

From VOA Learning English, this is As It Is.

I'm Caty Weaver.

Women are half the world's population. But they can face barriers to economic independence and security. Today we hear about a program aimed at providing low cost loans to women in India. We also examine the Roman Catholic debate about efforts to permit women clergy. But first, we learn about women peacekeepers in the Middle East.

Along the border of Israel and Lebanon, female peacekeeping troops are active in the United Nations force that guards the area. Avi Arditti tells us more.

"I think there is a little sprain of the knee."

Captain Annie is examining Gomo, a working security dog that lives at a base of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon.

The captain is a medical specialist and one of about 30 women who live on this French base of 700 peacekeepers. They help to keep the border secure and assist the Lebanese government.

Captain Annie, French soldiers don't use their last names, says she does not consider herself a 'female' peacekeeper, but a member of the UN force. But she says being a woman does sometimes help.

"The secret is to keep the smile and never raise the voice and with a little bit of softness and communication and patience is always good."

UNIFIL has a peacekeeping force of more than 11,000 troops in southern Lebanon. They come from 37 countries. In recent years, the United Nations has begun deploying women in greater numbers.

Major Akriti Sharma is from Jammu and Kashmir.

“As we all know, women are known for their compassion for their warmth, for their understanding. Being women in uniform it adds on to these factors obviously, and apart from this, we can have better access to the women and they feel more comfortable with us, we act as a role model.”

Women in UNIFIL serve on both the civilian and military forces, from helping with military planning to teaching French to Lebanese school children. Male and female peacekeepers live together, work together and play sports together. Force commander Eric of the French battalion says women help to bring security to an insecure area.

In southern Lebanon, many people hold conservative ideas about the roles of the sexes. But, UNIFIL’s female peacekeepers say they get along well with the local community -- men and women alike.

I’m Avi Arditti.

India has struggled with microfinance, small business loans aimed at fighting poverty. In 2010, a number of Indian borrowers took their own life. The suicides led to protests against microlenders and the government. Now, Faith Lapidus tells us about a microfinance program that has good results for Indian women.

It all started eight years ago, with a 1,000 dollar loan to buy buffaloes. Shahnaz Begum of Haryana state had never been employed. But with buffaloes, she suddenly had a source of earnings. It gave her a way to educate her children and a sense of power.

“I have confidence now that, being a woman, I can do something.”

In India, only 26 percent of women are employed. In the area where Shahnaz Begum lives most women do not start businesses. In fact, they rarely leave their homes.

T.K. Matthew established Deepalaya in 1971. At first the aim was to help educated children in extremely poor neighborhoods of New Delhi. He says years of work made him realize that the community's economic health is strongly tied to women.

"And we realize they are a great strength."

Deepalaya means "House of Light." It only provides loans to groups of women who must first combine their savings to add to the loan. Mr. Matthew says Deepalaya's borrowers are charged lower interest rates and given 20 months to repay the loan. He says, so far, there have been no payment failures among the nine-hundred borrowing groups in three states.

In 10 years, 13,000 women have started 7,000 businesses. The payments add to a \$2 million dollar fund that provides new loans.

One woman was able to provide her husband with continuous employment after buying a horse-pulled vehicle with a microfinance loan. She now sees a difference in the way she is treated at home.

“He used to fight with me, now he respects me. Now he talks nicely to me and keeps me happy.”

The Indian women say they also see a different future for their daughters. It involves education and employment.

I’m Faith Lapidus.

Worldwide more than 120 women have been ordained as Roman Catholic priests. Vatican officials do not recognize the ordinations. The ordinations, in fact, violate Church rules. But some Roman Catholics are demanding a change in rules.

Katherine Cole takes a look at the debate.

Time can appear to move slowly at the Vatican, the headquarters of the Catholic Church. But Giuseppe Visotto, a Vatican visitor, thinks the time has come for change.

“The Church has to adapt to modern society. The world is changing rapidly and the church has to follow in each and every respect.”

Half a world away, one Catholic congregation recently met at a Protestant church in Baltimore, Maryland. This group has already rejected the Vatican’s ban on female clergy. Its members are part of a movement that started in 2002 in Germany, where Pope Benedict was born.

Worldwide, about 150 women claim to be Catholic clergy members. Gloria Carpeneto is one of them.

“Women represent half the experience in the world.”

She says women have experiences that men do not have. And if only men are in the clergy, women’s voices are not represented.

About one-third of people raised as Catholics in America are said to have left the church. Some join Protestant groups that do accept women priests.

But public opinion has had little influence on Catholic Church officials. The Vatican has ruled that any official who ordains a woman priest should be expelled from the church.

Still, Italian priest Romulo Fenu says women are respected and cared for in Roman Catholicism. He notes the importance of Mary, the mother of Jesus, to Catholics. He says barring women from the priesthood is not evidence of discrimination.

I'm Katherine Cole.

And that's As It Is for today. I'm Caty Weaver. Thanks for all your comments about As It Is. Keep them coming. Send an email to special@voanews.com.