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Economic Empowerment of Indigenous Women

Indigenous women who belong to New Humanity of the Focolare Movement work for a united world mainly at the grassroots level following principles for establishing peace and fraternity with others that all members follow wherever they live. In communities where women traditionally remain in the home, working for peace and fraternity may mean being the first to start a business, to form a cooperative, to build a school, or to play a leadership role in the community. The simple principles that they live by and the relationships that they develop help to give them the confidence needed to take an active role particularly to relieve the suffering of those around them. Their actions bring about a greater peace and unity among those affected and set an example for others to follow.

The first principle they learn encourages them to be the first to reach out to others in need. When one part of the community suffers, others naturally want to assist them and often women take the lead in this. Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement and New Humanity wrote that caring for others is primarily sacrifice, it is living for others, forgetting oneself. Lubich suggested that, in general, “Women have the ability to love more and also to suffer more. It is with love and suffering that you bring peace because you need to love, you need lots of patience that comes precisely from having suffered.”

The six principles for peace emphasized by New Humanity of the Focolare Movement are, 1) Be the first to reach out to others; 2) Treat each person with respect; 3) Share each other's joys and sorrows; 4) Discover the good in others; 5) Treat others as you want to be treated; 6) Forgive those who hurt you.

The first 3 examples that follow highlight how indigenous women following these principles have the invented ways to bring about economic empowerment in their communities.

Santa Maria, Catamarca –Argentina. Tinku Kamayu (United for Work.) A cooperative formed by indigenous women.

The Tinku Kamayu cooperative is well established in Catamarca. For over ten years it has given work to women descended from the Calchaquí tribe. Margarita Ramirez, director of Tinku Kamayu, is a descendant of the Calchaquí people. She says that during the 2001 economic crisis, people had no work and they lived difficult lives in poverty. Of the different effects of the poverty prevalent at the time, the one that struck Margarita the most concerned a community of women who had many problems. Because of the 'macho' culture prevalent there in which women were supposed to stay at home, the community considered them bad women if they went out of their houses. Feeling this inequality deeply, Margarita reached out to eight women and said to them, 'If we have so many economic problems, why don't we start a weaving business?'

Working in the cooperative gave the women a new sense of empowerment. “Today”, Margarita says, “Tinku is a cooperative with 14 workers and our hope is to help build a better world even though we are only like a grain of sand. Our aim is to safeguard our ancestral origins. We said, ‘why not go back to the work culture of our ancestors who worked at weaving and spinning. This restores our freedom. It gives us great joy because we can hand on our culture through weaving.”

Maria Condori, a member of the cooperative says, “Here I really felt appreciated as a woman. Margarita always tells us: 'You should not feel more or less than anyone, you are businesswomen!' This is a great thing that has happened in my life. Tinku has given me everything. It gave me back

the will to live; I am now respected and valued as a woman; it helped my self-esteem and I am esteemed by others. No one can take this away from me.” Another woman says, “Above all you feel welcomed, and fulfilled as a woman, as a mother and wife.”

Catamarca, Jujuy, Salta – Argentina. Sustainable and Inclusive Tourism Project.

Women from 83 families coming from 5 different indigenous communities, originated a project called “Sustainable and Inclusive Tourism in North West Argentina.” Income from the project supplements their family’s subsistence level income from farming. The women sell handicrafts and arrange for tourist accommodations and guidance. “Here, we live off of agriculture and breeding goats” says Flavia from the community of Quebrada. “These two activities allow us just to survive. Therefore, we hope that income from tourism will improve our lives.” The women of the community lead the project. They have received the “Women Solidarity Award” from the Avon Foundation, an award given to “women who help to change the world.” The director of our project received an award in 2015 for developing “social projects that transform the reality of their communities.”

Village of Buota, Tarawa Island, Republic of Kiribati – Preparing for Emigration Due to Global Warming.

Tarawa is the largest island in the vast Pacific archipelago that forms the Republic of Kiribati. As a result of global warming, the country faces complete inundation by the sea within a few decades. The amount of arable land continues to succumb to the sea and with it go jobs and sources of electrical power. Since no one can stop the sea from advancing, the government plans to move the inhabitants to other parts of the Republic of Kiribati or to other countries. Aside from the tidal problem, only 10% of the population has a regular job while the rest live by their wits.

In Buota, one of the poorest villages on Tarawa Island, members of New Humanity of the Focolare Movement initiated a project to improve living conditions especially for the children and themselves. They reached out to thirty-five women and together they prioritized the needs of the community in which they lived. They realized that eventually they would have to leave their village and those without an adequate education would have difficulty finding jobs. Since many of the children did not attend school, they decided to work on improving educational opportunities. They began by expanding the pre-school program. They hired 2 teachers for a year and recruited 61 students, more than the existing classroom could handle. The families then worked together to build an additional classroom. They sold bread and ice to raise funds and volunteered their time to weave the straw roof. Next, they setup a handicraft workshop for the women and organized vocational training to improve their employability when they relocate. Officials from the health and agricultural ministry came twice to provide training on health, hygiene, nutrition, and organic gardening. The women leading the project report that the nursery school definitely has helped to strengthen the

cooperation and unity among the members of the community. The mothers of the students, for example, often work in teams to provide the necessary support for the teachers and students.

In the following example, a student teacher in an impoverished area led a community to build a school for their children to attend.

Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic – Café con Leche Elementary School

On the hills surrounding the capital of Santo Domingo, there is a part of the population that lives in very poor conditions, in houses with roofs made from aluminum, in a neighborhood called El Café. For many years, the children would have to walk one and a half hours under the tropical sun to go to the closest school. But very few attended it because of the heavy traffic and the fear that some of the children would be taken by gangs involved in illegal trafficking. Seeing this situation, Marisol, an education student, decided to start a school in a tiny building that had been put at their disposal by the local church. But, it was so small and so hot that the children preferred to stay under a tree where it was much cooler. Marisol did not want the children to miss school, remain uneducated, and run the risk of remaining without work or in the hands of criminals in order to survive. And, so, she had the idea to encourage the children to collect coins in a jar - a few pesos that they had in their possession in order to build the school. As family and friends heard what the children were doing, the contributions began to increase. One of Marisol's professors also a member of New Humanity of the Focolare Movement formed a foundation with a board of directors to manage the contributions. Funds were raised in Europe and the United States and Dominican foundations began to contribute. Eventually they raised enough to build a school for 200 students with some of the basic construction done by the children, their friends, and their families. With more contributions, they expanded the school to accommodate 580 students. Marisol became the schools' principal.

One of the instructional tools used at the school is a cube with the 6 principles of peace adapted to an educational environment, one principle on each side of the cube. Rolling the cube in the morning gives the students a principle to apply that day. If some disturbance has occurred, the students might roll the cube and interpret the phrase that turns up as a catalyst to restore peace,

Brief Snapshots of Other Applications

Living these basic principles of peace fosters relationships and friendships that bring peace and fraternity, mutual respect and appreciation. For example, it has empowered impoverished Muslim and Christian women to work together in the Shubra district of Cairo to form a handicraft cooperative. Among members of the Tutsi and Hutu people in Rwanda and between the Borana and Rendille people in Kenya, peaceful relationships of fraternity and friendship have developed between those who fought one another in the past.

Chiara Lubich has said “that if there is to be a worthwhile relationship, a good friendship, there has necessarily got to be a certain amount of sacrifice. Nothing is achieved without sacrifice. Everything we create in this world calls for commitment and sacrifice... What do I mean? I mean making yourself really one with others, entering their world, understanding them, suffering with them, identifying yourself with them, enjoying their joys, making yourself one with them. They want to go for a walk, so go for a walk. Even if you don't really want to, go just the same, become one with them.”

The members of New Humanity of the Focolare Movement believe, based on hundreds of examples such as those presented here, that these principles for peace apply universally at all levels of society including between nations and, if followed, will engender a world united in peace and fraternity.

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