AGENTS of CHANGE

How Heller students make their mark in the developing world

The Oldest Magic Show | Iranian History in Architecture | Technology and Global Warming
When the Hotel Montana collapsed January 12 in a massive earthquake in Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince, Ann Varghese, MS’09, was plunged into darkness and enveloped in concrete dust and shards. Moments before, the development worker had been standing at the hotel’s front desk making impromptu dinner plans with colleagues. They had spent the day discussing the logistics of implementing a nationwide drug distribution program for neglected tropical diseases. In an instant, the Kansas native and four others were buried alive beneath five stories of concrete rubble.

“We were all in a little compartment; it was really amazing, but the space was made for us,” says Varghese. “Behind us was the front desk, on the other three sides were concrete beams that had fallen, and the ceiling was right above us. If we had been six inches to the right or to the left, we would have been completely crushed. The five of us were contained, but there was no place to go.”

Thus began a harrowing ordeal that tested Varghese physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Without water or the ability to communicate with the outside world—almost the only sign of life she heard was the occasional whirring helicopter rotor slicing the air—Varghese and her colleagues were trapped in a three-foot-high cement cavern whose stability they worried about constantly. Dehydration and despair

Through the first night, the group believed they would be rescued any moment. But as the hours wore on, Varghese, growing severely dehydrated, sank into despair, her spirits lifted briefly by praying and singing aloud with the others. On the cusp of her third night she feared she wouldn’t survive until morning. Soon after, they heard the voices of French firefighters coming to their rescue. It took five hours to extricate four of the group, who were pulled by their legs while lying on their backs, through an excruciatingly small passageway the rescuers made for them. After fifty-five hours in the rubble, Varghese was the last to be pulled out. Two died due to severe injuries, one in a hospital.
An Uncommon Resolve

Years before the term “sustainable international development” was coined, Heller was training students to take on entrenched social problems wherever they occurred.

“...this was a test of our physical strength, of our faith, of our commitment to this work,” says the thirty-one-year-old, who spent six years in international development, including two years as a health volunteer in Cameroon with the Peace Corps, before earning a master’s in international health policy and management at Heller. “It’s not easy to choose this work or stick with it, but I cannot see myself doing anything else.”

Despite the trauma, Varghese—after visiting her family in Kansas and returning to her own home in Baltimore—immediately went back to work at IMA World Health, a nonprofit that provide health-care services and supplies in the developing world. “Part of my recovery is to move forward in Haiti,” she says. As soon as rebuilding efforts allow, she will return to the island nation.

Heller’s value proposition

You hear that kind of do-or-die dedication among Heller alumni and students a lot—probably because Heller has always been fueled by the proposition that social justice, whether through mass inoculations, universal health care, or youth programs, is achievable in the United States and globally. Years before the term “sustainable international development” was coined, Heller was training students to take on entrenched social problems wherever they occurred.

“When our students graduate, they take with them a state-of-the-art intellectual and practical tool kit to help them solve social problems,” says Dean Lisa Lynch. “The basic value proposition of Heller hasn’t really changed over the decade. This school is very much focused on generating knowledge that is of immediate use to policymakers and practitioners in the social-policy field.”

The established domestic research areas—in health and mental health policy, asset building, children, youth and family, disabilities, and behavioral health—continue to fuel the Heller enterprise, and, combined with newer international research, bring in more than $11 million annually in grants. But the school has witnessed enormous growth in its educational mission over the last decade through its sustainable international development (SID) programs, which combine graduate training in sustainable, just models of development with professional internships. Increasingly, international students view graduate-level training and analytical skills as prerequisites to effectively lift their countries out of poverty and environmental degradation.

Launched by professor and SID director Lawrence Simon and a small group of faculty in the mid-1990s, the SID programs, offering an MA in international health policy and management and an MA in sustainable international development, mushroomed from five students the first year to 247 this year. Made up of one-third students to take on international health policy and management at Heller. "It’s not easy to choose this work or stick with it, but I cannot see myself doing anything else."


**After several years, they had raised enough money to send Sebiyam to teacher-training college in Tamale. That’s when he discovered the importance of empowering women. As a student Planned Parenthood volunteers, he spread an urgently needed message about family planning, reproductive health, and HIV to women in the community. “I wanted them to look beyond the small window of their experience, to think about their future, and not just to dwell on their present circumstances,” he says.**

Since then, Sebiyam founded his own NGO, the Center for Youth and Women’s Empowerment, and in 2008 won a fellowship from the Ford Foundation’s International Fellowships Program (IFP) to study sustainable international development. He applied to the Heller School, he says, because he realized that Brandeis offered a course of study that would equip him better to achieve his dreams.

*These kids were the poorest of the poor and had no access to education,* says Parida, who speaks five languages.

Parida’s greatest inspiration, she says, is her mother, a woman who never had her own bank account or even knew how to write her signature, a requirement to vote in India. “Teaching my mother to write her name was my first step in the world of development work,” says Parida. Next step: armed with her Heller degree, Parida plans to return to India and concentrate on issues that will strengthen the voice of women in Indian society, from enforcing dowry laws to winning recognition of the economic value of housework.

**Moving mountains for maternal health**

Hiwot T. Belay, the daughter of a retired air force colonel and U.N. administrator, grew up in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, and began teaching tribal girls basic literacy. At age twelve, she became a Girl Guide in the Indian equivalent to the Girl Scouts, and began teaching tribal girls basic literacy.

Parida’s greatest inspiration, she says, is her mother, a woman who never had her own bank account or even knew how to write her signature, a requirement to vote in India. “Teaching my mother to write her name was my first step in the world of development work,” says Parida. Next step: armed with her Heller degree, Parida plans to return to India and concentrate on issues that will strengthen the voice of women in Indian society, from enforcing dowry laws to winning recognition of the economic value of housework.

**A feminist in every girl**

The road to women’s empowerment—through literacy, family planning, health education, infant survival, or microloans—winds throughout the developing world. Growing up in Orissa, India’s poorest province, MA candidate Sabita Parida was still a young girl when she developed a strong sense of the injustice of women’s oppression. “I was a little feminist; after all, every girl in India has to become a feminist, every girl has to fight for her rights—even for food,” says Parida, who is also a Ford IFP fellow.

**An early opportunity to assert herself**

An early opportunity to assert herself occurred in fourth grade when Parida overheard her teacher dismiss girls’ mathematical abilities. Not long after, she earned the highest math grade in her state, putting to rest any doubts about her own prowess with numbers. At age twelve, she became a Girl Guide in the Indian equivalent to the Girl Scouts, and began teaching tribal girls basic literacy.

**Sabita Parida works out an educational program in India.**

**Hiwot Belay’s ambition.**

Hiwot T. Belay’s ambition. After several years, they had raised enough money to send Sebiyam to teacher-training college in Tamale. That’s when he discovered the importance of empowering women. As a student Planned Parenthood volunteers, he spread an urgently needed message about family planning, reproductive health, and HIV to women in the community. “I wanted them to look beyond the small window of their experience, to think about their future, and not just to dwell on their present circumstances,” he says.

Since then, Sebiyam founded his own NGO, the Center for Youth and Women’s Empowerment, and in 2008 won a fellowship from the Ford Foundation’s International Fellowships Program (IFP) to study sustainable international development. He applied to the Heller School, he says, because he realized that Brandeis offered a course of study that would equip him better to achieve his dreams.

*These kids were the poorest of the poor and had no access to education,* says Parida, who speaks five languages.

Parida’s greatest inspiration, she says, is her mother, a woman who never had her own bank account or even knew how to write her signature, a requirement to vote in India. “Teaching my mother to write her name was my first step in the world of development work,” says Parida. Next step: armed with her Heller degree, Parida plans to return to India and concentrate on issues that will strengthen the voice of women in Indian society, from enforcing dowry laws to winning recognition of the economic value of housework.

**Moving mountains for maternal health**

Hiwot T. Belay, the daughter of a retired air force colonel and U.N. administrator, grew up in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, and began teaching tribal girls basic literacy. At age twelve, she became a Girl Guide in the Indian equivalent to the Girl Scouts, and began teaching tribal girls basic literacy.

Parida’s greatest inspiration, she says, is her mother, a woman who never had her own bank account or even knew how to write her signature, a requirement to vote in India. “Teaching my mother to write her name was my first step in the world of development work,” says Parida. Next step: armed with her Heller degree, Parida plans to return to India and concentrate on issues that will strengthen the voice of women in Indian society, from enforcing dowry laws to winning recognition of the economic value of housework.

**A feminist in every girl**

The road to women’s empowerment—through literacy, family planning, health education, infant survival, or microloans—winds throughout the developing world. Growing up in Orissa, India’s poorest province, MA candidate Sabita Parida was still a young girl when she developed a strong sense of the injustice of women’s oppression. “I was a little feminist; after all, every girl in India has to become a feminist, every girl has to fight for her rights—even for food,” says Parida, who is also a Ford IFP fellow.

An early opportunity to assert herself occurred in fourth grade when Parida overheard her teacher dismiss girls’ mathematical abilities. Not long after, she earned the highest math grade in her state, putting to rest any doubts about her own prowess with numbers. At age twelve, she became a Girl Guide in the Indian equivalent to the Girl Scouts, and began teaching tribal girls basic literacy.