

## **From dawn to dusk, the daily struggle of Africa's women**

It was still dark, not yet 4am. But outside Letenk'iel was moving already, rekindling the fire from the overnight embers. Inside the mud-walled hut, her husband Gebremariam coughed. Then as the first birds were heard, he swung his legs over the side of a bed made from rough rope strung across a wooden frame. He stood in the doorway and stretched. His wife was already at her morning chores.

As the cold dawn light suffused the sky she sprinkled water from a squat earthenware jar across the mud floor and began to sweep the dampened earth with a brush of long grasses bound tightly together. The day had begun.

Women work two-thirds of Africa's working hours, and produce 70 per cent of its food, yet earn only 10 per cent of its income, and own less than 1 per cent of its property. They work three hours a day longer than the average British woman does on professional and domestic work combined.

Letenk'iel, from the village of Meshal in southern Eritrea, poked about in the straw where the hens had spent the night in the hope that there might be eggs to take to market to exchange for salt and oil. But there were none.

The baby began to cry. Letenk'iel fastened the child to her back with a long, dirty cloth to keep him comforted until she had the time to breastfeed. The child coughed. She fed the tiny fire, in what looked like an old biscuit-tin, with slow-burning wood on which to roast the few kernels of wheat which would be breakfast for her family of six. They would get a handful each. She would "not bother" to eat.

African women's health is particularly poor. Only 37 per cent survive to the age of 65, compared with almost 90 per cent in the UK. A poor woman in Malawi is 200 times more likely to die as a result of pregnancy and childbirth than a woman in the UK. Some 250,000 women die each year from complications compared to just 1,500 in Europe.

The first big task of the day was to fetch water. First, she set her children about their chores. Gebremariam and the eldest boy, Daniel, were to shift stones from their field in readiness for ploughing. Kudos, the second son, would take the ox on the long trek for water. Her daughters, Mabraheet and Azmera, would spend hour hours fetching firewood from the far mountainside. After two hours of farm work, Daniel would set off on the hour's walk to school. He was the only one they could afford to send.

In Africa, one in three children does not go to school. Two thirds of the 40 million non-attenders are girls and the illiteracy among women in places such as Mozambique is double that of men.

Yet, as Asia has shown, when girls are educated, they marry later, have fewer children and their incomes rise. Economic productivity grows, infant mortality is halved, deaths in childbirth fall, birth rates slow, child malnutrition is halved, general nutrition and health

improve and the spread of HIV is reduced. Every extra year of education boosts a girl's eventual wages by at least 10 per cent.

For Letenk'iel, it was a 25-minute walk down the hill to the pump but it would take 40 minutes to walk back up with five gallons of water wedged into the small of her back and tied on with a rope of old rag.

Once there were three wells. The eight-metre one has dried up. The nine-metre well has a little brackish water at the bottom which even the donkeys refused to drink. The flow from the pump of the 25-metre well had slowed to a painful trickle. There was just barely enough for everyone to drink.

More than 75 per cent of the population of Ethiopia lack access to safe drinking-water. More than 300 million people across Africa drink dirty water daily. Access to clean water would save women and girls walking an average six kilometres a day to fetch water, freeing more time for the family, for school and for productive work. Yet the rich world's aid to the water sector has fallen by 25 per cent since 1996.

Letenk'iel hoisted the water container and swivelled it round to lodge in the small of her back. A friend fastened it in place. When she reached home, Gebremariam was back and, without pause, she began the preparation for lunch. As the others ate, Letenk'iel breastfed the baby. Often this took a long time. Letenk'iel's milk did not flow freely, largely because there was not much food to go around. She coughed - loose and rattling - as she prepared little tasks which could be done as the four-month-old suckled. It was an hour before the child had taken his fill. When his eyes closed, she passed him to Mabraheet who lay him among the blankets.

One in six children in Africa dies before their fifth birthday. Average spending on health per person in Africa in 2001 was between \$13 and \$21; in the developed world it is more than \$2,000 per person per year. African health systems are at the point of collapse after years of massive under-investment.

On a normal afternoon, Letenk'iel would have left the house to join her husband in the field, shifting stones. After the ploughing was done, and the seed sown, it would be her daily job to keep the weeds from the rows of sorghum, because they could not afford that any of the soil's goodness should be wasted nurturing weeds. If the rains came.

Women are the backbone of Africa's rural economy. They grow at least 70 per cent of its food and are responsible for half the animal husbandry. Most of what they earn is spent on the household and children; men, by contrast, spend a significantly higher amount on themselves.

Yet on widowhood many African women lose their meagre assets. A Namibian study showed 44 per cent of widows lost cattle, 28 per cent lost livestock and 41 per cent lost farm equipment in disputes with their in-laws after the death of their husbands. In many African countries, they lose all rights to cultivate their husband's land.

But today was the day for the mother-and-child clinic at the nearest health post. It was a two-hour walk each way. The baby had the rattling cough that he had caught from her. They were offering contraceptives and advice on HIV today too.

Of the 25 million people living with HIV and Aids in Africa, nearly 57 per cent are women. That figure rises to 80 per cent among those aged 15 to 19. Women have a greater biological vulnerability to the virus but the main problem is powerlessness. They are forced into sexual activity earlier, are unable to insist on condoms, have fewer rights and resources to call upon, and are sometimes forced to barter sexual favours to survive. "This is my choice: either I get Aids eventually or my baby starves now," as one Kenyan prostitute put it.

An HIV-positive woman is nearly 10 times as likely to experience violence at the hands of her partner as a woman who does not have the disease. Domestic violence causes more deaths and disability among women aged 15 to 44 worldwide than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war. In at least 20 African countries, more than half the women have also suffered female genital mutilation.

For Letenk'iel, back from the clinic, there was more water to be fetched. Then a meagre evening meal of flat bread, cooked on a large tray over the biscuit-tin stove. After dinner, as Letenk'iel was sitting in the stable, picking the lice from the baby's jumper, and helping Daniel with his homework, she saw a new rip in Azmera's thin and grimy little dress. "How did that happen?"

"It wasn't me," said the pert little six-year-old. "It got old."

Her mother wrapped the child in a blanket and, with the light fading, she sewed the threadbare material, using a strand pulled from the sack of a food-aid bag.

Darkness fell. She ushered the children to their beds, and began the last tidying chores before damping down the fire. She would be up in six hours.

### **Voices from a continent in turmoil**

#### **Hellen Wanjiku, 24, Kenya**

Hellen was born in Korogocho, a large slum on the northern outskirts of Nairobi. She is known as Shiko Babes, and is managing editor of the local community radio station.

She says: "The youth have empowered themselves. We believe we can survive. It is changing our belief and giving us an option. If a youth can get a job then they won't steal."

#### **Amal Achmed Altaib, 19, Sudan**

Amal will never forget the Janjaweed Arab militia attack on her village in Darfur in January last year. She now lives in a refugee camp.

She says: "They came on camels at 10 at night, shooting. Our houses were burnt and animals taken."

### **Ncumisa Kaba, 26, South Africa**

Ncumisa Kaba is one of the young African professional women who see themselves as the "real embodiment" of a better future. She is HIV negative and has regular tests.

She says: "We are not a continent of poverty and flies as we are widely perceived. We are potentially a land of milk and honey."

### **Fatouma Al-Kassoum, Mali**

Fatouma has five children: three boys and two girls. Her husband left her. She was trained by an Oxfam partner, GARI, to tell of the benefits of girls going to school.

She says: "Traditionally most girls marry young. I talk with parents and let them know that it's not good to prevent girls going to school."

### **Beatrice Okot, 38, Uganda**

Displaced by war in Uganda, Beatrice lives in two rooms with her two children. She has HIV and so did her husband. He died in 1994.

She says: "If there was no war, life would be better. We had land and a free house, no shortage of food. I always tell my children to be aware of HIV. They know I'm positive."

### **Serah Wanjiku, 19, Kenya**

For five shillings (4p), Serah sells small bottles of glue to the street children and unemployed of Korogoshi. Serah's parents died of Aids when she was 14.

She says: "I never wanted my life to become this. I have done a hairdressing course. I am not happy to sell glue, but I have to survive."

## **Women: A world apart**

### **Life expectancy**

Africa: 46

UK: 80

**Chance of a girl going to primary school**

Africa: 60 %

UK: 100 %

**Minutes worked per day**

Africa: 590\*

UK: 413

**Female literacy**

Africa: 53.2%

UK: 99.9%

**Births attended by a midwife**

Africa: 43 %

UK: 99 %

**Deaths in childbirth a year (per 100,000)**

Africa: 920

UK: 13

**Women using contraception**

Africa: 15 % \*\*

UK: 84 %

**Average number of children**

Africa: 5.5

UK: 1.7

**Deaths during abortion every year**

Africa: 29,800

UK: 8

### **Female MPs**

Africa: 6.5% (Chad) 49% (Rwanda)

UK: 18.5 %

### **Professional and technical staff who are women**

Africa: 46%

UK: 32%

### **Women with HIV**

Africa: 13,200,000

UK: 21,000

### **Give women their rights - and raise a continent**

What's black and white and (RED) all over? We live in a world of increasing sophistication and interconnectedness in which the issues of international politics can seem dauntingly complex. It is as well then sometimes to remind ourselves - as we do today with this second (RED) edition of The Independent where half of the revenue the newspaper makes today will be donated to the Global Fund to fight Aids - that there are some stark simplicities too. And that when it comes to Africa some things are, all too literally, black and white - as the scale of global inequality dramatically reveals.

The statistics we set out in our coverage today tell a simple enough story. Had the white woman on our front page really been a black African she would work at least three hours longer every day; she would most likely be illiterate, be 200 times more likely to die in childbirth - and be a million times more likely to be HIV positive. Based on average expectancy, her life would be almost over rather than not yet halfway through.

The (RED) project is one response to this shocking disparity. Through it a number of multinational companies commit to giving a cut of their profits on certain tailored products to fighting Africa's top killer disease. All the consumer has to do is buy. It is a great idea - allowing ordinary people to do their bit to help, via a daily part of their everyday lives - shopping for a better world.

But we all know it will take more than a bit of enlightened shopping to right some of the wrongs of the people of Africa. Consider the continent's women - who produce 70 per cent of Africa's food and yet own less than 1 per cent of its property. Addressing their

plight is not just a question of natural justice. It is what will drive the process of development in Africa.

Women are the backbone of Africa's economy. They do most of the farming, herding and selling. They cook, fetch water, gather firewood, rear children and care for the sick and elderly. They are the pivots of the informal economy; a survey in Benin showed that women traders represent more than 90 per cent of the informal economy. Yet women are excluded from decision-making or owning land because they are often illiterate, they lack confidence and they have no political clout. Many African governments - run by men - let women's rights to education, healthcare, legal status, political representation and fair pay languish at the bottom of their list of priorities.

Nowhere is this clearer than in education. All the studies show that, when girls are schooled, everything improves. They earn more money. Infant mortality drops; health and nutrition improve. The spread of HIV is reduced. Economic productivity rises. Money spent on the education of girls is the strongest investment in the next generation. Some progress has been made on education in Africa. The number of children in primary school increased by 48 per cent between 1990 and 2001. But girls are still lagging behind.

Africa's governments need to set education as a priority. But they cannot do it without the money. It will cost about \$10bn (£5.3bn) a year to get all Africa's children, girls included, in school. This is but a fraction of the increase the rich world pledged at Gleneagles last year, saying it would lift aid to \$50bn a year by 2010. Now they need to deliver. In May, Gordon Brown announced that the UK would allocate £8.5bn towards that over the next 10 years. That is about 15 per cent of the amount required. Other rich nations must provide matching sums.

It sounds like a lot of money. But \$10bn a year is roughly what the world lays out in a week on global military spending. Some things really are that black and white.