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Of the 1.3 billion people living in extreme poverty around the world, 70 per cent are women.

United Nations



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## WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

# Women and poverty



A woman carries her property from the rubble of her demolished home after a forced eviction in Makoko, Nigeria, 2005

## WOMEN AND POVERTY

Poverty disproportionately affects women. Statistics indicate they are more likely than men to be poor and hungry because their unequal position in society gives them less power, money, and protection from violence. It also reduces their access to basic human rights such as clean drinking water, sanitation, education, health care and decent work.

The process of globalisation – the liberation of trade and investment, along with privatisation and deregulation – has trapped an increasing number of women in poverty. The biggest beneficiaries of globalisation have been those with the best education and greatest wealth. For women, and others with less income, land, credit, and education, it has been associated with growing inequality, a drop in real wages, deteriorating social conditions and acute poverty.



Villagers in Ccaruacc, high in the Peruvian Andes, eke out a living growing vegetables and keeping goats and pigs. Women are the economic mainstay and they hold the community together.  
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## UNPAID AND INFORMAL WORK

### **Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours but earn only one-tenth of the world's income**

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All over the world, women are expected to undertake domestic and caring work in the home. This can be a particular burden in resource poor countries, where women have to fetch water and firewood as well as care for young children and elderly relatives. Most of this work is unpaid and undervalued.

Girls are often taken out of school to assist with this unpaid work – reducing their chances of economic independence and the possibility of learning about their rights. Even where women do have paid work, it is often in the informal sector, notorious for low pay and hazardous working conditions, sometimes including threats and violence.

#### UNPAID WORK AT HOME

'My mother didn't let me continue my education because she told me I had to work at home. I went to primary school but was not allowed to continue into secondary school. I wash dishes, clean the vegetables, cook, sew and collect water. I wish I could go back to school and become a teacher.'

*Asma Aboos, 15, Iran, as told to UNICEF*

#### ABUSIVE EMPLOYERS

In July 2010, LP Ariyawathie, a Sri Lankan woman working as a domestic servant in Saudi Arabia, reported severe abuse by her employers. They are alleged to have driven 24 nails, some 5cm long, and a needle into her hands, legs and forehead, causing severe injuries requiring hours of surgery when she returned to Sri Lanka.

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## WOMEN'S LIVES, MEN'S DECISIONS

### **'A woman who has no say in how her country is run is not truly free.'**

*Kofi-Annan, former United Nations Secretary General.*

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Most women have no power, control or choice over their lives and bodies – whether that is when to have sex or children, whether to go to school or work, get married or divorced, or participate in politics.

Decades of discriminatory laws, customs, culture and religious practices often combine to deny women a decision-making role. In Indonesia, government policies deny unmarried women access to family planning, and force pregnant unmarried girls to drop out of school. In Sierra Leone customary law (which operates in all areas outside the capital) treats women as minors, dependent on male relatives for financial support.

A major barrier to putting power in women's hands is the lack of women in decision-making bodies, such as parliaments, judiciaries and local councils. Many brave women often experience brutal violence for exercising choice – and claiming their human rights.

#### IT WAS LIKE PRISON

Zamira got married at 18 in a traditional Islamic marriage in Tajikistan. The marriage lasted for five years, during which time Zamira was never allowed to leave her husband's house and when they quarrelled he would beat her. 'It was like prison,' she said. Her husband divorced her according to Islamic tradition and his parents threw her out. Now Zamira and her nine-year-old son live with her parents in an over-crowded house.

#### HOW WOULD I SURVIVE?

'When my husband started beating me all I wanted to do was to leave him. His family told me to stay with him. They also advised me not to go to the police as they said that it would be much worse for both him and me if I did that. Really, though, all I want to do now is get a divorce but I am worried about how I would survive.'

*A woman in Bo town, Sierra Leone*

#### DESERVED TO BE HARASSED

During the 2010 elections in Afghanistan, a female parliamentary candidate told Amnesty International: 'The Taliban put a "night letter" [a warning] behind my door. I took it to the local police station but no one wanted to take the threat seriously. One of the police officers told me that if I wanted to run for office then I deserved to be harassed.'

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## MISSING OUT ON EDUCATION

### **Almost two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women, and globally 10 million more girls than boys are denied primary education**

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Lack of education has lifelong consequences. It reduces opportunities and financial independence. Girls have significantly lower completion rates in primary education than boys, who are seen as family breadwinners. In Tajikistan, for example, one in five girls stops her education by the age of 14, primarily because of the cost and gender stereotyping: it is often deeply ingrained that girls should work in the family home or be married off early. In Afghanistan, very few families allow daughters to continue their schooling after class 4 or 5 (age 11 or 12).

Lack of education, or incomplete education, increases women's vulnerability to HIV and AIDS. School is one place where girls can learn about practising safer sex. Education also reduces the risk of maternal mortality, and educated mothers have healthier and better educated children.

#### CYCLE OF POVERTY AND VIOLENCE

### **A study in India found that a woman loses an average of at least five paid work days for each incident of domestic violence**

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Poverty, for women, is both a consequence and cause of violence. Women who suffer physical, sexual or psychological violence often lose income, impoverishing their families, communities and societies. On the other hand, poverty makes

it harder for women to find avenues of escape from an abusive relationship. While economic independence does not shield women from violence, access to economic resources can enhance their capacity to make meaningful choices.

Violence is a major obstacle to girls' education. A girl who becomes pregnant as a result of rape may find herself excluded from school. And countless girls drop out of education because of harassment or violence on the way to school or in school.

#### **NO EDUCATION, NO HOPE**

In May 2008, a 27-year-old mother of three children in Iraq told Amnesty International that her father had forced her to marry when she was just 13. Years later her husband falsely accused her of adultery in order to divorce her and evade responsibility for supporting her. She was being detained in the Erbil women's prison because of her husband's accusations. She only received minimal education as a child and so, alone, could not support herself and her children. Her only hope was return to the family home to live as her husband's 'servant' so that she could at least be with her children.

#### **MY TEACHER SCARED ME**

'My teacher last year scared me because he put pressure on me to have sexual relations with him. When I told my parents, they didn't do anything against the teacher. They didn't even tell the principal. Now I am scared at school, and I miss class often.'

*A student in Benin*

In many countries, when there isn't enough money to go round, girls enter into sexual relationships to get the money they need for school.

Multiple discrimination and poverty are intimately linked to violence against women. They determine a woman's social status, thus shaping the forms of violence that a woman experiences and making some women into targets for certain forms of violence. Perpetrators know that women living in poverty are less likely to report abuse or seek assistance. Impoverished women are often denied access to justice, protection or services – thus further entrenching their poverty.

#### **INTERNATIONAL LAW**

The importance of equality and non-discrimination is recognised in all human rights treaties. It is also central to Amnesty International's work on economic, social and cultural rights. For example, a government cannot claim to be fulfilling its obligations to ensure the right to education, if it fails to tackle the violence and discrimination that keep girls from attending school.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women calls for an end to discrimination in all economic, social and cultural rights.

#### **OUR WORK**

Amnesty International works to highlight the way that poverty and human rights violations often go hand in hand; to empower and support those who have their rights violated; and to hold those responsible to account.