



The theme for 2021 International Women's Day was #ChooseToChallenge, spreading awareness on how we can all challenge and call out gender bias and inequality.

CIFF honoured the day by showcasing how CIFF colleagues and partners continue to help overcome barriers for women, and seek progress towards a future of gender equality and equity.

Read on to see how women in international development are enabling women and girls to thrive.

How do you
#ChooseToChallenge?



Faustina Fynne-Nyame, Executive Director, Africa, CIFF



"I come from a very humble background. My mum had my sister and me at a very young age. My grandmother, who at the time had just emigrated to England, could barely read or write but understood the **real value of education** and adopted us to live with her. She knew that to break this cycle of poverty and dependence on marriage, my sister and I needed a good education. Coming directly from a village in Ghana to a small rural town in England, I spoke little to no English at the time, but I could see how hard my grandmother worked to provide us with an education. Without my grandmother's tenacity and unwavering commitment, I would not be where I am today. Every single day, I strive to give other women and girls the opportunity I got.

CIFF's **Girl Capital** work as we know it today was born out of the realisation that supporting the girls' sexual and reproductive health has to start with education. I had spent my entire career in the reproductive health space, where we believed that if women have access to SRH facilities and products they would use them. But it became clear to me that providing commodities and services as the solution was not enough – this was merely putting a plaster on the problem.

As I listened to young women and girls, I realised they aspired for **agency and choice**. A significant part of this was showing them a pathway that would allow them to decide when to have children. And how do we give girls agency and choice? Through education. We need to invest in the whole girl because that is what she is entitled to, and that is what she deserves."

Manjula Singh, Director of Girl Capital, CIFF

"A little girl was born into a conservative family in India's biggest state, Uttar Pradesh. She was one of 3 girls and 2 boys. This girl had a visionary and courageous person in her life who **chose to challenge the prevailing social norm** of girls not being educated fully, getting married early, having babies quickly, not working, and not being equal members of society.

The courageous person in this little girl's life decided his daughters would get as much education, opportunity, and rights as his sons. He did this because he **knew it was the right thing to do for them**, but also the **wise thing to do for society and the country**. That little girl was me and that hero was my father. I am determined to help as many girls and women like as I can – and I am fortunate to be able to do so even in my workplace.

The Girl Capital strategy which I developed and lead for CIFF is amongst the most fulfilling things I have done in my career. Girl Capital aims to provide education for all girls, nurture skills development especially life skills for girls and young women, and foster income generation opportunities for all women, as well to tackle the social norms that hold girls and women down."





CIEF PARTNERS

Aishatu Ahmed, Trachoma Case Finder, Nigeria

Female case finders are vital to tackling the spread of [trachoma](#), the world's number one cause of blindness by infection. Part of their job is to travel around communities, to encourage people with advanced trachoma - a disease which disproportionately affects women - to undergo surgery, the only known way to stop the condition from worsening.

"Because of my track record distributing the oral polio vaccine in Bauchi State, Nigeria, I was successfully selected as a trachoma case finder. After becoming disabled as a child, I decided to be a trachoma case finder because I did not want anyone else to become disabled like me. I am calling on all women who are thinking about becoming trachoma case finders.

I say come, **join hands and work together to help people** - they should not have to go blind. Let us help them to get surgery."

Read more on Aishatu's story [here](#).



Ellen Agler, CEO, The End Fund

“The END Fund is dedicated to controlling and eliminating the five most common neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), which continue to affect 1 in 5 people globally.



There has been increasing recognition of the **disproportionate impact of some NTDs on the health of girls and women**: for example, urinary schistosomiasis infection could increase up to four-fold the risk of young women and teenagers contracting HIV when they become sexually active. As a woman leader in this sector, eliminating NTDs is near and dear to my heart because of a shared vision those at risk of NTDs can live healthy and prosperous lives.

During the pandemic last year, we leveraged our network and resources to continue helping protect the vulnerable communities we serve, who were now more at risk due to COVID-19. In my role as a woman leader, **I #ChooseToChallenge inequity**. It is an injustice that many do not have access to fundamental human rights such as water and sanitation. I am thankful to play a role in being part of driving the change. While at times it feels like progress is too slow for our liking, the importance of small steps cannot be understated. Each milestone is worth celebrating as we journey towards a more equitable world.”

“In my role as a woman leader, I #ChooseToChallenge inequity.”

Dr. Emma Waiyaya Medical Advisor, PharmAccess

“I #ChooseToChallenge the status quo in Maternal and Child Health. By taking a systems approach and using mobile phones as a tool to drive change, MomCare empowers pregnant women to **access quality health care** and engages them to be informed decision-makers on their care process for healthy outcomes. This work **challenges the gender data gap** in women’s health, especially in Sub Saharan Africa.

As a doctor, I dream of a future where women of all ages, socio-economic backgrounds and cultures are empowered to **participate freely in their healthcare**, leading to better health outcomes.”





Dr. Li Fang, China Country Director, World Resources Institute

“**More than half** of China’s environmental NGOs’ staff are women. They support the government’s green transformation, help and monitor companies to achieve more challenging environmental goals, inspire the public to advocate for sustainable consumption, and become an important she-force in the field of sustainable development.

As one of them, I often encourage my female colleagues to discover and fulfil their potential, which is also a reminder to myself. **In China, only the success of women can achieve the success of sustainable development**, and also the success of the NGO collective.”



Dr. Lijin Zhong, Chief of Staff, Energy Foundation China

“I have enjoyed a varied career, from an environmental engineer to a strategic advisor, from university to a global think tank, and then to the climate foundation community.

I am always inspired by exploring new fields and unlocking new skills, and excited to make bigger and better contributions to others and the world. I believe a female environmental scientist can not only take care of her family, but also play **a leading role in addressing global climate change** by staying passionate, inclusive and studious.”



Liz Jarman, CEO, Living Goods

"I have become increasingly sensitive to the importance of challenging gender bias and promoting gender equity, since taking the helm as CEO at Living Goods. Having received many emails from women at Living Goods saying how excited they were to be led by a woman, I realised the responsibility I had for them. Working to strengthen community health systems has deepened my passion for **elevating women's voices and needs** in the development agenda."



Women comprise 70% and 90% of the government community health workers (CHWs) Living Goods supports in Kenya and Uganda, respectively, and we exclusively serve women of reproductive age and their children. This has influenced how we think about our programmes, such as developing client-centred counselling methods that **speak to the needs of women at different reproductive ages**. Living Goods has also entered into a rich Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) journey to ensure that our policies, practices and procedures reflect our commitment to an equitable and diverse workplace, and to create an environment where staff can truly bring their full selves to their work."

"Working to strengthen community health systems has deepened my passion for elevating women's voices and needs."

Dr. Medge Owen, Founder and Director, Kybele

"During my time teaching obstetric anesthesiology and neonatal resuscitation in Turkey, I was struck by the differences in care and the lack of pain management options for women. As I continued to work in other low-resource countries, more and more I realised the number of **disparities impacting women's morbidity**. In some countries, women dread going into a hospital to have a baby because they know that they or their baby may not come out alive."

I strongly believe that **the right to safe childbirth is universal** and this is why I founded Kybele in 2001. Kybele's partnerships and medical volunteers are making a difference, as we work alongside medical providers and administrators to build relationships. We listen and learn to understand **specific situations and needs**, and then in partnership develop a plan to improve outcomes. Our research shows that our approach is working – changing and improving birth outcomes, reducing foetal and maternal deaths, all while operating within a cost-effective framework."

Catch up on a [2020 podcast interview](#) where Dr. Owen shares insights into women's vulnerabilities during childbirth.





Poonam Muttreja, CEO, Population Foundation of India

“At the Population Foundation of India, we believe that the best way to ensure that there is change which is deep-rooted, which challenges the patriarchy and helps us meet objectives is when

individuals are urged and nudged to claim and demand change and feel the need to empower themselves. So we challenge gender biases and stereotypes through our work across programmes at three levels: individual, societal and systemic. We look at impacting girls’ and women’s ability to claim their rights and their power to act for themselves and others.

As a woman leader, I **#ChooseToChallenge regressive social norms** that make it difficult for girls and women to seek out the kind of health services they desire. We do our best to keep women and girls’ choices central to the conversation and ensure that **they are empowered to make autonomous decisions about their own bodies and reproduction.** I firmly believe that it is only by inspiring them to dream and giving them the power and tools to plan that they will realise their full potential and their own futures. Only then can we hope to achieve larger goals, of the community, nation and the world.”

“As a woman leader, I **#ChooseToChallenge regressive social norms.**”

Safeena Husain, CEO, Educate Girls

“I chose to lead an organisation with the bold ambition to get every girl into school and learning. If we don’t have an **intentional focus on the daily, systemic and structural inequality faced by girls** – if we don’t educate our women and girls, the very people who are holding up half the sky – then we will fail to meet the SDGs and fail to build a sustainable future for our communities and our planet.

I **#ChooseToChallenge patriarchy** and I choose to challenge poverty. Where they intersect, that is where you will find the largest populations of girls – stuck at home, in domestic roles, working in the fields and married as children, denied their basic human rights. But **if we educate girls, they will be the levers of change** for improved health indicators, reduced carbon emissions, increased GDP and the education of the next generation.”



Savior Mendin, Grand Bassa Country Manager, Last Mile Health (Liberia)

“**Women are disproportionately impacted by crisis** - and they must be prioritised in the COVID-19 response. As Shirley Chisholm said, ‘**if they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.**’

We need many more folding chairs now to ensure women are decision-makers on the response and can lead the recovery.”



Sophie Hodder, Country Director, Marie Stopes Kenya

“Around the world, **20 million adolescents** want contraception but are unable to access it. Yet, it only costs three cents per day to protect a young woman from unintended pregnancy for a whole year, giving her the vital chance to finish her education or even save her life.

The next decade presents the global community with daunting challenges from gender inequality to the climate crisis. As we rebuild post the COVID-19 pandemic, Marie Stopes is committed to addressing these challenges. How? By further **developing our female leadership** and **expanding reproductive choice** to create a healthier, more resilient and equal future for all. There is still a long way to go – but seeing women leaders who truly represent us globally gives me hope and ambition for the future.”

Catch up on a recent interview with [Sophie Hodder on NTV Kenya](#) discussing young women’s access to family planning.





Yunwen Bai, Executive Director, Green Innovation Hub

“While women have always been on the verge of traditional science and the political sphere, **they are “trailblazers” in environmental protection.** Women have a more direct connection with the environment than men. Women are more aware of land, water and forests, more respectful and protective of natural resources, and we pay more attention to the protection of the future of nature and the environment.

Women have always played a leading role in safeguarding our planet. From the beginning of environmental awareness in the 1960s to the strong environmental movement today, women worldwide have actively participated in various ways, becoming engaged in nature research, environmental education and lobbying the government on environmental legislation.”

#ChooseToChallenge

