

Peru: economic empowerment of women with newly acquired property rights

This is a Results-Based Initiative which UNIFEM is implementing in partnership with the World Bank and the International Centre for Research on Women. It is one of three economic empowerment projects which the UK National Committee for UNIFEM is supporting this year.

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Alice Fookes visits Lima's women micro-entrepreneurs supported by UNIFEM

Alice Fookes, who leads UNIFEM UK's education programme, describes her recent visit to the Results-Based Initiative in Peru that helps women on low incomes to grow their businesses.



Alice with Luz Vega who sells confectionery and gifts

Villa San Salvador is a vast shanty town south of Lima. There are no paved roads, only dirt tracks where hundreds of noisy little 3-wheeler 'cars' traverse the streets looking for passengers. No one sees the grinding poverty hidden under the thick, choking dust but this is by no means the poorest area in metropolitan Lima.

I had stopped off after a trip to a family wedding in Chile to see for myself one of the economic empowerment projects UNIFEM UK is supporting. My guides were Carmela Cheung, the local UNIFEM representative, and Juan Carlos Vasquez, director of the local implementing partner, CAPLAB (an NGO providing vocational training for people living in poverty).

UNIFEM and CAPLAB had selected a group of 660 women in this area who have moved from the poorest to the next level of poverty. It's one of the things I really like about UNIFEM – it's not helping women in their poverty but out of their poverty. This is the difficult bit that comes after having enough food and water.

The women were chosen for the project for two reasons; they own the property rights to their homes and are all registered as micro-entrepreneurs. The grand title belies the reality. These tiny businesses are run either in the local covered market or from home. Items on sale range from chickens (including feet sold separately) and one type of fish only to juices, sweets and basic cleaning products. The idea is that women can use their property rights to access formal credit and allow their businesses to grow. The Peruvian Government began formalising informally owned property because research showed that if women own their own properties they have more time to study or take on paid work. Previously, women and children were expected to stay at home and 'guard' the property.

I was taken to visit six beneficiaries of this project. All had been able to take part in the CAPLAB training, either for 3 months or for 6 months. I noted with interest that the training covers inter-personal skills (including improving self-esteem just as vocational courses in the UK do) as well as simple business management skills such as building client relationships, stock control and working with the local authority to improve conditions in the covered market area. I asked Yolanda Paredes, who runs a tiny butcher's shop, what had helped her most. She told me that she had learned how to make better use of her market space and is now selling earrings in a corner previously unused. A simple and effective answer! Another woman, Zoila Uceda, runs a juice making shop with very little stock. She told me that learning about client relationships really helped her so that customers would return to her and not to any other 'Jugeria'. She hopes to take over a neighbouring 'Jugeria' when it becomes available.

Everyone I met, no matter how poor, seemed so optimistic and cheerful. Later, I went on to visit three other projects in Lima, coordinated by UNIFEM, which link in to this one. The visit has given me renewed impetus and inspiration to carry on working to raise funds to support UNIFEM's detailed and considered programmes.

In Villa San Salvador I witnessed the main principles underpinning women's empowerment actually in operation. I am delighted to report that UNIFEM, by providing women with leadership skills, education and training, and by promoting equal opportunities, access to health, safety and freedom from violence, is indeed

offering them purposeful, relevant, concrete steps out of poverty. In Lima, I also learned about the crucial importance of timely monitoring and data gathering. It may sound bureaucratic but if programmes like the one I witnessed are to be replicated on a large scale, using large sums of public/private money, ongoing performance indicators are absolutely central to the process. UNIFEM has the know-how and tools to do it.

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