



Women, men and development

Gender Equality in Finnish Development Cooperation

Ministry for Foreign Affairs



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Cover pictures:
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Even though the position of women has been improved in a number of ways during the past couple of decades, men and women are nowhere in the world treated as equals. In a welfare state like Finland, the situation is fairly good; in many developing countries, on the other hand, women's prospects are bleak. They are not entitled to participate in political and social decision-making and they are often poor, under-estimated, and over-burdened with work as well as subject to discrimination and violence. Violations against the human rights of women are often explained away by referring to religious or cultural traditions.

The workload of women in developing countries is enormous, since they often need to support the family, do the field work, collect the firewood and fetch the water nearly unaided. Globalisation has given rise to new problems: women increasingly take paid employment outside the home but, nevertheless, continue to be in charge of the household. Gainfully employed women often receive poor wages. Increasing poverty and marginalisation affect women, in particular.

In spite of the fact the women bear responsibility of such amounts of work, their knowledge and skills are not utilised as much as would be possible. Women are very seldom given the opportunity to express their ideas about how social wellbeing could be enhanced, and women's valuable experiences are ignored. Harnessing this knowledge is one of the main challenges of development cooperation.

Responding to the challenge is the task of both men and women. Gender equality can be achieved only by means of cooperation and, therefore, men are invited to take part in the advancement of women. Equality will improve men's life also – measures which help women be happy and feel well contribute to the wellbeing of their families and the entire community.

Gender equality in development cooperation



Women's living conditions have been actively addressed by means of development cooperation since the 1980's when specific projects were launched to advance the position of women. Women have been offered the chance to take up a loan, they have been taught to read and they have been supported in setting up commercial lines of production in crafts.

It has gradually become evident that projects which improve the status of women need to be tied to other social development. Individual women's projects easily remain isolated and a project's life cycle will be

short if it does not fit into local habits and circumstances. Permanent results call for a change of attitudes in the entire community. Special women's projects are still needed but care must be taken that the whole community, men included, can accept the projects and give them their full support.

In addition, equality issues need to be taken into account in all development cooperation projects, not only in specific women's or equality projects. Every single project has to be assessed on the basis of how men, on the one hand, and women, on the other, benefit from it. A development project which appears impartial may in practice discriminate against a certain group, such as women, and projects may fail because the gender roles of the community have not been acknowledged. It is very important that the division of labour between the sexes and the impact of the projects on that division are taken into account. In many rural villages, for example, women principally take care of the provision of water, which is why both men and women should be consulted when a water project is planned, otherwise the project may prove a failure. The views of local men and women have to be listened to throughout the project's entire life cycle.

In Finnish international development cooperation, one of the main objectives is to highlight projects' impact on women. For example, when project implementators are chosen to conduct a given project, not only the professional qualifications of the project personnel are assessed but attention is also paid to whether they are capable of dealing with gender issues.

WHAT DOES GENDER MEAN?

The English term *gender* often appears in contexts where the roles of the two sexes are discussed. *Gender* refers to the social aspects of being male or female, whereas *sex* refers to people's biological characteristics. Men and women act not only subordinate to their biological constraints but also to the social pressures and expectations which they meet as representatives of their own sex. *Gender* refers to the roles, tasks, rights and duties which are typical of each sex. We all learn, as of childhood, a number of behavioral patterns determined on the basis of sex. Learning these patterns is often automatic and we do not even notice or become aware of what happens.

RIPS INVOLVES BOTH MEN AND WOMEN

Since 1994, Finland has supported an extensive programme called Rural Integrated Project Support Programme, RIPS, in Tanzania. The programme covers an area with a population of some 2 million people. It pivots on the idea that the people of the region need to have a stake in their development. Ideas take shape and evolve among the people – the traditional



"top-down" model is replaced by a "bottom-up" approach. Different participatory methods have been used in conjunction with the programme and, based on evaluations, the results are encouraging. Tanzanian authorities have also shown interest in following the example of RIPS by introducing similar approaches in other parts of the country.

Active participation of women has been vital throughout the programme. Womens' groups are traditionally active in the rural districts of Tanzania, and RIPS helps them carry out their own ideas. In the village of Kitangari, women noticed that they could raise the process value of cashews cultivated in the area. Cashews had been normally sold without any processing, which is why the proceeds of the sale were small. The groups of women behind the idea received training supported by RIPS and they, in turn, distributed information to other village people. A cooperative was established for processing of cashews.

Thanks to the processing of cashews, women now earn more and use the money on their children's education. At present, the women dream of being able to build a small factory. Both other village women and men are of the opinion that processing was a good business idea. A similar plan of action has been applied to weaving of carpets. Also in this case, the initiative came from among the village women.

Women's work and men's money

Poverty continues to be an enormous problem. Six billion people in the world, of whom a sixth, that is, 1.3 billion, live in absolute poverty. They need to manage with less than one dollar per day, which is not sufficient to cover the basic needs even in countries where the cost of living is the lowest.

Poverty is, above all, a women's issue: 70% of the poor in the world are female. Poverty involves a number of problems which affect especially women, such as population growth, lack of education, and poor social status. These problems are interrelated and feed on one another, which

makes it difficult to distinguish between cause and effect. Persons with expert knowledge of development issues nowadays agree that poverty reduction and gender equality go hand in hand. They are separate objectives but also closely intertwined. Development cooperation should be able to meet the challenge of finding the very poorest people who easily remain outside assistance programmes; these people are often women and girls.

In many cultures, the division of labour between the sexes is distinct both at home and at work. Furthermore, in most countries of the world, women work more than men but their income is smaller than men's. Women's unpaid work at home, in agriculture and in the so-called unofficial sector often remains unnoticed by those who compile statistics, even if the value of that work may be as great as a third of the global GDP.



VEIKKO RUOHOTIE



Men and women also tend to use money in different ways. Men spend more money on personal expenses while women's income is spent to cover the expenses of the family: food, housing, clothes, health care and education. It is vital from the point of view of the families, therefore, that women's income be secured and the level of their income be raised.

There is a risk that trends related to globalisation deteriorate women's position even further. The adverse effects of globalisation threaten, above all, the poor and the disadvantaged, who remain further and further beyond the accelerating streams of development. Expanding global competition increases the already heavy workload of women. In the



world of free flows of capital, women are the ones who often toil from morning till night against a poor pay but the big profits end up in somebody else's pockets. Women work more and more outside the home, but still have to take care of the chores at home which have traditionally been their responsibility. As traditions break up, men tend to move more and further afield, leaving women alone in charge of the family.

CAN SUPPORT TO THE TAX ADMINISTRATION BE SUPPORT TO WOMEN?

Finland has been involved in Tanzania's tax administration reform programme since the year 1998. The programme aims at a more effective tax collection and tries to help Tanzanians acknowledge the idea that the government collects taxes to be able to run society. This is meant to contribute to increasing tax revenue. So far the results have been promising: Tanzania, which is only beginning to understand the mechanisms of market economy and a multiparty system, has managed to maintain its level of tax revenues and even expand the tax basis. It is expected that the ratio of tax revenues to the domestic product will start to grow in the year 2000.

At first glance, the reform programme does not appear to be a women's or equality project, and is not even filed as such. Furthermore, Finland's contribution of FIM 6.5 million is marginal as regards the scope of the problem: the equivalent of about FIM 400 million has been reserved for the programme to cover the years 2000-2004, of which Tanzania will pay a third while the rest will be financed by external donors. Could the Finnish aid, however, be regarded as one small component in a process which will contribute to improving welfare for women and their families? In case tax revenues remain inadequate, services required by women and children and wages in the female-dominated health care sector are usually the most severely affected.

Empowerment of women



Even though in nearly all countries close to half of those entitled to vote are women, an extremely small number of women hold positions of trust and public offices. Very few women have top positions in business. This is due to discriminatory attitudes and practices and women's heavy workload at home and at work. Lack of women at the decision-making level in society is a major shortcoming both from the point of view of women themselves and society as a whole: women's viewpoints and experiences remain untapped and women's values are not reflected at the decision-making level.

Equality in leadership and decision-making calls for the empowerment of women as well as their increasing self-appreciation. Women

need to be integrated into all domains of society, including the economy and politics. Outsiders cannot confer strength and power on women; the change has to take place from within. Development cooperation, for example, can be an instrument towards conditions where women themselves can act to the benefit of their own circumstances. Advancement of women is one of the priorities in Finnish development cooperation.

Even though women do not have much power in society, their role in the family may be central. Since women are in charge of many practical matters at home, they are important decision-makers in their own com-

munities. During the past decades, a great number of grass-roots organisations and movements have been set up in developing countries, which are engaged in pioneering work in their communities. They are also criticized but attitudes have softened as it has become evident that the organisations' initiatives serve all the members of the community.

ISLAMIC WOMEN PARLAMENTARIANS PAID A VISIT TO FINLAND

In September 1998, a group of women parliamentarians from Muslim countries visited Finland to get acquainted with the political system of Finland and Finnish society. These 23 women represented seventeen Islamic countries, including such countries as Azerbaijan, Iraq, Malesia and Uganda.

The visit was arranged by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs together with the Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations for Joint Action (NYTKIS) and the Organisations of Women Parliamentarians from Muslim Countries (OWPMC). The OWPMC was established after the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 and its aim is to promote, in the Muslim world, the idea of woman as a competent and equal actor in society.

The visitors met the Finnish Speaker of Parliament, Ms Riitta Uosukainen, and took part in a seminar arranged in Parliament, in which the issue of gender divisions in the various fields of society was discussed. During the week in Finland, the visitors met representatives of Finnish trade unions, the Office of the Equality Ombudsman and the Kristiina Institute of the University of Helsinki, attended different cultural performances and visited a library, a children's day care centre, a school and a farm. The visit also led to new connections; meetings help women to create networks which enable women from different parts of the world to discuss and to work together.



Equals in the sphere of sexuality



Issues related to population growth and reproductive health provide an example of the fact that social problems affect men and women in different ways. Even if reproduction and sexuality concern both sexes alike, traditional practices in many countries make them essentially women's issues.

In most parts of the world, women are still largely responsible for the care, feeding and breeding of the new generation. Women and girls often suffer from discriminatory practices and attitudes in the area of sexual life. They are also exposed to special health hazards, because health services related to childbirth and gynaecological

diseases are inadequate, and because women's and girls' access to health care is not always considered to be as important as health care services for men and boys. Furthermore, women often have to face sexual violence and are subjected to HIV/AIDS infection and other sexually transmitted diseases more easily than men.

Improvement of women's position requires that women's reproductive health and sexual integrity be specifically addressed. Reproductive health is a wide concept which refers not only to the absence of disease but also to a state of general wellbeing related to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction. Health services linked to reproductive health include, among other things, family-planning and sexual counselling, access to safe, effective and relatively cheap contraceptives, care during pregnancy, child welfare clinics, prevention and treatment of sexually transmit-

ted diseases, as well as access to a safe abortion in accordance with nationally enacted provisions.

The right to use family-planning services and the right to decide about one's own sexuality represent a crucial step towards a situation when women in developing countries are in charge of their own lives. Women who have the freedom and the means to influence the number of children in the family and the spacing of births, have significantly better chances of getting education, taking part in social activities and assuming economic responsibility for the family. Prevention of health hazards related to pregnancy and childbirth alleviates poverty and is conducive to the advancement women.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH PROJECT IN NICARAGUA

Finland is sponsoring a reproductive health project in Nicaragua, targeted especially on women and young people. The country is gradually recovering from a long period of civil war. Population growth is fast and girls often give birth to their first child before their 16th birthday. Sexually transmitted diseases and cervical cancer are common, and sexual abuse of women and girls is widespread. The young are ill-informed about issues relevant to sexual life.

The project involves training and education of both health care professionals and the general public. The aim is that people would become better aware of issues linked to reproductive health and their rights in this context. Another objective is to prevent domestic and sexual violence which are common in Nicaragua, and to start to systematically register cases of violence. In conjunction with the project, efforts are made to find out what could be done to make male Nicaraguans better understand issues related to reproductive health and women's sexual rights.

Who is responsible for food supply?



MARTTI LINTUNEN

In all parts of the world, women are mainly in charge of providing food for the family and of preparing meals. Women are also food producers: half of the global food output and up to 80% of the food output in developing countries rest on women's hands. The fundamental significance of women to the world's food production is often ignored because women's work on the fields is typically unpaid labour of which no statistical data is compiled; in addition, their products are directly consumed by the family or the community. Men more often cultivate cash crops – and use the income to cover their own needs.

In agriculture, women tend to use more labour-intensive methods than men do and women ingeniously exploit a wide range of species.

Women's agriculture has traditionally been ecologically sustainable. When several plant species are cultivated side by side, the crop is healthier and, as less pesticides are needed, natural diversity is also respected. A variety of plants further contributes to the chance of getting a crop even in poor years.

Although rural women in developing countries thus in practice feed their countries, they are among the most disadvantaged and poorest people in the world. Their workload is often unreasonable and their right to the farmland is not necessarily secured. In many countries, women are not entitled to possess land. It also appears that their situation is increas-

ingly exacerbating. Wars and unrest, male migration to cities where work is available, as well as deaths of AIDS, have left many women to take care of the family single-handedly. Moreover, a new kind of threat has emerged in the form of companies from industrial countries which seek to patent plant species in spite of the fact that women have for centuries taken care of the genetic diversity of these species.

FOOD AID TO FAMILIES VIA WOMEN

The World Food Programme (WFP), is in charge of the UN's food aid. The organisation combats hunger on two tracks: on the one hand, it is an emergency relief organisation which distributes food to victims of catastrophes; on the other, it tries to contribute to food security and to create sustainable development by means of various development projects. Finland is one of the big donors of the WFP.

Poverty and hunger go hand in hand: the majority of the hungry in the world are women and girls. The WFP's gender equality programme aims at equal access to food and income irrespective of sex. Ms Elina Sana from Finland has worked in the WFP as a gender adviser since January 1999 .

"The WFP has set as its target to distribute at least 80% of the food aid to families via women. Women are also involved in the planning and implementation of food aid programmes. When food is given directly to those in charge of feeding the family, it most certainly reaches those in need of it. The practice also enhances women's authority and respect for them in the community as the ones in control of such a valuable commodity as food", says Elina Sana.

Food aid is also meant to lead to long-term developmental effects. "School meal projects, for example, support girls' school attendance. A poor family acts wisely when they send their girl to school where she can have her daily meal; the family save in their expenses on food."

Investments in women's education are worthwhile



YK/DORANNE JACOBSON

The key to development is education of girls and women. For example, studies show that educated girls and women produce less children. This, in turn, reflects in the economy: the children are better off and it is more likely that they will, in time, go to school. Educated women have a greater chance of generating income of their own. Women whose income increases, in all probability will spend the money on the welfare of the family. Furthermore, educated women are better equipped to participate in social activities and capable of claiming their rights. Illiteracy, on



VEIKKO RUOHOTIE

the other hand, is an effective obstacle to participation. Going to school postpones marriage and early pregnancies and deliveries, which constitute a major health hazard for young girls.

Male school attendance is still more common in many countries than that of females, although both girls and boys now go to school more often than before. Drop-out rates are much higher among girls than among boys. Parents may consider girls' education unprofitable and rather use them as labour force at home. Girls' school attendance may also be hampered due to such concrete problems as a long distance to school, in which case the parents, in fear of what may take place on the way, do not dare to send the girl to school. Girls in their teens may find it hard to go to school if there are no toilets for girls. Planners of school buildings should therefore take into account the specific needs of girls.

Violence

shadows life

Women are subject to violence throughout their lives. Violence extends from maltreatment and rape in the family to widescale trafficking in women, killing of baby girls and violation of the human rights of women in connection with armed conflicts. Approximately two million girls are annually subjected to female genital mutilation ("female circumcision"), which in many cases leads to life-long disability.

Acts and threat of violence bring insecurity to the lives of girls and women and limit their freedom of movement and participation, thus excluding them from development. Violence against women is not only a human rights issue but also an economic question: every year, an enormous amount of money and vast resources are wasted, among other things, in lost working days.

Violence against women is linked to their low social status, which can be fought by raising their status and heightening their appreciation. Social empowerment and economic independence tend to protect women at least against certain forms of violence.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

In Central America, domestic violence against women is very common. In 1998, Finland granted a total of FIM 1 million to the IDB to be used to combatting domestic violence.

A group of experts in the field of domestic violence from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, representing local non-governmental organisations and health authorities, made a study trip to Finland and other Nordic countries in the summer 1999. The group visited several centres where violent men are treated and helped. Methods of treatment are fairly advanced in the Nordic countries; violent behaviour is approached by addressing the causes of the problem, that is, not only the victims of violence are helped but also those who behave in a violent manner.



PÄIVI MATTILA

The visitors learned that domestic violence is common also in the Nordic welfare states. In both Central America and the Nordic countries, family violence occurs in all social groups, even if violence among the more well-to-do families often remains concealed. Central American women's organisations therefore emphasise the need to bring the problem to light. The problem cannot be remedied as long as it is suppressed.

In Central America, intervention in cases of domestic violence is still unusual and help has not yet been offered to aggressive men. The visitors said that they had learned a great deal during their trip here and that they will now consider whether similar solutions could be developed in their own countries. Violence within families has to be viewed also from men's point of view.

Wars affect women



Armed conflicts have changed over the last decades: they last longer and are deeper; internal conflicts between ethnic, linguistic or religious groups have become increasingly common. A host of interrelated problems, including poverty, environmental degradation, lack of democracy and human rights violations, breed wars.

The methods used in warfare have also changed. These days, the majority of victims are civilians, mainly women, children and old people. Conflicts make large numbers of people leave their homes, seeking refuge from battle, persecution or hunger. There are at present a total of 51 million refugees and displaced persons in the world, of whom an estimated 80% are women and children.

Living in the middle of a war and being a refugee are enormous burdens to women. Women die and are wounded, remain lone parents of households, take care of the wounds of soldiers and their families in chaotic and in many ways poor conditions. Women may find it hard to adjust to new circumstances as refugees; others return to their homes but find it difficult to readjust due to lack of education or because the land of the family may be registered in the name of the husband.

Many women have fallen victims of murder, rape or some other human rights violation while in the midst of a war, fleeing as refugees, or on their way back home. Systematic rape is, furthermore, used as a weapon. It has been estimated that in the civil war of Ruanda in 1994, hundreds of thousands and, in the Bosnian war in 1995, tens of thousands of women were sexually abused or attacked. Moreover, women may be discriminated and persecuted on account of the political activities of their male relatives.

Finnish humanitarian aid is directed, as much as possible, in a manner which takes into account the special needs of women. The main part of the Finnish aid is channelled through the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which pays special attention to the empowerment of women. The programmes of the UNHCR include, among other things, training for women living in the middle of a crisis situation or women who are returning home, credits to purchasing of land for cultivation, support services for women who have been sexually assaulted, and programmes to help reduce violence in refugee communities. Finland has also supported projects initiated by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) which try to prevent trafficking in women and children in conjunction with wars as well as trafficking in refugee women and children in south-east Asia.

Human rights and social justice



According to earlier belief, human rights were meant to guarantee citizens a certain sphere of freedom in which the public authorities did not have any say. After the second world war, in particular, attention has been increasingly focused on the fact that the existence of freedoms does not suffice but people need to be guaranteed conditions where their rights and equality can materialise. Claims of global economic and social justice go to the heart of human rights demands today. This has meant a major step forward in the position of women and other disadvantaged groups. For example, the chance to get a loan may in practice enhance women's self-determination in the developing countries at least as much as the freedom of association and freedom of assembly.

Human rights were originally considered to concern men only. Such rights were not thought to extend to other members of the family or other private sphere of life even though this is essential from women's point of view. Equality between men and women was acknowledged worldwide in 1948 as the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. According to the Declaration, everyone is entitled to all the human rights and freedoms set forth in the document without discriminating either sex.

The human rights of women are often violated on the pretext that such action is based on religion, culture or tradition. However, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights conventions are grounded on the universality of human rights. Cultural differences can be taken into account in the implementation of the rights and freedoms, but they do not justify violation of human rights.

The most significant international document related to women's rights and freedoms is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979, which was ratified by Finland in 1986. The Convention prohibits discrimination against women and obliges states to take measures to ensure the realisation of gender equality. It justifies so-called positive special treatment of women, which means that action is taken to further the equal rights of the less advantaged. The Convention of the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, also draws attention to the status of girls.



YK/JOHN ISAAC

Women and development cooperation organised by the UN



YK/E. BERNHEIM

Nearly half of Finnish development cooperation is carried out in the form of multilateral assistance, that is, aid is channelled via international organisations, such as the UN and the UN development agencies. It is therefore important from the viewpoint of Finnish development cooperation that these organisations respect the principles of gender equality in their programmes.

Every development programme and special agency of the UN has a programme or strategy which aims at

the advancement of women. The UN Development Programme (UNDP), for example, has adopted equality issues as one of their priority areas by the side of elimination of poverty, protection of the environment and good governance. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) promotes the position of women and children by, among other things, emphasising the significance of safe pregnancies and motherhood as well as girls' education. Equality issues and the status of women are prioritised also by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Finland supports the activities of these organisations and funds both by means of allocations to their core funds and by participating in the financing of various programmes.

The UN Fund for Women (UNIFEM) concentrates expressly on the promotion of the status and rights of women and gender equality. UNIFEM's main objectives are to strengthen women's economic and political status as a means to reduce poverty, to further the human rights of women, and to support female leaders and good governance. Finland is one of the biggest contributors to the core budget of UNIFEM and, in addition, has supported a special fund which finances regional and local projects to reduce violence against women.

COMMON RULES ARE ESTABLISHED IN CONFERENCES

The UN has arranged several conferences in which the states of the world have had a chance to agree about common rules to be observed in conjunction with women's issues and development. The final documents of these conferences are not legal documents, but politically and morally binding on states which have agreed to comply with them and guiding principles for the states and the UN's development programmes. The conferences reflect a constantly evolving global process: comprehensive themes such as eradication of poverty, fulfilment of basic needs and global justice are discussed in separate conferences, all focusing on these themes from their special point of view.

Since the 1990's, in particular, non-governmental organisations have been active in these conferences, contributing ideas to the run-up phase and, later on, commenting on how well states have lived up to their commitments. In the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, a record 30.000 representatives from all over the world, including men, participated in the NGO forum.

Conferences which have had an essential impact on the status of women and the gender issue include:

- UN Decade for Women's World Conference, Mexico City, 1975
- UN Decade for Women's World Conference, Copenhagen, 1980
- UN World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women, Nairobi, 1980
- International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 1994
- UN World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 1995
- The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995

In the summer 2000, a follow-up meeting of the Beijing Conference will be arranged to see what has been achieved during the past five years. It is important to make sure that fine ideas about equality will not remain only in black and white.

Cooperation at grass-roots level involves women



The contribution of non-governmental organisations is increasingly important for international development cooperation. Cooperation between organisations from the north and the south provides people with opportunities to work for issues that they consider important and such cooperation may have far-reaching cultural effects on both sides.

NGOs normally operate at the grass-roots level, close to ordinary people, which gives them a good chance to get in touch with women and learn about their problems. In many developing countries, women may find it hard to participate in the decision-making which takes place

far from their homes and calls for great authority and a high status in society. In their own villages and other communities, on the other hand, women may be very active. Women consider it important that their children have prospects for a better future.

Finnish NGOs have launched a number of projects which deal with women's issues and are particularly active furthermore, Finnish NGOs are particularly active in the social and health sector. Women and children usually benefit the most from improvements brought about in these sectors.

EQUALITY IN VILLAGES IN BANGLADESH

In the remote rural areas of north-west Bangladesh, a pioneering non-governmental organisation, Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS) has operated since the country's independence in the early 1970's. Finnchurchaid supports the RDRS and receives, for its part, assistance from the development cooperation appropriations, earmarked by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for NGO activities. Finnchurchaid supports, among other things, literacy projects in rural areas, development of different livelihoods, provision of health care services and, for example, education related to reproductive health.

The RDRS has gradually raised as one of its main objectives the advancement of women in rural areas where women have traditionally been subordinated. Women are taught to read and to know their rights and freedoms. Women have, literally, stepped out of their homes.

In a remote village, a group of women convene every week under a certain tree. One of the women has been able to buy a sewing machine for herself thanks to a loan she has obtained from the RDRS. She was left a widow when still very young and, equipped with the sewing machine, she has managed to earn a livelihood for her family. The main part of the loan has already been repaid.

The RDRS aims to promote gender equality also in its own work, which shows, among other things, in the number of women in its own staff. A woman with the hemline of her tunic flaring in the wind, riding a motorbike, is now a familiar view in the villages. The RDRS says that the empowerment of women has not always been easy even within the organisation itself. Improvement of the status of women has always depended on the commitment of the organisation's leadership.