Case studies of six women who are defying stereotypes to tackle poverty and gender inequality in developing countries

“Women have traditionally played a crucial role in the progress of their families but are now pushing for a level platform by breaking taboos and inspiring others to do the same.” Mark Wilson, Executive Director, Panos London
The Millennium Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the most broadly supported, comprehensive and specific development goals the world has ever agreed upon. These eight time-bound goals provide concrete, numerical benchmarks for tackling extreme poverty in its many dimensions. They include goals and targets on income poverty, hunger, maternal and child mortality, disease, inadequate shelter, gender inequality, environmental degradation and the Global Partnership for Development.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

The Millennium Development Goals and Women

All eight MDGs touch essential aspects of women’s well-being, and, in turn, women’s empowerment is critical for achieving the goals.

Women have multiple roles. At any given time they can be mothers, leaders, students, decision-makers, farmers, workers, voters and much more. In each of these roles, the ability to be educated and healthy, to have voice and influence, and to enjoy opportunities and choices are critical to the attainment of the Goals. Gender equality and women’s empowerment are central to achieving the MDGs because without these capabilities and opportunities, women are less able to reach their full potential, live a life of dignity, and be productive citizens. (Unifem)
MDG Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

**Educate girls and women.** Educated girls tend to become women with greater economic independence. They have an increased ability to negotiate and bargain in home, community and economic life. Educated girls and women tend to participate more in public life, and they can manage natural resources in a more sustainable manner.

**Overcome barriers to schooling for girls.** There has been tremendous MDG focus on expanding enrollment in primary school. But these gains for girls are often lost in the transition to secondary school due to lack of separate, private, safe girl’s sanitation facilities, sexual harassment or violence at and en route to school, and due to the need for curriculum reform and teacher training for higher quality schools with greater relevance to girls’ lives.

**Promote mechanisms that give women a voice in politics and governance institutions.** These mechanisms can vary widely from proportional representation systems that increase the probability women will be elected, to more transparent political party selection processes, public funding for campaigns, and more. But in countries around the world, women in politics are strengthening the credibility of democracies through their participation, reinvigorating political accountability, and contributing to improved efficiency in policymaking through bringing their diverse perspectives.

**Enact and implement equal economic rights for all.** Legislation on equal pay for equal work, free choice of profession or employment, equality in hiring and promotions, leave and unemployment benefits, freedom from sexual harassment in the workplace, and other critical rights are increasingly being legislated. But weak implementation of these laws continues to constrain women’s equality and empowerment.

**Count women’s work,** Continued lack of political will and financial resources necessary to collect good quality data disaggregated by sex hampers the ability to make effective policies on wages, informal employment, unpaid care work, and other issues critical to women’s economic participation.

In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly created UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

In doing so, UN Member States took an historic step in accelerating the Organization’s goals on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

The creation of UN Women came about as part of the UN reform agenda, bringing together resources and mandates for greater impact. (UN Women)
Habiba Sarobi: Afghanistan’s first female governor

In 2005 Habiba Sarobi, 54, became Afghanistan’s first woman governor. Six years on she remains the country’s only female governor, a post she has held against a creeping tide of intolerant fundamentalism that has strengthened opposition to women in public positions. A pharmacist by profession, Sarobi had to abandon her job during the Taliban rule, fleeing to Peshawar in Pakistan with her children. There she worked underground teaching girls in refugee camps. As governor of Bamiyan, a province in the central highlands of Afghanistan, she aims to have 25 to 30 per cent of government jobs filled by women.

Habiba Sarobi: “Earlier people did not believe a woman could hold a position like this. I have been a successful model because I was able to institute good governance system in my province. Maybe I have survived in my position because I am still the only female governor.”

Overview: Afghanistan has long been rocked by political, social, religious and economic turmoil. This instability has had a particularly harrowing impact on the women of the region. Under Taliban rule, women were forbidden from working, entering education or engaging in wider society beyond the four walls of their homes. Because of this, progress in women’s rights, education and political engagement came to a standstill for a period of time but in the last few years, notable improvements have been made.
Progress: Since the inauguration of the Karzai regime in 2001, notable improvements have been made for women in politics. For example, according to the Afghan constitution, 25 per cent of parliament delegates must be women (that’s 68 out of 249 seats).

During the September 2010 elections, more than 2,500 parliamentary candidates stood for 249 seats. Of these, 400 of the candidates were women. Unexpectedly, 69 women won seats - a number higher than the minimum quota and a victory for Afghan women.

Setbacks: Illiteracy is the biggest setback that Afghan women face. As of 2008, 12 per cent of Afghan women could read and write. Human rights organisations feel that not enough is being done to boost education, particularly amongst women.

Habiba Sarobi: “We have set a target of having 25-30 per cent women in government jobs. Currently we have reached only 11 per cent because it is difficult to find educated qualified women.”

Investment in Afghan education has mainly targeted primary education. Secondary education has not seen many curriculum changes or investment. Consequently, a sector of Afghan society that grew up during instability has been left without an education and therefore with poor employment opportunities.

KEY FACTS

- Following the downfall of the Taliban, Afghanistan saw its highest school enrolment rates, with more than 4.3 million children enrolling in primary and secondary school education. In the 7-12 age bracket, 40.5 per cent of girls and 67 per cent of boys were enrolled. However these figures hide the dramatic discrepancy between the urban and rural regions in Afghanistan. Girls represent less than 15 per cent of total enrolment in nine districts in the south and east of Afghanistan (Source: World Bank).
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Rebecca Namanyanja, 28, used to run a small hotel business on the shores of Lake Victoria in Uganda but decided to buy a fishing boat to earn more money. A single mother of two young daughters, she was determined to expand her income to give her girls a good education having been forced to leave school herself because her parents could not pay the fees. Fishing is a traditionally male preserve, and she had to fight against the prejudice that prevents women joining the industry. However, she has now grown her business and owns five boats and employs ten men.

_Rebecca Namayanja:_ “In many African traditions and cultures it was long considered a taboo for a woman to touch the fishing nets... Women waited for their husband’s catches at home and preserved the fish, through salting and drying. But now we realise this was just a superstition.”

**Overview:** Uganda’s second largest export after coffee is fish. However, women have only recently started to break into the male-dominated fishing industry.

**Progress:** Because of the significant role the fishing industry plays in the country, women are being encouraged to partake further in the fishing industry. Programmes such as the Wece Farmers Fish Ponds, which is supported by the UN World Food programme, have been set up to help women to improve their lives and support their families by learning how to raise and farm fish in ponds away from Lake Victoria.
Other organisations such as the Women in the Fishing Industry Programme have been formed “to build the capacity of women to profitably run small scale business enterprises in the fishing industry and other sectors” (source: The GBV [gender-based violence] Prevention Network).

The Lake Victoria Fisheries Organisation has taken an active role in promoting female presence not just in fishery, but also in the running of Beach Management Units (BMUs). BMUs are community-based organisations that bring together everyone involved in fisheries at a beach – boat owners, boat crew, traders, processors, boat builders and repairers, net repairers and others – to work with government and other stakeholders in managing fisheries’ resources and improving the livelihoods of the community members.

**Setbacks:** In 1982, the very first cases of HIV/AIDS in Uganda were identified in Kasensero, a fishing village on the coast of Lake Victoria, in the Rakai district. HIV prevalence in fishing communities is now estimated to be 28 per cent, more than four times the national average, according to government statistics.

In March of 2010, fisheries state minister, Fred Mukisa, urged women to join the fishing industry in a bid to fight illegal fishing practices, like dynamite fishing. (Source: All Africa) The projects being founded encouraging fishing away from Lake Victoria are beneficial in the fight against the high rate of HIV infection in the fishing community.
KEY FACTS

- Statistics show that unlike many of its neighbouring countries, employment rates amongst women in Uganda are higher than that of men. According to statistics by the Uganda Labour Force Survey 2002/03, 89.4 per cent of women are listed as employed, compared to 87 per cent of men. In rural areas, the difference is bigger, with 88.6 per cent of women employed compared to 85.7 per cent of men.

- With a total literacy rate of 74 per cent in Uganda (Source: Unicef 2003/08), fishing is a very attractive industry for Ugandans to enter, as it does not require an educational certificate nor previous experience to start a fishing business.

- Fisheries contributed 6 per cent of GDP in 2001/02. About 70 per cent of this came from fish sales at landing sites and the remaining 30 per cent from value addition by traders, transporters and processors. Direct, indirect and induced multiplier impacts suggest that the sector’s importance is even greater. An estimated 1.2 million people are directly dependent on fisheries.

- However only 0.9 per cent of Uganda’s workforce is employed in the fishing industry. In rural areas, 1.8 per cent of men and 0.1 per cent of women work in fishery and in urban areas 0.8 per cent men and 0 per cent women work in fishery. Bringing the total to 1.7 per cent of men and 1 per cent women employed within the country’s second largest trade. (Source: Uganda Bureau of Statistics- Uganda Labour Force Survey 2002/03)

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Savita Tomar: female taxi driver (Delhi, India)

Savita Tomar, 19, lives with her parents, seven brothers and sisters and her grandmother in a single, semi-roofed room in a dusty sprawl on Delhi’s outskirts. When her father started suffering from a mental disability she was forced to go out to work. But having studied up to the age of ten, the only job she could get was a 12-hour shift cutting thread in an export house, standing on her feet all day. However, thanks to a training programme run by Azad Foundation, an NGO in Delhi, she is now one of a small but growing number of women taxi drivers. Overnight she became the main bread-winner in her family, earning Rs 5,000 (80 euros) a month. The job has given her independence and confidence.

Savita Tomar: “[Being a driver] has given me strength. Earlier I would not step out of the house alone. Now I go and do my work on my own. The salary is good and so is the work. It is different from other jobs. Every day is different, like the five different fingers of the hand. Earlier, women used to be drivers of the home only. Now they are getting out.”

Nayantara Janardhan, an executive at Sakha Consulting Wings, the non-profit arm of the Azad Foundation, which promotes job placements for the trained female cab drivers, said: “The idea was to provide the kind of livelihood which would make a difference to their lives. We wanted to raise the standard of living for their families. And there was also a conscious
Breaking Barriers: Women in a Man’s World

decision to break the gender bias of women being perceived as bad drivers. Finally, we wanted to provide a safe transport option for women in the city."

**Overview:** Delhi is home to nearly 13 million people, almost six million of whom are women. According to the Indian government’s 2009 Crime in India report, Delhi is by far India’s most unsafe major metropolis for women and children. Though it accounted for only 13.2 per cent of all crimes committed in 35 “mega cities” across India in 2009, nearly 24 per cent of total rape cases and almost 40 per cent of cases of reported kidnapping and abduction of women were committed here. More than half of incidents of sexual assault or harassment take place on public transport, a recent survey found. (Source: The Guardian)

**Progress:** Since Azad Foundation started training women to drive other companies have started hiring women and promoting taxis driven by women for women as a new service.

**Setbacks:** Taxi services such as Sakha Consulting Wings are only available for Delhi’s middle class.

**Key facts**
- India could increase its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by as much as 4 per cent if the employment rate for women were increased, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP).
- According to the recently published global gender gap survey by the World Economic Forum, India is ranked 98 among the 115 countries surveyed, lower than countries such as Sri Lanka, Kenya and Algeria.
- Also, according to UNDP, the ratio of average earned income in India (female to male) is 0.38, which is less than any of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) countries.
- With adult literacy rates of 47.8 per cent and the youth literacy rates of 68 per cent, Indian women trail behind their counterparts in Brazil, Mexico, China and Russia.
- The World Economic Forum report ranks India at No. 102, in “educational attainment."
- Currently more than 85 per cent of girls attend primary school. However, fewer than 60 per cent enrol in the secondary level and less than 12 per cent in the tertiary level.
- This reducing enrolment percentage definitely has an impact on the number of graduating women professionals. Less than 40 percent of the total graduates are women.
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Wendy Pekeur: general secretary of Sikhula Sonke (South Africa)

Wendy Pekeur / Anna Majavu – Panos Pictures

Wendy Pekeur, 31, is general secretary of Sikhula Sonke, South Africa’s first politically independent farmworkers’ union. Much of its work focuses on building the skills and knowledge of its women members and teaching them their socio-economic rights. Ninety per cent of the top leadership positions of Sikhula Sonke [isiXhosa for ‘we grow together’] are held by women. Pekeur grew up on a farm where her grandparents worked. She started volunteering with a non-governmental organisation, Women on Farms, when she was in her early twenties and helped launch Sikhula Sonke in 2004.

Wendy Pekeur: “I actually think the time is here for women’s revolution. People say we Sikhula Sonke women act too much with our emotions because we don’t always go for hardcore salary issues only. But we fight for a toilet in the orchards, we fight for kindergartens on farms. When you change the life of a woman you change the lives of everyone around her.”

Overview: In South Africa, roughly one million people work in the agricultural sector, chiefly as manual labourers. Of this number, around two thirds are women. Under apartheid women farm workers had little protection under South African legislation. Several acts of parliament,
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passed since apartheid ended, have improved the position of women farm workers under the law. The Employment Equity Act of 1998, for example, prohibits direct and indirect unfair discrimination on grounds of gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, and family responsibility in recruitment and working conditions.

However, women are usually employed as seasonal and temporary workers, (with women comprising around 20 per cent of permanent workers) and much of the new legislation does not protect them. Better-paid, better-protected and more secure contracts tend to be held by men.

Setbacks: According to the pressure group War on Want, women farm workers face harsher treatment and conditions whilst earning only 78 per cent of what their male counterparts. They are also more likely to be employed on temporary contracts, and for lower wages.

These employment patterns lead as well to the majority of women working on farms not being covered by social insurance schemes such as pension funds, medical benefits or maternity benefits.

The employment of women farm workers is often tied to their husband’s employment. Indeed, there are reports that married women farm workers are denied contracts in their own names, and work on the basis of contracts signed by their husbands.

Positions held by men were more secure than the seasonal and temporary positions mainly occupied by women. Housing is often tied to employment, with many examples of women farm workers being evicted from their homes after losing their jobs.

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<td>Women farm workers in South Africa earn 78 per cent of the salaries of their male counterparts. They are also more likely to be employed on temporary contracts, and for lower wages. (Source: War on Want)</td>
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<td>- Primary agriculture makes up around three per cent of South Africa’s GDP, roughly the same percentage as Spain (Source: CIA fact book)</td>
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<td>- Most trade unions in South Africa are male dominated – with many traditionally setting aside only the second vice-president position for women.</td>
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<td>- In Sikhula Sonke, 90 per cent of the leaders are women.</td>
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<td>- Sikhula Sonke has 4 000 members – based in the Western Cape.</td>
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(Source: Sikhula Sonke)
Sikhule Sonkwe Farmer’s union

This inequality has led to the formation of pressure groups and women-only farm-workers groups as well as the women-led farm workers’ union Sikhule Sonkwe. They have lobbied for women’s’ rights, provided legal support and fought against violence against women. In 2009, ahead of the South African general election, Women from South Africa’s three Cape provinces marched to parliament in Cape Town to denounce the country’s "slow and unbalanced" land redistribution programme.

If men want to join Sikhula Sonke, they must sign a declaration saying that they will refrain from violence against women.

On one farm Sikhula Sonke has negotiated maternity leave for female workers, even for seasonal workers. Another farm owner eventually agreed to start a pension fund for all workers on his farm, and contributes to the fund even during the months that the seasonal workers are not working.

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Raquel Barros founded the charity Lua Nova ("new moon") in 2000 after four years of frustrated attempts to get pregnant. She was living in Italy, with her husband, and decided to go back to her home city, Sorocaba, in São Paulo state, in order to help young mothers living on the street who couldn’t take care of their babies. In 2006 she started a programme to teach these women the skills they needed to build their own houses. Five of the women now work full time in the construction business. Raquel became pregnant herself two years after founding Lua Nova. Her twins are now nine years old.

Raquel Barros: “We can see that the prejudice is slowly giving place to the recognition of their work, even in such a masculine field of work. Now, people are recommending their services because they are meticulous and better organised than the men.”

Overview: Brazil has traditionally been a typically patriarchal society, with men given the role of bread winner and women handed the position of home-maker. It was not until 1988 that women became wholly equal to men in the eyes of the Brazilian constitution, and thus were able to hold jobs in the services and industry sector without the fear of discrimination.

Progress: Although women in Brazil have traditionally relied on employment in the services sector (retail, hotel, catering etc), many have begun to break away from that employment segment and enter sectors such as construction.
The Brazilian government’s special secretariat for policy on women reports that female contribution to the construction industry grew by 3 per cent between 2008 and 2009. Due to this, projects like Mão na Massa (Hands On) have launched in Brazil with the aim of promoting and assisting women in gaining access to the construction industry.

Setbacks: The gender gap has widened in recent years. The Global Gender Gap Report lists Brazil ranking at 85, compared to 67 in 2006.
Dagmar Rivieri Garroux (Tia Dag): founder of Casa do Zezinho (Brazil)

Dagmar Rivieri Garroux, known as Tia Dag (auntie Dag), runs Casa do Zezinho, a school in one of south São Paulo’s favelas. She set it up in 1994 after working with children fleeing from paramilitary groups in São Paulo. It is now one of the largest extracurricular schools in the city, home to 1,200 girls and boys aged between six and 21 years old. When the school first opened parents refused to allow their daughters to attend, but gradually she talked them round. Today Tia Dag proudly says that she convinces nine out of ten parents to allow their daughters to stay on in the school even once they are teenagers. By offering social, cultural
and artistic activities, as well as vocational training, Tia Dag and the teachers aim to prevent these young people from joining São Paulo’s criminal gangs. 

**Tia Dag:** “In downtown São Paulo, women work; they have careers even though the jobs pay poorly. But in the favela, women are unpaid servants. They are not expected to be anything more than underappreciated housewives... I know that if they let their daughters study they will have the same opportunities as the boys down the road. Well, not the same, because prejudice is widespread in Brazil, but their chances at pulling themselves out of this cycle of violence, submission and impoverishment will be much better.”

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**Key facts**

- Statistics from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics show that literacy rates amongst females have continued to soar in Brazil, reaching an impressive 99 per cent in 2007.

- Brazil has continued to be pushed down the gender gap report, currently standing at number 85 (out of 134 countries) in the world, compared to being positioned at 67 in 2006.

- However, the gender pay gap is slowly closing. In 2006, the average female earned US$4,704 compared to US$10,963 of that for men. However, in 2010, the average woman earned US$7,190, compared to man’s US$12,006 (source: the Global Gender Gap Report 2010).

- Race plays a significant role in unemployment rates. In 2005, it is estimated that unemployment rates amongst the black Brazilians (10.3 per cent) was estimated to be 30 per cent higher than those of the white Brazilians (8.1 per cent) (Source: International Labour Organisation).

- Women across all races in Brazil have generally relied on the services sector for employment, with 72 per cent employed within that sector compared to 13 per cent employed in the industry sector (source: ILO).

- According to the special secretariat for policy on women, there were 186,000 women in civil construction in Brazil out of an overall population of 190 million in 2007 (source: Special Secretariat for Policy on Women Report).
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Panos London promotes the participation of poor and marginalised people in national and international development debates through media and communication projects. It is part of the worldwide Panos Network.
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