

## Managing Stress Among Rural Poor Women in a Distressed Economy; DEC's<sup>1</sup> Experience.

By

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### 1. *Introduction: From Nuclear Security to Human Security.*

Non-governmental organisations, popularly known as NGOs, are recognised world wide as having greater capability of working effectively with people at the grassroots level. This is because of the nature, policy and implementation strategy of NGOs.

This paper is based on my experience while working with the poor, especially the marginalised rural poor, in the distressed economy of Nigeria. At the end of my presentation, I shall suggest possible patterns which one may adapt in an attempt towards working for a more positive change.

Fifty years ago, Albert Einstein summed up the discovery of atomic energy with characteristic simplicity. "Everything changed". He went on to predict: "We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humankind is to survive". Although nuclear explosions devastated Nagasaki and Hiroshima, humankind has survived its first critical test of preventing worldwide nuclear devastation. But five decades later, we need another profound transition in thinking - *from nuclear security to human security.*

The concept of security has for too long been interpreted narrowly. It was simply understood as security of territory from external aggression; or as the protection of national interests through adequate foreign policy; or as global security from the threat of a nuclear holocaust. Security has thus been related more to nation-states than to people. In the name of global security, the super powers were locked in an ideological struggle - fighting a cold war all over the world.

The developing nations, having won their independence only recently, were sensitive to any real or perceived threats to national identities. Forgotten were the legitimate concerns of ordinary people for whom security symbolized protection from the threat of disease, hunger, unemployment, crime, social conflict, political repression and environmental hazards.

With the dark shadows of a global war receding one can now see that many conflicts are within nations rather than between nations.

For many people, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Will they and their families have enough to eat? Will they lose or keep their jobs? Will their streets and neighbourhoods be safe from crime? Will they become a victim of violence because of their gender?

You can see with me that Human Security is not a concern with weapons - it is a concern with human life and dignity. Human security means that people can exercise these choices safely and freely and that they can be relatively confident that the opportunities they have today are not totally lost tomorrow.

## *2. Rural Women and Their Economic Security*

When people perceive threats to their immediate security, they often become less tolerant as the anti-women empowerment feelings in some African traditional setting show. Or, where people see the basis of their livelihood eroded - such as their access to potable water - they feel threatened and live in insecurity. Oppression and perceptions of injustice can also lead to violent protest against authoritarianism. This is the case in some Igbo societies of Nigeria where some men despise the newly acquired role of women in our society today, in the form of property acquisition, women-maintained households, etc.

A crucial area of threat to Human Security as it affects rural women is in the field of economics. Economic security requires an assured basic income - usually through productive and remunerative work. But only about a quarter of the world's people may at present be economically secure in this sense. According to the 1994 UNDP

Human Development Report, more than 35 million people were seeking for work, and a high proportion were women.

The problems are even greater in developing countries, where the galloping increase in rural poverty is hitting women hardest. Sixty percent of the rural poor are women; and the number of poor women has increased by 50 percent compared to the 1965-1970 level, as opposed to a 30% increase for men during the same period. Of the 550 million households in the world, 76 million are women maintained households. The largest proportion by far of female-headed-rural households, i.e. 31 percent, is in sub-Saharan Africa; Asia has 9%, while in Latin America and the Caribbean the figure is 17%.

Although rural women produce half of the developing world's food supply - as much as 80% in Africa - they have far less access than men to land, income, training, credit facilities and other vital resources. Although prime producers, rural women have difficulty obtaining plots even in land allocation programme where their share - as equal citizens - is mandated by law. In Nigeria, as is in many other African countries, the fact is that women always come out empty handed or deprived. On account of illiteracy and ignorance on their civil rights rural women lack the self confidence to go for what is their right. Several factors related to of assumed role of women in African societies, some of which are gradually changing, keep on depriving the women of their rights.

From our field experience we discovered that even those women who have some land or avail themselves of productive investment opportunities often find it difficult to farm and invest effectively because they have little access to credit. This, despite the mounting evidence that these poor rural women are credit worthy. In many developing countries, like Nigeria, 30% of the women receive less than 1% of the total credit given out annually.

This discrimination has led to increasing insecurity in income of women and, therefore, to greater stress in their life. Nominal wages have remained stagnant, or may have risen slightly, but inflation has eroded their value. In the area of food security, our experience while working with the rural poor (especially women) is that despite considerable increases in the availability of food in recent years,

some 240 million people (about 30% of the total world poor) are under nourished in the sub-saharan Africa. This situation affects women the more, who are often the last to eat in the household.

### *3. DEC Investment in the Security of Rural Women.*

#### *Agriculture*

In DEC, as in many other NGOs, we have been trying to invest in rural women self-help groups which were established in more than 300 villages in States East of the Niger. Our target is to increase food security especially among the rural poor families in these villages. Such schemes being used include training and deployment of women Agricultural Extension Workers in these villages to assist the rural poor with informations of relevant modern farming techniques to improve their farming method and boost output.

DEC also makes small credits available to each woman farmer in these 300 self groups every farming season. This enables them to hire more labour and obtain or diversify farm inputs. In this way they increase their agricultural output and make more money. Such credits lines which are opened to rural poor women to enable them increase their agricultural business are obtained by the women through their self-help associations registered with Nnebuife Women Development Association - an umbrella association embracing all DEC' assisted women self help associations in the Igbo speaking states of Eastern Nigeria. The total number of membership being funded annually as of 1995 is 5000 women.

Even though the gravity of the problem on the ground is enormous these schemes among others being carried out by DEC to alleviate the constant economic stress among the rural poor women have had a great impact in their lives. This is because they have gained access to food which comes from access to assets, work and assured income which DEC is enabling them to have.

## *Health*

Another great threat on human security which compounds stress on women with more impact on the rural poor is the question of Health Security. In developing countries, the major causes of death are infections and parasitic diseases, which kill 17 million people annually. Most of these deaths are linked with poor nutrition and unsafe environment - particularly polluted water, which contributes to the nearly one billion cases of diarrhoea a year.

In the rural areas of Nigeria, the threat to health security are usually greater for the poorest, and particularly for children. The fact is that while the poor people in general have less health security, the situation of women is particularly difficult. One of the most serious hazards they face is child bearing. More than three million people die each year from causes related to child birth. Most of these deaths could be prevented by ensuring access to safe and affordable family planning and offering the most basic support at home during pregnancy and delivery with the option of referrals to clinics or hospitals for women with evident complications.

Thus a miracle of life oftens turns into a nightmare of death just because a society cannot spare the loose change to provide a birth attendant at the time of the greatest vulnerability and anxiety in a woman's life.

The Development Education Centre (DEC) is training and supporting more than 100 village Health Workers annually in all her 300 pilot communities. This is part of DEC's contribution to reduce stress and anxiety often experienced by her target group, i.e. the rural poor women. Health security is improving in the pilot communities with the provision of essential drugs through DEC's Revolving Drug Loan Scheme. These village Health Workers are really creating a laudable impact in the remote country side where they have been working since 1992, when DEC started this project in her pilot communities.

### *Security From Physical Violence*

Another important aspect of Human Security which is so vital to women is their security from physical violence. In no society are women secure or are treated as being equal to men. Personal insecurity shadows them from cradle to grave. In the household, they are the last to eat. At school they are the last to be educated. At work, they are the last to be hired and first to be fired. And from childhood through adulthood, women are abused because of their gender.

True, women are getting better educated and are being employed, often as primary income-earners. Millions of women are now heads of households. In one third of the households in the world as a whole - and up to one-half in some African countries - women produce nearly 90% of the food. But there are still many shock indicators of gender insecurity and physical violence. It was recently estimated that one third of the wives in developing countries are physically battered.

Children who should be the most protected in any society are subject to many abuses. In developing countries, poverty compels many children to take on heavy work at too young an age - often at great cost to their health. For instance, in Nigeria many children are on the street hawking wares morning, afternoon and night, instead of schooling. In the rural areas children are malnourished due to the poverty and ignorance of their parents, especially their mothers.

DEC, through her Community Health Workers, are doing a great work in this direction through the health education programme, organised in village meetings, village schools, churches and regular home visits where greater awareness on these issues is created.

### *Security in Community and Family*

Finally, the issue of community or family security to members is a vital aspect of Human Security, which today is being threatened by societal changes. For example, the extended family system originally offers protection to its weaker members. This is especially so with

widows, and women-maintained households. The principle was that heads of households, including women-maintained households are entitled to enough land, assets, etc., to support their family. So land and landed properties are distributed accordingly.

But cases abound which runs on the contrary. Some members of the extended family turn to become personal threats to the life of a widow and her family. They use culture wrongly to perpetuate oppressive practices hence causing great stress and anxiety to the widow or woman-head of the household.

It is a common fact in Igbo society of Nigeria that most ignorant members of the extended family often perpetuate oppressive practices when it comes to women and land appropriation, inheritance and property rights. This happens even when such women are the maintainers of those households. For example, DEC made a case study Regina Agbo and her husband's kinsmen. Mrs Agbo is a member of DEC self help group in a community in Enugu State. She has been the head of her household since 20 years because her husband became blind after an accident. In 1994, her husband became the eldest man in her village. This entitled him to own and reap all the fruits of palm trees, oranges, kolanuts, etc., jointly owned by the kindred, according to tradition.

In Regina's case the reverse became the case, because some members of her husband's kinsmen are greedy, selfish and wicked. These kinsmen ganged up and refused Mrs Agbo and her minor sons from entering into the landed property or reaping fruits as was done by her husband's predecessor.

The stress of this oppression was too much on Mrs Agbo. The only thing that came to her mind was to carry the case to the Council of elders in the town with kolanuts. But her enemies were proving stronger than her because they had money and influence. According to them Regina Agbo is showing that she knows her rights and can demand for it. They will not allow her.

The case was delaying so much with the council of elders that she sensed foul play. She immediately left with some of her husband's kinsmen and her sons who were in support of her struggles to seek for legal advice. It was at this juncture that Mrs Regina Agbo was

brought to face the fact of her life. One has to bring out money if the case has to go to court.

Regina Agbo was determined to fight for her right because she was convinced that she and her family were being denied justice. She went immediately and sold some of her goods, like a drum of palm oil which she had used a DEC' loan to procure. From the sales she made a quick profit which she deposited with the lawyers. An injunction was got by her lawyer, during the first hearing. She was directed by the Chief Magistrate to take custody of all her husbands palm trees, kolanuts, etc., with immediate effect until the case is determined in court.

This directive by the magistrate, gave Regina a comfortable ground and confidence to fight the case. She then reaped the palm-nuts and made enough palm oil which she sold in order to get enough funds for the case. The case later ended in her favour and that of her family.

This is a case of an evidence of women empowerment, and Regina's story has encouraged many women being deprived of their rights to demand for justice.

DEC has intensified her community-based awareness building and advocacy workshops in many remote villages to create awareness on issues that hinder women development and self actualization. Customary and traditional practices which dehumanise women like the performance of certain widowhood rites, genital mutilation of young girls in the name of female circumcision, and so on, are all the concern of DEC.

It is my observation that some of these traditional practices are breaking down under the steady process of modernization. The extended family is now less likely to offer support to family members in distress. Traditional language and cultures are in some places withering under the onslaught of mass media. In addition, many oppressive practices are being fought by people-oriented organisations, like DEC. Through legal actions, like the case of Mrs Regina Agbo, there is a reduction in the suffering and the oppressive practices against women in our society.

#### *4. Conclusion: Practical Recommendations*

(a) People ready to commit themselves towards working for social justice in a distressed economy must become first of all aware and conscientized on the issues that encourage the distressed economy. This is because one cannot be said to be acting positively for any cause when one is ignorant of the matter one is trying to solve. Therefore there is greater need for social analysis by church and social workers.

(b) On getting conscientized, such individuals or groups should plan with their target audience (i.e. those severely affected by the problem which is under consideration) on how they themselves can engage in concrete analysis on the issues at stake through discussion and dialogue.

(c) Mobilization and conscientization are an arduous task and need greater self sacrifice, patience and understanding on the part of the facilitators. These have no other alternative than to carry their enthusiastic group or individuals with them while planning for a programme aimed at finding a solution to their problem.

(d) Remember that there is no easier way of finding a solution to your problem other than to start working at it, no matter how small your action plan seems to be. Hence, the call for active participation by any individual or group of persons in any positive plan geared towards solving individual or societal problems merits support.

(e) I strongly suggest a joint project with the Justice and Peace Commission of Enugu Catholic Diocese to establish the Justice and Peace self-help associations which will embrace men, women and youths of certain age, who will be mobilized and conscientized through the relevant Educational Programmes to be set up by the Commission. When these are based on local church stations and parish levels, the self-help associations will create real opportunities for the rural poor.

(f) The Justice and Peace Commission in the Diocese is expected to give an official backing to enthusiastic individuals who are ready and committed to the stated objective. Such support should be in form of training the leaders of each group who in turn facilitate and

conscientize others in their groups towards a more positive action for change in our society.

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