

# WORLD AFFAIRS COMMENTARY

*by Rahim Kanani*

## [Helene Gayle, President and CEO of CARE USA, on Empowering Women and Girls Worldwide](#)

In a recent in-depth interview with Helene Gayle, President and CEO of CARE USA, we discussed empowering women and girls around the world, the efforts and initiatives of CARE towards this end, non-profit leadership and management, the new digital CARE Package, innovations in development, her advice to President Obama on foreign aid, and future challenges and opportunities for the international development sector.

An expert on health, global development and humanitarian issues, Dr. Gayle spent 20 years with the Centers for Disease Control, working primarily on HIV/AIDS. She then worked at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, directing programs on HIV/AIDS and other global health issues. Dr. Gayle chairs the Obama Administration's Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS, and serves on the President's Commission on White House Fellowships.

**Rahim Kanani:** As President and CEO of CARE USA, how would you characterize the global trend in awareness, advocacy and action towards the social, political and economic empowerment of women and girls around the world?

**Helene Gayle:** I guess you could say the stars have aligned. It's as if many of the world's biggest and smartest thinkers have come to the same conclusion almost at once: you can't marginalize more than half of the globe's population and expect to see any meaningful solutions to the problems that ail the world. Perhaps it's because we're all faced with the same facts: 60 percent of the world's one billion poorest people are female; women work two-thirds of working hours but earn only 10 percent of the income; nearly two thirds of children out of school in the world are girls.

No matter how you measure it, women and girls bear the brunt of poverty. But it's also clear that women are also our greatest hope for ending it. We at CARE have long believed that if you change the life of a girl or woman, you don't just change that individual, you change her family and then her community. By doing so, you begin to turn those grim statistics around. Consider that for every year of education you give a girl or woman, she's more likely to have good health, to give birth to a child who survives and to send that child to school. Investing early, when that woman-to-be is a girl, only amplifies the impact, unlocking potential earlier in life and yielding greater returns for her and everyone around her.

Our aid infrastructure is starting to reflect this shift. Last year we saw the creation of UN Women, a new agency created to house and harmonize four former units that worked on the causes of girls and women. USAID, the government agency that provides American humanitarian assistance abroad also, is making gender a core part of its development programs. Now the challenge to all of us is to make sure that women and girl empowerment is not just the "in" thing to do or some kind of passing fad. We must bring about real and lasting change that can only come from organizational commitments to striking at poverty's roots.

The stars really shouldn't have to align for girls and women to realize their full potential. They deserve solutions that endure, something much closer to a constellation.

**Rahim Kanani:** In terms of organizational distinctiveness, what role has CARE played within this movement for development that pays special attention to women and girls?

**Helene Gayle:** CARE's size and reach allows us to scale up successful programs so they benefit the largest possible number of people. Our Village Savings and Loan Associations program started with a handful of people in southern Niger. When we saw how savings-led microfinance created tremendous economic opportunities for women without burdening participants with unmanageable debt, we were able to expand it. We've since launched 54,000 VSLAs in 21 African countries serving more than 1.9 million people – nearly all of them women. Today CARE provides more Africans access to financial services than any other international organization.

**Rahim Kanani:** What do you now know, having served as President and CEO for nearly five years, that you didn't know when you started?

**Helene Gayle:** There's knowing. And there's *knowing*. I admired and supported CARE before I joined, but seeing it from inside and up-close still gives me a regular source of wonderment, even after five years. CARE's breadth and depth is amazing. More than 12,000 people working in 70 countries.

And the dedication of CARE employees to their mission is just astounding. Some 90 percent of CARE's employees are from the countries where they work, so when the devastating earthquake struck Haiti last year, nearly everyone on our staff 133 was Haitian. They lost children. They lost friends. And they saw the communities they called home flattened. Despite that, they kept working – leading a relief and recovery operation that reached more than 290,000 Haitians. It's easy to stay motivated when you're surrounded by such incredible people.

**Rahim Kanani:** This International Women's Day, what should we know about the state of women and girls around the world?

**Helene Gayle:** This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Women's Day. So it's a particularly appropriate time to reflect. We can celebrate 100 years of economic, political and social achievements of women. But we should also recognize that in many places girls and women are in a precarious state. We still have plenty of work to do.

I think this moment in history will be remembered as one when women around the world grew increasingly connected, thanks to the digital revolution. CARE is increasingly fostering those connections.

A perfect example is our new digital CARE Package<sup>®</sup>. Many know CARE from our roots – sending CARE Packages of food and supplies to European survivors of World War II. Now we're bringing it back in honor of International Women's Day. The new CARE Package is digital, web-based ([www.care.org](http://www.care.org)) and social media friendly.

Senders can go online and customize a modern package of aid, one that brings, not boxes of food but long-term solutions. The original CARE Package reflected our best thinking at the time about how to meet human needs. Today's CARE Package reflects new challenges and new ways of thinking about development.

This time, instead of dispatching canned goods and clothing to faraway countries, senders of CARE Packages can choose to support CARE's work in maternal health, education and microfinance or other programs that meet the basic needs while building human capacity.

"Receivers" may include girls in Afghanistan who can attend new schools and expectant mothers in Peru who gain life-saving transportation to the hospital. And to truly "deliver" the package, we turn to people within the communities we serve. We don't parachute in with a one-size-fits-all solution.

But the spirit of the old CARE Package and the new are the same: both deepen our sense of global connectedness.

Groups can build digital CARE Packages together. The new CARE Package uses collaborative web technology so that people can build a group package and invite friends and colleagues to help reach a certain goal. Group members can then check back on their package's progress. Users also can make a package in honor of someone. People can spread the word about their CARE Packages to friends using Twitter and Facebook to encourage them to join an existing CARE Package or build their own.

The new CARE Package is virtual. But on this International Women's Day we must remember that the needs it addresses are all too real.

**Rahim Kanani:** If a foundation or philanthropist donated \$100M to CARE USA, what would be your first order of action?

**Helene Gayle:** We would scale up some of our most effective programs, including those that don't always get a lot of donor attention. Our work around women and agriculture is a good example. Few people realize that women produce half the world's food and 60 to 80 percent of food crops in developing countries. They're at the heart of their family's food and nutrition needs – a particularly important fact as global food prices continue to rise. Yet in many countries women are stuck with the least productive land, have little access to markets and live in cultures whose social norms greatly limit their mobility. That's why programs giving these women leadership roles, access to agricultural education and links to regional markets have been so successful.

In Ghana, women have seen their production of maize soar after learning conservation agriculture techniques that help control weeds and retain moisture in the soil. Many have gone on to become agriculture extension agents who share the methods to women in neighboring villages.

In northern Mozambique, women use traditional song and dance to spread similar techniques in the countryside. CARE has helped them connect directly with regional peanut buyers. This cut

out the middlemen and, in the case of one 16,000-person project, tripled average income. The impact goes well beyond the fields. Many families had simply stopped sending their children to school during the “lean season” because they were hungry and didn’t have enough energy. Now food is on the table and those children are back in school. This is the kind of change we at CARE would like to bring to more communities – now, not later.

**Rahim Kanani:** In addition to more investment, what does CARE need to increase its operational reach and effectiveness?

**Helene Gayle:** I see CARE as part of a growing movement. So one thing we need more and more of is cooperation. Cooperation with local groups we partner with on the ground. Cooperation with research institutions. Cooperation with corporations. Cooperation with the governments in the countries where we work. When these entities aren’t on the same page, progress suffers. Fortunately, empowering girls and women is wonderful glue. I expect CARE to gain many more partners in the years ahead, greatly increasing our effectiveness.

**Rahim Kanani:** As one of the world’s foremost voices on global development, are we moving in the right direction, or is the sector by and large too risk-averse to experiment with new, innovative, and perhaps more effective models of development?

**Helene Gayle:** Innovation is definitely there, but innovation always has to be coupled with experience when you’re doing work affecting the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable people. What works on a spreadsheet doesn’t always work in real life.

Take microfinance as an example. The general public sees microfinance as a monolith, but different organizations have developed very different approaches. Instead of the credit-led programs you most often read about, CARE created a savings-led model in Africa based on ancient community savings traditions. We show people and communities how to build up their savings before they start making small loans to each other. This approach fosters economic development without leaving participants in debt. Our quarterly reporting show repayment rates above 99 percent.

But the funny thing about innovation is that it often demands something else – more innovation. One of the issues we’ve encountered with our microsavings programs in Africa is that participants end up with a lot of excess cash. In Tanzania, we have a pilot program linking our microsavings programs to a low-cost mobile phone-based banking system. The idea is to allow participants to collect savings and make purchases without the security worries associated with a big, full cashbox.

**Rahim Kanani:** If President Obama granted you an audience for five minutes and was seeking counsel on the most effective model to conduct international development policy and practice, what would be your advice?

**Helene Gayle:** The most effective model, I would tell President Obama, is one designed to produce long-term solutions. It can’t, for instance, stop at helping an individual gain important skills in agriculture or business. A successful model must be more comprehensive and take

account of a society's hierarchies, those based on social class, ethnicity or gender. By removing major barriers for marginalized groups, you can create an enabling environment and see development programs with truly long-lasting results.

The second thing I'd emphasize is the importance of rejecting proposed cuts to the International Affairs budget. No model works well without fuel. The International Affairs budget is critical to addressing the underlying causes of poverty and meeting basic human needs in developing countries. It represents a practical and smart investment in building a stable and secure world. And with only one percent of our budget going to foreign aid, this is a small investment that yields big returns for our nation and the world.

U.S. foreign assistance has saved the lives of millions of women by empowering them to raise healthy families, send their sons and daughters to school, and foster small businesses. Because of U.S. aid, over the last 60 years, maternal and child mortality have dropped sharply, literacy rates have increased and economic opportunities have expanded in the developing world. These funds produce real change in the lives of women, children and their families living in extreme poverty, changing entire communities and nations for the better.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—the agency at the heart of U.S. development—has made great strides in recent years to begin to revitalize and rebuild the capacity of the agency in a more efficient and effective way. It is critical to continue this momentum.

**Rahim Kanani:** As you look ahead into the next decade, what challenges and opportunities are on the horizon with regard to not only the work of CARE worldwide, but also the field of international development?

**Helene Gayle:** Ironically, one of the most interesting challenges the international development sector will face in the coming decade is growing global wealth. As recently as 1990, more than 90 percent of the world's poor people lived in poor countries. Today, roughly three-quarters of the world's poor live in middle-income countries. What's happened is that dozens of countries, including very large ones such as China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Nigeria have prospered into middle-income nations. Unfortunately, that prosperity has bypassed hundreds of millions of their citizens. In coming years, the challenge of fighting poverty will be less about the overall levels assistance from wealthy countries to poor countries and more about nurturing economic, social and political policies to make sure people aren't being left behind.

CARE is very well-positioned to take on that challenge. We work with the most marginalized groups, the poorest of the poor. And our focus on empowering girls and women through health, education and economic access is inherently about addressing the disparities in opportunity that create disparities in wealth. If you look at all the big-picture global development statistics over time, you'll see that gender equality, economic equality, and economic prosperity are inseparable.

As for opportunities, without doubt one of the biggest opportunities in international development is harnessing digital communication. From mobile phones to social media, digital communication isn't just changing the way we help people, it's changing the way people help us.

We see this every time somebody builds a new digital CARE Package at [www.care.org](http://www.care.org). But we also see this in places such as Mozambique and Kenya, where MNetHope, Microsoft and Robertson Technologies are working on pilot programs that use phones and cloud computing to extend the reach of modern public health programs, into areas that are far away from modern health facilities.

There's great promise in this kind of connectivity. Of course, we can't forget that the connections are really about the people at both ends. I think that's what the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day is all about. It's a time to celebrate what has happened – but more importantly what can happen – if people around the world truly connect in the name of improving the lives of girls and women.

*Cross-posted with the [Huffington Post](#)*



**SPECIAL INTERVIEW SERIES: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S WEEK**

“ ...Ironically, one of the most **interesting challenges** the international development sector will face in the **coming decade** is **growing global wealth...** ”

- Dr. Helene Gayle  
President and CEO, CARE USA



Written by Rahim Kanani

March 6th, 2011 at 1:10 pm