

Q & A / PAOLA GIANTURCO / *Women Who Light the Dark*

1) What do you hope *Women Who Light the Dark* will accomplish?

I've documented women's lives in 40 countries, and everywhere, I have seen local women helping one another tackle the problems that darken their lives. They are using creative arts: in Morocco a theater group writes plays concerning the changes in laws on women's rights and performs in prisons, factories and communities where illiteracy is above 85%. Others use creative strategies: in Kenya, groups of mothers are collaborating to have wells dug at their daughters' schools—so the girls can bring water home after class instead of walking for hours to collect water while the boys are being educated. In a world full of bad news, I hope these stories of women's successes will be heartening and a reminder that positive change is underway. Because nonprofit enterprises have limited resources, I hope these stories will inspire others to support them.

2) You were faced with extraordinary challenges in pursuing these stories. What were the most demanding countries for you?

I photographed and interviewed during armed violence in both Nepal and Morocco and below-freezing weather in Slovakia. However, it was two relatively peaceful countries that disturbed me most: Cambodia, where 30 years ago, the Khmer Rouge killed virtually all the educated people—their children, today's adults, still seem traumatized—and Cameroun, a corrupt, disease-riddled, poverty-stricken African nation populated by people who are suffering. Half of the population lives on \$2/day, and in more extreme situations, families live on \$5/month, while antiretroviral drugs cost \$6/month.

3) What impact has Betty Makoni, founder of the Girl Child Network in Zimbabwe had on girls' lives and their destinies?

Zimbabwe is one of the countries where many men believe that HIV-AIDS will be cured if they have sex with a virgin. Betty Makoni, a young teacher, and six of her high school students began meeting after school to talk about this terrible experience and, over time, such groups started in other schools. Today, the Girl Child Network includes 20,000 girls, ages 6 to 16, all over Zimbabwe, about half of whom have been raped. The girls have mobilized to stop this pernicious practice—using an unusual weapon: poetry. They write about their experiences and perform their poems publicly, which ignites communities to action.

4) You have given a voice to women worldwide, their progress and achievements. What do women in Viet Nam say about the universal problem of gender-based violence?

The Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents, which I documented, was one of the first groups in Viet Nam to work with survivors of domestic violence. They use line dancing, games, art, and puppets as therapy. One of every three women in the world has been beaten, so I asked the two women who founded the group in Hanoi, what advice they would give women everywhere. One said, "Tell others. There are many around them who can support them." The other quoted Mother Teresa: "Life is a challenge. Please be courageous."

5) Even within the women's movement in Slovakia, the Roma women continue to face discrimination from the majority women. How are Roma women effecting social change while also coping with traditional Roma taboos?

For hundreds of years, Roma women and men have been discriminated against in many countries. In Slovakia, Roma children are sent to schools for the mentally disabled. As adults, ill-educated and unqualified for jobs, they often live in extreme poverty. I visited three groups of Roma women who are determined to change that. One runs a nursery school for Roma children (whose families typically cannot afford preschool education). Another runs an adoption service that places Roma children with Roma—and non-Roma—families who can give them a good start in life. And a third runs a summer camp, as well as an adult art program that kindles communication and understanding between Roma and non-Roma women.

6) You tell the stories of women and girls and dance in Cuba. What was your impression of life there?

I studied photography in Cuba in 2001; since then, access to that country has become even more difficult. As a Communist country, everyone lives at about the same economic level: food is rationed, housing is rented, there are few stores or restaurants. Although Cuban medical training is among the best in the Global South, medicine itself is hard to come by. Many North Americans would call the Cubans “poor”—yet they are culturally “rich.” The Cuba chapter features a ballet school run by a woman whose instructors teach 1,000 children a week, each of whom pays about 25 cents a month to participate.

7) In Nepal, how do the women's groups profiled empower women?

The nonprofit group Swati is training women in Kathmandu to become taxi drivers and entrepreneurs; Empowering Women of Nepal is teaching women in Pokhara to become Himalaya trekking guides. Jobs like these used to be inaccessible to women due to the social and cultural barriers. Given their new skills and the importance of tourism to Nepal's economy, opportunities now exist for these women to earn enough to feed and educate their families.

8) The formation of the Train Platform Schools in India is a great example of what can be. How did these come about?

Inderjit Khurana, an early childhood teacher, did volunteer work with Mother Teresa on the train platforms in Bhubaneswar, India. There, she saw homeless children, many abandoned by parents who arrived on the trains seeking jobs that didn't exist. The children live in squatter camps around the train stations, and many sell used newspapers, shine shoes for commuters or sweep the trains for tips. Realizing that the children existed too far outside the system to attend school, and that only education could improve their futures, Inderjit decided to take school to the children. Every morning, the children learn the Three R's sitting in a circle on the train platforms.

9) You relate such amazing stories and harrowing circumstances. For example, how did a Nicaraguan teenager tortured by the military dictatorship, more than 30 years ago, evolve to help other women?

In 1975 when Amanda Centeno was 19, Somoza's National Guard broke into her home, kidnapped and tortured her; later, they killed two of her brothers. She enlisted to fight against Somoza as a Sandinista soldier. Years after that, with feminist passion born of concerns about class and poverty, she vowed to provide her town's indigent women with job options beyond poorly-paid domestic and agricultural work. She started Mujeres Constructoras to train women as electricians, welders and carpenters. Educated as a lawyer, Amanda had to master many skills to run such a workshop! Today, still profoundly committed to equality, Amanda has begun to share management of the workshop with tradeswomen who demonstrate leadership abilities.

10) You report that Argentina was the first country in Latin America to require by law, that at least 30% of every political party's candidates be women, and to accept civil unions for same sex couples. What issues do lesbians in Argentina still encounter?

Lesbians there still face profound discrimination. For those who lived through the 1970's death squads and political kidnappings, fear of being different is enduring. As recently as 1998, ex-army personnel who were responsible for human rights violations 15 years earlier, were still in the police force and had "discretionary power to carry out preventative detentions." They abused lesbians physically and verbally. The Catholic Church views lesbians as aberrant because they do not give birth and it is against the law for lesbians to adopt in Argentina. Employers reject them even though they are educated and well qualified. Desdenosotras, an organization for lesbians that is open to all women, offers safe haven: a place to hold classes, meetings and parties. The group creates and presents entertaining, educational street theater performances to reshape public opinion about women's issues.

11) How are groups in Salvador da Bahia, whose population is 80% African-Brazilian, changing the fate of young girls living in the favelas (shantytowns)?

Bahia Street is a project co-founded by Rita Conceição, who grew up in the *favelas*, and Margaret Wilson, an American who did anthropological research in the *favelas*. Drug lords "govern" these shantytowns and when gangs fight, bullets pierce the walls of the shacks; open sewers, rats, disease and domestic violence are rampant. In the rainy season, houses slide down the hills. Bahia Street provides girls from the *favelas* with classes that supplement the inadequate public school program, in an effort to break the cycle of poverty that typically leads to death, prostitution or, at best, jobs cleaning houses.

12) The photographs and text are of equal importance in your work. Part travelogue, your narratives include so much local color, culture and history of the area. How much research is done before, during, and after your travels?

I do research before, during and after every trip, culling information from interviews, books and the Internet. After I draft each chapter, I ask scholars and subject-matter experts to comment—and I ask my local interpreters to read the text to the women I interview so they can make factual corrections. The process is not perfect: some women I interview are not well educated (some are not educated at all), so I do much research.

13) You complete your journeys with a chapter in Eugene, Oregon, focusing on international women with disabilities. How has Mobility International USA founder Susan Sygall made it possible for these women to swim, camp, go white water rafting, and so much more?

Susan Sygall uses a wheel chair due to a spinal cord injury that happened when she was 18. Her interest in international travel, activism, leadership, and her education in therapeutic recreation put her in a unique position to convene women challenged with disabilities. Her seminar at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was the first large gathering for women with disabilities from all over the world. Today, Mobility International USA sponsors the Women's Institute in Leadership and Disability. Women who are blind and/or deaf, others who require crutches, canes and wheelchairs, come from around the globe to participate for three weeks in sports activities that most of them have never tried, including ropes challenge courses. They return to their countries empowered to lead their local organizations for disabled people.

14) Why have you chosen to support the Global Fund for Women by donating your profits from the book?

Four reasons: a) Global Fund applicants can request grants with letters handwritten in their own languages. b) The organization treats its staff, donors and beneficiaries as equals—a poor woman in Bangladesh who contributes a dollar is acknowledged alongside affluent Americans who give thousands. c) The Global Fund for Women is seeding women's funds in 17 countries to encourage local philanthropy. d) Most of all, Global Fund grantees are transforming life for themselves, their families and communities, and—over time—for all of us.

15) What is your motivation for doing philanthropic books?

I observe that when local people solve their own problems, they are most likely to be effective. So my author royalties from all four books go to organizations that work at the grassroots level. Readers join me: *In Her Hands*, *Craftswomen Changing the World* stirred readers to donate at least \$110,000 to indigent women around the globe. When I revisited India after a devastating earthquake, I watched women rebuild their houses with money sent by a generous reader whom I never met. It takes all of us working together to kindle new hope and possibilities for our world.