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World vision

Photojournalist Paola Gianturco captures images of resourceful women

By Julia Dodge

With a backpack full of camera lenses and recording equipment, Paola Gianturco sets off on a climb through the Annapurna Mountain Range in Nepal. She and her three guides, who provide language interpretation and carry her heavy gear, travel thorough woods of jasmine, orchids and rhododendrons. They pass through villages as local women sweep their porches with whisks, and carry firewood on their backs with babies slung on their hips.

Comparing the feeling to spending hours on a Stairmaster, Gianturco writes "I allow myself to stop after every 50 steps — and after every five stops I sit gasping in the pine needles next to the trail, wondering what on

with self-sufficiency. They are completely violating the tradition that only men could be trekking guides.

For five years, Gianturco traveled the world, collecting similar inspirational stories of 129 remarkable women dedicated to social entrepreneurship and supporting human rights. Her largest project yet, spanning 15 different countries on five continents. The result is *Women Who Light the Dark*, a 240-page book capturing the lives of women who, despite limited resources, use their imagination to solve the world's problems.

"These are women who support their families on one dollar a day and go to school," says Gianturco. "I thought they were heroic."



earth I am doing here: in three years, I'll be 70 years old! Going back is not an option. I am tired, which is not terminal. I plunge on."

But Gianturco was in good hands. These women guides are thoroughly trained and certified by Empowering Women of Nepal, a non-profit that educates women — from poor farm girls to widows with children — in leadership, English and the ways of the trade, providing women

Released in September, *Women Who Light the Dark* documents creative ways women are creating jobs, such as the women in Nepal who, along with becoming trekking guides, are also becoming taxi drivers—jobs traditionally held by men. "Women were really frightened to ride in taxis driven by men," says Gianturco, who found herself ducking cabs while taking photos of the woman driver, cautious of the political



The Women's Institute on Leadership and Disability (WILD) in Eugene, Oregon, helps women of all cultures and abilities gain confidence by challenging them in whitewater rafting and swimming.

violence occurring in Nepal at that time. "So now women have the opportunity to make more money because they're meeting a market need."

Inspired by the international work of Global Fund for Women, which has awarded more than \$58 million to 3,450 women-led organizations around the world, and motivated by their 20th anniversary last month, Gianturco is transferring 100 percent of the book's royalties to the organization. This money will ultimately end up in the hands of most women featured in the book, as many are already grantees of the organization.

"I think local grassroots women are the most capable of solving the problems that

they face, if they have the funds to do it, which they almost never do," says Gianturco.

However, the featured women also work to receive funding for themselves, such as mothers in Kenya who had water wells dug in schoolyards so their children didn't have to miss school to fetch water elsewhere. "Not only did they now have accessible water, but they'd sell the water to pay the drillers (who dug the wells), and use the rest of the money to start small businesses," says Gianturco.

What struck Gianturco the most were the creative strategies that unified these women. "Just like a thunderbolt it came to me: they were

using what they had!" says Gianturco. "Singing, music, dancing, storytelling, poetry — in Zimbabwe young girls were reciting poetry in public about sexual assault," which, according to Gianturco, is very taboo. However she found it was very necessary since the common belief is that men can cure AIDS by having sex with a virgin. "They're leading a national movement with *poetry*. These women have truly inspired me."

Paola Gianturco will be visiting the Bay Area and Silicon Valley October 1-14. For more information on the book and Gianturco's speaking engagements, visit www.womenwholightthedark.com. ▲