

Episode 6 - Dr. Karen Sowers: Social Work at its Roots: Using Microenterprise to Promote Health, Social Welfare, and Community Building Among Street Children in Indonesia

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. Today's podcast features a conversation with Dr. Karen Sowers professor and dean of the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Dr. Sowers is nationally known for her research and scholarship in the areas of international practice juvenile justice evidence based social work practice and social work education. She has authored or coauthored numerous books book chapters and refereed journal articles. She has also served on several editorial boards and its founding co-editor of best practices and Mental Health an international journal along with Dr. Catherine Dulmus who is an associate dean for research and director of the Buffalo Center for Social Research in the School of Social Work at a University at Buffalo doctors dourness and sors Speak about developing curriculum models for microenterprise projects among street children in Indonesia. The power of micro enterprise and micro finance to fight poverty was first employed by economist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh in 1976 with 27 dollars from his own pocket. Since that time the strategy of providing small loans to help economically disadvantaged people create employment for themselves has been used extensively as an antipoverty economic development tool in Asia Africa and Latin America. In Indonesia firms with five or fewer employees or micro enterprises account for almost half of the total manufacturing employment.

[00:02:21] The Republic of Indonesia is a geographically diverse country in Southeast Asia with over 17000 islands. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation and the fourth most populous country in the world with nearly 240 million people about one point seven million of those are street children who must beg steal or sell their bodies just to survive and they are not alone. It is estimated that more than 80 million Indonesians are in poverty subsisting on less than one dollar a day. In addition Indonesia has been the target of several recent life threatening incidents. The terrorist bombings in Bali in 2002 and in Jakarta in 2003 and 2004 as well as the devastating tsunami of 2004. Now let's join the conversation between doctors Kathryn dormice and Karen Sowers as they discuss using micro enterprise to promote health social welfare and community building among street children in Indonesia. My name is Catherine Dulmus and I'm clearly pleased Dr. Sowers that you take some time out of the conference today to share with us some of your recent work. I understand you have quite a project going in Indonesia. Yes I do and I'm always happy to talk about it. It's just fascinating. Wonderful. Tell us a little bit about it. This is a project which began about two and a half years ago. We will be finishing the project in December. A colleague of mine Dr. Bill Rowe from the University of South Florida and I have partnered together to work with the Islamic University in Jakarta and the Ministry of Social Welfare in Jakarta to help develop infrastructures for street children in Indonesia. How fascinating. How did you happen to come across this particular project to get involved in.

[00:04:21] Dr Rowe had longstanding relationships with this university. He helped develop their master's program and his master's in social work program actually has a masters in community development and it's very interesting because most of the Islamic universities only have Islamic studies for a major. This is the first university in Indonesia which has paired and other discipline with Islamic studies and the president of the university is very forward thinking and actually sees social work and community development as that structure which will help move the entire country

forward because there's such poverty here. It sounds kind of like where our roots of social work started way back even here in the United States when community development was really the center of the social work profession. Yes absolutely. So Dr. Rowe had an ongoing relationship there helping them develop that program. How did it move into this particular project that you've been working on in Indonesia. Risala funday who is on the faculty contacted us and talked with us about helping them develop curriculum modules and working with street children because they have such a huge problem with street children particularly as it relates to the sex trade. I just kind of explain to just what you mean by street children. What does that mean in Indonesia. It's different in Indonesia than it is in the United States in the United States. We tend to see runaway children who have been sexually abused or abused in their homes and they're running away. This is a very different different scenario.

[00:06:03] There is such tremendous poverty in Indonesia that many of the street children are actually sent out onto the streets by their parents because this is one of the few ways in which they can garner resources and financial support for their families. That speaks volumes about the level of poverty no doubt in the country there. It does. Many of these families are really just living day to day and they've experienced several disasters recently which have increased the poverty in Indonesia. So we've also been within the last year been looking at street children and their relationship to those disasters. And one of the things that we've found is that because they are so street savvy and they know all of the back alleys and they know all of the places in which they can survive that during times of disaster street children are actually a resource to the country. How interesting resiliency and a different type of way. Yes absolutely. So tell us a little bit about particular projects that you're working on there related to the street children. There is a mess in Indonesia Jakarta in Jakarta specifically that if one has HIV and has intercourse with either a girl or a boy who is a virgin that it will cure HIV. This myth obviously proliferates HIV and spreads it even further. Many of the street children are very very young. They may be 6 7 10 years old very young and they will grow up on the streets. Some of them will return to their homes on a daily basis. Many of them do not. Many of them develop relationships with other street children and in fact they have boyfriends and girlfriends and live in alleys together and they help protect each other. Sounds like they've developed their own culture around street life.

[00:08:13] Yes they have yes they have the AIDS issue with the street children sounds a bit overwhelming. How is it that your program is attempting to address them. Our program isn't directly dealing with AIDS but it is very indirectly dealing with AIDS because we're working with street children and almost all of those street children are HIV infected. They also are at risk in many other kinds of ways with respect to their health the health infrastructure in Indonesia is not particularly good. So many of these children are dying early because they can't get the sustaining drugs that they need to be able to keep their health term. However they are exceedingly resilient and hardworking and committed to their families and to each other. So working with the street children also means at times working with the parents of the street children they love their children. They're simply trying to survive. And the importance of education it does not loom large in this culture because they are just living hand-to-mouth and trying to survive. So these children are not educated they're living on the streets. They're putting their lives at risk and we really believe strongly that the only way to combat this is economically to help turn the tide so that families and the children can be engaged in activities which will be financially rewarding for them. And at the same time will help to build the country. How many trips have you and Dr. Rono taken and in addition he's been there many right but related to this particular related to this project we've been there three times and hopefully we'll be going back again. It's a difficult trip.

[00:10:04] It's just hard to get there. There's no easy way to get there. And then once you do get there the living conditions are very different. Living conditions in this country as well as the working conditions even those persons who have high positions in the university are not

particularly well paid. Those who are working in the NGOs are also very poorly paid. And that means that we need to help find the funds to even support them to be able to travel a few miles from the NGO where they may be working to the university where we're meeting as well as being able to feed them while we're working. And so what is the project in particular that you and Dr. Rowe are working on regarding this youth. We're we're working with the Ministry of Social Welfare and helping to develop some pilot projects to implement micro business enterprises for street children. So what we want to do is help street children be involved in activities where they can earn money in legitimate ways that do not put themselves or their health at risk. Important indeed to the two of you have some ideas as to how to address that. Yes. As a matter of fact one of the pilot projects is a micro business enterprise with street children who now are living on a plot of land and they are raising goats and chickens and animals which they then send outside of the country for Ramadan because Ramadan uses animals for slaughter as part of their ritual. And it was very successful last Ramadan in fact they sold all the animals except for the breeding animals.

[00:12:00] We've also helped them develop a fish farm now that is specifically to help feed themselves and feed the village. Has there been particular trainings that you've worked with with the youth there is it that you're working around government officials to develop these programs. We're working with NGOs and the street children and faculty at the Islamic University. So every time we go we bring all of these groups together. We need them to help inform us in terms of helping to develop the infrastructures as well as the modules that we're developing for their curriculum. And there's faculty from the university that are involved as well you said yes there are about 10 faculty involved. It's like a huge undertaking but a good group effort and variety of fronts. It's been wonderful. I've learned a tremendous amount. I've learned a lot about their culture and have gained a great deal of respect for their culture and their religious beliefs. I also am amazed at their willingness to partner particularly with Americans in looking at solutions to problems the most important thing for us has been to listen and to hear them and to help them develop programs and training modules which are consistent with their cultural beliefs and their religious beliefs. You had funded for philosopher. We have we receive funding from the International Association of Schools of Social Work as well as some funding from both of our universities and from international programs. And we are now considering looking at other funding opportunities including Save the Children UNICEF and so forth. But would you see the next steps being if you were able to secure more funding. I think there are next steps for us whether we secure more funding or not.

[00:14:03] We have become so committed to the people that we've been working with the directors of the NGOs and the staff of the NGOs are tremendously committed to their work. They don't make much money and yet they are working with the poorest of the poor and the most desperate part of the population of Indonesia. So I think that we will probably continue to engage in work whether we receive more funding or not. I'd like to commend you and Dr. Rowe for your important work in this area and also recognize your universities respectively the University of South Florida and the University of Tennessee and wish you well as your future efforts. Hachiko back to Indonesia continue to do work in this important area. Thank you for joining us today Dr. Sowers. Thank you Dr. Dulmus you've been listening to a podcast featuring a conversation between Dr. Catherine Dulmus is associate dean for research and director of the Buffalo Center for Social Research and Dr. Karen Sowers professor and dean of the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Visit our website to hear more lectures and conversations about social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community. More information about who we are who's through our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.