

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 9

Issue 10 *October Roundtable: An Annotation of "The Women's Crusade" by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn*

Article 2

---

10-1-2009

## "The Female Entrepreneur"?

Cath Collins

*Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago de Chile*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Education Economics Commons](#), [Education Policy Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Economics Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Collins, Cath (2009) ""The Female Entrepreneur"?", *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 9: Iss. 10, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol9/iss10/2>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

---

## "The Female Entrepreneur"?

### Abstract

I read the "Women's Crusade" article that forms the centerpiece of this month's roundtable with initial interest, gradually turning to a vague sense of disquiet spiced with occasional disbelief. After a few more readings, I tried highlighting the passages that bothered me and stringing them together. Countries "riven by fundamentalism"— that's presumably the Islamic variety, rather than the Christian variant which holds such sway in the US. The suggestion that "everyone from the World Bank to the US [...] Chiefs of Staff to [...] CARE" now thinks that women are the answer to global extremism hides too many questionable assumptions to list: for now, I'll stick with the one that implies those three actors complete the fullest possible range of alternative views.

### Keywords

Human rights, Women's rights, Economics, Education, Capitalism

### Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

### Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

## "The Female Entrepreneur"?

by Cath Collins

I read the "Women's Crusade" article that forms the centerpiece of this month's roundtable with initial interest, gradually turning to a vague sense of disquiet spiced with occasional disbelief. After a few more readings, I tried highlighting the passages that bothered me and stringing them together. Countries "riven by fundamentalism"—that's presumably the Islamic variety, rather than the Christian variant which holds such sway in the US. The suggestion that "everyone from the World Bank to the US [...] Chiefs of Staff to [...] CARE" now thinks that women are the answer to global extremism hides too many questionable assumptions to list: for now, I'll stick with the one that implies those three actors complete the fullest possible range of alternative views.

Basically, the aspects of the article that grated on me have to do with its US-centeredness, not just in the casual and potentially defensible sense of offering North American referents for a predominantly North American readership. Good journalism invites empathy; outstanding journalism does so by helping the reader step into the world of the written-about. This journalism does something different: it reads otherness through the codes of the already-familiar, forcing the strange and potentially challenging into the twin moulds of hopelessly exotic (and faintly distasteful), on the one hand, and folksy "we're all the same at heart-ness," on the other. The point is more serious than a simple stylistic quibble: presumably Kristof and WuDun have a much better and more professional handle than I do on the best ways to reach their target readership. But aside from the medium, how about the message? The message here has a faintly illiberal tinge, best exemplified in the fact that its central redemptive offer is the seductive power of the (North) American dream. The story's heroines after all include Tererai Trent, remarkable principally because her maximum aspiration in life turned out to be a US education. Which, of course—and because this is a heart warming story—she achieved.

The article blithely assures us that Tererai, once she has completed the highly sought after PhD education she is now embarked upon, will be returning to her village to selflessly share the fruits of First World insights with her less fortunate sisters. The reality, as the article's authors really ought to know, is quite different. The brain drain from South to North, in these days of highly competitive, individualizing "value-added" education, is an established phenomenon. So too is the fact that the occasional bootstrap tale adds to, rather than altering, the fundamentally elite nature of this kind of unnatural selection. Individual success and "bettering oneself" may not, say stories of this kind, be the exclusive preserve of the already-privileged few. But they do continue to be the fastest way to the top of the ladder. The ladder, what is more, leans against a pyramid. The kind of individual, go-getter economic success that the article admiringly reports for another of its heroines, Lahore micro-entrepreneur Saima Muhammad, can never by its nature be for anything more than a tiny minority. But the article ducks the big structural questions about whether competitive mini-capitalism really offers the way for whole communities—indeed, a whole gender—to transform their situation for the better.

Saima's success, after all, leads her to become a respected neighborhood institution and even, as she herself acknowledges, a money-lender. Her standing in her family and community skyrockets, but not because anyone, least of all her mother-in-law, has felt moved to recognize

her intrinsic worth. No, Saima's new respectability is based on her status as breadwinner—and could, presumably, be reversed if things start to go badly on the small business front. Meanwhile, we are not told whether Saima plans to share her good fortune with other women. Does the neighborhood money lender give preferential rates? Does she see herself as a link in a chain of challenge and transformation of unjust structures, or does she simply see a way out for herself and her family?

This article begs at least as many questions as it raises, but to my mind the falsest note it strikes has to do with the argument that women's status as a legitimate development priority is not inherent. Rather, they are a convenient vehicle for targeting because they are responsible, family-centred—self-sacrificing, therefore—and, even better, potential capitalists too.

---

*Cath Collins has been associate lecturer in politics at the Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago de Chile since October 2007. She was previously Latin America Research Fellow at Chatham House London (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), before which she lectured in the politics of human rights in Latin America at the Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London. She has lived and worked as a youth and community organizer in Chile, Brazil, Bolivia and the UK.*