

Promoting Gender Equity

Lessons from the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program



Despite the growing focus on gender parity in higher education and the fact that in many wealthy nations women outpace men in tertiary enrollments, statistics show that in parts of the developing world, women are still underrepresented. In South and West Asia, for example, only 74 women are enrolled in higher education for every 100 men, whereas in sub-Saharan Africa, there are only 62 women enrolled for every 100 men (UNESCO, 2010).

Even in countries where they have achieved parity, women face other issues of inequity and marginalization, from domestic violence to a lack of female leadership in government. While there are no simple solutions for these complex and wide-ranging problems, promoting advanced education for women—particularly those that are devoted to ameliorating such issues at the grassroots level—is a crucial step. Not only does it build the skills and capacities of those working to promote gender equity, it increases their chances of advancing to positions of power from which they can affect change.

As part of its mission to provide higher education access to marginalized communities, the **Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program** (IFP) sought to address gender inequality by providing graduate fellowships to nearly 2,150 women—50% of the IFP fellow population—from 22 countries in the developing world. This brief explores how international fellowship programs like IFP can advance educational, social, and economic equity for women. In addition to discussing the approach the program took in providing educational access and opportunity to women, the brief looks at two stories of alumnae who have not only benefitted from the fellowship themselves, but who are working to advance gender equity in their home communities and countries.

Activists, advocates, and practitioners can draw upon the strategies and stories that follow to better understand the meaning of gender equity and advance their own efforts to achieve social justice for women and girls worldwide.

The **IFP Alumni Tracking Study Issue Brief Series** explores thematic issues related to IFP and its alumni, including social justice, leadership, community development, equity in education, and economic development. The series is meant to examine IFP through various research and analytical lenses and provide scholars, practitioners, and the IFP community with points of discussion and debate.

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About the IFP fellowship

Launched with the largest single grant in the Ford Foundation's history, from 2001 to 2010 the IFP fellowship provided advanced study opportunities to more than 4,300 individuals from 22 different countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. From its inception, IFP was intended to be much more than a fellowship program. The program not only sought to provide opportunities to individuals that had traditionally been excluded from higher education, it sought to select fellows that would serve as agents of change and advance social justice in their home communities.

The IFP Approach

The IFP fellowship had a bold vision for advancing gender equity and other social justice issues on a global scale. The program not only sought to advance educational access to women in countries where they were traditionally underrepresented; it sought to identify individuals from these groups that had demonstrated a commitment to addressing social problems. This joint goal, as well as the great care the program took in identifying, selecting, and supporting its beneficiaries, helps to characterize the IFP approach. While the IFP strategies described below applied equally to men and women in the program, they are highlighted here because they proved to be particularly effective in securing high program participation rates among women, in enabling women to stay the course and complete their program of study, and to ultimately build upon their IFP experience to tackle gender issues in their home communities.

A contextualized approach to providing access.

The IFP fellowship employed a decentralized administrative structure that relied on an international network of 22 partner organizations. Utilizing this decentralized model allowed the program to be attuned to the specific ways in which marginalization for

women and other disadvantaged groups manifested itself in each national context.

Comprehensive support for women and other marginalized groups. Achieving gender equity in higher education requires an understanding of the unique disadvantages that marginalized communities—women among them—may face. By employing a combination of financial as well as non-financial strategies to support and empower female IFP fellows, the program not only helped women pursue advanced degrees, it ensured that they were equipped with the necessary skills to succeed.

Empowering women (and men) who will empower others. Programs can achieve greater reach by capitalizing on the motivation of their beneficiaries and enhancing their capacity to affect social change. By selecting fellows that had already demonstrated a commitment to promoting gender equity and providing them with additional education and training (as well as moral support), the IFP fellowship enabled alumni to become change agents themselves and have a ripple effect in promoting gender equity in their home communities and countries.

On the Cover

IFP Nigeria alumna **Binta Isah-Ismael** (2002) is one of several alumni who recently participated in a social media campaign designed to spotlight IFP alumni who are working to promote **#GenderEquity**.

Connect with the IFP community on social media and read their **#FordIFPLegacy** stories:

Facebook facebook.com/FordIFP

LinkedIn linkedin.com/company/ford-foundation-international-fellowships-program

Data Snapshot

IFP Alumnae by the Numbers

Fifty percent of IFP alumni are women. The following statistics, drawn in part from our recently completed IFP Global Alumni Survey, give a brief overview of who IFP alumnae are and how the fellowship impacted them.

IFP ALUMNAE BY REGION*

84% of alumnae are living in their home country

Latin America

Brazil
Chile
Guatemala
Mexico
Peru

22%

The Middle East

Egypt
Palestine

22%

Africa
Ghana
Kenya
Mozambique
Nigeria
Senegal
South Africa
Tanzania
Uganda

4%

Asia
China
India
Indonesia
Philippines
Russia
Thailand
Vietnam

57%

Degree Pursued*

85%
Master's degree
or equivalent

15%
Doctoral degree
or equivalent

42
Average
age*

Fields of Study**

27% Social Sciences
18% Education and Communications
16% Development Studies
16% Environment, Health and Applied Sciences
8% Arts and Humanities
7% Law, Governance and Human Rights
4% Natural Science
3% Economics and Business Administration

DEGREE ATTAINMENT and CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Women



Men



97% Degree completion **95%**

76% Employment (Including self-employment) **79%**

31% of women who are employed have positions related to gender issues

ALUMNAE PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY



85% of alumnae feel that their IFP fellowship empowered them as a social justice leader



72% of alumnae see themselves as **role models** for members of their home community



46% of alumnae have created or helped create a **new organization** or new program

40% of these new organizations and programs are related to **gender issues**

Sources:

*IFP alumni population (n = 2,155 women).

**CHEPS 2012 survey data (n= 1,763 women).

IFP Global Alumni Survey, June 2015 (n=1,861; 932 women).

A Focus on Equity from Access to Completion

Of the various disadvantaged groups that IFP sought to attract, women constituted a key demographic for recruitment in almost every country. IFP's decentralized administrative structure allowed it to identify, understand, and address the unique needs of different target groups. Through a network of International Partners (IPs) working in each of the 22 IFP countries, the program conducted extensive research and consultation with local and international experts to determine underserved groups. Gender emerged as a key "exclusion factor" that cut across the range of target groups in each IFP country (Dassin, Enders, & Kottman, 2014). Other important exclusion factors were poverty, race, ethnicity, and residence or origin in a remote or rural area.

In identifying target groups, International Partners also sought to understand the nuances of marginalization for different communities. Part of this in-depth understanding involved identifying ways in which different types of marginalization overlapped with one another. For example, in identifying nomadic tribes in Africa as a target group for recruitment, an International Partner noted that female members of these tribes were particularly marginalized as a result of "deep cultural biases against higher education for females" (Dassin et al., 2014).

As a result of this appreciation for the complex and myriad challenges target groups faced, the fellowship was able to respond to some of the factors that can prevent disadvantaged individuals from pursuing higher education. For some female fellows, for example, the prospect of leaving their family behind while they undertook graduate work overseas was either untenable or logistically

impossible. The fact that IFP fellows could remain within their host country or region was a unique feature of the program which made it easier for many women with dependents to take advantage of the fellowship.

Financial and Non-Financial Support

In order to level the playing field for disadvantaged fellows, IFP made "a commitment to creating optimal conditions for their success" (Zurbuchen, 2014). One of the key ways the fellowship created these conditions was by coupling effective financial as well as non-financial programmatic features. This combination of financial and non-financial support was significant because, as scholars Salmi & Bassett (2014) have noted, in addition to financial support, the most effective equity promotion strategies provide services to overcome non-financial barriers as well. Financial support equipped fellows with the monetary resources necessary to complete an education, whereas outreach programs reduced the academic and personal barriers that "restrict access amongst students still underrepresented," women included (Salmi & Bassett, 2014).

The financial support IFP provided fellows consisted not only of tuition coverage, but also a living allowance, health insurance, a book allowance, and travel to and from the host country. Further, many IFP fellows were eligible to apply for extra stipends including a professional enhancement fund, a family fund, an English fund, and a disability fund (Zahler, 2014). Although such awards were often modest (\$1,500, for example, in the case of the family fund), their provision demonstrates recognition of a diverse array of needs among IFP fellows.

In terms of non-financial support, Salmi & Bassett also note that early intervention bridge programs are an important strategy demonstrated to increase retention rates. The use of such programs, referred to as Pre-Academic Training (PAT), formed a key feature of the IFP fellowship. Pre-Academic Training courses were customized based on the local context to provide support through the admissions process, English language instruction, and training on highly valued skills needed for academic success (Dassin

"After having the support of the IFP scholarship, I feel backed by an institution that trained and empowered me, which has allowed me to confront gender discrimination with strength and intelligence."

— Yuvitza Paz Reyes Donoso, 2008 IFP Chile alumna
(IFP Global Alumni Survey, 2015)

“The leadership training at the beginning of the program was very vital in building my confidence as a change agent and empowered me with skills to make positive change. I never look at myself as a victim now but as an active actor to change the situation.”

—Annet Koote, 2006 IFP Uganda alumna
(IFP Global Alumni Survey, 2015)

et al., 2014). Pre-Academic Training also gave fellows the chance to catch-up to their peers through tailored courses that were offered both in home and host institutions on an as-needed basis.

Cultivating Confidence

The IFP Global Alumni Survey provides evidence of the ways in which the program benefitted women. Fostering confidence and self-esteem can be an important component of any strategy to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Given the well-documented “confidence gap” between men and women (Kay & Shipman, 2014), the increased confidence reported by many IFP alumnae is a particularly important indication of the program’s ability to empower women specifically.

IFP Kenya alumna Philomena Tanui, for example, feels the fellowship gave her “the confidence to voice [her] opinions and beliefs and to advocate for others” after having been previously marginalized because of her gender (Tanui, IFP Global Alumni Survey, 2015). She is not alone in this sentiment: 85 percent of alumnae who responded to the survey feel the IFP fellowship “empowered” them to be social justice leaders.

IFP Alumni: a Ripple Effect for Gender Equity

Although the fellowship came to a close in 2013, the IFP legacy lives on through alumni who are working to advance gender equity and empower women in nearly every sector. We spoke with two alumnae who exemplify the goal of the fellowship to advance social justice aims like gender equity through the ongoing work of its fellows.

Wariyatun, Indonesia



Wariyatun, from Yogyakarta, Indonesia, is a prime example of how the IFP fellowship intended to work. Not only was she personally impacted by her IFP fellowship, but she has also made it her life goal to help other women. Growing up as a poor woman from an uneducated family, Wariyatun was expected to marry young and forgo an education. Instead, the IFP fellowship gave her the opportunity to escape child marriage and help other women follow in her path. Her passion stems from her belief that “every woman who has access to better education has a moral duty to defend their fellow women.”



Wariyatun has spent nearly a decade working on violence against women in her country. After receiving a Master's in Applied Anthropology with a focus on Gender and Development at Australian National University, in 2011 she rejoined her previous organization, Sahabat Perempuan, to increase awareness of gender equality and women's rights while advocating for an end to gender-based violence in Central Java. Now the chairperson of the organization, she influences local governments to put women's rights on the development agenda and serves as coordinator of several NGOs focusing on women's rights.

In addition to working to affect change on a policy level, Wariyatun has been able to serve as a positive role model for her family and community, who now understand that education can be a powerful tool to transform society. After witnessing how her education improved her own family's conditions, women in her community seek her advice in their desire to pursue a higher education. Wariyatun strongly believes that education for women and girls is the key to ending poverty and injustice.

Elamathi Rethinasamy, India



Hailing from a conservative community in South India, Elamathi Rethinasamy always felt unsettled about the poor treatment of women in her society where they are expected to marry young and dedicate their lives to domestic



"The IFP fellowship changed my perception and lifestyle. I used to be very submissive and passive. I gained personal confidence and assertiveness as the fellowship helped me to develop my skills in multidimensional ways."

— Elamathi Rethinasamy

responsibilities. Though Elamathi too felt the pressure at an early age to marry, with the support of her mother, she obtained a Bachelor's degree in Economics specializing in rural management. In her first job, she noticed that men did not take women in leadership positions seriously and felt motivated to study gender dynamics and interventions to address these issues.

As a result, Elamathi obtained her Master's in Gender and Development at the University of Sussex in England in 2004. Elamathi feels strongly that the IFP Fellowship has both impacted her personally and helped her influence others in her community. As a first generation woman from her locality to study abroad, Elamathi has witnessed a shift in attitudes regarding opportunities for women in her community.

Following her fellowship, Elamathi worked as a gender consultant for non-governmental organizations in Tamil Nadu, India, to bring about institutional change by designing gender-mainstreaming strategies. She has helped organizations establish gender staff support groups, sexual harassment committees and gender equality parameters in thematic interventions by ensuring

all projects have incorporated gender-sensitive, results-oriented strategies. Currently, Elamathi works in corporate social responsibility, helping foster confidence among rural women entrepreneurs and providing them with tools to run micro-businesses. Elamathi has seen these women gain decision-making credibility in their families by earning their own salaries. Through this work, Elamathi feels that she is able to realize the vision of women's empowerment and gender equality in India.

Over 2,150 Gender Advocates Worldwide

The stories of Wariyatun and Elamathi are but two of the hundreds of potential stories of how IFP alumni are promoting gender equity. Dr. Agnes Zani is a prominent senator in Kenya and serves as an advocate and expert on effective policies that enable girls and women to attend and succeed in school. Demonstrating that men also have a role to play in promoting gender equity, Dr. Riziki Ponsiano works to improve maternal and infant health in rural districts of Tanzania. In Plaboo, Thailand, Theereda Namhai runs a weaving collective that helps empower local women through financial independence. The individual alumni and their specific endeavors vary, but the goal to drive positive change for women and girls is the same.

Conclusion

Even with growing numbers of women enrolling in and completing higher education, there are many challenges that women continue to face in their efforts to achieve parity in all spheres of their lives. It has been well documented, for example, that even in countries where women have achieved parity with men in higher education, they often remain underrepresented in the labor market (particularly in higher levels of leadership) as well as in the highest levels of education and research (UNESCO, 2012).

These broader challenges to gender equity notwithstanding, as the fight to eradicate discrimination against women and girls continues and the demand for higher education increases, programs that promote gender equity at the tertiary level will become increasingly

essential. Examining programs like IFP that benefitted women provides valuable insights on how to combat gender disparities. Through a targeted approach that combines a context-specific and culturally nuanced outreach and selection process with effective financial support and training, programs can enable women to overcome financial, cultural and social barriers to pursuing a higher education.

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