

In Her Hands

Craftswomen Changing the World

Q & A with the authors Paola Gianturco and Toby Tuttle on their new book *IN HER HANDS*.



Paola Gianturco



Toby Tuttle

1. How did you conceive this book?

PAOLA: News from the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 inspired me. I discovered that extremely poor women especially in the global South spend the money they earn to educate their children. Men tend to spend on other things.

It seemed to me that if these women were successful in sponsoring a better-educated next generation, they could improve the future for their families, and eventually, their communities, countries and our world.

I felt that these poor women with world-altering dreams deserved the spotlight, and chose to focus on indigenous craftswomen because they—and their work—are beautiful. The craftswomen represent indigent mothers everywhere who earn money doing “women’s work” to educate their children.

2. Why do you call the women heroic?

PAOLA: Almost all the women in the book live below the international income-poverty line (which the UN defines as \$1 a day.) Yet they are determined to overcome deprivations and obstacles, using their artistic

talents to effect social and economic change. Imagine their vision and conviction: their crafts—embroidery, dolls, baskets, pottery—are actually powerful levers for improvement. Everyday, the women create and sell and invest in schooling for their children. The word, “heroic,” means undaunted and daring. The women are heroines.

3. How did craftswomen generally respond to your request to compensate them for their time while being interviewed?

TOBY: Everyone seemed thoroughly appreciative; but in most cases we did not discuss compensation directly with the craftswomen, but with our translator, who handled it for us. We always asked what would be an appropriate amount in that community. The payment was meant only to replace what income they were losing by spending their time with us instead of on their craft work.

In one case, our translator was herself the leader of the craftswomen’s group. She requested, after reflecting for a moment, that we not pay anything to any one woman, but instead open a checking account on the group’s behalf, at the bank in a nearby town. The group members could then access the funds for raw materials—always a problem—so that they could continue with their work. She then announced that each woman would repay her materials money to the account, with interest; and thus was born a new micro-enterprise organization.

4. What were some of the standard questions you asked all the craftswomen?

PAOLA: We used 118 open-ended and probe questions for everyone—plus an additional set of questions tailored to each place. Since all those questions and answers had to be translated, you can imagine how long we sat on the ground talking with a woman to complete one interview!

To break the ice, we’d ask, “Tell us the history of doll making here” or “Tell us how you learned to make dolls.” And continued with, “Tell us the story of the first doll you ever sold. When was that? Who bought it? How much did you charge? What did you do with the money?”

Later we asked, "Each week, how much money do you earn from selling dolls? How much does your husband earn? In your family, who makes the decision about how money will be spent? How are women regarded here when they earn money? What do their husbands think about it? Finally, we'd ask about the woman's parents, her wedding, her happiest and most disappointing times, and "What do you do on a typical day? What do you and your husband do for fun? What hopes and dreams do you have for your life? And for your children's lives?"

5. What surprised you about their answers?

PAOLA: Overall, how forthcoming the women were! We were startled by the kinds of personal information (e.g., birth control) that was sometimes volunteered.

-How much we learned from the women. About collaboration. About doing business in their cultures. A Muslim Indian woman said that since her marriage, she had never gone outside her hut alone—until she decided to sell her embroidery. A Shona woman in Zimbabwe said she got sick because jealous spirits were punishing her for financial success.

-The fact that the global women's movement has taught women in even the most remote villages to see friendly Western women as resources. They asked us to help obtain medicines, scholarships for their children and advice about abuse. We did our best to respond to these requests.

-How curious the women were about us. We always invited them to ask questions. Theirs included: how we got there; could they see pictures of our families; were there women in our country who made their crafts—and whether they were better at it?

-How long the connections have lasted. Through our interpreters, we are still in touch with many of the women. We know whose baby is sick in South Africa, whose daughter is getting good grades in Turkey, whose sister died in Zimbabwe. We have been honored to have three of the women as our guests in the United States.

-The best surprise: that the world is smaller and women's spirits larger than we had ever imagined.

6. What brought you to this amazing project? What are your backgrounds?

PAOLA: The women who attended the UN conference in Beijing in September, 1995 were the mothers of this book. My father, who died the month before, was its father. A physician and inventor of medical devices, he used his life to help others. His example inspired me to contribute my own skills to make things a little better, if I could, for poor micro-entrepreneurial women. For almost forty years, I'd used those skills to benefit big businesses run by well-paid men. I'd done marketing, advertising, corporate communications and public relations for large corporations. "Women and business" had been an important theme in my working life.

My father taught me to take pictures when I was 8. So I decided to devote a sabbatical year to a project that combined what I knew best and loved most with what I cared about passionately: increasing public awareness of poor women who are creating an important artistic, economic and social legacy.

TOBY: Paola and I had both been in the advertising business for years, and for four years we had worked together. Then we'd gone our separate business ways. I worked with my husband in the institutional investment business for ten years. But Paola and I remained friends. One day she called me, and said, "I need to do something new and meaningful. I have this idea...."

I had just turned 60. I had read somewhere that to ensure an ongoing feeling of youthfulness, at each new decade of age, one should take up something totally new. Besides being a concept that resonated down to my toes, THIS was totally new.

7. How has earning money affected the lives of these women?

PAOLA: First, menus changed. A woman in India told us that she always used to serve her family millet and ground chilies but now she could afford

to add buttermilk and—every other day—a vegetable. Better nutrition reduces infant (and maternal) mortality; health improves; people live longer.

As the women realize their work is valuable enough to sell, their self-esteem improves. Children and husbands give the women more respect. Domestic violence can be reduced. If poverty is alleviated, families don't need so many children to earn money, so birth rates drop. Women's income allows families to upgrade their living quarters, so housing and sanitation improve. The United Nations and The World Bank both report that when women enter the economy in developing countries, the gross domestic product grows.

All of these are reason that the UN has named women as a centerpiece in their ten year "Program to Eradicate Poverty" worldwide, which will end in 2006.

8. Were the local men generally resistant or supportive to the women's efforts?

TOBY: We had read of angry male reactions to some of the early efforts to organize women's micro-enterprise groups, and were terribly afraid of what we'd find that—but we did not. We found families that were so poor that income from any family member was welcome. In some places where there are no paying jobs for men, the women's craft income is the only family money. And some women said their husbands were proud of their work. But there were some communities (in Bolivia and India) where organizers told us they needed to approach the village men first and let them know about the plan. It did not seem to be difficult to get their blessings, once the advantages were explained—that the whole family would benefit if the wife earned money.

9. What are some of the organizations that are supporting craftswomen around the world?

PAOLA: Toby and I are enthusiastic supporters of six non-profit organizations that are particularly effective helping poor women all over the world.

The Crafts Center is based in Washington DC, and helps low-income artisans market traditional crafts by linking them to resources, importers, exporters, wholesalers, distributors and retailers.

Aid to Artisans provides craftspeople with product design, production and selling assistance.

Freedom from Hunger organizes village banking groups that make micro-enterprise loans.

The Global Fund for Women provides small grants to women's groups working on poverty and economic autonomy.

The Association for Women in Development is an international organization of women policymakers, scholars and grass roots practitioners working on social and economic development issues.

Women's Edge advocates for international women in Washington.

10. What is the most important thing you want to convey with your work?

PAOLA: I want people to understand more fully how effective women are, and how valuable their work is. I hope *In Her Hands* will help make anonymous, invisible craftswomen visible—and their beautiful crafts, more appreciated. I hope people will use the *Resource for Action* section to support the craftswomen's efforts to enhance their families' futures—by purchasing their products, contributing to micro-enterprise loan programs and advocating to change unfair trade and development policies.

TOBY: We read and imagine a lot about the misery and degradation of poverty, and those elements are surely there. But I saw something else that meant a lot to me, and that I want to celebrate: I saw women who knew they were poor, but were not demeaned by their poverty. They were proud of their work, took pleasure in their families, accepted us without resentment and maintained their sense of humor. We experienced smiles and laughter, hugs and an unexpected sense of sisterhood.