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## Women who shoulder the world's burdens with grace

By G. Jefferson Price III

**BALTIMORE** - On a blistering day last summer, in the Kawa Fako community of Niger, where people were starving to death, an important man dressed in billowing blue robes and an Arab headdress stood before a crowd of people waiting for food and said:

"Make sure the women take the food."

The women! I thought. They are not usually even allowed out of the house in the daytime, though on this day they were all out, dressed in marvelously colored clothing, some struggling in the shadows of the trees to suckle their emaciated infants.

The men of the community were all lined up, waiting to take the emergency food supplies that had been brought to the village by Catholic Relief Services (CRS), a humanitarian relief agency based in the United States.

"If the men keep it," someone explained, "all the food would not get to the families. Too much of it would be bartered for other things the men want, like beer."

There are many good men in places like Kawa Fako, where during chronic droughts people barely survive on weeds and berries until aid organizations like CRS arrive to offer food and supplies.

In the world's harshest places, men struggle, as women do, to help their families survive. But the heaviest burdens often fall on the women, whose children are with them throughout the day as they work in the fields or do domestic chores.

CRS, the relief and development agency of the US Catholic community, is only one of the scores of United Nations, government, and nongovernmental organizations striving around the world to bring food and other means of support to the world's most vulnerable people. Among others working with equal diligence are CARE, the International Red Cross, Oxfam, and World Vision.

But CRS is the agency I've spent most of the past year with. It is the organization that brought me face to face with the women who toil with extraordinary grace and dignity - even a sense of humor - in circumstances of unimaginable hardship.

In Kawa Fako that hot August day, I met Binta Amadou, a mother of three children, one a hungry infant named Hayizu struggling to get milk from his mother's breast. "I have not much milk," she told me with the help of an interpreter.

"We had *anza* but now there is no *anza*," she said matter-of-factly about the bitter pea-

sized berry that grows on desert bushes. It is softened and boiled into a bitter broth, often the only sustenance in a land chronically devastated by drought. In Niger, 1 of every 4 children dies before the age of 5 - the second-highest mortality rate for young children in the world.

Binta Amadou's day starts early. She rises at dawn to cook whatever she has, awakens the children, and washes them with water that is brought to their small hut from a nearby well. She helps her husband prepare for his day and then she forages for whatever food she can find to cook. When there was no more *anza*, she said, "we boiled leaves from trees and weeds."

In these circumstances, one would expect cries of bitterness or the groan of despair. But here, the women of Kawa Fako are serene and smiling, awaiting their delivered bounty: 220 pounds of millet, 33 pounds of beans, three gallons of cooking oil.

"Tonight we will have a feast," Binta Amadou said, laughing. "then we will save the food to last us for the next 40 days."

My travels over the past year have brought me to many women like Binta Amadou. I have met them in remote villages of Angola and Madagascar, on the sunbaked reaches of desert in Darfur, Sudan, where they have fled marauding militiamen who murder and rape and plunder. They exist in northern Uganda, where antigovernment rebels kidnap children and force them to become murderers and sex slaves. I have met them in the remote villages of India, where some 300 million people live below the \$1-a-day poverty line. And I have met them in places closer to home, like Haiti, the poorest land in the Western hemisphere, and in Colombia, a country also struggling with decades of conflict.

There is no hall of fame for these women. But in the lands they inhabit, these women are the indispensable backbone of society, the glue holding their families together.

In Madagascar, Mariam Sese, a mother of seven, lives in a small settlement of huts in a jungle clearing. She rises at 4 in the morning and makes a meager breakfast for her family. Then she goes to work on a small plot of land where she and her husband are trying to grow some things to eat. She does this work with her hands and a simple hoe. At 10 a.m. she returns and makes a meal for her children. Then she goes back to work in the field. There is no sanitation in the village, so she goes to the river to wash her cooking utensils, to bathe herself and her children, and to fetch drinking water.

Mariam Sese does this every day of the week, every week of the year.

What did she think of all this? She smiled. "I am happy. I have children. I love my family. I wish we had a well."

In Darfur, 200,000 people have been killed in a civil war between government-supported militias and local rebels, and 2 million more have been driven from their homes. Here Miriam Adam, a mother of two, waited patiently for a food distribution. Her village had been attacked in October 2003 by marauding militiamen. "They took everything, even our clothes."

At the time she was living in one of the camps for displaced people. What did she need? "I need food for my family," she said. "I need grass." Grass? "Grass to build a home, there is no grass now," she said, looking out at the barren desert. She might have asked for revenge, but she did not.

The women who help the poor and hungry are just as tireless.

In Gulu, Uganda, there is Sister Pauline Acayo, a nun who runs a peacebuilding project for

CRS. This project helps in the repatriation and forgiveness process for former child soldiers.

Despite the atrocious stories of murder and hideous crime she has heard from these returnees, Sister Pauline beams with pleasure at the successes. "These are our children," Sister Pauline said with a smile. "They need to be forgiven and restored to their communities. There is no other way."

From India, the faces of many women come to mind. One is that of Sunitha Krishnan, a tiny woman who has made her life's work the rescue and rehabilitation of girls abducted or sold into the sex trade, sometimes as young as 3 and 4.

Ms. Krishnan leads a program in Hyderabad, India, named Prajwala - eternal flame. Prajwala rescues, educates, and provides homes for thousands of girls of all ages who have been hideously abused, left with emotional scars and often diseases, including AIDS.

Despite her tiny size, Krishnan has stood up to the underworld gangs that profit from the sex trade and to corrupt officials who enable the trade to flourish.

The faces of the youngest who have been helped by Prajwala were so innocent-looking it tore my heart apart to know of the abuse and disease they had endured.

One who was 9 had been rescued when she was 6. She had been gang-raped by her abductors and injured so badly it took hours of reconstructive surgery to restore her body.

This girl, who seemed as joyful as one would expect of a child her age, was an extraordinary hero. Rapists are rarely caught and brought to trial in such cases, but they were in this case. The girl, by then 7, testified personally against the men who had ravaged her. The girl's strength in confronting her tormentors in court so impressed a local official, he offered to adopt her. To which the girl replied: "I have a mother. Sunitha Krishnan is my mother. I have many sisters; they are with me in the Prajwala school. I have a home. That is Prajwala."

Across all of these stories rises a common theme: No matter how different their cultures and languages, how diverse the struggles of their lives - drought, war, natural or man-made disasters, crime, and abuse - in their vulnerability, their basic needs are the same. A woman devastated by war in Sudan has the same needs as the rescued girl in India: a safe home, food to eat, healthcare, education.

Everywhere, it seems, it is the women who are the most adamant keepers of those ambitions. Universally, they manage to go about this with grace, boldness, and even touches of humor in the most challenging circumstances.

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