

FREE WOMEN, WOMEN FREEING OTHERS



I HAVE KNOWN THE POVERTY
AND SUFFERING OF MY PARENTS.
I HAVE TOILED IN THE MOST HUMBLE
OCCUPATIONS. I HAVE LOVED A MAN
INSPIRE OF ALL HIS WEAKNESSES.
I HAVE FOUGHT TO BRING UP MY
CHILDREN. I HAVE ENDURED INSULTS
AND HUMILIATIONS.

AM I NOT A WOMAN ?

Free women, women freeing others

"The fundamental question facing women today is to know whether they accept equal opportunity among themselves. Until now the world has never accepted an equality which gives priority to the most disadvantaged... This would be a radical turning point in the history of the world."

Joseph Wresinski, All Together in Dignity,
Mexico, International Women's Year, 1975

I have known the same suffering and poverty as my parents.

I have been left illiterate,
deprived of childhood and youthful dreams.
I have done the dirtiest work, the least-paid.
I have loved a man, despite his weaknesses.

I have begged to feed my children.
With all these humiliations, and insults,

Am I not a woman?

Around me there was always noise and violence.

I withdrew into myself to escape.

When I was eleven I had to take care of my brothers and sisters.

I didn't go to school any more; I was ashamed of my clothes.

My life as a woman began when I was ten years old.

From then on, boys were always after me.

I used to dream and hope, but no one gave me hope.

They told me: You'll be like the others,
you'll have a baby soon as you go with a boy.

You're a whore just like your mother.

Am I not a woman?

We marry when we're young to escape poverty.

I grew up in an orphanage; I got married to have a roof over my head.

No water, no electricity, a cellar overrun with rats.

Pregnant again...my husband said he didn't want more children,
that it was my fault.

The social worker told me: Your husband should be more careful.

I couldn't take it any more!

Yet I've never been as happy as when he was born.

People make us ashamed to be pregnant.

They wanted to take my baby away...to operate on my daughter...
they didn't explain anything to me.

They make all the decisions about our lives. I can only remain silent.

Am I not a woman?

I don't have the right to be pretty, to dress well.
When I go out I always feel that people are watching me, insulting me.
Not many women here live to be old. I 'm worn out already.

Am I not a woman?

I wanted to work, but I got pregnant again.
When my husband left I had to work. It was hard; I earned very little.
The children were left alone all day. I want my children to have a chance.
I wanted to be a teacher; I learned work in a laundry;
now I'm looking for cleaning jobs.
We all have to ask for money, to beg help from the city, the churches.
It's humiliating!

Am I not a woman?

We never have free time, outings, contacts with others.
My mother hasn't been out of her house for 22 years.
I want to live without fear, without worrying all the time: Will there
be food for my children? Will my husband find job?
Will they give us somewhere to live?
I don't know anything about politics...God...religion.
These churches, I don't know much.
So I listen and I don't know what to say.

Am I not a woman?

Women facing extreme poverty want to create a different world from that in which they have to live now.

They are the most profoundly affected by the justices against which many women have revolted and against which they are now struggling. With all other women, therefore, they want the right, to decide freely the direction of their own lives.

In common with all women who do not have adequate, independent income, women in very poor communities demand :

- that the work they do in the home for their families count towards employment benefits;
- that their rent be calculated according to their income and family size to give them adequate shelter;
- the right to realistic minimum allowance that would free them from financial dependence on their husbands and on public or private agencies ;
- a pension at retirement age, taking into account the number of children they have raised ;

Along with these rights, women are demanding fundamental rights which other women already enjoy.

First of all, they want their human dignity, and that of their families to be recognized and respected. They want to be informed and consulted about any decisions which affect their lives and that of their children. They demand not to be judged responsible for the situation in which they are obliged to live.

They want their daughters to have the right :

- to be brought up within their own families ;
- to go to primary and secondary schools that take into account their difficulties and handicaps ;
- to continue their studies or training in the field of their choices ;
- to be able to use their skills freely in steady, declared employment ;

They want their daughters to grow up in the security of a respected family and learn how to love the people close to them. They want them to have time for vacations and recreation ; access to art, music, poetry and other cultural expression.

When their daughters marry, they should be able to do so of their own free will, and not merely because they are pregnant or because their families or surroundings force them into it. Rather than marrying to escape an unbarable situation as they themselves did in many cases. They want their daughters to have the right to choose the man with whom they will share their lives.

For their daughters and for themselves, they demand the right of having their womanhood respected. For this, they must have the means of caring for their bodies, with access to basic physical hygiene facilities, adequate clothing and personal grooming aids which are taken for granted by other women.

They want themselves and their children to be given regular physical examinations and to be provided with medical care and hospitalization when necessary. Frequently ill, they either do not receive care or are forced into humiliating situations. They demand that they no longer be judged to be guilty for their physical health and appearance.

They demand the right to plan their families freely, without threats and pressure from social and medical services or from public opinion. Their decision to limit the number of children they have must be their own choice, and not be imposed on them because of their poverty and vulnerability.

They demand the right to status as mothers of their children, in recognition of which they will receive the human and financial means of rearing and educating them. They want to receive training in marketable skills, and to choose whether to work in the job market or the home.

They deny anyone's right to judge them and to consider them responsible for the disintegration of their households, for the poverty in which they live, for the dilapidated condition of their housing, for the scholastic failure of their children and for the delinquent acts of their teenage children. They need and wish for regular support from home attendants, marriage counsellors and home economists.

They want to learn how to communicate with others, and how to exchange ideas in discussion. Finally, they claim the right of access to expression of their own needs and aspirations and the basic right to be heard.

Women struggling in extreme poverty want all women to realize that the injustices of which they are victims reinforce the inequality of all women in our societies.

From their earliest age, they must assume adult responsibilities, under very harsh circumstances and without the adequate means to do so. They are often made to feel responsible for the problems arising from this situation. Confronted with their condition, they ask to be helped in assuming their responsibilities. Above all they ask that their dignity as women, wives, mothers and citizens be recognized. They want people to respect their freedom, their rights, their families and their social backgrounds.

These women lead and are leading a courageous struggle to free their family from hunger, ignorance and violence. For this reason they often are the reference points which unify their social groups. To invest in them would be a recognition of their indispensable role in the eradication of extreme poverty. In supporting their aspirations to be respected and responsible members of society, we would support their efforts to be women to their fullest degree.

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