

This month we celebrated International Women's Day on March 8th. It's a day that celebrates the achievements of women, but it also gives us a chance to pause and think about the challenges that women still face all around the world.

As a man, I can't pretend to know how half the world's population, how women, experience the world. But I can listen. All of us can listen.

The COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately impacting women around the world. In fact, disasters in general take a heavier toll on women. On this episode we are going to hear from two women who will share about how they have experienced or seen the effects of the pandemic.

I'm Scott Campbell and you're listening to Relief, Development and Podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN AGAIN)

Scott: Etaferaw (Eee tauf er o) Anke (Awn Ka) is a single mother living with HIV in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. Etaferaw supports herself and her daughter with her small clothing business. The spread of COVID-19 meant she couldn't sell clothing like she normally would, making it difficult for her to provide for herself and for her daughter. Most single parent households, like Etaferaw's, are headed by women, and it's harder for them to survive the economic impacts of the pandemic.

Etaferaw received assistance from one of MCC's partners BCDA, which provides people with healthcare, education, economic empowerment and supports people affected by HIV/AIDS. This is especially important now because people with HIV may be more affected by COVID-19 and need to take special precautions.

Our story today was recorded by Rose Shenk, a former MCC Representative in Ethiopia and translated by Bem-net Metafaria (Meta-far-ee-uh), a former IVEP participant. This interview is Bem-net's first time translating for a podcast so you may notice the translation switches between first and third person.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN AGAIN)

Rose Shenk: Okay so I am here talking to Etaferaw beside a busy street in Addis Ababa. Etaferaw is selling used clothing. This is a tiny little shop out on the open on the edge of a four-lane highway that's going up in Toto mountain. So, she has an orange piece of plastic spread out over some rocks and she has her goods on top of the plastic, and it is skirts and socks, some boys' underwear. These are used clothing that she has bought in bulk that she is selling to make an income.

Etaferaw: So, after COVID came we had to stay at home. It was hard, businesses were slowing down so it was hard for people to survive. If I don't sell the clothes and they are sitting at home, I cannot eat. The business is slowing down now so at this time, it's hard.

A lot of people are taking care of themselves and staying safe but there are some people, and they say, "God will protect us." So that's what they are saying but God will protect you when you protect yourself first.

Rose: Etaferaw, I am wondering if you can tell me how BCDA has helped you deal with these challenges of COVID that you've been describing?

Etaferaw: I am HIV positive so it has been hard, for my husband has died so it was hard to raise my child. So through COVID they're supporting us a lot through this COVID time. We're getting a lot of support. So, there are a lot of HIV positive people so it might affect them a lot other (more) than other people. So, they have given us education about COVID for everyone that's being supported. They have given us the necessary information and they have trained us how to take care of ourselves from the virus.

They get masks and sanitizer every month and to make food they get salt, they get oil for their food, so it's a lot of support from BCDA every month.

I want to thank God in this time, I thank God. COVID you can't see it, it is on the air you can't see it with your own eyes, so it is hard to take care but still I am taking care of myself.

Rose: Thank you Etaferaw and our translator was Bemnet Metafaria (Meta-far-ee-uh). Thank you so much to both of you on this cold and rainy day in Addis.

Scott: That was Etaferaw Anke, participant with MCC's partner, BCDA, Beza Community Development Association

Our guest today is Annie Loewen, one of MCC's humanitarian assistance coordinators. She works with MCC's staff around the world to help plan emergency response projects.

We're going to be talking about how COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting women and what MCC is doing to address this issue. Welcome, Annie! I am so glad you can join us.

Annie: Thanks! It's great to be here.

Scott: So for your thesis in your Master's degree it focuses on how women are disproportionately impacted by disasters and their aftermath. What drew you to this topic?

Annie: That's a good question. About ten years ago I was working with MCC in Rwanda and violence just over the border in eastern Congo meant that large numbers of refugees were crossing over the border to find safety. And I was able to go with one of our MCC partners to talk to a group of men and women who had just been displaced, and I realized how little we hear women's voices and how we don't actively seek guidance of these women when we are making decisions about how best to respond to the circumstances that are impacting their lives and the lives of their families. It really just brought that to light to me, how these disasters are happening around the world, but we don't often hear the distinct perspective of women in those disasters.

Scott: What did you discover in your research?

Annie: Often when we think of disasters we kind of assume that the impact is felt equally by both men and women and we assume that the risk factors are the same but what is most surprising is that often is not the case. The reality is that men and women don't always experience disaster or crisis in the same way. The risks that they face are often different or at least unequal.

For instance, in a hurricane or a typhoon we would assume that women would have the same risk of injury or loss of life as men, but often when we look at the data afterwards we see that women are more likely to be injured or even killed and this is often because women's roles and experiences are different. Cultural norms may prevent young girls from learning how to swim or climb trees. Women may not have access to radios that would let them know that they should be seeking shelter. Women may not even be able to leave the house without having a male member of the family with them.

And with this current pandemic we might assume the same thing – that men and women face the same level of unemployment or income loss, the same kind of physical or mental health challenges, but as more and more data is coming out we are seeing that that is not actually the case. We know that women are often employed in a much more volatile employment sector. They don't have a social safety net. They don't have the ability to save as well as a single man might have. But we're not actively working at trying to minimize those risks pre-emptively. If we were able to adapt our approach we could actually take a look at what are the pressures that women are facing, what are the things that are making them

disproportionately more vulnerable to crisis and work proactively to try to minimize those impacts.

Scott: How has COVID-19 impacted the domestic, economic and social life for women?

The International Labour Organization estimates that 88 percent of caregiving positions in the world are filled by women, that is front-line workers like nurses and personal care workers, health care attendants, so women are experiencing higher rates of infection of COVID-19 because they are taking care of sick people. Women are also more likely to be employed in retail and hospitality, selling in local markets or working in textile markets where work cannot be done remotely, so there is an increased risk of illness there as well.

On top of that women are feeling increased demands of caregiving in their families. If someone falls ill, or if children are unable to go to school, those caregiving demands are going to fall on women. Before the pandemic it was estimated that for every one hour of unpaid domestic work provided by men in the household, women would be providing three hours. With the pandemic, we are seeing that those numbers are at least double of what they were previously. So women are facing pressure to leave their jobs because they simply don't have the time.

Those increased pressures at home have also meant that we are seeing significant increases in violence, domestic violence and intimate partner violence, and this is also being seen across the world. Here in Canada some domestic violence crisis lines have been reporting increases of up to 50 percent increase in their call volumes compared to pre-pandemic. A recent report by the International Rescue Committee conducted a survey of women across 15 African countries and they found that women are reporting up to 73 percent increase in intimate partner violence and 32 percent increase in the levels of early child marriage for young girls.

These increases in violence are driven by household stress from lockdowns and loss of income, increased checkpoints and security personnel which pose dangers to women who are leaving their homes. Increased need for water for hygiene practices means that more women are taking trips to collect water and a third of women and girls experience harassment while they are walking to collect that water. The physical and the emotional impacts of this kind of violence combined with the social stigma that women face for being identified as a survivor have life-long impacts and these are situations that are not easily addressed, and nor can they be easily reversed. So it permeates all aspects of life for women.

Scott: Earlier this year, UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted that “COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights.” How does this line up with what you’ve seen in your research?

Annie: Yeah, that's going to be a very accurate statement of what we've seen. Even here in Canada we're seeing that employment figures for women are closer to what they were three decades ago and that's a very significant loss. The same impact is being seen in countries around the world where a lot of women are employed in the hospitality sector or retail sector or completely informal areas such as trading in local markets that are being shut down to prevent the spread of disease, leaving many of those women without access to income. Socially women are feeling more isolated with restrictions on movement and having to stay home to take care of children who might otherwise be in school. Women are just generally less present in public spaces. Their voices are not being heard in their communities. Young girls are not in school and are likely to have a more difficult time returning to school than their male counterparts once the pandemic is over, because they have taken on caregiving roles in the home or have found employment to help their families. If we are not able to minimize these impacts and work at regaining this lost ground, this will have a very long impact as we move forward.

Scott: Why should these impacts on women worldwide be a concern for everyone?

Annie: That's a really good question. Often the way we talk about women is to describe them as this niche category or as a group that is separate from the bigger picture, but the reality is that women make up half of the world's population, women constitute 40 percent of the global labor force and these are not marginal or niche numbers by any account.

Scott: How are things better for everyone when women are cared for?

Annie: Obviously in a lot of cases women are the central hub of the home and they take care of everybody. It is a social norm for a lot of cultures that women are taking care and are providing help for the elderly members of the family as well as children. They are making sure that all the little tasks get done every day; and more and more the global economy and the structures we are working with, women need to work in order for their families to thrive and for them to succeed.

So over the past 30 years as women have been gaining more freedom and more rights to things like land ownership and access to different education and economic opportunities we're seeing that malnutrition rates for children go down. We're seeing, on the whole, the household has more access to income that isn't designated only to food or rent. It's allowing people to get a better education. It's allowing communities to have more open and free discussion on topics, and those are really significant gains. And thinking about how this pandemic is isolating women away from those areas where they've already contributed a lot and already made significant gains, that is a very serious impact as we're looking forward.

Scott: How is MCC and our partners working to address these challenges?

Annie: I think for MCC and for our partners, like for many organizations, this pandemic has really shone a light on the gaps that have existed in our programming when it comes to providing women with tools and support. And our partners have worked to include a lot of the basic things like basic hygiene facilities and adapting our ongoing program to be able to safely work in insuring that social distancing, working with smaller groups, and providing community sessions to inform people about COVID-19 and how to prevent the spread of disease.

We have partners who are working on improving their ability to respond to the needs of survivors of gender-based violence or domestic violence by connecting them with healthcare and counseling services and working with communities with men and boys to talk about domestic violence and the harmful impacts it is. Our partners are becoming more aware of the labor burden women carry and are looking for ways to ensure that women are able to equally participate in our programing.

So things like ensuring that child-care options are given to women when attending training or even providing training more informally as women are working in their gardens to reduce the time that they would otherwise need to use to attend a more formal training session. Many of our partners are providing ongoing food assistance and cash transfers to families who have lost employment or facing uncertainty and adapting the work that MCC does in building agricultural and livelihood capacity so that the progress that has been made is not lost.

Scott: Can you give us an example of a particular project that MCC and our partners are working on that maybe paints a picture of what is going on day to day in MCC' programming and in the lives of some women around the world being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19?

Annie: There's a really interesting project that I work on in Congo. It's working with displaced community members, people who have been forced from their homes, originally by violence and now this global pandemic is creating even more obstacles for these families. A large portion of those families are headed by women who are taking care of all their children plus possibly other children that they've taken in.

And MCC is working with our local partner there, the Mennonite Church of Congo, to provide not only immediate food assistance needs but also to provide women with access to land and agricultural training to grow their own food for the future, to work at a community level to raise awareness of violence against women and women's equality and the very harmful impacts it has. Our partners are spaces for women specifically to seek help and support when they need it.

We often forget that even though COVID is a global crisis and the impact is being felt everywhere, it is being felt even more severely by the people who are also experiencing other types of crisis like violence and displacement or the impact of natural disasters. Our partners are working really hard to adapt their programming both to address the impact of COVID-19 along with other serious concerns that exist among the people they are working with.

Scott: When you think about the programs that MCC and our partners are offering, the work that's coming across your desk every day, how do you see these programs and this work counteracting the long-term negative impacts of COVID-19?

Annie: The hope is that these programs can keep women engaged in our programming and as I mentioned before, keep the impact of COVID-19 as minimal as possible to prevent that loss of knowledge, that loss of momentum, the ground that has been gained that women have been working so hard to achieve over the past several decades. If we can provide food assistance or cash transfers, if we can try to build community support networks and prevention strategies to end violence against women, if we can provide training opportunities — then we can not only support women currently when they are in the most need but also set up those women for a greater chance of success once the more severe phase of this global pandemic begins to give way.

Scott: If you're like me, you're deeply impacted by the work you are privileged to do with MCC, and those are words I use to describe to friends and family about the work I get to do. I also find that my work impacts the rest of my life and the lenses I see my family through, my church life through, how I view what's going on in my community. Can I assume that the work you do impacts how you view life as whole?

Annie: I think that when you work so closely with people who are vulnerable, who are experiencing tragedy, and trying to support that work, it follows you everywhere. You can't escape it. Especially now since having my own kids, those interactions with mothers in Lebanon who have been displaced from war in Syria, those conversations that I've had with women in Nepal who are trying to create a better community atmosphere for their young children — you think about those things as you go through your day and as you're falling asleep at night — the ways that you can help, the ways you feel helpless. It's not a thing you can easily forget and nor do you want to because it informs the way that I interact with people on a daily basis, that sense of compassion, that sense that we all have a responsibility to help each other, to try to make the world a better place, not only for our own children, but for everybody else's children as well.

Scott: I can hear in your voice that this is important work for you.

Annie: Yeah, absolutely. For sure.

We have a question from a listener, Paula Holtzinger and she asks, “What feedback mechanisms are being used right now to give voice to beneficiaries of MCC’s programs? And how is this feedback being integrated into informing current and future projects?”

Annie: This is something that MCC and we are always looking for ways to improve and expand on. MCC’s local partners are working in the community. They’re trying to design a project. We try to work with them to assess the local community needs by actively seeking active community participation. That will look like asking individuals or women’s groups, groups of men, groups of children: “What are the problems they are facing and what are the supports they need that we can provide to help them overcome those problems?” We work with local leadership to prioritize what they’re concerned about and working with local governments and non-profits in the area to make sure we’re filling those gaps that aren’t being filled by anybody else.

We’re also working with partners at a project level to refine formal complaint mechanisms, so ensuring that in each project there is a way for the beneficiaries of our project, the participants in our project, to be able to say how they feel about it. So whether that’s having one of our partner staff members doing household visits and talking with people on a regular basis or whether that’s a phone number for phone calls or What’sApp messages to be collected and examined, and looking at how we can improve the project based on that feedback. We’ve also started doing more evaluations after a project is finished where we go back and talk to the beneficiaries about their experiences and how that project did or did not help them, what we could have done differently in that situation. And then we use those responses when we are thinking about what we’re going to do in that community in the future.

Scott: Annie, I really appreciate you speaking with me today. Thanks so much for taking some time.

Annie: Absolutely, thanks so much for having me.

That was one of MCC’s humanitarian assistance coordinator, Annie Loewen.

Next month, I’m speaking with Katherine Smith, MCC’s Border/Migration & Communications coordinator about how COVID-19 is impacting asylum seekers at the American border.

If you had a chance to sit down with Katherine and ask her a question, what would you want to know? Send us your questions by email to podcast@mcc.org and we might feature your question on the show.

This episode of Relief, development and podcast was produced by Elizabeth Miller-Derstine and the head producer is Emily Loewen. Thank you again to Annie Loewen for speaking with me today, to Etaferaw Anke for sharing her story, to Bemnet Metafaria for translating and Rose Shenk for gathering the tape. And special thanks to listener Paula Holtzinger who submitted questions for Annie.

If you like this podcast, it would be great if you could subscribe and rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen!

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks, and take good care.

(Music plays us out)