

# *Dedicated Lives*

WOMEN ORGANISING FOR A FAIRER WORLD

Helen O'Connell



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An Oxfam Publication



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Helen O'Connell



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**Front cover photo:** *An Oxfam project worker talking to a woman's group in Bangladesh.* Tanvir/Oxfam

**Back cover photo:** *Vanete Almeida at the grave of one of the Tolpuddle Martyrs.* Oxfam

The photographs of the eight women visitors which appear at the head of each section were taken by Robert M. Davis/Oxfam

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## *Foreword*

The dedicated lives described in this book are special but not unusual. The commitment and will to promote positive change in favour of women shown by the eight women portrayed here are shared and demonstrated by a great many of the women with whom Oxfam works.

These eight women came to the UK as part of the initiative organised by Oxfam's Gender and Development Unit (GADU) to mark the organisation's 50th anniversary. The first stage of the Anniversary Linking Project was the visit of these Southern women to meet with women from a variety of kindred organisations in the UK and Ireland, to share experiences of their work and find ways of working together and supporting each other. Future stages of the project include a conference and further exchange visits between people doing similar work in different countries of the South.

GADU has set up this innovative project as a way of strengthening partnership and encouraging networking among women's organisations, and it marks a new stage in relationships with Southern NGOs. It is a way of developing joint strategies for development which combine the perspectives and realities of Southern organisations and funding agencies such as Oxfam.

**Eugenia Piza-Lopez, GADU, Oxfam**

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## *Introduction:*

### *'You have struck a rock'*

These words of Albertina Sisulu spoken on 9 August 1956, when 20,000 women went to Pretoria to protest against the extension of the pass laws to African women, are borne out in the lives and work of many thousands of women worldwide who are refusing to accept inequality on any grounds. Each of the eight women whose story is told in this book is in her own way playing an important role in working for justice, not for women only, but for men and children too. They are working for a world in which everyone's human rights are respected regardless of gender, race or class, and in which resources are allocated more equitably and used more sustainably. For them the struggle for women's rights is fundamental to creating this world.

The last decade of the twentieth century is an inhospitable time in which to work for equality and justice. There is increasing disparity in rights and access to resources. This disparity is based on gender, race and class differences within countries as well as on the ever-widening gap between South and North. Economic and environmental problems are widespread, and armed conflict rife in many regions.

One-fifth of the world's people — one billion — are living in poverty; most are in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and a disproportionate number are women. The last two decades have witnessed growing poverty amongst women. Each year half a million women die in childbirth or from pregnancy-related causes; that is one every minute. The majority of these deaths are in Southern countries and can be attributed to poverty and inadequate health services. According to Unesco, there are around 960 million adults in the world who cannot read or write and two-thirds of these are women. It is feared that the literacy gap between women and men will increase further as rising poverty and ailing economies increase the demand for women's unskilled labour. A recent study by the International Fund for Agricultural Development reported that in the last 20 years poverty for rural women had increased by 48 per cent, compared to 3 per cent for rural men. The causes are many but include the failure on the part of governments and aid donors to support women farmers. In around one-third of households worldwide, women are the primary source of income; in some countries the figure is over 50 per cent. In the UK nine out of every ten single parents are women and almost half of these are living in poverty. Growing male unemployment, desertion and divorce, migration, and war

are some of the main reasons for the worldwide increase in women-maintained households.

### ***Economic crisis***

The debt crisis and the measures proposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to deal with it, namely structural adjustment programmes, are dominating life in many of the countries covered in this book. Debts continue to spiral and become unpayable as new loans are borrowed to pay interest on old. Each year Southern countries transfer more to Northern governments, financial institutions, and commercial banks than they receive in aid. More and more foreign currency is absorbed in interest payments at the expense of essential imports such as medicines, petrol, or spare parts for machinery. Most new loans, and further aid payments, are conditional on the implementation of structural adjustment programmes. These programmes drastically cut government expenditure, liberalise economic and trading relations, promote privatisation and production for export. Their primary aim is the continuance of debt repayments to ensure the survival of Northern economies.

There is widespread evidence that structural adjustment programmes have disastrous implications for everyone in the lowest income groups, especially women. Currency devaluation, required by these programmes, causes a sharp fall in real wages, and the removal of subsidies on basic necessities such as food and fuel results in immediate price increases. Cuts in public spending on education, health, housing, and transport increase women's workload and also increase women's unemployment levels, as these are the sectors in which most women work. Privatisation of health-care services and education disproportionately affect women and girls: women have limited access to the services which they need to fulfil their caring roles; and when money for schooling is scarce, boys rather than girls are given priority. Structural adjustment programmes are founded on women's capacity to cope, to economise, to work even longer hours, and once again to put their own needs aside.

### ***Environmental crisis***

Recent decades have also seen a mounting anxiety about environmental degradation. Industrialisation and the modernisation of agriculture, with the consequent unsustainable exploitation of natural resources and wanton waste and pollution, have resulted in significant damage to the natural environment. Here, again, the poorest social groups and women in particular are the worst affected. It is they who live and work in degraded rural areas or in polluted urban slums. In rural areas women and their families are totally dependent on the natural environment for survival.

### ***Conflict and human rights***

Worldwide there are already around 20 million refugees, 85 per cent of whom are women and their dependent children; there are another 25 million people displaced within their own countries. The reasons people flee



their homes are many, but persecution on political or religious grounds, or because of people's racial or social category, and the fear of armed aggression are amongst the commonest. Open and violent conflicts are going on in the home countries of three women featured in this book. Mouna Odeh lives in the Occupied Territories where daily life is marked by checkpoints, curfews and the Intifada resurgence; Gigi Francisco is from the Philippines, large areas of which are heavily militarised; while in South Africa, Mmatshilo Motsei's home, political violence increases side by side with the negotiations about a new constitution. State-backed violence is commonplace in many countries, and blatant human rights abuses — arbitrary arrests, torture and 'disappearances' — all-too-frequent occurrences. When governments overtly or covertly support the use of armed aggression to quell opposition and retain power they are unlikely to champion basic human rights for women or men.

Thus the four freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (freedom from fear and want, freedom of speech and belief) are a dream rather than a reality for millions of people. Many countries have enshrined equality for women within their constitutions and improved women's access to education and employment but none has deliberately reallocated resources towards creating societies in which women could exercise their rights fully, or reorganised paid work to enable women and men to fulfil their family responsibilities. Few, if any, countries teach boys as well as girls the value and importance of caring for others. Few governments have taken thorough and systematic action on male violence against women.

It is in this context that the women described in this book live their lives and carry on their work — work which is as exciting and rewarding as it can be stressful and frightening.

## *Women organising*

Since the 1970s women's organisations and movements have flourished in almost all countries. They vary widely in perspective and activity. The organisations in which the eight women in this book work share a particular analysis of women's oppression. They argue that women are discriminated against specifically on the grounds of gender, and that the majority of Southern women face additional discrimination based on class and race, as members of disadvantaged social groups, as members of ethnic minorities within their own countries, and as citizens of underdeveloped countries.

Although these three tiers of oppression experienced by women are inextricably linked, discrimination on the grounds of gender is the starting point. Women and men are allocated very specific gender roles and rights within each society and are educated and conditioned for these from birth. In all societies there is a division between the social, cultural, economic, and political roles that women and men are expected to fulfil, although the actual tasks women and men do can vary widely from one society to another. If all roles were regarded as being of equal merit by society, and open to both genders, then a division of roles would not be necessarily problematic. However, the roles assigned to women and men are imbued



with differential values which in turn confer differential rights and power; and there is a clear, and universal, bias in favour of men.

The implications for women of bias based on gender are manifold: the 'triple burden' of home, work and community; the sexual division of labour; the fear or experience of physical and sexual violence. Almost invariably women have primary responsibility for caring for children, for the elderly, and for those family members who are ill or disabled. This responsibility usually brings with it a range of domestic obligations which can include growing, buying and preparing food, rearing animals, washing and cleaning, fetching water and fuelwood. It is women, too, who maintain close ties with other family members, organise social functions like weddings, run community health-care initiatives, and attend at births and deaths. This work, so essential to human survival, figures nowhere in the national accounts of societies which increasingly recognise only monetary value.

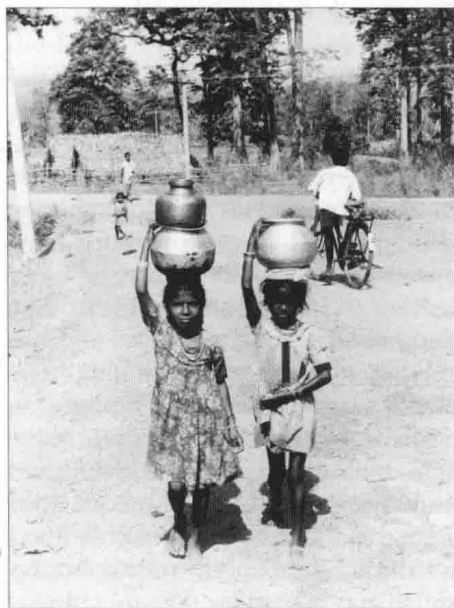
### ***Gender constraints***

The sexual division of labour within home and family is mirrored in the segregation of occupations in the workplace. By and large, women predominate in the lower-paid sectors of formal employment, such as the public services and manufacturing, as marginal workers in the informal sector, as seasonal agricultural labourers, or as domestics, or street traders. Lower educational and training qualifications combine with family obligations and cultural constraints to make it very difficult for most women to obtain secure well-paid employment. Even when they are employed, women face gender-based discrimination: they are, for example, perceived to be 'secondary' earners — the dependents of men — and therefore to need less income; and many women are exposed to sexual harassment.

There is another major constraint on women's opportunity to plan and control their own lives: violence or the threat of violence. Men use violence against women as a conscious means of controlling women's fertility, freedom to come and go, to speak out or to organise. In most societies this violence is condoned by other family and community members, by religious organisations, and by the state. Women are regarded as men's property to be used or abused at will. The use of violence is one extreme manifestation of the unequal social and economic relations between women and men; it is an abuse of power. It is only recently that a few countries have begun to treat male violence against women in the family as a serious matter and a punishable offence.

The gender-based constraints women experience daily are deep-rooted in all societies. Girls are brought up to behave in certain ways, to put the needs of others before their own and to regard themselves as less than equal; this is as true in the UK as in India. A woman is educated to accept that the family is her primary world and thus her identity is defined in relation to the men in her family: she is daughter, wife, sister, mother or niece. There are rules — strict in some societies and more lenient in others — which define those people with whom she can associate and communicate.

This discriminatory treatment is further reflected in the fact that mothers and fathers give better health-care, food and education to boy infants and



John Ogle/Oxfam

*Girl children help with domestic tasks from an early age.*

children. In Southern Asia and Africa nearly 40 per cent of young girls of primary-school age are not attending school. Vigi Srinivasan is all too aware of the cultural and economic obstacles which prevent girls receiving full-time education. From an early age young girls are expected to take on domestic tasks, such as fetching water or fuelwood, caring for younger siblings, and watching over grazing animals.

Gender constraints prevent women from participating on an equal basis in the family, in their community, in the marketplace, and in decision-making structures. They shape a woman's capacity to control her own fertility, her rights and access to education, to land, and to other resources. They determine what health care she will

receive, and her ability to obtain credit, and to use technology. They limit her opportunities to organise, to make links with women outside her own community or country, and her access to political power.

### ***Challenge and change***

It is not surprising, then, that millions of girls reach adulthood having had no opportunity to develop a sense of self-worth or self-confidence. Challenging and ending this internalised inferiority is the aim of all of the women featured in this book. They believe that women must create space for themselves to meet and talk. They see collective discussion and action outside the immediate circle of the family as central to women's empowerment and to changing gender relations in the home, workplace, trade union and decision-making structures. Women's groups which focus on education for consciousness enable women to see themselves in a new way, to question the basis of their inequality. It is only in this way that women can begin to develop a sense of identity and a perception of what their own interests may be separate from the welfare of the family. Then they can begin to take action to transform their situation and press for changes in the wider society.

A critical first step for organising is women's health issues, as demonstrated in the work of several women who appear in this book. An understanding of how one's body works, in particular with respect to sexuality and fertility, is crucial to gaining some control over one's life and the courage to overcome barriers at home and outside.

## ***Strategies for action***

Women and their organisations have adopted different strategies to achieve their objective of ending discrimination and transforming their societies. Some, like Vigi and Mariam for example, decide to work primarily at local level to encourage women to get together and speak out about their needs and interests. Others, like Gigi and Vanete, choose to work with women in mixed organisations to create a space in which they can press for their demands. All agree that women's groups and organisations must first and foremost be independent. From this position of strength, women can then begin to build alliances of solidarity with other social movements.

Of course, changing relations between women and men takes a long time: although conventional women-men relations are unjust there is a certain security in following the norm. Centuries of subordination and putting the needs of others first make it difficult for women to press for their own rights. Furthermore, it is impossible to work to remove the inequalities women face without challenging social structures, such as the family, and certain aspects of a society's culture; and those who benefit from the *status quo* are frequently quick to react with criticism or hostility. Where cultural values and religious beliefs are closely connected it is even more difficult to achieve change. Religious fundamentalism, of whatever persuasion, hampers women's efforts to achieve equality.

It is likewise impossible to achieve empowerment and equality for women without challenging wider economic exploitation and political marginalisation. Equality for women is not possible within economic and political structures which are oriented towards the interests of elite groups. The women featured in this book share an approach to their work which relates the daily lives of women and issues of women's health, education, and economic survival to national economic and social policy, human rights, trade, the environment, and international relations. They are equally concerned with promoting education and consciousness-raising with women at a local level, finding ways to assist women in day-to-day survival, campaigning for equal rights for women and other oppressed groups, and challenging national and international economic and political structures.

It is this breadth of vision that gives women's organisations a central and leading role in the social movements of their countries: in the trade unions, peasant federations, and other progressive movements for change.

## ***Reshaping development***

The eight women featured in this book share a vision of a different world. They are seeking a fundamental shift in priorities and in the allocation of resources. In particular they are questioning the economic model which has determined the development, or underdevelopment, of their countries over the last 40 years and which has exacerbated gender, race and class inequalities.

Since the 1950s the development policy pursued by economic planners from Southern governments and Northern donor agencies was founded on economic growth as the means of reducing poverty. They promoted the Northern model of economic development, namely industrialisation and

modernisation of agriculture — which of course was only made feasible in the North by cheap imports of raw materials from the South and trading relations firmly fixed in the North's favour. The belief was that if Southern countries produced and sold more they would prosper, and general well-being would filter down to the poorest social groups. Women were perceived solely as housewives, as bearers and nurturers of children, and as passive consumers of food, health care and other services. It was assumed, wrongly, that women and children would automatically benefit from any increase in men's earnings. No one troubled to examine economic relations within households and families.

When it became apparent after some decades that development based on economic growth had not worked, it was decided to direct special programmes towards women. These aimed to meet people's basic needs for clean water, health care and nutritious food. Some years later, when evidence that poverty was diminishing still failed to materialise, additional programmes were devised to enhance women's access to money through small-scale income-generating projects, in handcrafts for example.

Throughout, the planners failed to rise above their narrow assumptions about women's work. They did not recognise that women have multiple responsibilities and roles, or that income earned by men did not automatically benefit all family members equally. Not only were women not helped by development programmes, they were often adversely affected in a number of ways. Many development projects in agriculture, for example, increased women's workload on cash-crop production controlled by men while reducing the time women had available for the cultivation of their own fields.

A new strategy called 'integrating women in development' (known as WID) was adopted by some government and multi-lateral development organisations during the 1980s. Special components were added on to agricultural development programmes, for example, to improve women's access to training, credit, inputs and sometimes land. But, again, women's existing roles and responsibilities were ignored; and the WID strategy failed to question the model of development on offer and seemed to take for granted the inequalities in international and national economic structures and thereby to reinforce them. The effects of following a model of development based primarily on economic growth have been growing poverty, economic and environmental crisis, and widespread failure to meet the basic needs of most people and respect individual rights.

Women's groups and organisations are now demanding a different development model, one which recognises the importance of social functions, in addition to economic activities. They are arguing for development policies which put people first and which are founded on respect for human rights. These policies would reallocate resources towards meeting the basic needs of women, men and children for food, health care, education, childcare and housing. They would ensure that women and men received training and access to resources to enable them to earn an income for themselves and their families. The necessary pre-conditions for such development are an urgent solution to the debt crisis, a fairer global trading system, regulation of the operations of multi-national companies, and aid programmes aimed genuinely at reducing poverty.

## ***Women and environment***

This development model is long-term and sustainable, does not jeopardise the rights of women and other oppressed groups for the sake of a limited notion of global well-being, nor endanger the future in favour of short-term profits. Women's organisations reject narrow concepts of environmental protection or conservation. They want full recognition and strengthening of women's roles as environmental managers and decision-makers.

The relationship between the environment, poverty, and human rights is particularly highlighted by the women in this book. As Vanete Almeida says,

We can not talk about ecology separate from the reality of people's lives. If people do not have land to grow crops on then they have to cut down the trees... How can I respect nature, if I, my children and my family are not respected?

They refute the view that blames population size for poverty and environmental degradation and are critical of population programmes which aggressively promote the use of contraceptive methods or sterilisation at the expense of women's reproductive health and choice. Research has shown that with improved social status and access to education women are able to take greater control of their lives, have greater capacities to earn income, and can better guarantee their own health and that of their children. The knowledge and right to control one's own fertility is basic to all other rights for women. Access to safe, appropriate and affordable fertility regulatory methods allows women to exercise this right.

## ***Social transformation***

Simultaneously the women's organisations featured here are pressing for a redefinition of human rights and their full extension to women. Such redefined human rights would include not only civil and political rights, but also social rights to education, health care and housing. For Vanete and the other women there can be no development unless fundamental inequalities are tackled.

The vision of transformation shared by the eight women also extends to the decision-making structures of their countries. Political structures have largely failed women. They do not consult, represent or protect the interests of women or other disadvantaged groups. Carola and the others are calling for empowerment for women and for all who are marginalised; for the democratisation of structures from the family to national governments and international institutions, to enable women, men and children to take an active and creative role in shaping and running their societies and in determining priorities and policies. For them democracy is not about periodic elections or a multi-party system, it is about information, consultation, open decision-making and accountability in the interests of the majority.

Through organising into social movements women, and others who are exploited and marginalised, can begin to ensure that their voices and views are heard. They can begin to exert some influence over decisions that are

taken locally, nationally, and internationally in their name.

The women featured here want to place power in the hands of people who once capacitated can build caring and efficient societies. They are demanding the right and the opportunity to build societies based on social and economic justice and respect for human rights.



Shahidul Alam/Oxfam

*Women's group meeting, Bangladesh. By organising into social movements, women can begin to make their voices heard.*



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## *Restoring women's dignity*



MARIAM DEM

Mariam Dem's destiny as a young woman in Senegal was to marry, have children, take good care of her husband and children and in this way get to paradise. She comes from a traditional Senegalese family: her father came from a Marabout family of judges and educators, her mother's family were leading landowners, members of the Fulani tribe. Mariam was brought up by an uncle, who wanted Mariam to be a model Fulani woman. As a girl she had to return to the house immediately school finished each day and help prepare food for the household.

Mariam was introduced to political ideas by an older cousin who came to live with them when Mariam was about sixteen. This cousin had caused a lot of trouble in the family because of her views and her involvement in student politics. She was sent to live with the uncle 'as he was the person who put things right and would make her conform to being a good girl'. Mariam and her cousin shared a room and quickly became good friends:

She had my mother's name and that made a very strong bond between us although I did not share her views. I thought I should support her in the family as I did not think it was right that they gave her such a hard time just because she thought differently. So we went around together, she introduced me to friends in the student movement and in the peasant movement... I began to come out of myself a bit, to see the world was larger than my home and school.

When she left school Mariam went to university and, like her cousin, joined the student movement. In the holidays the movement sent students out into the villages to enable them to understand the living conditions of rural people and to work with farmers' organisations. This first-hand experience of poverty altered the course of her life. For the first time she realised that the majority of Senegalese people did not have enough food, and were not healthy, that it was difficult for their children to get to school.

I saw women in one family — there were only women left as the father had died and the grown-up sons had gone to Dakar to work or



to university — it was they who cultivated the rice field. They had to give over half their harvest back to the organisation that gave them credit for seeds. If they got six sacks, four sacks were given back ... They got up very early, they were the last to go to bed, all the time they were either in the field or processing the rice or cooking. The family did not want me to know that they had nothing; they went and got coffee on credit for me. So I took my grant and bought some things ... That was a shock. They were really living in deprivation, yet they had so much courage and strength and even enjoyed life.

Mariam began to question the social, economic and political structures in Senegal. She was struck by the paradox of the important role that women played as producers and reproducers and their position of inferiority. Deciding to work for change, she was first attracted by a clandestine left-wing movement, then joined a non-governmental organisation working with young unemployed graduates. In the late 1980s she became Programme Officer for Oxfam in Senegal with special responsibility for work with the poorest groups of women in rural and urban areas. She says:

I devote myself to development because I think that one of the monsters that women have to overthrow is under-development.

### *More work but no reward*

In the rural areas, although women work in farming and grow much of the food, they cannot own land. In the towns most women work in small-scale trading or in factories, and here, too, provide an important part of the family's income, although they have no authority in the household. Day-to-day survival has become increasingly difficult for the majority in Senegal. The government has embarked on a structural adjustment programme in an attempt to repay its external debts. Social investment in health, education and training has been cut, subsidies to poor farmers have been removed.

The most striking effect is that women have become poorer... Enterprises are closed, men have lost their jobs, women have to work harder to get money to keep the family, or they become head of households when the men migrate or emigrate to look for work.

The drought in many rural areas is making life even more difficult. When the men go, the women stay because, as they say in Senegal, 'a woman cannot abandon her family':

Women have to work the land, but without easy access to agricultural credit. The woman has a little bit of land to feed her children; it rains for three months. During the dry season they go to cities to work or they stay and do more livestock farming as well as agriculture.

Under-development and poverty are not the only problems facing women in Senegal. The Islamic religion places women in the position of minors in relation to male family members. As Islam allows men to have up to four wives, around 60 per cent of marriages are polygamous. Mariam points out that the Koran says that a man can only take four wives if he can look after

all of them and treat them fairly. This qualification is usually forgotten. From women Mariam hears two responses to questions on polygamy: an official, public reply and a private view:

In public women will say to you: 'Oh it is not bad, when it is not my turn, when I don't cook, I can do other activities.' But when you get to know women better and spend more time talking to them, the contrary opinion is expressed: that 'polygamy is a catastrophe.'

Mariam explains that for many women it is a catastrophe economically, because each mother has full responsibility for her own children and if the husband has several children he cannot take proper care of them all; and it is a catastrophe socially because, contrary to the myth, there are frequently conflicts between the women.

But to challenge polygamy is to challenge religion, an almost impossible task for women right now. In Mariam's view attitudes to polygamy will change only through education and pressure from women's organisations for improvements in the legal status of women. There is a growing fundamentalist movement in Senegal, especially among young people, which has serious implications for women. There are now young Senegalese women who wear long dresses and do not speak to men in public. Mariam believes that in times of economic and political stress people turn to religion hoping to find solutions to their problems.

Economic hardship has opened up new opportunities for women but building equality between women and men is slow and difficult. Mariam says, women do want to change, but have first to change their mental attitudes: 'the culture is very tenacious, very strong'. Because women's social position has not improved, women's perceptions of themselves and their aspirations for a different future are limited and they sometimes doubt if change is possible:

[Women] asks themselves all the time, 'when is this going to change? Why I am doing more and my status is still low?' They think that things will never change. That is a dangerous feeling of impotence.

### ***'Wake-up, free up'***

In the early 1970s Mariam became active in the emerging feminist movement. This movement was started by women political activists increasingly frustrated by the failure of political movements to devise



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

*Senegal: Market traders.*