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# Celebrating Women's Leadership: Women of Substance & Resilience

A collection of Short Stories by:

Maria Eugenia Brizuela de Avila,  
Purnima Mane,  
Fatiha Serour

Members of the Working Group on Domestic Violence  
– GWL

# BACKGROUND

For centuries, women across the world have fulfilled a dual reproductive and productive role, ensuring household food security, raising children and keeping their extended families cared for. Whether due to conflict, migration, self-motivation and determination, and/or changes in their circumstances, many women often take on a leadership role to overcome daily survival challenges.

The following stories celebrate women's resilience when taking (or being forced to take) on such a role, showing, once again, their capability at all levels even though as women, they were often denied opportunities or education to be prepared for it. The central linking point between the women in El Salvador, India and Sudan is their ability to survive and thrive against all odds and without the support generally offered to their male counterparts.

In El Salvador, migration depleted communities of their human resources due to men's departure. In their bid to continue functioning, community women who needed to better their dirty roads, undertook the physical work when the small seed funding only paid for the materials. They showed leadership, focus, resilience and achieved their objectives and beyond.

In India, though the legal age at marriage for girls is 18, girls are often married by their families at a much earlier age. Delaying marriage is vital for young girls' health as early marriage results in early pregnancy, and often maternal and child mortality and morbidity. It also enables young girls to pursue their education which, in itself, contributes to young women's socio-economic independence. A pioneering project with which the organization I led was involved in Bihar, one of India's most backward states, took on this issue working with women leaders at different levels. Women

health workers (ASHAs) who have been at the forefront of service delivery at the community level took on this issue but so did young school girls trained to become peer educators against early marriage. Their combined educational efforts and advocacy paid off as the age of marriage rose in the target districts of Bihar.

In North Sudan, Maryam was a highly respected woman leader across the 5 provinces in remote Northern Sudan despite the traditional Muslim environment. As a director of agriculture, her trail across villages and deprived communities in the northern desert illustrated her spirit and strength of character and, at the same time, the deep respect that her communities had for her. I learnt my first lesson of female leadership and resilience.

Although set in different contexts and time, the following three stories share a common thread : women's strength and resilience against all odds.

# Maria Eugenia Brizuela de Avila, Former Foreign Minister of El Salvador

As Foreign Minister of a small developing country, I was touched by women's resilience and leadership frequently. I know for centuries, women across the world have fulfilled a dual reproductive and productive role, ensuring household food security, raising children, and keeping their extended families cared for. In this challenging environment I witnessed so many of my countrywomen taking on leadership roles to overcome daily survival challenges.

My country El Salvador is the smallest in Central America and the most densely populated. With 6.6 million inhabitants in 21,000 square kilometers, women represent 53% of the total population. This strong demographic disparity has its roots, not only in our civil war during the 80's where the majority of the 75,000 who died were men, but in decades of migration.

My people have migrated despite the impact of family separation and the risks they face on the road to their destination. Migration has been, and continues to be, an alternative to a large part of Salvadoran population who decide to leave the country because of poverty, unemployment, natural disasters, climate change effects, family reunification and/or insecurity. It is estimated that approximately one-third of the Salvadoran population lives outside the country and that, of this, 93.5% reside in the United States. Migration has transformed family structures and changed relationships and gender roles in families, as men have been mostly the ones to embark on this journey. That is why so many women who

remain take responsibility for the family. Nowadays, 37.7% of households in my country are led by a woman.

Our society has evolved; however, gaps persist in all areas of women's and girls' autonomy, reflecting the barriers they still face as women. There are traditional sociocultural patterns that prevent women and girls from fully accessing social, economic, political, and cultural opportunities throughout their life cycle.

In that context, as Foreign Minister in charge of international cooperation and implementing development projects locally, I walked rural areas where it was even more notorious how migration depleted communities of their human resources due to men's departure.

There I met "Maria". She is the hero of my story, a Salvadoran woman who represents resilience and leadership.

Her husband had left following the American dream and sent her money regularly, but this was not enough to cover all Maria and her children needed. In her bid to better her community, she undertook the task of formulating projects, one of them being the improvement of the dirt roads that gave the community access to school and a health clinic. She went as far as organizing the community women to take on the physical work needed when the funding we were able to grant her only paid for the materials. She showed leadership, focus, resilience and achieved her objectives positively impacting the community.

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So, what did I learn from Maria? Women leadership is crucial to complementing socio-economic development of my country and with a gender dividend of 53% we can't afford to leave out more than half the potential leaders we need. We require effective laws, policies and programs that focus on the person, with co-responsibility from the State, the private sector and civil society.

Maria showed me that we needed to invest in actions that guaranteed women like her, in the most vulnerable and excluded conditions, the opportunities and resources necessary to fully participate socially, economically, politically, and culturally.

She was unstoppable as she had a clear vision and objective, a positive attitude, managed her energy, networked with the people who would support her and got involved!

As the Networks of Women Leaders and Allies for Generation Equality Concept Note state: "The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted unanimously by 189 countries at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, retains its status and significance as the strongest international consensus on girls' and women's equality and justice ever produced by the world's

governments. Twenty-five years later, while some progress has been made, the majority of Beijing's promises and commitments remain unfulfilled".

Let us not forget the Marias that are still in our world and lend them that helping hand to build a better future for all!

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# Purnima Mane,

## Former President Pathfinder International and Former ASG and Deputy Executive Director, UNFPA.

India, my country of origin, has made significant progress in the last decade in terms of socio-economic development. However, a perennial challenge facing India has been improving girls' and women's access to education, their economic empowerment, and enhancement of their possibilities for self-fulfilment and contribution to their community, society and economy. Fundamental barriers to addressing these challenges have been low age at marriage and consequent low levels of educational enrolment and high drop-out among girls, particularly in socio-economically lagging states like Bihar, where cultural norms and practices often do not keep pace with legal changes and where marriage registration rates are low. While the legal age at marriage for girls was 18 years in India. Bihar topped the list of States which proved resistant to change on the ground mainly due to all the reasons mentioned earlier. Early marriage and conception in turn has links to higher death rates during pregnancy and childbirth – girls who are 15 years and younger are known to be five times more likely to die than women in their twenties, suffer poor health and face higher infant mortality (UNFPA, 2012; UNICEF, 2014).

Fortunately, in Bihar, the situation is changing, thanks to targeted efforts by the State government, working hand in hand with multiple stake-holders -- non-profit agencies, both local and international, donor agencies, UN agencies such as UNFPA, local organizations and leaders, and diverse members of the community including the

women and girls themselves. I witnessed this evolution personally as Deputy Executive Director, UNFPA (2007-2011) and later when I was President and CEO of Pathfinder International (2012-2016). What struck me when I visited one project in Bihar in 2013-2014, was the vital but relatively unsung leadership played by women and girls at all levels which contributed toward bringing about this change. My story is about this leadership which needs to be appreciated and fostered.

In 2001, Pathfinder International launched a major project in 3 districts of Bihar working with multiple partners and funded by Packard Foundation and later by UNFPA, eventually covering 120,000 people. It involved an all-out effort at changing the social norms and behavior around age at marriage, conception, contraception and family planning. The project named PRACHAR was a ten-year, phased project and multi-pronged in that it worked with all levels of the community – adolescents (both married and unmarried), parents, mothers in law, school teachers, community health workers, community leaders, and all influencers, through building both female and male communicators at the local level in adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health (Daniel, et al, 2008). The broad involvement of multiple partners with special attention to women and girls, was vital to shaping change in

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the cultural norms being addressed.

When I visited the project in rural Bihar, I met with a group of adolescent boys and girls who had undergone a training program on the harms of early marriage through local communicators trained by Pathfinder. What impressed me was the leadership shown by adolescent school girls who were part of the program. While boys and girls were both being educated to be peer educators (and I spoke to both groups), the manner in which the girls displayed boldness in making the case and their skills in strategic communication in challenging norms was palpable. At times during the meeting, I noted that they boys often could not get in a word sideways, even if they tried!

I recall a young 16-year old girl who told me that when her parents and her grandmother had started talking about her marriage, she recognized quickly that she could not challenge their authority, which would have blocked her from being successful.

Instead, she explained to them why her education was vital for her future and how it could add value for the family too in a changing, modernizing world (some of the benefits were making her more attractive as a candidate for marriage due to her enhanced education, increasing possibility for her gainful employment, and gaining a valued status in the community). And she also reminded them that if she was accepted by the family as old enough to vote only at 18, which is the legal voting age in India, then how come she was being urged to get married before 18 which was also the legal age limit?

No idea whether or not it was the clinching argument that won over her family but her family came around, thanks to her strategy and her confidence!

I was also amazed to learn from the girls in the group I met, that they had worked in pairs or groups, coaching girls on how to talk to their families about the disadvantages of early marriage for them personally, and bolstering their confidence to speak up; how they had spoken to village leaders to get their support in making the case for keeping girls in school and/or not marrying them early; and how they had used every opportunity to spread the word. In this entire effort, they were assisted by female teachers in particular, as well as other community leaders who had been trained as part of the project. The leadership of these young girls and the women who supported them including their mothers and sometimes mothers in law too, was commendable and unique - in a culture where girls were seen as meant to stay largely invisible, these young girls were raising their voices and speaking out, both for their own sakes and for others.

A critical role in norm-shifting was played by Community health workers, known as ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists). The ASHA program was launched in India in 2005 as part of an ambitious government program known as the National Rural Health Mission. The ASHAs, largely women, come from local communities and have some school education. They work mostly with their own communities as health educators, health promoters, and providers of health products and services. They receive a small honorarium and some performance-based remuneration but are essentially volunteers. From a distance, it all felt like a fantastic approach but when I visited Bihar, I realized how tough their job was. Not only were their remunerations limited and their list of duties long, taking on a range of health issues (including Covid-19 today), but often they were not provided adequate equipment, products and necessary support in a timely fashion, nor did they have the same social

standing that formal health sector workers held. Being part of the community made it a challenge at times to stand up to harmful practices which their own community adopted. In the largely male-dominated world of health, they were not always respected because they were women. And yet, it was remarkable to see how the ASHAs used the limited power of their position in communities, and their training, to work with community members to change social norms around marriage and conception. Talking to groups of ASHAs, I witnessed their ability to exercise leadership in challenging situations and speak up. In a meeting which was presided by the State Health Minister, a young ASHA worker spoke up explaining what the ASHAs needed for the program to succeed, even when she was not called upon to speak. It required a lot of courage to intervene and she sure displayed it! And the State Minister made sure her comments were acted upon.

The gutsy work of all involved with PRACHAR paid off. Data showed that age at marriage went up in the program districts by 2.6 years compared to other districts not covered by the program, and the age at first birth went up by 1.5 years later than at the start of the project in PRACHAR districts (Pathfinder International, 2013). An independent evaluation in 2012, showed that these results lasted beyond the program phase and influenced the behavior of those even indirectly exposed to the work of PRACHAR through meetings held in the districts (Jejeebhoy, et al, 2015). When the project closed in 2013, the approach of PRACHAR was considered so successful that it was integrated into the government program on reducing child mortality, maternal mortality and family planning. The new model was less expansive, and intensive but the ASHAs continued to be the ones who led the program along with local NGOs, and working with young people remained the focus.

A host of factors contributed to the success of PRACHAR (some of these have been

analyzed separately in publications of Pathfinder International referenced earlier, and independently by Mane and Aggleton, 2019). In addition to the scientific evidence, what stood out for me when I look back on my visit to Bihar and my meetings, was the leadership shown by women and girls who were not always in powerful positions and yet exerted their influence to push the envelope - the school girls, the ASHAs, the married young women, their mothers and mothers-in-law, and the female teachers. We know that ultimately it is leadership at the ground level that fosters positive change and gets us to our end-goal, and in this instance, female leadership played that key role.

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# Fatiha Serour, Former DSRSG- Somalia; Co-founder Justice Impact Lab.

## Maryam – Northern Sudan

Today, the term ‘leadership’ is used in relation to high level political and/or business leadership thus centring it at that level. To me, leadership is an innate quality that is not just related to a ‘position’ or level – be it political, financial or professional- and history has demonstrated that with great visionaries such as Nelson Mandela and many more. In the years I served the UN and the non-governmental sector, every country and/or community where I worked provided compelling examples of women leadership in its multifaceted nature. Whether in Somalia, South Africa, Ethiopia, Senegal, Sudan or Syria, Yemen, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon or Iraq (to name but a few), I met and worked with inspiring women leaders both at the highest levels as well as in these countries’ remotest and sometimes landlocked parts. Maryam (from Marawi province in Northern Sudan) is one of them. She oozes natural leadership. Maryam taught me my first leadership lesson and cemented my commitment to supporting women leaders wherever my development and peace building trail took me.

## Prelude

It was April 1989 when the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

approached me (Oxford University) to assist them with a Grameen Bank-type micro-finance programme targeting women in five provinces in Northern Sudan. As a development ‘specialist’, I jumped at the opportunity to practice what I taught and support women to supplement household income. Little did I know that my adventure as a development and peace-building practitioner was starting to never end - happily.

At my pre-mission briefing in HQ/Rome, I received relevant documents and was assured that a taxi would be waiting for me when I reach Khartoum airport at 2 am so that I am safely driven through the curfew. The following day, I was expected to meet the project management team at Sudan’s Ministry of Agriculture before setting off for Marawi province (close to Egypt’s border) to start work across the five provinces.

I arrived in Khartoum but found no one waiting for me – which, I realised later in my career, that it was a ‘natural’ occurrence. I approached a taxi driver and asked him to drive me to my hotel. I was worried that I only had travellers’ cheques rather than cash to cover the fare but did not breathe a word to the driver. I credit my Arabic speaking as well as being Algerian as having eased a potentially serious security issue, travelling through the curfew. The taxi driver became my protector, explaining to the military who I was and that I was there to help Sudanese people. It worked and we reached the hotel safely where I asked the receptionist to pay for the ride and add it to my bill.

The following morning, I went to the Ministry to start our workings sessions prior to departure for the North the day after. I was then informed that there was a fuel shortage and our flight was delayed until the following day – an explanation that was repeated for 3 days until I ‘threatened’ to return to HQ if I could not proceed with my mission in the North. I then offered the option of travelling by ‘road’ across



the desert to fulfil my responsibilities. This achieved the outcome that I hoped for. The following day, I along with one of their staff members, started the long and arduous journey across the desert. This lasted over 12 hours due to our car being stuck in the sand. I was struck by the visible signs of poverty but also by people's extreme kindness, helping us move the car and providing us with tea and bread. The Sudanese people are amongst the kindest people I met in my work trail.

## In Marawi – Northern Sudan

We reached Marawi where we noted the floods-related devastation: destroyed buildings, displacement, muddy pathways. We drove to the house of the Director of Agriculture – Maryam. She came to greet us: tall, majestic in her white robe and scarf, her beautiful and proud face bearing the Shaygia tribal 'scars'. A confident look that radiated leadership and being in charge. We started programming our work over a cup of tea. Then we asked to be directed to a hotel so that we have a shower and an early night. Maryam started laughing heartily: "hotel, what hotel?" she said, indicating that Marawi had no hotel and that its only guest house had been destroyed by the floods.

She smiled at our surprised look but was fast in her decision-making and problem solving. She pointed to two mattresses in the courtyard and invited us to stay with them. We appreciated that kindness because we needed 'safe' accommodation as trailing across the provinces was challenging. In addition, Maryam headed a poor household where she was the provider and carer for her elderly parents (one of whom was blind). I learned about empathy and sharing as other facets of her leadership.

Another initial indication of Maryam's leadership emerged at the first meeting

of the project team with us. Her opening statement set a clear tone as she said: "Salam and welcome. I am very proud to open the first meeting where only women sit at the decision-making table". Here, Maryam's leadership had an instant impact on the 5 young group promoters as they valued the fact that they sat at the decision-making table but also had a strategic opportunity to overcome the social/traditional barriers and could so unleash their leadership potential and, in the process, help other women.

That opening statement was powerful and empowering to the group promoters as it enhanced their confidence. This was important for both personal and professional growth including fulfilling their project responsibilities. The latter included training poor women farmers to set up production units, using group collateral for their application for IFAD credit to meet the costs of inputs. This was a challenging task as the group promoters had to learn then teach women farmers about the link between credit and savings to ensure repayment. In a culture where loans are generally between family or community members without conditions, women beneficiaries needed to appreciate the importance of credit repayment so that they do not feel trapped in a mechanism they were not prepared for.

Maryam accompanied us to all the provinces and villages where the project was implemented. As we needed to set off very early morning, any food or drink was kindly offered by people who would

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welcome Maryam with a broad smile that demonstrated not just affection but deep respect. Sitting around tea and ‘foul’, Maryam used her opening statements to emphasise the project’s strategic opportunity for poor women farmers to enhance their economic power, social status and community leadership. Women and men alike listened to her compelling message, namely the project will contribute to women’s economic empowerment, their households’ livelihoods and women’s independence -if/when needed. Such a message was challenging to Northern Sudan’s patriarchal society. However, Maryam never relented until male heads of households agreed for their wives/daughters to take part in and benefit from IFAD credit as well as be allowed to sign the paper work instead of their fathers/husbands. Every household we entered, every area we covered, people of both gender and all ages, recognised Maryam from miles, spoke about her own struggle to achieve that leadership status even though she had the responsibility of providing and caring for her family.

## Six months later

Six months later, I returned to Marawi and the other provinces to assess project progress. I noted that both the group promoters and women in the production units were thriving. IFAD credit repayment reached one of the highest levels at 93% (higher than male credit repayment). They also had ‘disposable’ income for the first time in their lives and could cover school and medical fees. This not only empowered project women but it also enhanced their status within their household and community. The group promoters also displayed professional maturity, enhanced strength and confidence especially when interacting with male community leaders – a nascent leadership facilitated by Maryam.

## Conclusion

To me, Maryam’s leadership is what we now call ‘thought leadership’: clarity of vision, focus on the pathway, inner strength, ability to translate the vision into relevant action. But Maryam also has empathy; mentors the women she works with; is kind and thoughtful. I could not find words that are powerful enough to illustrate her resolve and resilience as the physical environment where her projects were implemented was harsh to the depths of one’s bones and would therefore discourage anyone. But not Maryam. She was up at 4 am for her prayers before setting off for work and inspiring her community to think that change is possible and within reach.

Thanks to Maryam, I learnt about resilience and courage; kindness despite extreme poverty; vision of women taking the lead against all odds; empathy despite challenging social circumstances; and a great sense of humour that built trust and engaged a dialogue when dialogue possibilities seemed remote if not impossible.

There are many Maryams in our world and we need to recognize and support them.

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## Maria Eugenia Brizuela de Avila

María Eugenia Brizuela de Ávila (born 1956 in El Salvador) is a lawyer who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs for the country from 1999 to 2004. She was the first woman to become president of a private bank, the first woman to run an insurance company, the first to sit on the Board of the Central American Institute of Business Administration (INCAE) and the first female Foreign Minister. She pioneered Corporate Sustainability at HSBC for Latin America from 2006 to 2015. She is now an Executive Coach and sits on profit and nonprofit Boards: Banco Davivienda Honduras, Financial Conglomerate Davivienda El Salvador, Stock Exchange El Salvador, Universidad Dr Jose Matías Delgado, INCAE Business School, International Commission on Missing Persons, among others.

She holds a diploma in French language and civilization from the Sorbonne, Paris and one on Insurance from SITC, Zurich. She graduated with honors when studying law at the José Matías Delgado University. She then earned a master's degree in Business Administration from INCAE the Central American Institute of Business Administration. She earned a postgraduate in Sustainable Business from the University of Cambridge.

Mayu, as she is known, was a member of the Board at the Salvadoran Social Security Institute and of the Fund of Social Investment.. In 2006, she received the Distinguished Professional of the Year Award from her alma mater, José Matías Delgado University. In 2007 she was honored with the Golden Palm, highest recognition from the private sector in her country. In 2009 Brizuela was inducted into the American School Hall of Fame and received the Most Distinguished Graduate award from INCAE. In 2018 she was named Honorary Member of FUSADES, the most prestigious think tank in the region. In 2020 Forbes selected her among the top 100 most influential women in Central America and the Caribbean.





## Purnima Mane

Purnima Mane is an internationally respected expert on sexual and reproductive health who served as the President and CEO of Pathfinder International.

Mane has a distinguished track record as an international expert on gender and HIV and led the process of developing the HIV Prevention Policy, which was endorsed by the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board in June 2005 and the first UNAIDS Strategic Plan (1996–2000).

Mane holds a doctorate from Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, where she later went on to become an associate professor. Before joining UNAIDS, Mane worked for over 13 years in India on public health and gender-related issues.

She served as United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Deputy Executive Director (Programme), a position she was appointed to in March 2007. Mane joined UNFPA from the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), where she served as director of policy, evidence and partnership.

Mane joined the World Health Organization's Global Programme on AIDS in 1994 and then moved to UNAIDS at its inception in 1996, where she provided oversight to the area of behavioural sciences research and gender and AIDS. She also managed the executive office.

Purnima Mane also worked at the Population Council in New York, where she later became vice-president and director of international programmes. She went on to work for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, where she was chief fund portfolio director and director, Asia.

She returned to UNAIDS in 2004 as director, policy, evidence and partnerships, serving as a vital member of the senior management team.





## Fatiha Serour

Fatiha Serour is Co-founder of the Justice impact Lab as well as a member of the Africa Group of Justice & Accountability (AGJA), an independent group of Senior African experts on international criminal law and human rights, including political figures, members of domestic tribunals, and human rights advocates that came together in November 2015 to strengthen justice & accountability in Africa. Prior to joining AGJA, Fatiha was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Special Representative in Somalia. She is an international development and peace-building expert with over 25 years' experience, and has held numerous positions within the United Nations, including senior gender adviser in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) as well as Regional Director in the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). She was also the Director of the Youth Division and Commonwealth Youth Programme (Commonwealth Secretariat). She set up and led Serour Associates for Inclusion & Equity, an association that focuses on supporting the right to inclusive development, justice and equity through practical, transparent and cost-effective approaches. She has held various positions with the UN system, and her experience covers over 45 countries in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia where she led initiatives aimed at achieving the peace-development-justice nexus with a specific focus on gender and youth. As a human rights and social justice activist, Fatiha is undeterred in her commitment to justice and the fight against impunity.