

## Gender gap leaves many behind

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The women slowly walk toward the field, then sit together in a circle. There are more than 50 of them, wearing brightly coloured dresses that stand out against the landscape. They've come from all corners of this west Kenyan village.

One woman, Monica, stands up and welcomes the others to the meeting, which she calls a "merry-go-round." Then she begins talking about a local girl who recently graduated from primary school with top marks but can't go to high school because her parents don't have the money to send her.

As the women shake their heads in disappointment, Monica passes around a basket. She encourages them to donate what they can to help the girl. She reminds the women of how the merry-go-round has helped them in the past: when their crops failed, when their husbands drank away the harvest money, or when their own girls needed to pay school fees.

The basket makes its way around the circle a few times and, by the end of the meeting, is full of crumpled bills and small coins.

We watch in amazement, but are not surprised. After all, when Monica speaks, others listen. That's because she has become a leader of the community. Unlike most of the women, she has been to school and even owns her own shop. This makes her luckier than most.

So Monica decided to give back. For nearly a decade she has organized these monthly merry-go-rounds, where women in the community help other women by donating money to a pool, which is then given to a single family.

That money makes it possible for them to purchase necessities such as livestock, schoolbooks and medicine. It also gives the women a level of independence they've never had before.

Life is not easy for most women in rural Kenya. Days consist of cooking, cleaning, parenting, farming, collecting water from the river and occasionally selling charcoal in town. They get little support from their husbands, who see much of this work as beneath them. Alcohol abuse and domestic violence are common.



MARC KIELBURGER FOR THE TORONTO STAR  
Monica (centre), dances after meeting recently with the women in her income-sharing program in rural Kenya.

But thanks to the merry-go-round, a few of the women have started to take control of their lives. Old stereotypes are slowly being broken as females take a more active and prominent role in the community.

"Sometimes it doesn't take much to help," Monica says. "Just a little bit makes a difference."

The struggle for women's rights in this tiny community is no different than the ones that exist throughout the world. Despite making up roughly half the globe's population, women earn one-tenth of the world's income and own less than 1 per cent of the land. Discrimination, exploitation and violence are still harsh realities.

In places like Thailand and Cambodia, women are bought and sold, then forced into prostitution. In Mexico and Guatemala, women working in factories lose their jobs if they get pregnant. In the Congo and Sudan, rape is used as a weapon of war.

The list goes on. And on.

So as we celebrate International Women's Day today, it's important to remember that gender inequality still haunts millions of women around the world. It seems, despite 60 years of human-rights advancements, many women have been largely left behind.

While discrimination in Canada is far less prevalent than in many countries, we are not immune. Women here still earn just more than two-thirds of what men earn for the same job, while a mere one-fifth of our MPs are female – which ranks 45th internationally.

That's why the Conservative government's decision last year to slash funding for Status of Women Canada – the federal agency in charge of ensuring women's rights are a part of government policy – caused so much concern. One opposition MP even called it "reprehensible."

The key to turning this tide is education. Monica and the merry-go-round are proof that when females go to school, mortality and fertility rates drop, while health and human rights improve. It's a simple equation with huge significance.

The best hope for making this happen lies in the UN's Millennium Development Goals, which pledge to, among other things, ensure that as many girls go to school as boys by 2015.

Today, for every 100 boys not in school, there are 117 girls in the same situation.

So write to your local MP to show your support for the goal of female education abroad, as well as for better gender equality here at home. When citizens take action and voice their concerns, they can set their government's priorities.

Monica knows the difference this can make. As we stand with her under the hot Kenyan sun, she gives advice to the women sitting in the merry-go-round.

"If you want to get out of your problems," she tells them, "if you want to change your life, educate your children."

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