. She has four brothers-in-law and five sisters-in-law. She lived with her family in one room apartment of her brother-in-law's house in the village.

The husband, Mr. John Ugwu (real name withheld) died after a prolonged sickness of diabetes. Mrs. Angela whom to the best of my knowledge lived very happily with her husband and children before he fell sick that led to his death. During the course of her husband sickness she suffered so much with the challenges of nursing and caring for her husband who was the breadwinner and also taking care of their children at school.

When her husband died, her husband's family relations immediately confined her in a certain corner in the kitchen where she was provided with banana leaves to sleep on as mat. She tied dirty wrappers like a mad woman. She ate with her left hand unwashed. And was being treated as a non-person. All these are done to suggest that she is responsible for the death of her husband. Worse still, Angela was forced to drink the water used in bathing the body of her husband's corpse according to the custom of their land. When the Ladies of Charity AIC, Nigeria intervened, we were told that it was their custom and tradition. However, we did not give up but rather we discouraged her from taking that dose of dirty water and the aggrieved brothers and sisters-in-law reluctantly accepted this. Further, she was also told that she has no proprietary rights over any of the properties of her husband since according to them, a property cannot own another property. A woman is the property of the husband.

On the day of the funeral and burial ceremony, she still stayed in her small corner in the kitchen, sitting on the banana leaves without moving or going out. She stayed in her confinement and was not allowed to ease herself except very late in the night. She had one eating plate that was never washed which she used in eating whatever that was brought to her. Angela stayed in that condition for nine (9) native weeks which is thirty-six days. After which her hair was shaved off completely, then, she bathed and wore her mourning clothes of black materials in the hot and humid climate of Nigeria. She wore these with black accessories for a period of one year.

AIC-Ukrainia Testimony by Mariana Dobrianska, AIC volunteer in Bukovina

(surrounded by Thèrese Nguyễn, AIC Vietnam President, and Anna Kovachova, AIC Slovakia President)

When we visited Maria Iwanowna, she was 86 years old. She had broken her leg and because she had no money she had not seen a doctor – so her bones had set incorrectly. As a result, she can neither walk nor sit down. She is bed-ridden and suffers severely from open wounds in her legs. Her husband was killed in the war and her son died a long time ago. She lives alone in a small hut built from pieces of wood. Maria Kwanowna had worked as a tractor driver in a large

Kolkhoze (collective farm). From her time as a worker she has a medal, a photo of a proud, laughing young woman on her tractor - and also terrible back pain and a minimal pension.

Even today, in post-communist countries, the only people who count are those who are useful to society; this does not include the sick, people with disabilities and the elderly.

However, the men normally receive an additional pension for their military service and there are fewer of them because of casualties of war and alcohol abuse (life expectancy for Ukrainian men, in contrast to that of men in other European countries, has been going down over the last few years, it is now 61.2 years) Thus it is usually older women who are left to live in poverty – thanks to a culture in which life experience, hard work, and the dignity of the weakest counts for nothing and where elderly women are considered to be useless. Their meager income barely provides bread, potatoes, a little cabbage, an egg. They find it impossible to buy a pair of shoes or a new coat – absolutely necessary for the long, hard winters; they cannot afford wood for their fires or doctors' fees. Families are broken up, the young people often live wherever they can find work or else they have emigrate. The families themselves are often poor as well and the grandmother gives from the little she has.

That is why, after a life of hard work, they are to be found begging in the towns, in underground stations. Sometimes they try to sell tablemats, a few flowers, a handful of onions or their last small possessions. In the country, they get by with a few hens and a garden while they are still in good health. When they become sick there is no hope. Old people's homes in towns are horrible places, in country areas they are few and far between. There is no home care – unless one is lucky enough to live near an AIC / Daughter of Charity group. In Maria Iwanowna's case, her wounds are at last being treated and she has hot food to eat. She does not complain, she praises her "angels" – volunteers and Sisters. She is happy when we visit because she loves to talk to people, to tell her life story – a small diversion in the long days she spends in prayer.

She has lost everything, her family and her health, her physical and financial independence – but she still has her dignity. However, society and government have forgotten Maria Iwanowna and millions of other elderly women in post-communist countries.

AIC Cameroon Testimony by Martine Hawoua and Jeanne D'arc

Zazou

(surrounded by Sumaia Sabade, AIC Brazil President)

For more than twenty years now, Cameroon has been going through a severe economic crisis. People's buying power has severely decreased; many workers have lost their jobs because state bodies have ceased functioning; young people are unemployed. The consequences of this situation are disastrous for the whole of society (divorce, leaving home, irresponsibility). The soaring death rate, especially in the case of men, leaves many widows behind. Thus the woman finds herself head of the family in spite of herself, laden with all the subsequent responsibilities. The man, if he is living at home, abandons his responsibilities. He no longer makes any money from growing cotton because, not only are production costs very high but cotton prices are very low on the international market.

The woman who is engaged in food production finds herself alone, having to take on all the family responsibilities. The weather is against her and in addition she needs inputs and improved seed strains which she cannot afford. Yields of sorghum, groundnut and maize are poor because of the rainfall pattern; crops with shorter growing cycles are needed to adapt to the new situation. It is a struggle to meet the many family needs (sending the children to school, feeding, clothing and caring for them).

In addition to all of this, the woman is subjected to many discriminatory practices: polygamy, inhuman widowhood rites, levirat (marrying the dead husband's brother), forced marriage, illiteracy, early school leaving, difficult working conditions, early motherhood, illness, AIDS, no

right to land ownership – and the consequences linked to all of these. The woman is discriminated against compared to the man. Financial systems working in her favor are almost non-existent or she cannot deal with the intricacies involved. She finds it very difficult when the children's education is left to her alone; the children soon leave to fend for themselves. This results in delinquency, homelessness, unwanted pregnancies, AIDS and all its attendant problems – especially in those parts of the country where the spread of the illness is accentuated by polygamy, the abduction of women, levirat and sorority (marrying the dead wife's sister).

As an example, Martine Hawoua will describe an individual case history of AIDS and poverty.

A respected, upper class man, married with two wives, father of seven children was living with a third woman, a bar manager. He did not try to hide his situation and everybody knew – even his wives.

After some years, the woman fell gravely ill and died a few months later. One of his wives also became ill and died from tuberculosis leaving her four children to be cared for by the other wife.

In the meantime, the unfaithful husband moved in with another (fourth) woman

The dead wife's youngest child died of severe malnutrition about six months after her mother.

The father then began to show symptoms (continuous diarrhea and fever, coughing). He was admitted to hospital where he was advised to undergo testing for AIDS – he refused. The test was, however, carried out without his permission. The difficulty then was to give him the result of the test and so begin treatment.

He discharged himself and went for treatment to a “healer” – he was brought home on a stretcher. He was readmitted to hospital where he had to accept his sad reality. It was too late for the treatment to be effective. He died shortly afterwards.

Josephine, the unfortunate, unemployed woman who had been at his side for the whole year of his illness, found herself widowed, the mother of all of his six children. She had scarcely started mourning when the husband's family seized all the household goods – even the sheets.

The woman was emotionally devastated. The husband's family accused her of being the AIDS carrier and held her responsible for the deaths of her husband, his wife and the child.

Josephine, a Nigerian citizen, wanted to return to her family but the children were a problem. She had no papers and so could not claim her husband's pension.

Her situation continued to worsen and she fell ill. Volunteers became aware of her dilemma and so she was able to get medical help and food and was cared for by an association for infected/affected people. She also received spiritual help from a religious congregation and her children were housed and their education assured by an NGO.

Efforts are being made to secure her pension and a volunteer is by her side during her treatment. There is still no contact with her husband's family.

AIC-France Testimony by Marie France ROCH

(surrounded by Lijia Ferrández de Cámara from AIC Mexico)

Elodie is 25 years of age lives and works in Lyon and is a trained beautician. Her mother is from a very modest background and cannot afford to keep her at home.

She fell in love with a handsome man who owns a fine car and is apparently well off. She became besotted with him (just as in TV soaps) and followed him to the South of France where he owns a nightclub. She was fascinated by the lifestyle and by the easy money.

She soon gave birth to his child. Then he became violent and neglected his child. She had no choice but to leave him and took an action against him in order to protect the child. She was awarded custody.

A more liberal attitude to life and selfish and easy love induce young people to leave their families at a very early stage and move in with a partner whom they barely know. Then a baby

arrives – all this with no thought for the future. As far as the man is concerned the woman and the child are just chattels; in his eyes the woman is simply for pleasure.

Elodie found herself with nowhere to live, no work and no resources. She was a lone parent and this made it very difficult for her to get work. With no long-term contract, she went from one part time job to another and one lodgings to another - in a region where some landlords, in seaside locations, withdraw their apartments in May so that they can triple the rents.

This is a tourist area; the cost of renting in seaside locations added to the lust for money means that landlords would only rent their apartments during the winter months. Some tenants will pay the higher prices during the summer so that they can stay in their apartments – they then need food subsidies from social security since all their money goes on rent.

Elodie contacted Equipes Saint-Vincent at Hyères where she stayed for a year. She got back her self-confidence little by little and began to help our volunteers by serving in the subsidized grocery shop, cleaning and tidying etc. “ I began to feel normal again and I found people who were prepared to listen to me.”

Thanks to Equipes Saint Vincent she found somewhere to live. With their support she became motivated again and got a job through CNE, which did not clash with nursery hours, at a pharmacy in a large shopping centre. She still had to pay a child minder until 8pm each day.

The end of the month is a hard time for her financially. She comes to the subsidized grocery store during the last week of every month. She is now independent but is waiting to find out if her contract will become long-term, in which case her future would be assured.

Market forces and “freedom” for young people mean that many young women find themselves alone, with no family and no husband. They may be responsible for a child, or several children – some perhaps from different fathers.

Saint Vincent volunteer centers are therefore places where young people can meet, get moral support and encouragement to take action rather than to despair.

Elodie says “ I feel that I am not alone.”

AIC-Dominican Republic by Alta Gracia de Vargas

(surrounded by Isabel Salvador Mabasso, from AIC Mozambique)

I am writing to share my introduction into the family of your association with you. Firstly I would like to tell you a little bit about myself. My name is Wendy Esther González, I am 32 years of age and have 4 children. I was married at 17 and had my first child when I was 19. When I got married I had to leave school even though I was gifted and had only one year to go before starting my baccalaureate.

I was born and grew up in Simonico, Villa Duarte, in east Santa Domingo. I lived in a very poor area. There is no employment there and as women cannot find work they neglect their homes and their children and spend their time in “forbidden” activities like playing cards or bingo or gambling the small amount of money they have – money supposed to be spent on maintaining the household. Male chauvinism is very prevalent in Dominican society and is more pronounced in the poorer areas. The result is that women are really marginalized and dominated by their husbands. They are economically dependent on the husband and are subjected to ill treatment and humiliation. Many women have too many children as a result of unwanted pregnancies and they do not have the means to give these children a good education and adequate nourishment. Because the women are badly treated by their husbands, they seek out other men with whom they have more children. They are then ill-treated again and so it becomes a vicious circle in which both women and children are the losers. When separation occurs, many husbands give no maintenance for their children’s nourishment.

Prostitution is another scourge. Since there is no employment and no prospects for the future, many young adolescents turn to prostitution or become addicted to drugs. In the last few years, the lack of economic resources and employment opportunities has caused an increase in delinquency. This is why I would like to be in a position to help my neighbor – even if I am a woman who has been ill-treated.

Young people, just like children, hate studying and planning for the future. Their self-esteem is low because of family problems. They see their parents fighting, do not have a balanced diet, live in poverty etc.. Both children and old people are in a precarious situation. The children have to look after themselves, without any help from their parents; they live on the streets and are delinquents. Old people are left to look after themselves.

Eight years ago I got to know the Sisters and I began to go to their go to their community meetings. Later, when she was 4 years old, my daughter was fortunate enough to go for her breakfast to the Casita Infantil Margarita Naseau (a center for giving nourishment to underfed children and a training center in hygiene and nutrition for mothers). My daughter also went to lessons there. I began to help in the preparation of meals at the Casita – being a mother who was benefiting from its work. I increased my commitment to the Sisters of AIC Villa-Duarte. I am now involved in the running of the Casita, in the essential activities of AIV (selling flour, clothes). With the help of other women and a Sister of Charity I work towards improving the health in the area and I work with a pastoral group which is involved in health matters in the parish. I am always available to help the Sisters when they need me.

Thanks to the help I give to the Sisters, I feel good about myself. They have encouraged me to pursue my studies in the Radio Santa Maria literacy school. This school is right beside our parish; it is under the direction of the Sisters of Charity and volunteers carry out the teaching duties. This year I intend to continue my studies and start the baccalaureate. When I have finished that I would like to study to become a nurse.

Because I have been involved with the sisters in the Casita Infantil for many years, they have asked me if I would like to become an AIC member. I have accepted because I like helping the most deprived people in society and because the work we do here is very important. The support I have received from the Sisters has helped me to escape from a difficult situation. I have exceeded my own expectations and I value myself as a woman. I am committed to fighting adversity and so overcome the difficulties we come up against in our area. I would like to be seen as a role model for my children. I intend to become a Villa-Duarte AIC member as soon as possible since I have already completed the probationary period.

Thank you for your attention and I thank God for having been at my side, for having made me humble and for giving me the opportunity to collaborate with Him in helping the most deprived people – just as Saint Vincent taught us to do.

Testimony of Fatimata ISMAGHIL: women's position in Touareg society in Niger. (Video).

My name is Fatimata ISMAGHIL. I am from Niger I am a Touareg.

Ownership of goods

In our society, the woman is entitled to have her own capital. She has the same rights of ownership as men, the right to choose her husband and the right to own her house.

Having my own house is very important for me – having one's own house gives you independence. Independence is based mainly on economy. The more economic power you have the more you can make your own decisions.

In a marriage, the future husband gives a dowry. The mother prepares her daughter and her tent; this is her house, where she will live. The young husband comes into the bride's family; he is the one who comes to live with his wife, in her tent, at her parents' home.

The children's education

It is the woman's responsibility to educate the children. I have no favorites among my children; boys and girls, get the same opportunities to succeed in life. The girls must receive everything the boys get. I make sure they realize they are equals.

The girls must be given the opportunity to go to school - this gives them opportunities in life. Education must be given its proper place because the girls of today are tomorrow's women.

The family

The woman is responsible for managing the family – the family's possessions, the common good. She manages everything – whether this is the husband's possessions or her own. She controls all the family assets, she decides what is to be sold in order to buy whatever is needed or to do whatever has to be done.

The man's responsibility is to seek out whatever is needed to sustain his family; clothes, food, medicine – everything which has to be found outside and then brought into the house.

At the present time things are changing. A widow who is head of the family has to work. Women practice lots of trades – this allows them to support their family.

There are also women who do small renovation jobs, this was not done in the old days, and there are new trades for women – like animal husbandry. People are trying to create new activities adapted to their present lifestyle.

Tradition

The woman is responsible for protecting our traditions; she passes on these traditions to her boys and girls. In our children's education we try not to forget our code of honor, "the ashak". This is our basic philosophy, where we find our lifestyle rules, our traditions and our customs. This is our treasure trove - it is not always what we learn from others. Our parents were good people; we were cared for. We have our traditional medicines, we have our own way of creating things which are useful for our lifestyle. We have lots of things. Now we are losing them because other things are becoming more important. The question I ask myself is: are these other things what we really need, are they appropriate for our way of life?

Conjugal violence

In my country, men who behave violently towards women, who insult them, are rejected by society. It is dishonorable for a man to raise his hand against a woman. It is incomprehensible, it has to be explained... *it is cowardice for a man to strike a woman in our culture.*

Everything is done to avoid this happening. The woman leaves as soon as it becomes known that a man has struck a woman. The man has no rights and divorce follows immediately. He cannot get married again because women reject him. He projects a very poor image and is a very bad example to his children.

Women supporting each other

In Agadez, where I come from, there are many new women's groups springing up. The need for these groups is becoming more and more urgent. People understand that we must act together to exert the maximum influence. Ideas, experiences and material things are all necessary if we are to make progress.

We must not neglect solidarity, it gives us the strength to move forward. We must always show a united front, wherever we are.

On the political front the woman has a more important role than the man. We have to organize ourselves so that we are not just militant voters on Election Day. Then the men get elected and sit in government. We must put ourselves forward as election candidates, fight to get elected so that we can represent women.

We must neglect neither our associations nor political action. Women must act together. Our aim is not to fight or oppose men – men and women complement each other. They are our husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. At the same time, we know that the future of other women depends on us.

Conclusion

We must give our daughters every opportunity. They must not be condemned, from birth, to be submissive or just an object. We must not subject them to a future they perhaps do not want. Girls must be given the opportunity to make their own lives and to succeed according to their hopes and desires.

The whole of society loses out if a girl, a future mother, is not allowed to blossom. Woman is the essence of society – and its future.

I believe this is very important for tomorrow's woman – wherever she is and whatever her cultural identity. We must give this girl – tomorrow's woman – the opportunity to realize her full potential.

CAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE CHANGE ?

Gobaletch Gebre

Thanks to my mother and my grandmother, I had practical training: they were my school.

I created the Help Center “Kembatti Menti Gezzima-Toppe” (KMG) in Ethiopia, in order to show the community that it can be an agent of change.

In Ethiopia, violence against women is customary, it is allowed by law, culture and custom. From the cradle to the grave they are violated every day, especially in their own houses, where they should be protected, in principle. That is where girls learn from their mothers how to hold on and suffer in silence. They are strongly conditioned.

Women are considered objects: violated, exploited, abused, that is habitual violence against women. But when they are raped, mutilated, killed, does anyone wonder why this is customary?

According to the Bible, God created man in his image, and woman equal to man. So how come there is this apartheid between genders, similar to apartheid between races? Both are offenses against Human Rights and human dignity.

Apartheid in races: they say evolution is different, that Blacks are mentally inferior and same thing for apartheid between genders: women are inferior biologically, morally and intellectually and therefore cannot do what men do or function in the same way. They are limited to housework and procreation. Today they say women have the same rights, inscribed in the Constitution. But African women know that this is false. In no system is there any value for women.

Why does poverty have a woman's face? Because violence against women is habitual.

In the calculation of the United Nations' GNP, women's work is excluded. And yet they give life, work from morning to night, look after children, elderly, do 57% of agricultural work; thanks to them others can work and live. Thanks to women men can live in peace.

Through the calculation of its GNP a country can “see” its production, but women's work is not taken into account. They don't make profits so no one invests in them. Paradoxically, prostitution is taken into account in the GNP because it produces profits.

How can we change this situation?

By showing women how to become agents of change. But how can I become a leader if my oppressors belong to my family?

Women must find ways to recover dignity and justice for all through struggle. Struggle is different from fight: in struggle, we measure the other's strength; in fight, we want to defeat the other. We must attain solidarity between women.

Women must reach empowerment. They must know themselves and be recognized. Once a woman has learned to be autonomous, she cannot keep this learning to herself, she must be creative and share her experience with other women.

In Ethiopia, the violence to be eliminated is the practice of excision. Mutilations are part of the culture. Mothers mutilate their daughters themselves, out of ignorance. Our role (KMG's) is to create venues under the trees, where everyone can talk.

Women must first know who they are, what their rights are, know their bodies, their physical and mental health. They need information, they need to be able to use money count, invest. Their participation must be recognized. They have to know that, as human beings, they are equal and have the ability to participate.

All these elements have to be gathered into a community conversation.

How is culture incorporated in the structures of power to create control?

Men create culture. When women's rights are violated, when they are humiliated, mutilated, neglected, it is done in the name of culture.

What is culture? Culture does not belong to one group only. We are the products of several cultures. We choose certain cultural aspects. We cannot accept a culture that takes her humanity away from women. We have gifts that men do not have, such as to give life.

KMG's action started and grew where the Church was present. I spoke in church of excision. "Who are we to correct God's work? God gave women a special gift..."

In this manner conversation groups were created, with men, women, young and old, authorities, got together. They met every other week and followed the method below :

Building a community network

Identifying problems and concerns

<p style="text-align: center;">Supporting community, opportunities, hopes change</p>

Putting into new words

Recognizing problems and concerns

Actions

Decisions

Within a community, excision is carried out on 100% of girls. After 2 years and conversation workshops, 178 girls refused. In 2002 the first wedding of a non-excised girl was celebrated. It was a landmark, the media reported it. Things have changed. Currently 7 villages refuse excision and organize support groups for non-excised women. All women who do not want to be excised are followed until their wedding.

Today, births and weddings are registered in the country.

The government proclaimed a law against mutilation, with a fine of 40 euros and jail time of 3 months, but this law is not being implemented yet.

In 2004 people started using our programs. For the 5th anniversary of our center, the number of non-excised women rose to 25 000. This proves that culture can be changed: we can choose and eliminate what takes away our dignity.

Developing is not begging, but acquiring dignity and empowerment, having the choice of the culture in which I want to live.

Why do we accept that a woman should die because it is in her culture? What would Jesus have done in this case?

We are more numerous than men, we must do things globally, we must gather up. Starting at home in our own families. Give power to our daughters, not by saying but by doing. Show our worth to our sons. Show who we are, by trusting ourselves. Acting for humanity and solidarity starts in one's family.

We must rebuild communion among women, create leadership, not govern like men but govern through the consolidation of humanity.

PANEL

Anna Casella

Today's theme is: "Culture – Inducing poverty or bringing about change?" this is the question which we will consider in this debate – is culture an obstacle or an incentive to development? Even more relevant is the question – when and under which circumstances can cultural considerations help to bring about change?

Source of the problems with which women are confronted

The presentation has shown us that adherence to a particular culture is a fundamental part of our lives. However, the experiences of some people could lead us to disbelieve this observation and become pessimistic. Women experience serious difficulties, often because of their culture. They go through traumatic experiences.

We have seen examples of rites involving widowhood and polygamy – e.g. levirate (whereby the widow is obliged to marry her deceased husband's brother), and African sorority (the polygamous marriage to all the sisters) which is predominant in Latin America. There is also the loneliness of European women and the economic and relationship difficulties of women in the East. All of the above show us that the difficulties experienced by women are manifested on different levels:

1. Relationships; (between man and wife, marriage customs, dowries and how they are negotiated, difficulties experienced in how to survive after the husband's death, the isolation of women within the family situation or their segregation, as is the case in Arab cultures, the loneliness of European women in the wake of a failed marriage.
2. On an economic level: (overwork, lack of equal rights to goods and resources, difficulties in gaining access to the necessities of life, in combining family and work and, in more affluent cultures, underpaid employment and tiredness caused by working double shifts.
3. On an individual level: (ill health, lack of opportunity to make decisions affecting one's personal situation, a greater exposure to sickness and accidents, genital mutilation, the lack of education and self-esteem, the lack of satisfactory relationships)

All of the above are causes of poverty among women and are instrumental in perpetuating it.

However, all of these situations have neither the same origins nor the same causes:

- Widowhood rites, polygamy, levirate and sorority (Cameroon) reflect an old-fashioned concept of the man-woman relationship. Female genital mutilation is a traditional form of control over women. Some accept these norms but others reject them - some women do not accept the logic involved and demand the right to choose. (As witnessed by some African women.)
- Witness statements from the Dominican Republic speak about machismo – the supremacy of men over women with violence often a factor. What is evolving is regarded as a cultural transformation rather than a traditional cultural norm (O. Lewis's Culture of Poverty), especially in the poorer quarters like the city areas of Latin America, where the struggle to survive is often very violent and breeds this aggressive attitude which women accept as the price for economic support,
- Ukrainian women refer to the deficiencies in their social security system, which oblige them to start looking after their families again while their men folk are undergoing a serious identity crisis. There are no longer any social institutions and, often, the terrible destruction of previous regimes has to be put right (street children of Romania or the

reestablishment of a civic culture in Albania to replace the kanun – the traditional cultural, familial canon)

- In France, on the other hand, we see the present cultural model crisis common to the whole of the west. Modern thinking, in the absence of other cultural settings, portrays marriage as a romantic ideology which has no relevance to real life and which has no common base.

Here, then, is the first given: the problems experienced by women are cross-cultural; they are present in every culture but can have different sources.

- An out of date cultural system, which ignores new thinking: as in some cultural traditions where marriage is the only option available to women; or the tradition in which the marriage goes ahead only if all the groom's family possessions are passed over to the family of the bride. This system, which was designed to bring the families together, does not take into account the changing feelings of a large proportion of women.
- A too-rapid replacement of cultural traditions without putting anything else in their place. The traditional system regarding property in Mozambique, for example, gave married women the right to land tenancy so that they could grow crops. (In Mozambique the women work the land). Now, a change in the legislation which has liberalized the buying and selling of community owned lands discriminates against women who cannot afford to buy land and thus find themselves impoverished.
- The lack of any common cultural model, as is the case throughout the western world, where, according to a French anthropologist, culture becomes a completely personal possession, and where the links between people are extremely fragile and encourage an increase in violence.

What cultural models are we dealing with?

Gender equality, family, and the social role of women: this seems to be the common theme here today.

Traditional culture links sex, gender and social role. In other words, sex determines what we can and cannot do; it imposes a hierarchy and assigns roles. Thus the female world (the family) and the male world (outside the family) are distinctly separate. The concept that the woman is always protected by the man (father, husband, brother) also controls her sexual behavior (man's honor depends on woman's behavior). Traditional culture looks on the family as a production unit and social unit, held together by the woman's work. Since the family is an economic entity, the transfer of possessions from one family to another on marriage (dowry or lobol as it is called in Mozambique) is a matter for the families and not for the women.

On the other hand western, Cartesian, atheist, capitalist cultures are radically individualist. The individual is the deciding factor in any situation or in any economic transaction. The person is isolated, obliged to put themselves first economically, professionally and in relationship terms.

In practice, it could be said that the woman suffers from "too much family" in some situations and "too little family" in others.

- In countries where the family (one's own family or family married into) is a "complete social institution", the woman is deprived of any individuality and independence and the family is based on her sacrificing herself.
- In countries where traditions are being questioned (Eastern Europe or Africa) the woman is still carrying out her duties of work, care and help. She does this on her own, often without any protection from either her traditional community or from national

legislation. She is living under an archaic system which does not give her the support she deserves.

- Finally, in well-established capitalist countries like in Europe or North America, women are the victims of deficient relationship systems. They are not always protected by law (e.g. where health care is privately funded). There are economic consequences for divorced women who find themselves alone.

How do women react in these situations?

Women can either give in to the situation, they can organize themselves, they can protest and they can look for alternatives. (witness accounts from Bogaletch Gebre, Cameroon and Nigerian ladies).

How should we approach the whole question of culture?

We must move forward and redefine the concept of culture.

Here are a few important criteria:

Culture and tradition are not the same. Culture is dynamic in time, it changes continuously. Tradition is one element of culture but questioning tradition in order to achieve a new awareness, is a culture in itself. Cultures, which support excision, exist (even in Europe where there are immigrant communities) while other cultures oppose such a position. Cultural innovations themselves become "cultures". The opposition of Ethiopian women against excision, their very resistance is a new "culture". Culture can be defined as "collective behavior". It is a dynamic and creative concept which recognizes that several cultures can coexist in the same society.

Culture is not a homogenous, coherent, fixed system. Different points of view can exist between individuals and cultural tradition. Some traditions are accepted by the older generations and are being contested today in the name of an individual's human rights - contested by these same communities which were responsible for them in the first place. Marriage, (which includes levirate, sorority and polygamy), which is considered as a family business and as a production unit, contravenes women's rights, as does the unequal division of goods between boys and girls which the Touareg woman spoke about – a system which was also practiced by Italian peasant families until recent times. The patriarchal system based on women and young people being submissive to the older generations (a system with which we Italians are familiar) is incompatible with a new awareness of the right to equality of each individual in a group.

When we look at cultural tradition from the point of view of gender, certain aspects are open to dispute. It is clear that the traditional family model based on the sharing out of work, the hierarchical structure and the greater relative importance of the group rather than the individual can work for some members of society but doesn't work for those lower down the hierarchy – the women. So it is clear that the western cultural system based on the individual, super consumerism and isolation can satisfy the aims of economic institutions but is not suited to the needs of either women or young people. Looking at culture from the gender bias means making a judgment call – and that can also mean invoking intervention. The system of international aid, for example, is based on a very incomplete notion of the economy of developing countries. The concept of "gender" means accepting the fact that women spend 74% of their income on their children while the figure for men is merely 20%. (Unicef).

Volunteers, ethics and culture

Voluntary organizations which work together have their own culture. It can be said that you, Vincentian volunteers, have your own concept of women and of family which you have a right and a duty to promote.

This means that we must have a deeper understanding of volunteer ethics.

The first duty of a volunteer is understanding culture.

Knowing the cultural contexts in which we work means questioning ourselves on the mentality of the people we work with – this can sometimes be difficult to understand and to accept. Why do so many Latin-American women accept the machismo of their men folk? Is it because of some deficiency or is it because they have no economic alternative? Why do many immigrant women in Europe accept the practice of female genital mutilation? If this is the situation, then we are faced with the need for a more serious type of intervention in the form of information and the education of people's consciences and on the creation of public opinion which will support these changes. (In Italy the Consolo legislation forbids all genital mutilation but also proposes projects and education to tackle the root of the practice.)

Being aware of cultural contexts also means being able to identify which traditions can be abandoned and where and how the culture in question is changing. What are the crisis issues? Could they be new thinking patterns in women, changing economic systems, ways of integrating oneself into the modern world? The Macuxi Indians of Roraima (Brazil) send their children to urban schools and watch television, even though they are still living in the aldeias. In the town of Boa Vista these same Macuxi discuss their situation as displaced Indians.

The second step is to form alliances with social services which are working towards change. The bodies working to bring about change include women's organizations, professional bodies, magazines, local leading figures, and church bodies.

The third measure is to encourage the empowerment of women

We have seen some examples emerge from intervention strategies which play an important role in women determining their own future.

The first issue is getting to know oneself. Women play a fundamental role in every society: they are involved in education, caring, the economy, knowledge transfer, medical assistance and agriculture. They counsel their husbands on how to exercise their authority, they give guidance to their children and set up help and collaboration networks. However they do not receive recognition for the role they play nor are they so concerned for themselves. One way forward would be that they should be made aware of their own importance, of their environment and of all those things in their surroundings, which are no longer considered to be adequate in a changing world.

The second issue involves relations.

Encouraging gender relations' networks can facilitate development and reduce the incidence of loneliness. This means access for women to social services for both themselves and for their children and helping them to understand the workings of these services, especially in the western world.

The third issue involves the workplace and the economy.

The tools required here are the ability of women to access employment and the means leading to employment and also the proper management of economic resources.

The fourth issue is that of health.

In many areas in the world the knowledge of both traditional and non-traditional health care and the application of this knowledge to both themselves and for their children is a priority as is the spreading of information on the effects of AIDS and other illnesses.

The fifth issue is that of education and literacy. This means not only working towards getting women to go to school (or to literacy courses for migrants) but also establishing a system of education which is geared towards women and which recognizes their particular circumstances.

In conclusion – some key points:

- Difficulties experienced by women are cross-cultural and there are many factors, which cause these problems.
- We look at the term “culture” in a new light: it is dynamic (culture as the evolving body of institutions). Culture is not monolithic (Different positions on a particular point of view or on a particular way of behaving can coexist within the same culture)
- We must look at culture from the “gender” point of view and judge traditional practices which cause difficulties for women and do them harm.
- We do not refer to “respecting culture” but rather to “promoting” cultures – this is a value judgment.
- Changing the relationship between men and women means instigating an endogenous cultural process which will affect the whole of society. This will be achieved when women have an enlightened knowledge of themselves and of new ways.
- Vincentian volunteers also have a “culture” – their vision of the world (of women, of development)

Volunteers have their own ethic which leads them to understand, to judge and to act in a way that promotes the individual.

Chapter 3

Practical means to meet women poverty

SEMINAR OUTLINE

Uca Agullo

We are currently observing the feminization of poverty. This is the reason why we have decided to dedicate a whole day to the search for means to address the poverty of women and to guarantee the respect of their fundamental rights in various cultures.

Today, in many countries the depreciation of the feminine gender, the ignorance of its rights, and in some cases the negative influence of the media, prevent women from reinforcing their social and professional autonomy.

Yesterday we examined various situations of poverty, and, thanks to various testimonials, we became aware that, although women play a major role at various levels of society, it is very rare that they are able to escape poverty.

However, the concrete example that we have examined yesterday has revealed a positive aspect: since it has been possible to change something deeply rooted in culture, mutilation in this case, then it must be possible to change other elements of culture, less complex this time.

Hence **the urge to provide the participants with efficient and concrete methods to address the various aspects of poverty that we are faced with every day.** This will be done through Forums. We will then be able to disseminate these methods in our own respective countries.

When we had the idea to set up panels of interactive working sessions during our Assembly, our objective was the following: to promote new methods for the training of volunteers, so that we remain more faithful to our charisma and become more effective in our work.

We suggest methods that other teams have already used and which have yielded good results.

The cultural corners will welcome us at the end of the day. They will be a place of exchange, relaxation and sharing.

FORUMS

The objective of the forums was to propose concrete methods to meet the needs of poor women.

Each forum gathered 50 delegates and the topics were:

- Micro credits
- Systemic Change
- Community Health care program
- Cooperatives
- International representation and political action
- Social integration through culture

The leader of the forum presented real experiences and lead a debate inviting the participants to share their own experiences to enrich the database of “AIC good practices”.

Each participant received a document about the learned technique to share with the members of their association.

In the December 2007 AIC Training Booklet, three forums are developed: Cooperatives, Micro credits and Community Health care program.

WORKSHOPS

The last day of the assembly, while AIC national presidents met by region, the other delegates had the choice to participate in 4 different workshops:

- **Project methodology to improve the situation of women**, led by Natalie Monteza
- **Funds raising** by Christine de Cambray
- **Communication for a better visibility of AIC** by Claudette Mouffe
- **Prevention of violence towards women** by Anne Sturm

Each workshop brought together about 40 persons. The participation was dynamic. Texts are available in the AIC international secretariat.

Chapter 4

Operational Guidelines and Poverty of Women

SEMINAR OUTLINE

Uca Agullo

Today's working session is of particular interest. It is the key day to devise the various ways, which will unite our commitment to the AIC for the near future.

However far away we are one from another, there exists between us an indissoluble union, which makes us very strong and encourages us to go forward. We know that we are not alone, but that a large, solid and fraternal network unites the work of 250,000 voluntary workers throughout the world.

During these few days of meeting, our Network is deciding how it plans to work in order to offer a joint contribution to those who want to "change the world", and more precisely the world of cultural injustice, which prevents the majority of women from developing and evolving, and which in other cases – that of the gender violence – affect their life dramatically.

The Forums presented new tools, which are going to help us to deal more creatively and effectively with the various types of poverty, among which those that are induced by "cultures". During the workshops, we did some brainstorming to seek the means available to us that we might be able to use to change given situations, and how to show an effective solidarity with so many women who are worn down by the various aspects of poverty.

We have a great force in common: our work at grass roots with the poor, their attention to us, the respect that they inspire and deserve, all of that united in a spirituality that leads us to act through teamwork, a fraternal welcome and spiritual communion. Here are a number of positive aspects, which cast light on our BEING as followers of St. Vincent.

All this requires a Reinforced Association. That is why we all have to feel responsible for what we all share in common: the AIC.

Sister Maria Pilar will show that our roots, Saint Vincent's spirituality, encourage our creativity to face today's poverty.

After dinner, the solidarity bazaar will once again provide us with a chance of getting together to raise funds, which show that we stand by the side of voluntary workers when they go through difficult moments. When someone goes through difficult times, they must feel that they are supported: it is only through solidarity that they will gather enough strength to continue to go forward, whereas, in most cases, they do not know where to start.

All the countries have welcomed this AIC initiative and have taken part in it generously. The money collected yesterday and today will be given to our international association.

THE ROOTS OF VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Sister Maria Pilar Lopez, dc

INTRODUCTION-

First and foremost, I would like to thank Marina Costa for having invited me to share my thoughts with you on a subject close to all our hearts: how the Holy Ghost acted in Saint Vincent who, faithful to God's wish, discovered His Will, and how his spirituality, his "own style" of following Christ, has reached all of us, his sons and daughters.

While preparing my talk, I have tried to take into consideration what happened before studying the **operational guidelines** that will inspire your action in the coming years. I have also kept in mind the fact that I am talking to you in the context of an Assembly aimed at discussing a very significant topic, that of **"Women and Poverty – Diversity of Cultures"**.

This means that we have to focus further on the origin, the **roots**, as I have put it in the title, of what is called **the Vincentian Spirituality** and transpose it within today's society, so that it can illuminate our concrete action. Furthermore, we cannot forget that this origin happened in a specific **cultural situation**, which in some aspects is very similar to today's situation and in others, totally different.

This is why we will also briefly mention Saint Vincent's contribution to the **promotion of women** and their role in society and the Church.

When possible, I will quote Saint Vincent texts that I used when I gave lectures to the ladies of the first Associations. So, they might be less known as people usually use quotes from the Founder addressing himself to Missionaries or to the Daughters of Charity.

The spirituality of Saint Vincent

If we mean by spirituality, all the ideas and attitudes that characterize the spiritual life of a person or a group of people, this will translate itself for a Christian as a **concrete way of following Christ**.

The spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul was born from his strong meeting with God and with Christ in the world of the Poor. This led him to live by **two key principles** in his experience of the gospel:

- **"Serving the Poor is a way to God"**¹

- Serving the Poor is building for them **the Kingdom of God and His Justice**.

These principles are, for Saint Vincent de Paul, the true expression of the realization of God's will and the continuation of Christ's life and mission, evangelizer of the poor.

Vincent de Paul is more of a man of action than the author of a structured and systematized spirituality. With his life and his countless written papers, he transmits us a "way of life": to continue the mission of Christ, sent by the Father to **evangelize the poor**, to tell them that **the Kingdom of God** is near and that this Kingdom **is for them**.

On numerous occasions, Saint Vincent insists on the **identification of Christ with the poor**. Let us take two beautiful texts as examples. In a sermon to the Ladies on the 11th of July 1657, he told them:

¹ English translation of the quotes from "Obras completas San Vicente de Paúl. Ed. Sígueme" Volume IX, p. 25 and S.V., IX, 25

*“He himself wanted to have been born poor, to keep the poor company, to serve the poor, to put himself in the place of the poor; He went on saying that the good and the bad one does to the poor will be considered as deeds to his divine person. Could He have shown a more tender love of the poor? Ladies, there is no difference between loving him and loving the poor; in this way, to serve the poor well is to serve Him”*²

On the 13th of December 1646, he told the Sisters:

*“When one serves the poor, one serves Jesus Christ. My daughters, what a great truth this is! Serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. This is as true as we are standing here”*³

For Vincent de Paul, continuing the mission of Christ is respecting God’s will, which implies for our Founder, as it should be for all of us, a thirst for justice, building the kingdom of God and His justice.⁴ One of the original **characteristics** of the Vincentian spirituality is the **relation** that our Founder establishes **between the kingdom of God and God’s will**; a relation which, as he showed in his life, can be achieved through concrete action. This is why he tells us:

*“One has to sanctify one’s deeds searching for God in these actions, and do these actions to find God rather than to see them done”*⁵

Another characteristic of the spirit Saint Vincent left us is: considering the **poor as people who have their dignity and their rights**, this is why we owe them not pity but justice.

Let us remember some of his words:

*“May justice goes hand in hand with mercy”*⁶

*“There cannot be charity without justice”*⁷

*“The duties of justice are preferable to those of charity”*⁸

*“May God give us the grace to soften our hearts for the poor (the underprivileged) and to believe that, when we are helping them, we are doing justice and not mercy”*⁹

For Vincent de Paul, the poor are first and foremost people in their own right who live in a situation of misery, of exploitation, of marginalisation and of injustice. He founded the Charities, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity to make the priests and lay brothers aware that **one loves or betrays God through the poor**.

In his time, Vincent de Paul’s opinion was revolutionary. Despite all of this, our Founder was never led astray by political motivations, although he took part directly and indirectly in politics. His personal calling as evangelizer of the Poor, and nothing else, led him to participate in affairs of a political nature; in this way, he tried to work for the good of “the poor people dying of hunger and condemned by society”.

Vincent de Paul’s life is completely **consumed** by the fire of **charity**, making him state that one has to come in aid of the needy,

*“... with the same speed as when one runs to put out a fire”*¹⁰

For Vincent de Paul:

*“charity, when it inhabits a soul, fills its deepest corners: one cannot rest; it is a fire that does not burn out; always keeping the person alert and active who let himself burnt by it once”*¹¹

² S.V., X, p. 954-955

³ S.V., IX A, p. 240

⁴ Compare S.V., XI A, p. 428-444 and p. 445-447

⁵ S.V., 11 A, p. 430

⁶ S.V., I, p. 464

⁷ S.V., II, p. 48

⁸ S.V., VII, p. 525

⁹ S.V., VII, p. 90

¹⁰ S.V., XI B, p. 724

His particular way of understanding and following Jesus Christ, **goes beyond all cultures**, all times, all places. What we cannot do is persist in keeping today what is not essential. Our mission will be **to keep the fundamental elements alive** that need to last, going beyond all conventions and cultures that change with time.

This is not easy sometimes but nor was it for Saint Vincent himself whose behavior was, at times, completely *counter-cultural*, as we will see, as an example, in the following topic.

Saint Vincent brings a new perspective on women. What it entails for us today.

In the XVIIth century, women were second-class citizens in the social as well as in the religious sphere, subordinate to men and with no legal rights. We will not go into further details to prove this, quoting great men of the time or Church hierarchies, as we could get upset about it and this is not my intention.

Before and during Saint Vincent's time, great women, in civil society as well as in the Church, had already spoken out against this situation, but to no avail.

Vincent de Paul breaks moulds, frees himself from the inhumane conception of women and discovers that **women are vital in overcoming the situation of misery the poor find themselves in.**

Convinced by this, he confronts the traditions of his time, opens new paths and **introduces women**, albeit of the consequences, **to social and religious life.** He first achieves this with women from the upper class, frees them from a superficial existence and enables them to become protagonists in their own lives. He then works with women from the lower classes, who are still more submitted to men, and puts them on an equal footing to those of the upper class, helping all of them do charity work which, in that century, was a task for men only. Let him give us his opinion on the matter:

*"It seems that taking care of foundlings is a man's duty and not a woman's. I believe that **God uses the ones he wants**".¹²*

The text comes from the sermon he gave to the Ladies that I mentioned earlier and he goes on to say:

*"Regarding the fact that this is not a task for women, you have to know ladies that **God has used your gender to accomplish the greatest things** that the world has ever known. Which men once accomplished what Judith did, what Esther did, what the maid of Orleans did in this kingdom, what Saint Genevieve did when she supplied food to Paris during a famine?"¹³*

In this aspect too, Vincent de Paul does not do anything but follow in Jesus Christ's footsteps. We are not here to analyze the attitude Jesus had towards women, we will however briefly refer to a text used by John Paul II, in the beautiful letter he addressed to women on the occasion of the Conference of Beijing, to summarize this attitude:

*"He, **going beyond the norms prevailing in the culture of his time**, had, regarding women, an attitude of openness, respect, of refuge and tenderness. In this way, he honored in women the dignity they have always had, in the plan and in the love of God".¹⁴*

Let us see also, with an example, how Vincent de Paul goes beyond the norms prevailing in the culture of his time.

¹¹ S.V., XI A, p. 132

¹² S.V., X, p. 939

¹³ S.V., X, p. 939

¹⁴ "Letter from the Pope John Paul II to women", Vatican, 29th June 1995

We borrowed this example from the rules of the “Women’s Charity of Châtillon-les-Dombes” at the end of 1617. This is one his founding documents, dating back to three hundred and ninety years ago.

Saint Vincent says in these Rules:

*“As there are reasons to hope that there will be foundations for this association and that **it is not right for women to carry out their administration on their own**, the servants of the poor will chose as a representative a pious and devout clergyman or a virtuous citizen”.*¹⁵

Vincent de Paul soon realizes that the cultural trait of his time: “*it is not right for women to carry out their administration on their own*” is wrong. Around 1630, he writes to Louise de Marillac:

*“Experience shows us that it is **absolutely necessary for women not to depend on men**, especially money-wise”.*¹⁶

What is Saint Vincent teaching us here? When **the well being of the poor is in the balance, one must not hesitate and act counter-culturally if necessary.**

We are also faced today with situations in which we have to act *counter-culturally*. Here are two brief real-life examples:

It is well known that when a young gypsy woman gets married, she becomes a part of her husband’s family, lives with them and has to submit to everything that is imposed on her, especially by her mother-in-law. In a disregarded family, the fact that the baby has fever is just not accepted as he has received the proper vaccines. The mother secretly takes her child to get vaccinated at the local hospital. Is she less of gypsy for it? Does she lose her values as a gypsy? The answer is obvious, the baby’s health has to come first; when the child is better, this will improve the well being of all his people.

A Daughter of Charity from Burundi follows a childcare class in Paris. When she returns to the Food Center where she serves the poor, she decides that if a child keeps coming back because he suffers from malnutrition, she will not receive him if his mother does not come with her husband; this is easy to understand why. Will she be going against her culture by acting this way? Of course not, not only is she caring for her child, she is also helping African men become aware of their responsibilities. Don’t you agree?

I cannot set aside this topic without mentioning the fact that **Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac** were also preoccupied with **poor girls’ education**, something unheard of at the time. Saint Vincent had already referred to the matter in the various Association Rules. Saint Louise, in 1641, turns to the Cantor of the Cathedral of Paris to ask for his permission to found a school in the suburb of Saint-Denis to educate girls from poor backgrounds, whose parents cannot afford to pay for schooling.

We all know that even today, in some cultures, many girls do not have the same education opportunities as boys. Please forgive me for mentioning the gypsy people again but they are close to my heart. When we arrived in the area, one of the first services we set up was the organization of a nursery, so that the girls would not be forced to stay at home and take care of their younger siblings. We then organized a series of other activities... Picture a group of beautiful young girls parading on a catwalk in clothes they had made themselves. They are now supported by numerous organizations; since 1999, they have their own website, in Castilian, Catalan and English, where they can express themselves and even talk about feminism as well as being a gypsy.

¹⁵ S.V., X, p. 575

¹⁶ S.V., I, p. 141

In a conference in 2002, they were recognized for their *gypsy contributions to feminism*, essential features of the gypsy culture, which far from being undermined, has been enhanced by their contributions thanks to the training they received:

- The family as the nucleus of the community.
- Maternity disregarded in movements for the liberation of women is now promoted.
- Gypsy women demand among other things respect and equality for all their people, an equality taking their history and their characteristics into account.¹⁷

What I mean by all I have just said is that there are values and counter-values in all cultures. We have to **make our own judgment** of what has to be **respected, supported and accepted** in each culture, while, at the same time, be careful that our **Vincentian spirit is not spoiled** by the great influence a particular **counter-value** could have.

How the Vincentian spirit illuminates our actions

In the second part of my talk, we will analyze some aspects which, with the practical implementation of the inspiring principles we have just seen, can help us improve our service to the poor, in line with the spirit left to us by our Founders. I say “Founders” thinking about Louise de Marillac’s great involvement and above all about the Organization and the Associations of Charity.

1. The need for organization and training:

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to our Founders because they opened the way and gave us guidelines to follow which are still valid today. Saint Vincent, helped by Saint Louise on some occasions, wrote a series of Rules adapting them to different realities.

The Father Dodin, a great specialist of Saint Vincent, wrote that the Rules of the first Charity, that of Châtillon, were:

“A masterpiece of **organization and tenderness**”.

In these Rules, Saint Vincent notes that:

‘Some virtuous ladies from the town of Châtillon-les-Dombes..., have decided to meet to aid spiritually and physically the inhabitants of their town, who have had at times to **suffer a lot**, more from a lack of order and organization than a shortage of charitable souls’.¹⁸

We live in a much more pluralistic society than in the XVIIth century. While our Founders found it vital to act following the “**Rules**”, today we have to work with carefully elaborated “**Projects**” which take into account all the variables.

In general, the people we help have broken down mentally; the worst off they are, the more we have to **intervene in a clear and structured way**. If not, we will only contribute to their disintegration.

The Vincentian sometimes make mistakes. Being who we are and doing what the children of Saint Vincent have been doing for more than three centuries, this happens. I am referring above all to the Social Services aspect.

Today, it is essential to be **professionally trained** in order to develop a mentality where the followings points are absolutely necessary:

¹⁷ See complete text on <http://www.dromkotar.org/>

¹⁸ S.V., X, p. 574

- the **permanent study** of poverty situations,
- the development of a **critical conscience** of the causes of poverty,
- the necessity to elaborate projects with easy-to-assess objectives,
- to intervene with the proper methodological, technical or administrative approach.

2. To clearly analyze the reality.

The main difference between the poverty of today and that of Saint Vincent's time is that today's poverty is not something inevitable. Before the Industrial Revolution, there were not enough goods to lift misery out of humanity, nor the means to do so. While today, for the first time in the history of humankind, **there are enough resources to make sure that everybody has access to basic goods**. This is why the poor of today are the **impoverished** and not the needy as in earlier times.

In order to analyze clearly today's reality, we have to realize that **poverty-marginalisation-exclusion**, as a whole, is not purely accidental, it is a reality born from cold and continual mechanisms. It is what John Paul II called "structures of sin".¹⁹

While the first reality that any social action has to confront is **poverty** and marginalisation, the second reality is injustice. Indeed, poverty, being a social problem, is linked to the very structure of society, as it is **a manifestation of an unfair distribution of goods**. We have seen that this is not what God wants and that Saint Vincent spoke out against it.

What I am now going to talk about is linked with what I have read about "political action" in your publications. We have already seen that Saint Vincent is not a "politician" although he did intervene politically when the well being of the poor required an action of justice.

In today's world as in yesterday's, political neutrality does not exist. In such an inter-connected world as ours, any action is politicized, whether actively or passively. **To keep silent in the face of injustice** is to tolerate and allow injustice to continue. Passively, it comes down to **taking sides with injustice**.

This is why Luiz González-Carvajal, a Spanish theologian and specialist of Saint Vincent, writes in his book "The Cause of the Poor is the Cause of the Church":

"The Church and its institutions cannot choose to go into politics or not, but rather chose what policies and in whose favor they will adopt... The policies of the Christian community have to benefit the poorest of the poor and their goal is to bring the justice of man closer to the justice of God".²⁰

Before setting up a project, especially with women, a very important aspect regarding the clear analysis of reality is the importance of **knowing how to define, collectively, a particular situation**, in order to find in the very community opportunities to develop. We will from then on be able to elaborate association and community life projects, which are vital for the empowerment of women.

3. To have a clear picture in mind of the society we want and to be coherent.

As we said before, to act in this way will cause **tensions** between **announcing and denouncing**. We cannot only denounce the transgression of ethical values by public authorities, for example, we also have to self-criticize our own actions.

¹⁹ See «Sollicitudo, rei sociales, nº 36»

²⁰ Luis González Carvajal, "La causa de los pobres causa de la Iglesia", Sal Terrae (1982)

In order for our denunciation to be **prophetic and morally acceptable**, we also have to be **accountable** in our own lives... This can be uncomfortable as it implies a change of values and therefore adaptation to Saint Vincent's way of life while following Jesus. For me, belonging to the Association is not a way of working but a **way of life**.

We live in a system where individualism, competitiveness and the "benefit" of a chosen few, cause the exclusion of many others. In this system, whether we like or not, we all have a place. *Our place* is to be able to **say regarding our lives**:

- it is possible for **"being" to replace "having"**, as a fundamental value in our society.
- **we need far less** to satisfy our basic human needs.
- **the quality of our relationships** makes us much happier than the quantity of goods we possess.

4. **To firmly believe in people.**

Introducing this topic, I am deeply convinced that this is a matter of life and death and from this depends the future of the people we are working with. I am not only talking about the poor in our care but also our collaborators, volunteers and people who contact us to better know the Association.

Believing in people means that we have to believe in our hearts some basic notions:

- **to consider** without any exception **that each and every one of us has duties and rights**.
- to truly trust the **capacity of any person to improve and go forward**.

The first thing we need to believe in people is to do so through the **eyes of faith**. We saw how Vincent de Paul identified Christ with the poor and the poor with Christ. Let us listen to him again:

*"Turn the medal and see with the lights of faith that **the Son of God**, who wanted to belong to the poor, **is represented with the poor**... My god! How beautiful are the poor, when we look at them from God's perspective and with the same esteem as Jesus Christ!"²¹*

It is through the eyes of faith that our elders, with a Vincentian charisma, taught us to look at the Poor. Countless generations of Vincentians, throughout their lives, looked at the Poor as teachers **"who preach by their very presence"** and as masters ²²who need **to be loved tenderly and deeply respected**.

With such a vision of man, one cannot fall into stereotypes and label people. Expressions such as: "they're all the same", "we can't do anything about it", "he doesn't want to change"... cannot come out of the heart of a Vincentian. If this happens to me, I have to stop and think. With this attitude, I might be denying my incapacity to act, foreseeing the failure of my intervention, and defining the future of the person the Lord has put into my care.

We do not have the time to go into the hackneyed debate on "for aid" and "against aid". All I am saying is that **direct help** cannot be considered as an end in itself, nor as an isolated activity, but rather as a **mean** to help awaken the people concerned, to help them **go forward in their lives** and reach their goals, at medium or long term. We focus in our work on **"accompanying the process"** rather than on "solving problems".

²¹ S.V., XI B, p. 725

²² S.V., IX A, p. 120

Helping a person to become aware of his/her own reality, as well the steps to overcome it, is a **lengthy task** and has to **respect the desire of each person** to organize his or her own life. The people who contact us are not looking for someone to change them but someone who, when they have decided to change, will **support them**, accompany them and help them. A good indicator in our work with the poor is to see **the progressive level of autonomy** reached by each person we are working with.

Working on the assumption that all intervention in the social sphere has to be educational, we could say that the best **educator enables the person to develop its full potential** and can do so at appropriate moment.

5. Capacity of collaboration and networking.

The process we have talked about, on an individual basis, also has to be **developed collectively and in coordination** with other departments and with the person's family. This means that our efforts will be multiplied and encourage the development of other very important factors such as sociability, a sense of belonging and the cohesion of the environment.

Fortunately, the believers are not the only ones who feel concerned about and want to fight against injustice! We cannot forget our commitment to the underprivileged based on a civil ethic. In reality, believers and non-believers share a common workspace because they have the same basic demands and because the task is so great that all men and women of good will need to work hand in hand.

This is why **our action must not be isolated**. First of all, our action has to be closely linked with the project itself, taking into consideration its objectives. It is normal, in all projects, to make changes as we go along. These changes have to be based on decisions taken by the team in charge of the project. **Individual actions** or actions taken without the team's agreement cannot be accepted.

In all certainty, in our projects, we will be in contact and will coordinate with the other active forces in our society who work in the same fields as us. We will hopefully work with other members of the **Vincentian family**, sharing the same spirit and pooling the wealth of each branch's particular features.

We all are the children of a Vincent de Paul who was the first to organize Charity and who did so with a specific end in mind: to work twice as hard and offer a better Service to those who are suffering. I am referring once again to the events in Châtillon in 1617 and to the birth of the Association. One aspect of Saint Vincent's work in Châtillon we are maybe not taking enough into consideration is the following: he managed to intervene in specific problems of a group of people; **from and within the environment causing these problems** and in order to do this, **he combines the actions coming from the community itself**. This was repeated afterwards in the other Associations. If you take a look at the Rules of the Mixed Charity of Mâcon, you will see how it is organized, involving all active forces of the city.²³

²³ See S.V., X, p. 634 and following.

6. Recognize the poor as a gift in our lives.

We have seen that one of the requirements of the Vincentian spirit is to believe in the capacity of each and everyone to improve and go forward. It is also a reality that even those **who apparently only receive** because of the situation they are in, **are contributing with their capacity to receive**.

It is not easy for us to receive, especially for those of us who are used to give. It is not easy to set up a relationship from a “receiving” position, as it is something we have not “trained for”. If in our lifetime, we had not created relationships with the needy, the fragile, the vulnerable people, who **offered their availability** in trusting themselves in our Service, we would not have discovered all the **hidden capacities in ourselves**. Many of these capacities have got nothing to do with age, knowledge... They concern for example: a generosity of spirit to let oneself be moved, to know how to listen, acknowledgement and reciprocity to allow the other rights and justice. We can and we have to use all our capacities while the Lord keeps us in his Service to the Poor.

It is in this perspective that the recognition of the poor as a gift acquires its full meaning; **with them, I discover my own limitations and my own areas of exclusion**. At the same time, while accompanying the other, I am aware of my own growth, as in all exchange there is a mutual enrichment. **I grow at the same time as the other person**. This is where the expression “**the poor are our teachers and masters**” acquires its full meaning.

Last but not least, let me finish by quoting something very dear to Saint Vincent, **the wonderful providence of God**. May **an excessive confidence** in our personal and material resources, whatever they are, **never make us forget “God’s providence”**. May we not make the mistake of measuring our efficiency of our Service with the same indicators used by our society; that is to say in economic terms with statistics of success and failures. To not let this meaning of efficiency affect us, we have to make it clear that we are following a Jesus whose life was an apparent failure and that we are the spiritual children of Vincent de Paul. For whom, efficiency only consisted in implementing God’s plan, as lived by Jesus and expressed in the 4th chapter of Saint Luke:

“The Spirit of our Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering the sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord”²⁴

May Marie, our Mother, who always knew how to be attentive to the necessities of others, help us live our lives by the principles we have discussed.

²⁴ Luke, 4, 18-19.

INTRODUCTION TO OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

Marina Costa

I would like to say a few words about the operational guidelines of the AIC, before we start the work together. We will try to find the path we will follow in the next few years, in response to poverty, especially women in poverty.

To be part of the team of AIC signifies giving support to the project of St. Vincent.

- The project that gives us our identity
- At the time we decide to be part of the association, we commit ourselves to actively participate in the project
- The fundamentals of the project are found in the Basic Document

The project of St Vincent is to fight against poverty, and against all situations that affect people and prevent them to live in normal and satisfactory conditions.

We the AIC volunteers propose to put the project into practice

- With reference to the Gospels, with the social doctrine of the Church and the Spirit of St Vincent
- Achieving a common action formulated in the phrase ‘Against poverty acting together’, which is also the title of our Basic Document.

To put into practice the project today, AIC proposes methods and strategies that are not decided theoretically. On the contrary, they come directly from the AIC teams all over the world and are formulated and voted upon by the AIC delegates, whose member countries are represented in this Assembly.

How are the Operational Guidelines Developed

There is a very strong link between the experiences of the AIC groups in the field and the development of the Operational Guidelines of the Association; it is in fact, the experiences of all grass roots teams in the field, in all countries that encourage AIC to find a continually changing response to poverty.

How does it work practically?

In 51 countries of the world the AIC teams **analyze the reality of their environment** and respond with concrete activities and projects that have two principal objectives,

- respond to the needs of the poor and accompany them in their process of transformation
- develop activities to put pressure, to react against the causes of poverty and to raise awareness within society,

These actions and projects are transmitted by AIC through different methods, together with the evaluation that the groups themselves give regarding the state of poverty, their ways of responding, their successes, and the difficulties the poor encounter. The methods of transmission are the annual reports of each team, the reports of the national presidents of AIC, their letters and different communications, the bulletins, the visits to other countries, encounters during training seminars. However there is also a particular method of exchange of information that is aimed at the preparation of the assembly and it is a survey in the form of a questionnaire proposed to the associations before the Assembly.

The continuous reflection that AIC takes from all the relevant information, together with the **key ideas of the International Organizations** that our representatives pass on to us, guide the points which are brought to the attention of the delegate volunteers at the International Assemblies, these are then analyzed, discussed and finally proposed and voted as Operational Guidelines.

In this way, it appears clear that the experiences of the groups as your teams, their projects, and their actions stimulate the growth and progress of all AIC.

You know well the development of the Guidelines, since 1990 at the Assembly of Assisi, it was decided for the first time to elaborate the Operational Guidelines voted by the delegates in the name of all the AIC volunteers in the world. (The development is found in the Basic Document chapter 9)

Looking back at the past we see a **common theme** that raises our own awareness and deepens our ideas.

We have started with **autopromotion** and **solidarity** within AIC, then we continued with promoting deeper **cultural awareness** and sharing the ideas that are at the heart of our actions.

The social work to fight against poverty is based on a commitment in becoming a **transforming force**, to change ourselves, our relations with the poor, and society.

This action of transformation demands a strong sense of co-responsibility between us and all society, it asks that we dynamically and constructively reinforce our teams, so that they assist people who live in poverty to become **actors of change** in their personal life and in their community. The action of transformation demands a strong commitment to fight against the causes of poverty that we can develop by **networking** and applying **political pressure**.

AIC is involved particularly with poverty related to women through various seminars and initiatives that I spoke about the first day.

The fight against poverty and injustice, takes the lead in **our way to work for peace**, in collaboration with all the forces in society and the church, acting with coherence and faith.

All these Guidelines are part of a united and coherent vision made up of the strong points that we work with in our actions; certain ideas are always present (training and communication) but they can progressively take on new implications. Other ideas appear and develop at each Assembly and others will appear according to the changing needs within society and the evolution of poverty.

It is in this frame of reference that lie the Guidelines or the paths that will come out of this Assembly, that you will work on today and tomorrow, taking care to deepen the issues that you feel the most important and to detect new ideas and methods to respond to women in poverty with a creativity that is characteristic of St Vincent De Paul and that also characterizes our service.

All the principles that we try to put into practice in our service and that have become the criteria that guide our actions, make up the **“common cultural basis”** in which we, AIC volunteers of the world, recognize, where we find the same intentions and style of commitment, and a way of being together that links us in our work throughout the world even within our great diversity of cultures and situations.

For the regional coordinators and myself, it is an experience each time we visit a country. We arrive at unknown airports, into different worlds speaking unknown languages, but when we meet with the volunteers we feel at home because we share the same motivation that pushes us towards others, the same openness, the same welcome, and the concern for improving the situation of the poor. It is a strong link of faith and charity that becomes a true friendship.

There is something special, and very strong that unites us in AIC, I feel it very strongly, the old members of the Executive Board, who were with us for the first few days, confirmed this. I hope that you also felt the same experience during the days of the Assembly, where it is easy to get to know one another, to work together and to become friends.

We have spoke a lot about culture; **is it not our own special culture amongst us, that of the AIC that unites us in our work for the common good?**

Now you will divide into groups to work and to reflect on the most important part of the Assembly; to propose new paths for the future.

I wish you every success

Chapter 5

Commitments

SEMINAR OUTLINE

Uca Agullo

The statutory Assembly is a moment when the associations assume their right and their duty to take part in the life of the Association.

By your presence here, and through your interest in what has been achieved and what remains to be done, you illustrate the very meaning of joint responsibility.

A report of activities and a financial report will be presented to us. Both reports will be submitted to the approval of the Assembly. All the presidents have already received these reports three months ago for study and analysis.

In the second part of the Statutory Assembly, during which we are going to choose a new B.E.. It is an important moment and a great responsibility for the administration and the follow up work that the AIC will carry out, because those people, chosen for their experience, dedication and total commitment to the AIC project, will be entrusted with the future development of the Association.

When this part, which is mandatory under our statutes, will be completed, the International President, Marina Costa, will read to us the finalised text of the Operational Lines. After we have met country by country to discuss and reflect on this very important subject matter, this text will be submitted to the vote of the Assembly. It will lead to: **the commitments**.

In the afternoon the national presidents will have the opportunity to get together, by regions this time, to meet with the new presidents, share their preoccupations and reflect on common and organizational problems. **Reflect on how the AIC can benefit from your skills, your experience and your interest in the training of the leaders of our association.**

The Statutory Assembly will end with a closing Speech, during which we will probably be asked to reinforce the commitment freely made as volunteers. It is also probable that we will be encouraged to make the changes that are necessary, because when societies change and develop, the same applies to their members. This is why it is necessary that the service provided by the AIC should evolve and adapt on a constant basis. Hence our need to renew ourselves and the fact that we will always have to look for new forms of challenges to face the needs of the most disadvantaged.

Tonight we will enjoy Italian songs, an opportunity to experience the culture of this great country, which has welcomed us so generously and offered us the possibility to strengthen our friendships and reinforce our commitment to continue to work together with enthusiasm.

2007 – 2009 OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

Convinced

- Of the interaction between culture and poverty of women
- That every culture can evolve

AIC groups commit to

1. Strengthen resolutions regarding poverty of women through:

- Creation and development of opportunities to share problems, to work together and to find solutions.
- Education towards a better balance of roles between men and women
- Training in human rights especially the defense of women's rights and training in political action to implement laws in favor of women.

2. Accompany women in their own responsible development

Convinced that:

- Any change has to come from women themselves and from an understanding of their situation
- Every woman has the resources within herself to change the course of her life
- Every woman has the ability to contribute in the evolution of her culture
- Every volunteer has the ability to create necessary conditions for the development of women

3. Give the society a sense of responsibility

Through the reinforcement of:

- Networking with a view to the promotion of women
- Lobbying efforts to encourage involvement and responsibility of the society
- Raising awareness of the medias to promote the dignity of women

Based on values such as

- Respect for the dignity of women
- Solidarity among women
- Reinforcement of the sense of family
- Training and inner experience of the Vincentian spirituality

CLOSING SPEECH

Marina Costa

First of all I would like to thank you for the trust you showed me. The vote you have given me is mainly an approval for the work that the Executive Bureau has carried out during the past two years. Therefore I sincerely want to thank all members of the Executive Bureau who worked with me during these years with the utmost solidarity, sharing responsibilities and tasks with friendship and engagement.

On this particular occasion we had a large number of candidates for the EB and I want to thank everybody for their availability to take the burden of a task at international level but more so I want to thank the National Presidents who have presented these candidates, this clearly demonstrates that the spirit of duty and joint-responsibility is extremely strong within the A.I.C.

I want to thank all those who have been elected, but my thanks also go to the non-elected ones. Their nomination has given us the possibility to perform democratic elections: not to be elected in an association like ours is not a failure, it is a service, and accepting this possibility shows that the spirit of solidarity and belonging of these volunteers is strongly alive. I sincerely thank all of you.

I am sure that the new EB will continue to work with the same spirit of solidarity and communion which animates AIC, making it easy to form a fine group, full of enthusiasm and able to facilitate the implementation of Assembly's resolutions.

During the past days we have learned to know each other not only as persons, but in a deeper way, comparing our cultures; we have developed a more open and viable aptitude to discover the others and their personal values. At the moment of our departure we feel proud of our culture but richer since we have shared it in our moments of exchange and dialogue.

We formulated pathways to respond to women's poverty which you will carry them over to your associations: and, what I think is most important, when you will be back, sharing not only the contents of the operational Lines but also the spirit of brotherhood and communion which inspired us during the Assembly.

I wish that all of you will be able to revive, in your own countries, the experience of mutual welcome, the richness of the sharing cultures, the enthusiasm these days have given us both at personal and association level, and most of all the hope that our experience has given us. We convey the joy of having experimented that we are a large family, a family united by the same faith and ideals.

According to the emerged pathways I would like to underline some salient points.

To assume responsibilities is a strong point and a forward leap in the line of social joint responsibility, we have emphasized the need to feel jointly responsible and we now see the need of a more concrete and active action, and I particularly refer to the assumption of responsibilities.

- Versus women in a situation of poverty
- Versus ourselves as volunteers
- Versus the whole of the society

How can we act ?

To give more power to women we, as volunteers, have to learn how to accompany them with a respectful and thoughtful attitude, promoting the creation of conditions necessary towards their development:

- Accept them as they are
- Enhance their propositions and their solutions (not just giving them what we think best for them)
- Give them confidence
- Accept their pace

We could simply say: **act with them as God acts with us.**

You presented many action models, some have already been indicated in previous Operational Lines (for example training and education) but now we engage ourselves to focus directly on them as a better response to women's poverty.

Other pathways have been suggested, new and concrete ones, and I would like to add a comment concerning the **spaces for talks and meeting**. In some situations it will prove necessary to create new spaces, in other cases these spaces are already existing : there are already meeting sites for women, in labs, in training courses, in mothers' clubs etc. **These are ideal sites to grant women the possibility to put their problems, successes, ambitions in common**, to detect their potentiality and accomplish the importance of uniting their forces. Let us engage ourselves in developing this aspect.

I also want to point out **the necessity to allow visibility to the work done by A.I.C.** and this is an issue where every single one of us is involved. We have to be able to convey our spirit, our values, to be able to clearly say what we are doing and the pride of being part of this association.

In order to change women's situation, and to implement the new Lines, **A.I.C. has an added value, and these are the strong points:**

- **To be a women's association which work with women**, understands their problems and identifies itself with them in a common situation: to be women in a society prevalingly masculine, without equality of gender.
- **Being proximity agents**, which stimulates to avoid indifference towards conflicts and allows to create deep links, source of a major confidence.
- **Work in group**, through groups solely composed of local volunteers, who are personally experiencing the problems of the community.
- Stimulate the **creation**, ever increasing, of **A.I.C. groups consisting of women in a poverty situation** engaging themselves in a self-promotion, self-management process, for the development and well-being of their community
- To have the possibility **to participate at the various levels of local action**, local, national and international.
- **To have representatives in the international organisations**. They are fully aware and responsible of being a representative for A.I.C., they are well informed and prepared , able to present propositions, to promote initiatives which deal with women's cause.

We are all aware that the closing of an Assembly is not an end but simply a start, now we enter a new stage of our transformation pathway and of fight against poverties.

The spirit of belonging and membership that we have experienced during these days, the contents of the Seminar, the strength which common praying conveys, the seed left in each one of us during all moments of the assembly, makes us leave with a **new strength and a renewed commitment** to enliven our task. We have consolidated our union and the friendship links, we have appreciated the common value of our engagement and stimulated the initiatives of a work in common.

The experiences of those in need, their necessities, have always been a major presence in our work, in our discussions, in our prayers of these days. They will always be present in our initiatives and in our future projects.

An Assembly is the time of full awareness, to research for possible pathways: we have worked, exchanged ideas, set objectives, planned pathways, and now, starting from now, from the moment we shall be at home, **the action must start to implement the decisions taken**, to convert into actions and give life to pathways and Lines that we have worked out together.

I ask you this with all my strength and I use the support of two incitements, much stronger than mines:

These are the words of Shaika Haya, president of the 61st United Nations General Assembly, held in New York in December 2006, it is an urgent appeal stating that in the today's situation of our world :

“More has to be done and we have to act more rapidly”

The second incitement belongs to St. Vincent. He affirmed that we had to go towards the poor:

“... with the same speed as when trying to extinguish a fire”

Bring within your association the enthusiasm, the hope, the feeling of communion which you experienced during the past days. Show through your engagement and enthusiasm that

it is worth answering Christ's challenge.

“It is worth engaging for the poor following St. Vincent”

Share with them the new paths and the ideas arisen in the Assembly and convey this message with all your strength :

“More has to be done and we have to act more rapidly”

Good work to all of you !

