In the UK, a Non-Governmental Organisation – the Zochaeus Trust 2000 – and the Institute for Brain Chemistry and Human Nutrition have highlighted concern at the clear relationship between poor maternal nutrition, inadequate incomes and low birth weight. The incidence of low birth weight is rising in the UK and in some inner-city regions is similar to that of developing nations. The consequences of poor maternal nutrition, before and during pregnancy, are becoming clearer: low birth weights result in associated physical and mental ill health, and an expert at the National Institute of Health in USA now considers that improper maternal nutrition is a key factor in the sharp rise in mental ill health among young people.

Some of the articles point out the political dimension to poverty. The Global Call for Action Against Poverty, launched by several women’s organisations and development agencies, is a worldwide alliance committed to pressuring world leaders to fulfil their promises to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, the landmark document which promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women. Hundreds of civil society organisations from all over the world – including women’s groups, trade unions, faith groups and human rights organisations – are joining together to work toward shifts in national and international policies to end poverty. At the recent meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the UN Observer for the Anglican Consultative Council, whose delegation comprised 41 Anglican women from 27 Provinces, identified poverty of women as one of the four most urgent issues that should be addressed by the governments of the world. Basic to the elimination of women and children living in poverty is the economic empowerment of women. This was pointed out by the Secretary General Kofi Annan, in his opening address. The delegate from Ireland (a man) stated that the economic health of his country could be directly tied to an increase of women entering the workforce over the past five years; “Gender equality equals economic well-being.” Awareness of the extent and repercussions of the poverty of women is crucial for the whole of the Anglican Communion. Churches are urged to do their part to understand and work to combat “the feminine face of poverty.”

Editorial note
This editorial has been jointly written by Canon Alice Medcof, Co-ordinator of the International Anglican Women’s Network and Dr Sally Thompson, Co-ordinator of IAFN.

More information on the Global Action Against Poverty initiative can be found at: http://www.whiteband.org
Poverty is found everywhere in Africa. Nearly half the population live on less than one dollar per day. In my country, the political situation since 1996 has left people living in a culture of hatred, vengeance, violence and war. It is difficult to develop if there is no peace. So poverty affects a great part of human life.

Congolese families do not have reserves of food, and many are malnourished. People live from day to day; the whole National territory is affected by poverty. No social class is spared: that is why very many women have no resistance when they give birth and many die. Poverty affects the area where resources of wealth are exploited and the State remains poor, despite the mining sector. During the colonial period, all the mine workers received rations of maize, sugar, meat and depending on the number of children. So they had large families, but even then some were poor; hence the problem is one of work for the restoration of our communities. We have done some research in our parishes in the periphery. The results were terrible. Women living in these areas are violated in their own homes in the name of culture. These women are living in pain and bodily suffering. They know nothing of women’s rights, they have never heard of it.

Woman being the source of human life, is also the earth that contains life. That is why the Mothers’ Union of Katanga Diocese has taken a commitment to:

● invite women to strengthen themselves through examples of ethical qualities;
● teach women about projects of small firms such as micro-credit for those who want to do business, sewing work or breeding chickens.

With these initiatives we will achieve our objectives in order to fight against the poverty that affects our province and our homes.

Contact Person: Mugipa Isingoma, M.U. President of the Diocese of Katanga and IAWN link in the Province of DR Congo, C/o Mary Sumner House, 24 Tufton St, London SW1 3RB, ENGLAND

In the 1990s the Government of Canada identified the issue of Children Living in Poverty as one of immediate and urgent concern. Campaign 2000 was inaugurated: it was hoped that all facets of government and civil society would set in motion programmes that would reduce the number of such children. But by year 2000 many more children were living in poverty and by year 2000 the number had increased again – substantially.

Setting goals does not equate with success.

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Woman being the source of human life, is also the earth that contains life. That is why the Mothers’ Union of Katanga Diocese has taken a commitment to:

● make women participate in the work of social development;
● provide necessary information on peace education, good government and the transformation of the conflicts, the rights and duties of women;
● undertake to research the situation on woman and children’s needs as they are the victims of conflicts, HIV/AIDS, violence and discrimination in order to promote women’s emergence so that they can be different at any level of social life;

“...I am the mother of Maria Louiz and Joso Vitor. My name is Ciceria Margarida. After I gained a place for my children at the crèche, my life improved a lot. Best of all I quickly found a job, praise God.” House of Hope (crèche).

“My name is Maria Jose. After I started to participate in the services and know about the truth of God and learn how to be content and thankful, primarily to God for having shown me how good it is to be a sister in Christ Jesus and have a family in faith. In addition to this, today I have peace, joy, slightly better health, basic food and even a house.”

Brazil is the tenth largest economy in the world – yet it is a country of great disparity, with nearly 44 million people living below the poverty line and facing hunger. Recife is a metropolitan city in north-east of Brazil with a population of two million people and life here for women of lower socio-economic class is a constant daily battle for survival. Many families have arrived in Piedade, Recife, as a result of natural disasters, war, poverty and by year 2000 the number had increased again – substantially.

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Life has become increasingly difficult for more Zambians, especially women. This is because of the combination of the economic, political, social, cultural and environmental factors. Social factors such as poverty against which women struggle are the foundation of women’s lives. The result is that they live in constant fear of being killed or to be killed both inside and outside their homes.

The population of Zambia is 10.8 million and over 50% are female. Despite being in the majority, cultural and traditional practices have continued to reinforce women’s second-class status. Lobola (bride price) is still paid, widows are frequently dispossessed of their property and customary laws uphold the notion that a married woman is a minor under the guardianship of her husband.

Women in rural areas continue to carry out most work especially in the agricultural sector. They produce up to 80% of food consumed. Women work longer hours; they also form the majority of subsistence farmers. In our liberalised market economy, price subsidies have been reduced and for a woman to qualify for credit to start farming or any other activity is almost impossible.

Furthermore, there are “cultural” practices that women and sometimes men get their wealth and status steeds to land, as property acquired by the wife is considered a husband’s.

Women in rural areas are mostly affected and so are peri-urban women. Urban poverty has many implications for households. Subsidies removed have resulted in higher prices of basic food stuffs. Women spend hours searching for additional incomes such as petty trading. Poverty among young women is particularly intense, they have less education and fewer chances of skills training and better paid work. Some unfortunately resort to sex work. HIV/AIDS prevalence is alarming amongst girls between 16-19 years. It has dropped from 25% to 16% but it is still serious.

With the introduction of user fees in clinics and hospitals, poorer women in society are particularly vulnerable. Owing to women’s multi-roles in reproduction and health provision for the family, they are the main recipients of health care. Thus Health Services are vital and a key recipient of health care.

One of the challenges which befalls married women is being forced (or willingly) to follow their husbands who keep moving from one town to another; from rural area to urban area looking for greener pasture which is hard to come by or non-existent. This makes it very difficult for women to improve their livelihoods. These women are unable to control their children as they are out of school and can’t be fully supported and are no longer comfortable in the hands of their parents.

The Government has tried to reduce the high rate of poverty by encouraging the formation of co-operatives and women have come up with a policy allowing girls who are pregnant, or have had children, to go back to school to help them secure a better future. They have re-introduced literacy classes to cut down the extent of illiteracy among women. The Government is also encouraging women to form women’s clubs; give them training on how to grow certain crops. The groups are given seeds and fertilizer and do the hard work of tilling the land themselves.

The war (against poverty) is so severe that others have come in. The first lady Mrs Maureen Mwanawasa goes around the country assisting women’s groups in whatever they are doing in a particular community. Other organisations have joined the fight, for example the Non-Governmental Organisations. Some are partly Christian organisations and they give training to women counsellors; some give credit loans after a series of training programmes on how to manage small-scale businesses.

Challenges: 
- As the first lady, the wife of the current President goes around assisting women’s groups. Is there a future for the said groups once this term of office comes to an end?
- Groups or organisations like the Christian Enterprise Trust of Zambia (CETZAM) have been giving credit loans to hundreds of women’s groups country-wide asking for weekly payments. In case of adversity in a group member’s family, a majority of women have lost belongings in replacement for the loans, leaving them poorer than before.

The way forward

The only hope for women and poverty is the Church. More and more Church organisations are coming up with programmes to challenge the poverty, though some denominations confine themselves within the perimeters of their own Church members. Our Mothers’ Union in the Diocese of Central Zambia, having built a hall inNdola, is trying to empower women by giving them life skills through training them for six months in designing and tailoring. This Margaret School of Tailoring is expensive to run and we are handicapped through lack of funds despite help from supporters. Some of the women have set up their own small-scale tailoring shops and others look for employment in clothes-making industries which are very few. Our biggest task is to lobby the Government for assistance.

Contact Person: Julia Lufungulo, Anglican Diocese of Central Zambia, PO Box 70172, Ndola – ZAMBIA

UGANDA

“Mamda, can I get a pill for pimples?” This question was put to me by one of my students at Kasese Women’s Learning Centre and I realised that young women the world over have the same concerns. We are (or have been!) all concerned with how we appear to others. Are we attractive, or are there things about us which spoil how we look? And in fact the question goes so much further than skin deep. Do I have worth or value? This is the real question we ponder deep down.

Women are so often undervalued by society and consequently suffer from low self-esteem. Traditionally in Uganda, it is the women who carry the load as far as domestic work is concerned. Their daily duties are many – necessitating early rising and long working hours after dark. So here in Kasese, Western Uganda, parents in the past have often not considered it necessary to send girls to school when they will only be doing domestic chores in later life. That attitude has now changed but, even here they appreciate the value of educating their daughters, if money is short it is the girls who miss out.

So Kasese Women’s Learning Centre aims to give young women another opportunity if they have been unable to complete their secondary education. We combine literacy with practical skills such as cooking, tailoring. Our core curriculum also covers life skills and basic aspects of health and nutrition. We strive to build up the confidence of these young women and to show them that they are not helpless. They are valuable members of society who are going to determine the lives of their families. They can acquire skills which may help them to overcome poverty and become financially independent.

The centre comes under the umbrella of the Church with the Church being one part of the Diocese of South Rwenzori. We employ local teachers and our cookery teacher is herself a former student. Masika Sylvia, aged 22, attended an introductory course and, showing promise, was then invited to work as assistant to the Church Mission Society worker who was teaching cookery. Later, she was appointed to take charge of the centre.

Introductory courses at the centre last for three months and aim to reach as many women as possible. Afterwards, some students, having gained confidence, go on to further studies and some find employment with local businesses or become self-employed. However, the problem of poverty remains and even though skills can be learned, setting up a small business requires capital which most do not have.

But what these women all have is the desire to see their lives and the lives of their families improved. Masika Sylvia, now aged 22, sums it up very well: “I want to say ‘no’ to sufferings as a woman of Africa. These classes will help me be bright in mind and achieve a bright future. I want to be an example to other women who have dropped out of school.”

Contact Person: Cheryl Parrett, Kasese Women’s Learning Centre, South Rwenzori Diocese, PO Box 142, Kasese, UGANDA

Kasese Women’s Learning Centre. Photo: C. Parret.
NLD members were hounded by Military of the vote, with an overwhelming Democracy (NLD) won a landslide 84% which were, astonishingly, free and more far to little avail. Following the popular Burma, which the junta has renamed sting of isolation, to share the pain and Exchange Meetings” to help draw the system which they call “Women’s within their community. The Karen then have to endure rejection by their culturally conditioned to suffer injustice by Burmese soldiers. Karen women are often taken for forced relocation centres in Karen State. But was the relocation of families because of violence, which made people leave the land where they could till for survival and crowd into big cities. Women don’t run land where they could till for survival and crowd into big cities. Women don’t run

When the Burmese army began its infamous “four cuts policy” in the 1990s to starve the Karen National Liberation Army of support by Karen rice farmers, the Karen refugee camps swelled out of proportion. The army has so far burned down 2,500 villages and $26,000 so-called International Disabled Persons (IDPs) are hiding deep in the jungle. Karen women are often taken for forced labour; at night they suffer routine rape by Burmese soldiers.

All too often, women in Burma have been culturally conditioned to suffer injustice in silence. Many who have suffered: rape then have to endure rejection by their husband and the consequent shame within their community. The Karen Women’s Organisation introduced a system which they call “Women’s Exchange Meetings” to help draw the sting of isolation, to share the pain and find healing through doing so.

Burma, which the junta has renamed Myanmar, is the subject of international embargoes and endless condemnation – so far to little avail. Following the popular uprising of 1988, when 10,000 are said to have died, elections were held in 1990 which were, astonishingly, free and more or less fair. Aung San Su Kyi, the remarkable woman elected to lead this country and her National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide 84% of the vote, with an overwhelming majority in military districts. The government was ever allowed to form. NLD members were hounded by Military Intelligence and either fled, or were imprisoned or terrorized into silence. She, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, is under house arrest in Rangoon (re-named Yangon).

For ordinary people, life in the refugee camps along the Thai border with Burma is a better option than hiding in the forests or living in the notorious relocation centres in Karen State. But Thailand has made it clear it would like to be shot of refugees and is imposing tighter and tighter restrictions; there are always fears of forcible repatriation, and sometimes cross-border raids by the Burmese army. As with most of the camps, Mae La is in an isolated area, surrounded by barbed wire. It is forbidden to go out without a pass or to visit. Visitors are forbidden or severely restricted. There is no electricity.

It is both unsurprising and inexplicable that the Karen Women’s Organisation has “political” aims, in the sense of hoping to support the KWO, however modestly, and to encourage the extraordinary work it is doing in such difficult circumstances. The project is funded by the three Anglican churches in Brussels, by the Tokyo Union Church, and by many individual donors and supporters.

For me, poverty is closely related with abuse. I am saying this because it starts from childhood when a baby girl is taken as a minor at birth. She has to do everything for her brother e.g. washing his clothes, his plates and sometimes even carrying him on her back. For me that is the start of abuse. This little girl cannot decide for herself what she wants to do with her life; always she has to be told. She even has a husband chosen for her and when she is married the husband takes charge of her life.

Women then become vulnerable in that they have little or no skills as all for anything. Mostly, men die earlier and leave these poor women with nothing but lots of children to raise. Most of the women are illiterate because going to school is a privilege for boys. They need to be educated from nothing.

The other challenge we were faced with was the relocation of families because of violence, which made people leave the land where they could till for survival and crowd into big cities. Women don’t run away from their responsibilities like men do. With men, once it becomes tough, they run away. It is easier to train women because they are keen to give food to their children and share even amongst them.

The Church and the Government are working so hard to empower women to be self-sufficient. A lot of women take their children to school but unfortunately they die from AIDS even before they can help their parents out of poverty. It is a vicious cycle.

The Mothers’ Union provides literacy classes, garden projects, sewing classes, bead work lessons, baking lessons, poultry farming. They are taught that a person can live from the soil. We want to provide what Christ had promised us, and we feel it is our duty as the Church to do that. We also teach parenting skills so that children are brought up properly to become responsible Christians and to get life in its fullness.

Nothing and no one is ever quite as you expect. Four-year-old Poe Kwa is angry, intelligent, charming. “A handful” as parents would say affectionately. Except that Poe Kwa’s father tried to sell him to the local Thai villagers in return for drugs. When the father came to reclaim him, the little boy opted to stay put with the Karen Women’s Organisation (KWO), an organisation without which his life – if he had one – would be unimaginably harsh.

Poe Kwa’s women rescuers brought him to Mae La refugee camp in Thailand. This is a huge encampment of bamboo huts, the size of a small town (population 49,043). When I met him, Poe Kwa was playing with a little girl, Beekoo, 5, half-paralysed, mentally-retarded, and wonderfully cheerful; she had been abandoned by her parents. The children were inseparable, both from each other and from the Karen Woman Organisation’s volunteer looking after them.

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Rural revolution: Untouchable women who have taken control of the granite quarry in which the past three years and the proposed poverty eradication a chief part of its
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and has been in place for at least 2500
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are 'a nation within a nation'. But
population of 1 billion. (Dalits are also
own very little.
use of public wells, and often places of
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"unclean" by the castes (in spite of
means "crushed" and "downtrodden".
The word "Dalit" comes from the
ancient language of India, and
The whole of society is divided into
and internalise the imposed
Dalits believe and internalise the imposed
identities, and suffer from low self-
prejudice and caste. Dalits are known as the "untouchables" or "unclean" by the castes (in spite of
Mahatama Gandhi renaming them Harjians — children of God) and they live on the edges of towns and villages, and indeed on the edge of Indian society. Their touch, and even their shadow, is considered polluting. They are exclusively excluded from access to education, medical facilities, use of public wells, and often places of worship. Traditionally, Dalits have the worst jobs: street cleaners, cleaners of public toilets, digging graves, agricultural work. They have the poorest housing and own very little.

USA

Working women and their children constitute the overwhelming majority of people living in poverty in the United States, representing over 32 million of the nearly 35 million Americans living in poverty today. This is clearly a crisis. But the Federal Government is not working to make poverty eradication a chief part of its agenda; in fact, quite the opposite seems to be happening. With poverty levels rising for the past three years and the proposed budget for 2006 seeking to severely cut 150 social service programmes, the current

Bush administration seems headed toward a shattering elimination of the social safety net. This has been gradually on the decline since it was established over 70 years ago, with the most recent assault on America's poorest beginning in earnest during the trickle-down economics era of President Ronald Reagan.

It was in this context of a rising rate of poverty, unemployment, crime, and corporate scandals that in 1983 in the town of Red Bank, New Jersey, an ecumenical group of 35 concerned people formed a vibrant resistance movement against poverty and hunger in the community. Lunch Break was formed to help those struggling to provide the bare necessities for their families, Lunch Break began serving daily hot lunches. The project has expanded over 100 meals served weeklyday, regularly distributes between 30-40 grocery baskets to families and provides 800 family meals every weekday. Lunch Break is a 100% volunteer effort, and all food and money is contributed through donations, Volunteering, or court-appointed community service. The project also serves as a support for women. Inice's involvement with Lunch Break began over 15 years ago when she was a working single mother. "Lunch Break helped me out many times with food and clothes," she remarks. Today, as a member of the Board of Trustees and a regular volunteer in the food pantry and clothing distribution centre, she is clear that Lunch Break, itself a "resource" by which they benefit from the encouragement they get from one another. "Women are the support system of Lunch Break. I often see women coming back who have turned around and say, 'How can I help? What can I do for others here?' — Whether we are in need or not, we help each other." Lunch Break also works because it is a community effort. With daily volunteers from St. Leo's Catholic Church, high school volunteers, college students, a mix of volunteers and other service workers, as well as the clients who themselves volunteer their time, it is a place where community is built, work and tackle the many aspects of poverty in America. Even with these efforts, this scourge of poverty has persisted. But have learned the importance of a system of networks and support groups, both public and private, that together create a web of support that touches all aspects of poverty.

Contact Person: Person Kenneth
David, C/o Network Office

Lakiya – The Negev Weaving project

Many of us are familiar with images of the nomadic Bedouin lifestyle with woven tents, rugs, belts and other domestic items, it comes as a welcome surprise to find in the St. Andrew's Church of Scotland gift shop in Jerusalem, which promotes Palestinian crafts, samples of rugs and bags woven by women in the Negev Desert. They now produce top quality rugs and cushions for the commercial market both in Israel and overseas.

When I first visited Lakiya village twelve years ago, the Negev Weaving Project was small, based in one or two houses and sheds established with help from a British NGO as an income-generating project for Palestinian Bedouin women. There were many obstacles to overcome such as the consistency of weaving, dyes and sizing as well as the problems of language and marketing. On my return last month, I was delighted to find that they had made enormous advances. It is an inspiring story of how women from one of the most economically and socially disadvantaged societies in the Middle East have been able to carve out a niche for themselves by developing their traditional skills.

Lakiya's contemporary ethnic rugs are handwoven from pure handspun wool by Bedouin women in villages and homesetdes in the Negev. Due to the lack of water, the wool from the harsh desert sheep is good for rug weavers. Lakiya purchases fibers and dyes, the sheep's wool, and dye is produced locally. The loom on the women's farms is a small, based in one or two houses and sheds established with help from a British NGO as an income-generating project for Palestinian Bedouin women. There were many obstacles to overcome such as the consistency of weaving, dyes and sizing as well as the problems of language and marketing. On my return last month, I was delighted to find that they had made enormous advances. It is an inspiring story of how women from one of the most economically and socially disadvantaged societies in the Middle East have been able to carve out a niche for themselves by developing their traditional skills.

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For more details of the Lunch Break project see: www.lunchbreak.org

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www.lakiya.org.il
The Church of Bangladesh is a tiny church of around 15,000 members in an Islamic nation of 140 million, but it has a large vision. Through its development arm, the Church of Bangladesh Social Development Programme (CBSDP), it plays a significant part in transforming society.

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world, and its large population has to bear an unfair burden of problems: such as being ranked the most corrupt nation in the world, as well as periodic natural disasters of cyclones and floods. Women suffer disproportionately due to a second-class status. For within Bengali society, a woman's status traditionally derives from her position and role within the family. Within this system, the father – or in his absence the next male kin – is the head of the household. So both decision-making power and economic control are vested in the hands of men. Women are expected to be obedient, faithful and fertile. If they fail in any regard, they are easily divorced. Polygamy, domestic abuse and mistrust are common and women rarely have access to any form of legal or community redress.

However the CBSDP seeks to follow Christ's teachings, in particular His statement in Nazareth, “The spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me. He has sent me to announce good news to the poor and to set the captive free” (Luke 4:18). In Bangladesh, women – especially those divorced or widowed – are among the poorest in society, while in terms of human rights, dignity or ability to economically sustain themselves, they are the most constrained by the constraints of religion, culture and male-dominated politics.

CBSDP has now for over ten years centred its work round a framework of micro-credit. Poor and vulnerable women are formed into groups: group members take a small loan of around US$4 and invest it in various ways buying livestock or poultry to breed or produce eggs to feed the family or to sell, starting a small business using welding equipment to hire out. The women pay back very low interest of 12% – of which only 6% is service charge. The rest is put into savings and is owned by the group for future loans and investment.

On the weekly day for interest collection, there is also a group meeting in which a CBSDP fieldworker conducts training on a variety of issues such as gender rights, the dangers of dowry, how to start a kitchen garden (to improve family nutrition), literacy, business skills and environmental awareness. A condition of the loan is that they invest in (subsidised) sanitary latrines. The groups are also involved in community politics as within a community, they are forming a group of women’s organisations, which gives them the ability to lobby and raise women’s issues with community leaders and government officials. Initially, husbands and conservative Muslims leaders are suspicious and resist the CBSDP owning the villages, but after the men see the increased health of families, appreciate the new source of income and benefit as a community from women’s empowerment, they are enthusiastically favourable. Women have gained respect from the men around them, have more freedom to travel alone (such as to market), are more involved in household decision-making and can improve their children’s prospects through better health and being able to afford schooling. It really is a win-win situation for both men and women.

The CBSDP fieldworker conducts training on a variety: buying livestock or poultry to breed or produce eggs to feed the family or to sell, start a small business using welding equipment to hire out. The women pay back very low interest of 12% – of which only 6% is service charge. The rest is put into savings and is owned by the group for future loans and investment.

When I was 12 or 13 years old, an Indian lady used to come to visit us. We were really poor and she always told me, “See, nobody can feed you here. If you come with me, I’d give you a better job. So come with me, but don’t tell anyone.” I didn’t really know her but I was tempted by the idea of having a job and I promised that I could get a job hawking steel cooking pots in India. One day, I told my father that I’m just going out with this auntie and I’ll be back in a month. I didn’t take anything with me, I just left with her. I still remember that when I left, I was thinking of the money I’d get in my job, I can save money and marry someone really good in India.

Faridah’s story.

Faridah is a housewife who went to India when told by a woman she could buy plates and cups cheaply there to then sell her back to Bangladesh. On following the woman across the border, she was imprisoned in a brothel and forced to do the household work. She eventually escaped and paid an agent to take her back to Bangladesh. Faridah was accepted back home where, although welcomed by her family, she was shunned by the community. Her parents arranged a marriage for her, with the husband believing he would get a dowry. But he divorced her as she had been in India and was pregnant. She now stays with her parents and helps to harvest rice and vegetables from the fields to get money. Her one wish is to get some land for her son and send him to school so that he does not end up like her husband.

Sabina’s story.

“Sabina was the eldest in the family. We’re very poor because my father had two wives. There are altogether eight of us. All of us never went to school. I stayed at home to help my mother.”

There is a clear link between gender and poverty in the UK today, where there are high rates of poverty amongst female-headed households. Much of women’s poverty is hidden. In poor households, women often deny themselves basics such as food in order to protect their families from the consequences of poverty even in a relatively wealthy country such as the UK.

The Women’s National Commission (WNC) is the official independent advisory body giving the views of women throughout England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to the UK Government. It has over 400 partner organisations and individual members drawn from women’s voluntary and community groups, organisations, professional associations, trade unions and faith groups, including the Mothers’ Union.

The Mothers’ Union contributed to a recent statement by WNC to the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in March. It highlighted some serious and major barriers that women in the UK considered must be addressed in order for their lives, and those of other women around the world, to improve. One of the most significant tasks is to address the very real poverty that women in the UK experience. Some of the women mothers and single pensioners, primarily due caring responsibilities, which mean they either cannot work or work part-time – often in low paid sectors. According to some statistics, of all lone parent households, 53% are poor, and older women, if single, have a 24% chance of living in poverty. Almost two-thirds of pensioners are women and their average pension is half the income of retired men. This is because they have not had opportunity, often because of their caring roles, to earn enough for a reasonable pension. The combination of racism and sexism makes Black and Minority Ethnic women particularly vulnerable to poverty.

At any one time around 200 women will be working in street prostitution in Bristol – getting picked up from the street and giving sex in exchange for money, drugs or a place to stay. If we understand poverty as not simply a lack of money and material possessions, but a lack of choice, then these women are amongst the poorest in Europe. What's more, if you live or work in any city in the UK, you probably pass them every day without a moment's thought, I did.

Some believe that these women choose to enter prostitution, make their money and care little for the consequences. The truth is that all of the women I met slid into prostitution without ever meaning to, and then found it almost impossible to climb out of the pit they were in. 99% of female sex workers in Bristol are addicted to crack cocaine or heroin, often both. It is money to feed these all-consuming addictions that fuels street prostitution. Many of the women begin using drugs as teenagers, often to escape from the abuse they are subjected to or to cope with broken family lives, or poverty. They drop out of school and leave home without any expectations of themselves. Their self-worth is on the floor. From here in it is easy to accept any relationship that comes along. It is the women who’d like to cover up the way you feel about your lifestyle with heroin that melts your fears away, or crack that makes you feel like a
 god. It is easy to pick up a drug habit, but very difficult to free yourself from one.

Women become deeply entrenched in a cycle of drug addiction and prostitution. Every day, however you feel, you have to get up and stand on the street, offering yourself to a stranger. You could be raped, violently attacked, robbed or pick up a sexually transmitted infection. You don’t always have time to eat or find somewhere decent to sleep, so you quickly get sick.

Your family find it too painful to know you. Any children you have are likely to be taken into local authority care as you are unable to look after them. You use more drugs to cover up the pain of your spiralling life.

But hope has moved into the neighbourhood. The One25 Project works amongst these women, providing essential health, food, information and support services through its van outreach programme. The project’s drop-in centre provides a raft of support services, and gives the women respect and dignity. The staff and volunteers also provide individual support to women at home, in court, in hospital, in prison. Quietly, and in the everyday events of life, One25 is saying, “Wait, it doesn’t have to be like this.”

Through their core values of relationship with the women, and love, they gently challenge the lack of choice, the abject poverty that the women have come to accept as their lot. And it works. Slowly, women break the cycle and lead a new life.

There is nothing extraordinary about the One25 team. The staff team and 80 volunteers who support the project are simply local women who want to make a difference. Often, as in my lost prayer in the cold, they sense only their own poverty and powerlessness. But the difference is the extraordinary God who works with them and through and around them because they take seriously His challenge to all forms of poverty: “I have come that you might have life and have it to the full.”

The next IAFN newsletter, to be published in the Trinity Anglican World, is to be on the theme of HEALTH AND THE FAMILY.

Visit the Family Network website: www.iafn.net

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