

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *The Axis of Equidity*

A woman has so many parts to her body, life is very hard indeed.

— LU XUN, "ANXIOUS THOUGHTS ON  
'NATURAL BREASTS'" (1927)

We've been chronicling the world of impoverished women, but let's break for a billionaire.

Zhang Yin is a petite, ebullient Chinese woman who started her career as a garment worker, earning \$6 a month to help support her seven siblings. Then, in the early 1980s, she moved to the special economic zone of Shenzhen and found a job at a paper trading company partly owned by foreigners. Zhang Yin learned the intricacies of the paper business, and she could have stayed and risen in the firm. But she is a restless, ambitious woman, buzzing with entrepreneurial energy, so she struck out for Hong Kong in 1985 to work for a trading company there. The company went bankrupt within a year. Zhang Yin then started her own company in Hong Kong, buying scrap paper there and shipping it to firms throughout China. She soon realized that the grand arbitrage opportunity was between waste paper in the United States and in China. Since China has few forests, much of its paper is made from straw or bamboo and is of execrable quality. That made recyclable American scrap paper, derived from wood pulp and worth very little locally, a valuable commodity in China—particularly as industrialization led to soaring demand for paper.

Working with her husband, a Taiwanese, Zhang Yin at first bought American scrap paper through intermediaries, but in 1990 she moved to Los Angeles and began to work out of her home. She drove around California in a used Dodge minivan, visiting garbage dumps and making arrangements to obtain their scrap paper. The dumps were happy to make deals with her.

place in the world to be born female. Foot-binding, child marriage, concubinage, and female infanticide were embedded in traditional Chinese culture. Rural Chinese girls in the early twentieth century sometimes didn't even get real names, just the equivalent of "No. 2 sister" or "No. 4 sister." Or, perhaps even less dignified, girls might be named Laidi or Yindi or Zhaodi, all variations of "Bring a younger brother." Girls were rarely educated, often sold, and vast numbers ended up in the brothels of Shanghai.

So was it cultural imperialism for Westerners to criticize foot-binding and female infanticide? Perhaps. But it was also the right thing to do. If we believe firmly in certain values, such as the equality of all human beings regardless of color or gender, then we should not be afraid to stand up for them; it would be feckless to defer to slavery, torture, foot-binding, honor killings, or genital cutting just because we believe in respecting other faiths or cultures. One lesson of China is that we need not accept that discrimination is an intractable element of any society. If culture were immutable, China would still be impoverished and Sheryl would be stumbling along on three-inch feet.

The battle for women's rights in China was as bitter as it is today in the Middle East, and there were setbacks. Chinese social conservatives were furious when young women began to cut their hair, saying that this made women look like men. In the late 1920s, street thugs would sometimes seize a woman with short hair and pull out all of her hair or even cut off her breasts. *If you want to look like a man*, they said, *this will do it.*

Communism after the 1949 revolution was brutal in China, leading to tens of millions of deaths by famine or repression, but its single most positive legacy was the emancipation of women. After taking power, Mao brought women into the workforce and the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and he used his political capital to abolish child marriage, prostitution, and concubinage. It was Mao who proclaimed: "Women hold up half the sky."

There were some setbacks for women with the death of ideology and the rise of a market economy in the 1980s, and Chinese women still face challenges. Even college-educated women experience discrimination in finding jobs, and sexual harassment is widespread. A Chinese cabinet minister once mistook Sheryl for a local secretary and tried to force himself on her; she got her revenge when she wrote

"I had to learn from scratch," Zhang Yin said. "The business was just my husband and me, and I didn't speak a word of English." She was able to ship scrap paper back to China cheaply, because ships were bringing toys and clothing from China to California ports but returning mostly empty. As Chinese demand for paper soared, Zhang Yin built up her company, and in 1995 she returned to China to open a paper-making plant in the southern boomtown of Dongguan. Her plants make containerboard, which is used to make corrugated cardboard boxes for Chinese exports.

Zhang Yin's recycling company in California, called America Chung Nam, is now the biggest American exporter to China by volume. Her Chinese paper manufacturer, Nine Dragons Paper, has more than five thousand employees, and she has grand ambitions for it. "My goal is to make Nine Dragons, in three to five years, the leader in containerboards," she told our *New York Times* friend David Barboza. "My desire has always been to be the leader in an industry."

By 2006, Zhang Yin had a net worth of \$4.6 billion and topped some lists of China's richest people. She was arguably the world's richest self-made woman, although market turmoil later sent her net worth plunging and threatened her operations. In any case, there is something larger going on here: By the reckoning of the Huron Report, which tries to track China's wealth, six of the ten richest self-made women in the world are now Chinese.

All this reflects the way China has established a more equal playing field for women. In a larger sense, China has emerged as a model on gender issues for developing countries: It evolved from repressing women to emancipating them, underscoring that cultural barriers can be overcome relatively swiftly where there is the political will to do so. A broad range of countries around the world—Rwanda, Botswana, Tunisia, Morocco, Sri Lanka—have likewise made rapid progress in empowering women. Challenges remain, but these countries remind us that gender barriers can be dismantled, to the benefit of men and women alike.

We sometimes hear people voice doubts about opposition to sex trafficking, genital cutting, or honor killings because of their supposed inevitability. What can our good intentions achieve against thousands of years of tradition?

One response is China. A century ago, China was arguably the worst

about the incident in our book *China Wakes*. Concubinage has returned with *er nai*, or No. 2 wives, and China has millions of prostitutes again (although, in contrast to India, they mostly enter the business by choice). The combination of the one-child birth control policy and convenient access to ultrasound testing means that parents routinely check the sex of a fetus and get an abortion if it is female. The sex ratio of newborns is 116 boys for every 100 girls, meaning that many poor men will never be able to marry; this will be a source of future instability. Sadly, neither economic development nor the rise of education and a middle class seems to have affected the predilection for aborting female fetuses.

All that said, no country has made as much progress in improving the status of women as China has. Over the past one hundred years, it has become—at least in the cities—one of the best places to grow up female. Urban Chinese men typically involve themselves more in household tasks like cooking and child care than most American men do. Indeed, Chinese women often dominate household decision-making, leading to the expression “*qi guan yan*,” or “the wife rules strictly.” And while job discrimination against women is real, it has less to do with sexism than with employers being wary of China’s generous maternity benefits.

We could see the progress in Sheryl’s ancestral village in southern China. When Sheryl’s maternal grandmother was five years old, her mother tried to make her beautiful by wrapping cloth bandages around her feet from her toes to her heels, starting a process that would crush the tiny bones so that she could display dainty three-inch feet called golden lotuses. These were considered sensual. Nineteenth-century Chinese had far more erotic words for women’s feet than for their breasts. Sheryl’s grandmother stripped off the bandages after she moved with her husband to Toronto, but it was too late. She became the matriarch of seven strong-willed children but hobbled until the end of her life in tiny shoes, walking like a slim penguin on short stilts.

By the time we began visiting China, foot-binding had disappeared, but village women still mostly accepted second-class citizenship, pleading with the Goddess of Mercy for a son and sometimes drowning their own daughters after birth. Yet the spread of education and job opportunities for young women led to a rapid recalibration of perceptions concerning gender. Educating and empowering girls is certainly the

right thing to do, but, most important in the eyes of many families, it is profitable! China has enjoyed a virtuous circle in which, once girls had economic value, parents invested more in them and gave them greater autonomy.

Chinese women are also making inroads in fields that were once overwhelmingly male. The majority of math and chemistry students in China are still male, but the edge is slimmer than in the United States. Chess is one of the most male-dominated pursuits all around the world, and that is also true in China—but women there are catching up more than elsewhere. In 1991, Xie Jun became the first women’s world chess champion from China, and since then two other Chinese women—Zhu Chen and Xu Yuhua—have succeeded her. Moreover, a girl named Hou Yifan may be the greatest talent ever in women’s chess. At the age of fourteen in 2008, she narrowly lost in the finals for the women’s world championship, and she is still improving rapidly. If any female now playing is to wrest the title of world chess champion from men, it is likely to be her.

China is an important model because it was precisely its emancipation of girls that preceded and enabled its economic takeoff. The same is true of other rapidly growing Asian economies. As Homi Kharas, an economist who has worked on these issues for the World Bank and the Brookings Institution, advised us:

Engineering an economic takeoff is really about using a nation’s resources most efficiently. Many East Asian economies enjoyed a sustained boom by moving young peasant women from farms to factories, after giving them a basic education for free. In Malaysia, Thailand, and China, export-oriented industries like garments and semi-conductors predominantly employed young women who had previously been working in less productive family farms or doing household work. The economies got multiple benefits from this transition. By improving the labor productivity of the young women, growth was raised. By employing them in export industries, the countries got foreign exchange which could be used to buy needed capital equipment. The young women saved much of their money or sent it back to relatives in the village, raising national saving rates. Because they had good jobs and income-earning opportunities, they also delayed marriage and

childbearing, lowering fertility and population growth rates. So a major factor in East Asia's economic success was the contribution of its young peasant female workforce.

It's no accident that the countries that have enjoyed an economic takeoff have been those that educated girls and then gave them the autonomy to move to the cities to find work. In contrast, it would be difficult to imagine—at least for the moment—millions of rural Pakistani or Egyptian teenage girls being fully educated and then allowed to move to the cities while still single to take up jobs and power an industrial revolution.

Leading Indian business executives have noted that one of their country's weaknesses is that it does not employ women as efficiently as China, and they are trying to rectify that. Azim Premji, chairman of Wipro Technologies, a leading technology company, notes that 26 percent of Wipro's engineers are now female. His foundation, the Azim Premji Foundation, focuses on getting more village girls in school—partly to help those individuals, but also because the result will be lower fertility and a more capable labor force to power the economy as a whole.

Implicit in what we're saying about China is something that sounds shocking to many Americans: Sweatshops have given women a boost. Americans mostly hear about the iniquities of garment factories, and they are real—the forced overtime, the sexual harassment, the dangerous conditions. Yet women and girls still stream to such factories because they're preferable to the alternative of hoeing fields all day back in a village. In most poor countries, women don't have many job options. In agriculture, for example, women typically aren't as strong as men and thus are paid less. Yet in the manufacturing world, it's the opposite. The factories prefer young women, perhaps because they're more docile and perhaps because their small fingers are more nimble for assembly or sewing. So the rise of manufacturing has generally raised the opportunities and status of women.

The implication is that instead of denouncing sweatshops, we in the West should be encouraging manufacturing in poor countries, particularly in Africa and the Muslim world. There is virtually no manufacturing for export in Africa (aside from Mauritius and small amounts in Lesotho and Namibia), and one of the ways we could help women in Egypt and Ethiopia would be to encourage factories for the export of

cheap shoes or shirts. Labor-intensive factories would create large numbers of jobs for women, and they would bring in more capital—and gender equality.

The United States has established a terrific program to promote African exports by reducing tariffs on them. It's called the African Growth and Opportunity Act, or AGOA, and it's an effective aid program that never gets adequate attention or support. If Western countries wanted to do something simple that would benefit African women, they would merge AGOA with the European equivalent, called Everything But Arms. As the Oxford University economist Paul Collier has noted, that merger of standards and bureaucracies would create a larger common market for tariff-free import of African manufactured goods. That would constitute a significant incentive to locate factories in Africa, boosting employment and giving Africans a new channel to help themselves.

Almost halfway around the world, a country very different from China is also emerging as a model on gender issues. Rwanda is an impoverished, landlocked, patriarchal society that still lives in the shadow of the 1994 genocide in which 800,000 people were slaughtered in one hundred days. Most of the killers were from the Hutu tribe and most of the victims from the minority Tutsi tribe, and tribal tensions remain a challenge to the country's stability. Yet somehow from this infertile, chauvinistic soil has emerged a country in which women now play an important economic, political, and social role—in a way that hugely benefits Rwanda as a whole. Rwanda is consciously implementing policies that empower and promote women—and, perhaps partly as a result, it is one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa. In some respects, in everything but size, Rwanda is now the China of Africa.

In the aftermath of the genocide, 70 percent of Rwanda's population was female, and so the country was obliged to utilize women. But it was more than necessity. Men had discredited themselves during the genocide. Women were just minor players in the slaughter, so that only 2.3 percent of those jailed for the killings were female. As a result, there was a broad sense afterward that females were more responsible and less inclined to savagery. The country was thus mentally prepared to give women a larger role.

Paul Kagame, the rebel leader who defeated the *genocidaires* and



became Rwanda's president, wanted to revive his country's economy and saw that he needed women to do that. "You shut that population out of economic activity at your peril," he told us, as his press secretary—a woman—looked on approvingly. "The decision to involve women, we did not leave it to chance," he added. "In the constitution, we said that women have to make up 30 percent of the parliament."

Kagame speaks fluent English, meets regularly with Americans, and perhaps realized that it would be helpful to brand Rwanda as an equal-opportunity country. Rwanda's cabinet room, which is more high-tech than its equivalent in the White House, frequently echoes with women's voices. Kagame regularly has appointed strong women to cabinet posts and other top positions. Women now hold the positions of president of the supreme court, minister of education, mayor of Kigali, and director of Rwanda television, while at the grassroots level many women played major roles in village reconstruction. By 2007 Rwanda surpassed Sweden to become the nation with the highest share of women members of any parliament in the world—48.8 percent of its seats in the lower house. Then, in September 2008, a new election left Rwanda the first country with a majority of female legislators—55 percent in the lower house. In contrast, 17 percent of members of the United States House of Representatives were women in 2008, leaving the United States ranked sixty-eighth among countries of the world in the share of women holding national political office.

Rwanda is one of a number of poor countries—others include Costa Rica and Mozambique—that have at least one third female total representation in parliament. Rwanda is also one of the least corrupt, fastest-growing, and best-governed countries in Africa.

Countries like Rwanda and China have shown that governments can nurture women and girls in ways that boost economic development. In such countries with good governance and equal opportunities, Western help is often particularly effective.

Murvelene Clarke was a forty-one-year-old woman in Brooklyn who felt a vague desire to be more civic-minded and to devote more of her income to charity. She was earning \$52,000 a year working at a bank and thought she had plenty to meet her own needs. "I heard about tithing, where you give ten percent of your income to the church," Murvelene explained. "I'm not a member of a church, but I thought I, too, should give ten percent of my income to charity."

One priority for Murvelene was a charity that spent little on administrative expenses. So she went online and spent several hours browsing the charities that received the top rating—four stars—from Charity Navigator, a Web site that evaluates charities on their efficiency. Charity Navigator is not a perfect guide, because its focus is on overhead rather than impact, but it's a useful starting point. Murvelene came across an organization called Women for Women International, and she liked what she saw. It's a sponsorship organization that enables an American to support a particular woman in a needy country abroad. Murvelene, a black woman of Jamaican ancestry, liked the idea of sponsoring an African woman. So she signed up, agreeing to pay \$27 a month for a year, and asked to be connected to a woman in Rwanda.

Murvelene was paired with Claudine Mukakarisa, a twenty-seven-year-old genocide survivor from Butare, Rwanda. Extremist Hutus had targeted her family, which was Tutsi, and she was the only survivor. Claudine had been kidnapped at the age of thirteen, along with her older sister, and had been taken to a Hutu rape house. "They started sexually violating both of us," Claudine explained in a shy, pained monotone when we talked with her, "and then they started beating us."

Large numbers of militia members came to the house, patiently lining up to rape the women. This went on for days, and of course there was no medical attention. "We had started rotting in our reproductive organs, and maggots were coming out of our bodies," Claudine said. "Walking was almost impossible. So we crawled on our knees." When Kagame's army defeated the *genocidaires*, the Hutu militia fled to Congo—but took Claudine and her sister along as well. Militia members killed her sister but finally let Claudine go.

"I don't know why I was released and my sister killed," she said, shrugging. Probably it was because she was pregnant. Claudine was puzzled by her swelling belly, as she still had no idea about the facts of life. "I had thought I could not get pregnant, because I had been told that a girl becomes pregnant only if she is kissed on the cheek. And I had never been kissed."

Still only thirteen years old and very pregnant, Claudine trekked around the country trying to find help. She gave birth by herself in a parking lot. Unable to see how she would ever feed the baby, and hating its unknown father for having raped her, Claudine abandoned it to die.

"But my heart wouldn't allow me to do that," she said. "So I went back and picked up my baby." Claudine begged for food in the streets,

and she and the baby barely survived. "Many people would chase me away," she said, "because I was stinking." Claudine is quiet, demure, soft-spoken; her lip quivers occasionally as she tells her story in flat tones, but she is not obviously emotional. Her overriding characteristic is the determination to survive with her child.

After several years of this, an uncle took Claudine in, but he demanded sex from her in exchange for shelter. When she became pregnant again, he kicked her out. Over time, Claudine found that she could get jobs gardening or washing clothes, typically earning about \$1 for a day's work. She managed to send her two children to school, but only barely: The fees were \$7 per child per term, and so she and her children lived from day to day.

Murvelene's sponsorship gave new hope to Claudine and her children. Of Murvelene's \$27 monthly payment, \$12 goes to training programs and other support efforts, and \$15 is given directly to Claudine. The managers coach the women to save—partly to build a habit of micro-savings, and partly to have a cushion when they graduate from the program in a year's time—and so Claudine saves \$5 each month and spends \$10. Some of the \$10 goes to paying her children's school fees and buying food, but Claudine devotes some to buying a large bag of charcoal, used for cooking. She sells it bit by bit at a retail markup to other poor families.

In addition, Claudine goes to the Women for Women compound each morning for classes. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are devoted to vocational training, to teach the women skills that will bring them an income for the rest of their lives. Claudine is learning beadwork, so that she can make embroidery to sell either on her own or through Women for Women (the aim is for the embroidery to be sold in posh New York department stores). Other women learn how to use reeds to weave baskets or placemats, or, if they are really talented, they study sewing so that they can work as tailors. A tailor can earn \$4 a day, a respectable income in Rwanda; those with other skills earn somewhat less. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the women attend classes on health, literacy, or human rights. One aim is to make the women more assertive and less accepting of injustices.

Claudine and Murvelene write each other letters, and Murvelene sent Claudine pictures of New York City, to show her where she lived. Claudine and her children studied these pictures with fascination, as if they were viewing another planet.



**C**laudine at a Women for Women meeting in Rwanda (Nicholas D. Kristof)

Nine months after sponsoring Claudine, Murvelene was laid off. She laughed when we asked her if she had second thoughts about her sponsorship commitment to Claudine. "I never regretted it for a moment," she said. "If I'm lucky enough to be able to help her, and she can lift herself out of the position she's in, and lift up her family members or other people around her, to me that's really important. And for me, it was a way to get out of myself. A lot of times, you forget how fortunate you are here, never really needing anything."

Since being laid off, Murvelene has had freelance jobs, and she continues to allocate 10 percent of her income to charity. "Any freelance money I get, or if somebody gives me a gift, I keep a running total in my head and think, 'Okay, I've got to give so much.' It's not so hard."

Claudine is also thriving, and she feels immense gratitude toward Murvelene for giving her and her children this opportunity. It helps that the Rwandan economy is booming, creating more opportunities for Women for Women graduates. But Rwanda is flourishing precisely because it has figured out how to turn people like Claudine into economic assets.

## Tears over Time Magazine

Zainab Salbi is thin with olive skin and close-cropped black hair framing large, luminous eyes. She looks like central casting's idea of a free-spirited Middle Eastern princess, and she speaks English with a tinge of a foreign accent reflecting her childhood in Iraq. Zainab grew up in Baghdad in the period shaped by the long Iran-Iraq war, always fearful of attacks, raised by a father who was a pilot and a mother who was an unusually emancipated woman trained in biology. But the crucial factor for Zainab's family was that both parents were close to Saddam Hussein. Her father was Saddam's personal pilot, and Zainab grew up calling Saddam uncle and spending weekends at his house, playing with his children.

That meant privileges and gifts, including a new car from Saddam each year, but also constant, gnawing fear. Proximity did not equal protection, and any slip could mean disaster for the entire family. One of Zainab's friends at school was the daughter of a senior official who was dragged out of a meeting on television and then executed; the daughter became a pariah. Zainab heard whispered stories of Saddam and his sons raping girls and of intelligence agents videotaping women as they were being raped and then blackmailing the victims afterward.

"He was a poison gas," Zainab told Sheryl in a long conversation in Zainab's office in Washington, D.C. "We breathed him slowly, sometimes dying slowly." Yet Saddam was always courtly and helpful to Zainab, even squiring her around and giving her tours of his property. One time, when she didn't have a bathing suit and everyone else was swimming, he offered her his dishdasha, or robe, to wear so she could join in the fun. She demurred, thinking it might be too transparent when wet. He insisted. She kept refusing.

Then, when Zainab was a university student, her mother abruptly and bizarrely pushed Zainab into a marriage with an Iraqi man living in America. "All of a sudden, when I'm age twenty, my mother begs me to accept a marriage proposal from the United States," Zainab recalled. "She begged and cried and said, 'Please listen to me! I wanted to be a good daughter and so I came to the United States.'"

Zainab barely knew her husband, who was much older, and who

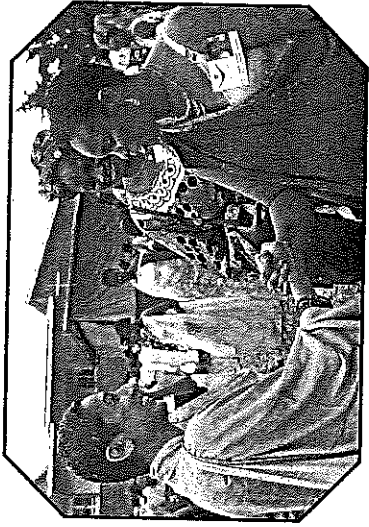
soon proved abusive and distant. After three months of marriage, he became violent, threw her facedown on the bed, and raped her. That's when Zainab walked out on him. The first Gulf War had erupted in the meantime, however, so she couldn't go home. Instead, Zainab remained in the United States, bitterly resenting her mother for having pushed her into a failed marriage and terrified that the American authorities would figure out how close her family was to Saddam. "I decided that I would never tell anyone I knew Saddam Hussein," she said, and she kept her secret.

Slowly, life improved. Zainab met and married a gentle Palestinian doctoral student named Amjad. They planned a delayed honeymoon in Spain and saved up for it. Iraq receded from her life. Then, in 1993, when Zainab was twenty-four and had been married to Amjad for six months, they were visiting a friend. While Amjad and the friend were in the kitchen, preparing dinner, Zainab idly picked up a *Time* magazine and read an article about rape camps in Bosnia. Serbian soldiers were gang-raping women as part of a military strategy to terrorize the population. The article was accompanied by a photo of some of the women, and it struck such a chord inside Zainab that she burst into tears. Amjad came running in, alarmed. Zainab shoved the article in his face. "We have to do something!" she said. "I have to do something to help these women."

Zainab called around to humanitarian organizations to see if she could volunteer to help women in Bosnia, but she couldn't find a single group working with the rape victims. She started telephoning around again, offering to set up a program. A Unitarian church agreed to hear her proposal. She walked into the church's board meeting with her father-in-law's briefcase, thinking it would make her look older. With the support of the church, Zainab and Amjad turned their basement into the operations center for a new group that they called Women for Women in Bosnia. They frantically began networking and fund-raising, donating the money they had set aside for a delayed honeymoon to Spain. The women in Bosnia needed it more.

Soon Zainab flew to the Balkans and began meeting women who had been raped by Serb soldiers. Her first meeting was with a woman named Ajsa, who had been released from a rape camp when she was eight months pregnant—too late to get an abortion.

For three years, Zainab and Amjad struggled to build their organization while taking university courses. Every dime they raised went to



the four hundred women in their organization, leaving them barely anything to pay bills or to feed themselves. Zainab was just about to give up and look for a paying job when a check—for \$67,000—arrived in the mail. Working Assets, a phone company that donates 1 percent of its sales to charity, had chosen Zainab to receive the gift, and it rescued the organization. Over time the group evolved into Women for Women International, working with survivors not only in Bosnia but in war-torn countries all over the world.

Zainab's next break came in 2000, when Oprah Winfrey put her on her show for the first of seven interviews. Women for Women International began to thrive, building up a major international network of supporters and a \$20 million budget. But Zainab still kept secret her association with Saddam.

One day in the spring of 2004, Zainab was in Bukavu in eastern Congo. She was talking to a woman named Nabito, who described how rebels had raped her and her three daughters, the youngest of them just nine years old. The rebels even ordered one of Nabito's teenage sons to rape her. When he didn't, they shot him in the feet. She told all this to Zainab and then said: "I never told anybody but you this story."

Zainab was horrified. "What should I do?" she asked. "Should I keep it a secret or tell the whole world?"

"If you can tell the whole world and prevent it from happening again, then do so," Nabito said. Later that day, on the drive back to Rwanda, Zainab cried. She wept all five hours as her driver navigated

the bumpy dirty roads. She cried again back at her room in the guest house. That night, in her room, she resolved that if Nabito could tell embarrassing secrets, then so could she. Zainab decided to reveal her own rape by her former husband, her family's relationship with Saddam, and another secret she had absorbed only recently.

Zainab's mother, in failing health, had come to America for a checkup, and Zainab had finally dared talk about the anger she had nursed since her first marriage. Zainab spoke of how betrayed she had felt when her supposedly liberated mother rushed her into an ultimately abusive marriage with an older man she barely knew. Why, she asked her mother, had she urged that marriage?

Zainab's mother had lost her voice by then and could communicate only by writing notes. Through tears, she scribbled her response: "He wanted you, Zainab. I didn't see any other way." The "he" was Saddam Hussein. He had lusted after Zainab, and her parents had been terrified that Saddam would seize Zainab and keep her as a mistress until he found a new toy.

So, inspired by Nabito, Zainab began telling her full story, every seedy part of it. "The irony was that I run a program that encourages women to communicate, but I didn't communicate for a long time," Zainab said. "Now, I do."

Women for Women International is effective because it touches people at the grassroots level. This kind of bottom-up approach in development work has repeatedly shown its superiority in bringing about economic and social change. Meanwhile, far away in West Africa, someone else was using a similar grassroots approach to defeat one of the most ghastly and deeply embedded traditions that harms girls, genital cutting.