

Women IN Business

Poverty, illiteracy, and disease are some of the tragedies of our day, and of the millions of people impacted each year, women are amongst the most vulnerable.

These three global problems are deeply intertwined. Poor, uneducated women cannot easily find jobs in the established labour markets, and so are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty.

Yet there is hope: one particularly powerful way to impact the lives of those struggling to eke out an existence is through business – sustainable businesses that encourage entrepreneurship, and extend to people the means to find dignity in respectable work, and to provide for their families.

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2006 Report on Women and Entrepreneurship notes that there are two basic types of entrepreneurship drivers – opportunity and necessity. Opportunity entrepreneurship is that which springs from a gap in the market being identified and someone creating a business to address that need or want. Necessity entrepreneurship is initiated when individuals experience a lack of real or satisfactory options in the established labour markets. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of entrepreneurship

practiced by women in developing nations is that driven by necessity, representing an important means to avoid unemployment and, in some countries, to escape poverty.

One inspirational role model in the fight against poverty, Mohammed Yunus, pioneered in Bangladesh the use of micro-credit to stimulate business and entrepreneurship through the bank he founded in the early 1980s. Through Grameen Bank, customers (over 90% women) are able to access micro-loans to use as seed money to start their own businesses. These women use their funds to invest in viable businesses such as manufacturing pottery, weaving and garment sewing etc.

Yunus' experience over the last three decades has shown that women who are given a chance, while also being held accountable in a supportive environment, have proven to be reliable workers and smart entrepreneurs. A Google search of 'micro-finance, Christian organisation' shows that Yunus is not alone in this approach: Christians also are engaged in encouraging entrepreneurship and alleviating poverty in this manner.

Another business-based approach is to establish operations in developing countries that apply fair practices to employees and suppliers: reasonable wages and workloads enable workers to care for themselves, their families and communities. Irish pop rock icon, Bono, the lead singer for the band 'U2', is a renowned advocate of this approach.

Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson, are Christians who have been challenged to contribute towards alleviating poverty in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Over the years Bono has struggled with how his faith in Christ could be applied to combat major world problems, such as poverty, in places where the traditional local church hadn't been able to make a significant impact. In an interview with Bill Hybels (Willow Creek Church), he shared that while he's no Mother Theresa, he believes that God has given him a currency – fame – which is what he can use to make a difference.

What particularly inspires me about Bono and Ali's work is that they are not giving handouts or 'aid' – instead they have chosen 'trade': to invest in the economy of the African country of Lesotho, as an example, to create jobs and thereby provide a way out of poverty.

While you might be familiar with their story so far, I'll recap the highlights. In 2005, Bono and Ali started a clothing business, Edun Apparel. Through Edun they are extending the apparel value chain to include African cotton growers by paying fair prices for their cotton, while also training them in sustainable agriculture practices in partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society. The cotton is manufactured into material and then made into T-shirts by African apparel workers in Lesotho. Besides providing good jobs, they partner with other organisations to help provide medication for

Economic growth and political democracy cannot achieve their full potential unless the female half of humanity participates on an equal footing with the male.

Norwegian Nobel Committee on announcing Mohammed Yunus as the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner.

those suffering from HIV/AIDS, malaria and other preventable diseases.

In the context of mission today, there is increasing momentum towards acknowledging the value of business in addressing people's physical and economic needs. Business is a worthwhile mission: it need not be viewed only as an enabler so the 'real' work can be done after hours. Helping women find their dignity as human beings by encouraging and/or establishing places of respectable employment is a worthy endeavour. Perhaps we can think of God-honouring businesses as being a form of salt. Salt changes the flavour of its environment - even though you can't always see it, you know it's active because of the change in taste.

Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we (believers in



Christ) are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. That is our destiny – to do good works. So the question I've been asking myself is – God, what have You prepared for me to do? And, more specifically, a question which I'd challenge you to consider with me – have You prepared me to do good works through business to positively impact the lives of women in the developing world?

May He clearly guide each one of us. ✨

The author is a business woman, and board member on the Interserve NZ Council.

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