Why Women? Making the Case for Sustainable Development

Over the past 70 years, CARE has developed a long perspective on what works to eradicate global poverty, promote human rights and help people in extreme emergency and conflict situations. The number one thing we’ve learned is this:

Poverty is only partly about money. Mostly, it’s about power.

CARE believes that at its root, poverty is about injustice and the systems and structures that deny the chronically poor access to the resources and opportunities that enable them to improve their lives. The kind of grinding poverty prevalent in much of the developing world has lasted so long because the very structures in society that should lift themselves out of poverty often work to keep poor people, and especially women and girls, from accessing the tools they need to advance in their communities.¹ In countries where women can’t work, go to school, hold positions of authority, access health care, move about freely and safely in society, voice their concerns and opinions, choose their own marriages and plan their own families, their futures and the well-being of their communities suffer. These factors expand and entrench poverty.

Globally, 1.2 billion people live in absolute poverty and most of them are women and girls.² CARE focuses on poverty eradication by working directly with women and girls in developing countries because, when you help a woman improve her socio-economic situation, develop new skills and access resources, you help her, her family and her community. When she is able to earn money, she reinvests it into her children’s education, health and future. When she is able to speak up in her community, she speaks on behalf of everyone with ideas that are practical and beneficial to not only her, but also to the society around her. By investing in women and girls, we promote a smart, strategic and effective approach that is not only the right thing to do, but also gives development dollars the most impact.³

Women make up half of the world’s population; yet historically, they’ve been restricted from access to resources and opportunities that would help them contribute to their societies, including property and livestock, education, access to financial services and other tools that would promote their skills and productivity. They’ve been silenced when voicing their opinions and experience, blocked from education, travel, inheritance and land rights, health care and employment; they’ve been subjected to violence and discrimination that keeps them and their families in poverty.

That’s why poverty is intractable in many parts of the world – because we have marginalized half the population and misunderstood, underutilized and misdirected the power, resources and potential women have for impacting change.

We have the capacity, resources, skills and knowledge to eradicate global poverty now, but only if we remove barriers to women and girls playing equal and active roles in their communities.

CARE addresses these barriers through wide-ranging development and humanitarian assistance programs that equip women and girls with the tools and support they need. Research shows that when women have equal access to education, resources, rights, employment and economic opportunities, and when they’re able to make their own decisions about when or whether to marry or have children, the benefits are far reaching.
Women have the potential to lift entire communities out of poverty and increase security at the personal, family, community and country-level.\(^4\)

\textit{Development abroad helps Americans at home.}\n
Contributing to sustainable development helps foster stability and prosperity abroad. This improves America’s ability to build allies, advance businesses and trade and remain global leaders. Now is the time for the U.S. to exert our moral, political and financial leadership to bring together science, policy and common will to improve the lives of those left in the most dire of conditions. The prospects for peace and prosperity rest on our ability to address root causes of poverty and to expand a quality of life that is still unknown to so many people around the world. This is in our best interest, for a world where people are productive members of their economy, is a safer world where extremism has less opportunity to take root.\(^5\)

When you take the long view, it’s clear that fighting poverty and empowering women and girls is a critical part of solving the world’s economic and security problems.

\textbf{What’s the solution?}

\textit{Invest in women – they can bring about real, effective change!}

CARE’s work focuses deeply on promoting gender equality as a catalyst for effective, sustainable development. We:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Empower women and girls to speak for themselves, have their voices heard and acted upon, including promoting inclusive governance. Their real-life experiences are often the key to practical solutions to everyday challenges.
  \item Help communities as a whole lift themselves out of poverty and gender discrimination by including men and boys alongside women and girls. We do this by addressing long-held cultural beliefs, social norms, values and exclusionary practices that prolong inequality and poverty.
  \item Strengthen the capacity of poor people to hold power-holders accountable.
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Does it work?}

Yes! Over the years CARE and others in the global community have focused on gender equality and women’s empowerment as a development approach and we’ve seen drastic and measurable improvements in global rates of malnutrition and hunger, education, women’s economic development, access to health care and many other poverty eradication measures.\(^6\) We still have a lot of work ahead of us and CARE recognizes that ultimately, effective long-term development hinges on the U.S. government adequately funding and fully integrating gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment throughout its foreign assistance programs. With that level of investment, we can create stability and self-sufficiency at the local and national levels abroad and promote American prosperity, leadership and stability for everyone.

\textbf{We urge Congress to support a strong International Affairs budget at the current FY17 and FY18 levels and to oppose any deep and disproportionate cuts to critical, life-saving foreign assistance programs.}

\textbf{Endnotes:}

1. Lefton, Rebecca, “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment are Key to Addressing Global Poverty,” Center for American Progress, March 11, 2013.