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### **Peru: Achieving Gender Equality Drop by Drop, Wave by Wave**

Silent, stoic, ignored. The woman stands timidly behind her husband, eyes cast down, fixed on the fine, brown dust eternally embedded in her nails, a product of a lifetime of farming. As her husband signs the deed to sell the land she has grown to adore, a tear rolls down her time-withered cheek, gradually cascading to the dirt below, the last mark she'll leave on the soil she has cultivated and nurtured for decades. Climbing reluctantly into the tiny wooden wagon, she grasps for any emotion at all, attempting to override the painful numbness in her heart. The burro lumbers clumsily down the lush, mountainous landscape, and the woman takes one final glance at the fertile soil of her farm, her tears forever permeating through the arid ground.

This is a scene all too familiar for females around the world; their rights and opinions are essentially being ignored, further complicating the global struggle to overcome hunger. Females make up over half of the world's population. 60% of the world's hungry, however, are women ("Hunger" 1). The Republic of Peru presents leaders, lawmakers, and citizens with the opportunity to examine world hunger and evaluate the critical role of females in ending this crisis. Peru is a dynamic nation characterized by a vivid, diverse populace of hard-working citizens, farmers and urbanites alike. From Quechua to Japanese, European to Aymara, this coastal South American nation possesses a unique blend of cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds ("Background Notes: Peru" 1). Unfortunately, this colorful country is home to some of the poorest people on the planet, particularly its female population. In 2007, 39.3% of Peruvians were declared "poor." 13.7% of those were declared "extremely poor" ("Background Notes: Peru" 5). On the surface, one cannot grasp the true essence of the gender and cultural issues facing Peru. However, with research and persistence, students, teachers, and citizens across the globe can formulate effective solutions such as financial education, equal land ownership, and introduction to new forms of media. These solutions can be applied to a global perspective, providing new insight into the conundrum of eliminating world hunger first through gender tolerance, respect, and finally, equality.

Understanding the nature and implications of gender inequality is key. "Perceptions of gender are deeply rooted, vary widely both within and between cultures, and change over time. . . .By creating social relations in which neither of the sexes suffers discrimination, gender equity aims at improving gender relations and gender roles, and achieving gender equality," explains the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (10). Delving into the logistics of gender roles in today's ever-changing society, it is obvious that this is a complex issue. For instance, gender roles are not merely determined by male or female anatomy, but by the behaviors and occupations considered socially acceptable for each gender (8). Gender and gender roles, in fact, are both socially constructed. To elaborate, the FAO outlines the traditional role of each gender in many rural societies: "Men prepare land, irrigate crops, and harvest and transport produce to market. . . .[Women] raise children, grow and prepare food, manage family poultry, and collect fuel wood and water" (8). In fact, many rural women earn a meager income from tasks such as selling produce; this extra income is often used to purchase food for the family, send children to school, and fund other household necessities (8). Women receive few accolades-and even less pay-for their critical roles and vast responsibilities in managing the home, often entirely unnoticed and unrewarded. Gender equality is a multifarious, ever-important topic: one that extends far beyond the bounds of male and female genetics, revealing the complexity and importance of equal gender roles and rights in today's society.

Financial education is an important step in achieving gender equality. The FAO notes that women are all too often uneducated in the ways of finance and fiscal responsibility, global trade, and the selling and buying of livestock (8). When her sole purpose in Peru does not go beyond caring for the home, a woman's self-confidence and self-reliance suffer, thus discouraging advancement in society and even inhibiting optimum productivity in the home and on the farm. An effective solution to this problem is simply introduce the basics of finance to rural women through empowerment, inclusion, and education on the imperative yet basic tools of money management.

A groundbreaking project called Sierra Sur encourages Peruvian women to take control of their finances by promoting simple, but powerful actions such as opening a savings account and advocating life insurance. Approximately 8,500 Peruvian women opened savings accounts as of September 2009 under the project's watchful eye ("Boosting knowledge..." 2). Sierra Sur not only supports the protection of money, but also teaches women how to properly and effectively organize their economic affairs. Participants of the program are informed of the vast benefits of life insurance: an often inexpensive, but crucial asset to financial success and security ("Boosting knowledge..." 3). Life insurance "is an important tool for combating poverty," notes Roberto Haudry, IFAD's Country Program Manager for Peru, "If poor households receive such coverage, they will not be forced to sell the few assets they have in event of the illness or death of a family member" (qtd. in "Boosting knowledge..." 3). Because the male is in charge of the household, his death could result in property loss and even eviction for his wife and children. Project participant Margarita Puma Taco explains:

Before the project, we didn't know anything about life insurance or savings. We could not afford caskets and buried our dead wrapped in blankets. We had to sell animals, blankets, and other belongings. When a mother died, her children were often abandoned, I raised many of these abandoned children. When you are poor, all you have to leave your children is more poverty. But this life insurance is very good for all of us. Now we will not have to suffer as much (qtd. in "Boosting knowledge..." 3).

The life insurance policies bolstered by Sierra Sur are also affordable; participants only have to pay about one-third of the cost to receive adequate coverage to finance a funeral or combat repair costs in event of a natural disaster ("Boosting knowledge..." 3). Sierra Sur also points out that "The project encourages women to take advantage of formal savings mechanisms by providing training and cash incentives for the use of bank savings accounts and life insurance. Participants also benefit by having increased assets, financial security, and financial sophistication" ("Boosting knowledge..." 2). Financial education enables rural females to become acquainted with the delicate process of economic organization, creating a sense of inclusion in the global financial market. This promotes autonomy, self-reliance, and productivity; aspects of life they cannot fully experience on the farm alone.

The next crucial facet to female empowerment is mass communication through technology advancement. Rural Peruvian women, such as Teofila Anchahua, were once terrified to lay a hand on the keyboard of a computer, afraid of damaging the alien form of technology. Now, however, through the Puno-Cusco Corridor Project, Anchahua has access to her e-mail several times a week at the local Commercial Information Center ("Boosting knowledge..." 3). The project, which was recently established in five Peruvian provinces, supplies Internet access, and ultimately, new and useful information, to rural citizens ("Boosting knowledge..." 3). Internet access, like a window to a new world, allows citizens to gain a new perspective on global affairs. By acquiring new information, rural Peruvians can form their own opinions about the occurrences in today's ever-changing world, thus they feel important, empowered, and in tune to the vast technological advances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Also, they may learn a great deal from the Internet, fostering their autonomous lives.

Permitting women to own and manage land and property is yet another simple, practical step to advance their roles in society, promoting equality in the male dominated fiscal universe. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, a mere 15% of the world's agriculture agents are women. This statistic is staggering when considering that in just 40 years, food production will need to be doubled to feed the projected population for the year 2050: 9.2 billion people ("Bridging the Gap" 9). The world's population is exponentially growing, creating new challenges and opportunities for advancement. At the same time, new opportunities for poverty continue to proliferate across the globe. An expanding populace translates to an even greater need for food productivity, raising imperative questions concerning gender roles in rural societies largely dependant on agriculture for their survival.

Women often possess valuable farm knowledge from decades of experience; this knowledge; however, is essentially being ignored by male counterparts. The roles of women in rural family life are often suppressed to the lowliest of existences characterized by labor with little acknowledgement or praise. For instance, the FAO addresses the role of females in modern farming:

Credit, extension, input and seed supply services usually address the needs of male household heads. Rural women are rarely consulted in development projects that may increase men's production and income, but add to their own workloads. When work burdens increase, girls are removed from school more often than boys, to help with farming and household tasks ("Bridging the Gap" 9).

Women are being denied financial responsibility on the farm, project management opportunities, and even general education opportunities. The exclusion of women in the financial aspect of farming clearly affects the daughters in the family, ensuring that young girls work rather than attend school, once again hindering productivity and decision-making ability. When girls feel that they do not deserve to learn the same capacity at the same rate as their male counterparts, they automatically feel submissive to the "superior" sex, limiting their chances for advancement at an astonishingly early age.

In addition to their lack of education, women frequently have access to land ownership solely through their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Their influence on matters concerning land tenure typically depends on the type of relationship they possess with these men (Meinzen-Dick 2). Submission, fear, and anger all too often describe the accord women possess with their male relatives, lessening the security of their land and even promoting domestic violence. However, by including brothers, husbands, sisters, and wives in the decision-making aspects of farming, equality and insight are implemented into this industry, advocating harmonious collaboration and reducing the threat of domestic violence. When partnership is equal amongst landowners, it also benefits property security. For instance, if a woman's husband is the sole owner of the family land, she is "vulnerable to eviction" as well as at risk of losing landownership simply because her husband is not willing to cooperate and accommodate her ideas, opinions, and feedback in the decision-making process (Meinzen-Dick 2). Limiting land tenure and property ownership to the male gender is unpractical, even detrimental to farm security and familial relationships.

Although financial education, equal land ownership, and communication skills are necessary in the fight against poverty, one must examine the possibility and promise of these solutions when applied to the economic crisis in Peru's Ica Valley. The Ica region of Peru is a treasure trove of agriculture; its rich soil, hard working citizens, and endless potential have made it home to 52 % of the entire nation's agribusiness industry (Arguello 2). This bountiful region, however, was devastated by the drastic downturn of the global economy. Dramatic wage reductions have plagued this region, especially for its female workers, who were "more likely to be economically poor to start with" (Arguello 2). The crisis is also leading to alarming rates of unemployment, causing already poor households to plunge even deeper into poverty. In fact, the Ica region saw the demand for labor drop 30%, resulting in thousands of job losses. As a result, an astounding number of already poverty stricken households have experienced a sudden loss of income (Arguello 2). These statistics, though grim and worrisome, provide new opportunities for citizens, young

and old, rich and poor, to gain insight and understanding concerning the turmoil in the Ica Valley, a small, but crucial corner of the world's food production industry.

From asparagus to oranges, paprika to lemons, the Ica Valley is home to a beautiful, plentiful variety of commodities; however, of the mostly female farmhands who produce these foods, 40% live in extreme poverty (Arguello 2). How is a region that produces such agricultural wealth characterized by such extreme poverty? The answer to this question is simple: hardworking Ica Valley women are not treated with respect and equality. These women are treated strictly as laborers; their efforts, expansive farming knowledge, and capacity to own and manage land are ignored. To advance and better the lives of struggling women in the Peru's devastated Ica Valley, the aforementioned solutions are necessary. Land ownership will allow women to set wages for their farms, ensuring that discrimination does not occur. Furthermore, women will gain first hand experience developing land ownership skills in the good times, and in this case, the bad times. New communication techniques will also benefit females in the Ica Valley; these portals will increase farming on a global scale, as farmers gain access to foreign farming techniques, other farmers' ideas, and a wealth of new information. The Ica Valley, though in deep maelstrom, is an opportunity waiting, an opportunity to examine inequality, formulate practical ideas, and implement these ideas to better the lives of women, Ica Valley farmers, and consumers across the globe.

Peru, a window into possibility and advancement, also a picture of poverty and hunger, is a diverse nation with opportunity for citizens from all walks of life, all occupations, all countries, and all political views to unite and fight world hunger. Natural disaster, economic turmoil, and incessant layoffs have plagued this coastal South American nation, inhibiting every industry from fruit production to livestock, farming to technology advancement. These hindrances have only escalated the perpetual issue of gender inequality. Women across the globe, and across Peru, have experienced the detrimental effects of this discrimination. Denied rights to property ownership, financial responsibility, and technology, many women have found themselves performing unreasonable amounts of physical labor. These efforts are all too often unaccompanied by any accolades, praise, and most importantly, pay. Their rights, skills, and knowledge have inherently been ignored, discarded, and set aside. These issues, however, can be resolved with several simple, effectual solutions.

Like a drop in an ocean, one woman's connection to technology creates a wave, spurring countless other women to join the instantaneous age of Internet. Technology, such as e-mail, promotes confidence in today's many technological advancements and creates new opportunities for global interaction including financial, commercial, and social. Though women may have access to new information on the World Wide Web, financial education is necessary by training women in the ways of money management, financial security, and the numerous benefits of life insurance. Land ownership is yet another simple, useful tool to advance the role of females in modern farming society. Mutual land ownership between men and women promotes harmony, equality, and partnership in the management and upkeep of livestock, land, and crops. This simple act of collaboration also reduces the threat of domestic violence, increases land security in event of a death or disaster, and ensures that women take part in the daily decision making processes of farming. A drop in an ocean creates a wave. And Peru, a promising, beautiful country, is in desperate need of such a wave. A proud nation with a poverty-afflicted populace, Peruvians face many challenges on a daily basis; their simple lives as farmers are forever affected by the economic devastation. Peruvian women are enduring the worst of such times; however, with plausible, easily enforceable reformations, ideas, and innovations, gender equality can be achieved promptly and effectively, vastly improving the lives of women across the globe, one drop at a time.

Two dotted lines grace the official document, one for her, one for her husband. Slowly, the woman lifts her hand to the page, her fingers shaking nervously as she signs the deed to dual ownership of her family's new land. Upon initial glance at the land, it appears rough, rugged, and challenging. The woman, however, only sees fields and hills of emerald, glimmering in the sunlight, the picture of what the

upcoming months, years, and decades will yield. She smiles contentedly at her husband as they walk up the dirt encrusted steps to their new home, meager in the eyes of many, but so beautiful in their eyes. Every rock, every tree, every weed of the land they now proudly own exudes promises of hope and teamwork.

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