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The Impact of Rural Poverty on Women's Health Outcomes in Ethiopia: A Review of *A Walk to Beautiful*

Christine A. Wernet, Ph.D.

Film Information

Title: *A Walk to Beautiful*

Year: 2008

Length: 54 minutes

Language/subtitles: English and various Afroasiatic languages (such as Somali, Oromo, and Amharic) with English subtitles

Producers: Mary Olive Smith and Steven Engel

Directors: Mary Olive Smith and Amy Bucher

Review

It is estimated that 2-3 million women worldwide suffer from the debilitating effects of birth injuries such as fistulas, a tear between the birth canal and the bladder or the rectum. This hidden epidemic is both preventable and highly curable, yet poor women, especially those who live in the rural areas of less developed countries, continue to be profoundly, negatively impacted physically, psychologically, and socially by this condition. The moving PBS documentary, *A Walk to Beautiful*, highlights this global problem.

Fistulas can occur after an obstructed labor. In rural areas of less developed countries, hospitals and medical clinics are scarce, and when there are complications with births, women can be in labor for many days. As a result, women can develop a fistula and experience urinary and/or fecal incontinence. When this occurs women are shunned socially, and lose not only their livelihood, but oftentimes their families, and even their will to live. Inaccessibility of health care, which results in an inability to work and function in one's community, is a serious violation of human rights.

Poor women in less developed countries are susceptible to fistulas not only because of a lack of access to hospitals, but also poverty and malnutrition. In these countries, women and girls are often responsible for heavy manual labor, such as carrying large containers of water and doing agricultural work. When this labor is combined with poor nutrition, girls do not grow properly and tend to be small for their age. Not only are they small in height, but they tend to have small pelvises, which can result in obstructed delivery during childbirth. Additionally, poor girls in countries like Ethiopia are often married off and give birth at a young age, making child birth more difficult and fistulas more common.

A Walk to Beautiful tells the story of three women in Ethiopia, Ayehu, Almaz, and Wubete, who suffer from fistulas. Ayehu lives in a rural village that is a six-hour walk away from the nearest road. She reports that she was married off at the age of eight or nine. While giving birth to her second child she experienced complications and was in labor for a week. The child was stillborn and the long labor left Ayehu with urinary incontinence. Her husband divorced her and the village shunned her. She suffered for six years before she found out about the fistula hospital in the capital Addis Ababa and made the twenty-three hour journey, by foot and by bus, for treatment. The fistula was easily stitched up, and Ayehu had a full recovery. She was able to return to her village and resume her life.

Dr. Catherine Hamlin, co-founder of the hospital for fistula patients, explains that these women are not welcome in regular hospitals that deal with more urgent problems. She points out that when women with fistulas show up at the gates of hospitals in Ethiopia they are often turned away by the guards because they are poor and have a stench.

The women in the film talk about the extreme psychological trauma that they experience because of the way they are treated in society. The stench and constant leakage that comes with

the incontinence leaves them as social outcasts, even from their own families, and they talk regularly about taking their own lives as the only solution to their problems if they are not cured.

According to the film, the main causes of this debilitating problem are a lack of food and health services. At the time of filming, there were 146 gynecologists working in Ethiopia, a country of approximately 77 million. The vast majority of these doctors were located in the cities, leaving rural women completely neglected.

A Walk to Beautiful is an insightful 54 minute film that deserves our attention. This moving, high quality documentary graphically depicts human rights violations, shedding light on a hidden problem that is a reality for millions of woman around the world. It could be used in a variety of sociology classes such as demography, social stratification, global social issues, gender, and introduction to sociology. It could also be used to spur research and new policies to address these problems.

Christine A. Wernet, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of South Carolina Aiken. Her research focuses on the intersection of gender and stratification in countries around the world as well as in the United States. As a returned Peace Corps Volunteer, Fulbright scholar, and lecturer on Semester at Sea, her research is informed and guided by her extensive international experience. She has received grants and awards that have furthered her exploration of global inequalities, and she has published numerous articles in national and international journals.

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