



Dining for Women

## Program Fact Sheet

**PROGRAM:** Shem Women's Group

**WEBSITE:** <http://www.shemgroup.org>

**MISSION:** To empower Tibetan women and their communities through grassroots development

**ONE REASON WE LIKE THIS PROGRAM:** *Dining for Women is particularly impressed with the fact that Tibetan women actually design the projects that Shem implements. The fact that educated Tibetan women are acting as the change agents is very exciting; everyone benefits in this model, the young women planning and implementing the projects and the villagers. It is a very holistic and grassroots approach to development.*

**SHEM WOMEN'S GROUP'S STORY:** Shem began in October of 2003 as a course in gender studies taught by Michelle Kleisath, an English teacher and gender studies specialist. In September of 2004, at the request of class participants, Ms. Kleisath started teaching an additional course in small-scale development to interested women. This class began in hopes of encouraging female students to design and implement their own small-scale development projects. Nearly sixty women attended the first class meeting, a number far exceeding the expected turnout. The top fifteen applicants were chosen from this pool and met with Ms. Kleisath on a weekly basis to learn basic project development skills. Such a class was unprecedented in Tibet's Qinghai province.

During the course of the semester, the students learned how to identify the problems of their communities, design sustainable projects that would successfully alleviate these problems, write professional proposals to outside funding sources, and manage the execution of their projects. In an effort to create a sustainable support system for Tibetan women active in grassroots development, Shem was formed in March of 2005. "Shem" means charity and compassion in Tibetan. Charity and compassion are fundamental in helping others and are the guiding principles behind group members' work.

In their first two years of operation, the members of Shem raised nearly \$140,000 and successfully implemented sixteen development projects in impoverished Tibetan communities. These projects were funded by private donors and international funding organizations. In 2007 and 2008, Shem's project managers successfully completed twenty-one small-scale development projects in rural areas in order to improve the local communities' living conditions. Around 10,394 villagers benefited from those projects. Shem is now run by four full time staff: Chugpilhamo, Lhamotso, Rendzenjiyi, and Samtsogye. This core staff is now running a fourth annual development class and a women's discussion group for educated Tibetan women. So far, Shem Women's Group has successfully completed seventy-two projects all over Tibet and has grown to around fifty group members.

**HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS:** Shem focuses on increasing the well-being of people in impoverished communities by providing access to basic needs such as water, fuel, electricity, health care, and basic education. They fulfill their mission by training educated Tibetan women to design, implement, and manage sustainable grassroots development projects that will successfully alleviate the problems that their communities face.

At the village level, while the projects fulfill basic survival needs for village women and their families, Shem project managers—educated Tibetan women—present villagers with strong female role models. The work of these young women raises the villagers' confidence in women's abilities and encourages villagers to value women's education. At

the university level, Shem offers discussion groups and workshops designed to empower educated Tibetan women, and they provide women with the resources and training they need to put their ideas into action.

## WHERE THEY SERVE: Tibet

### COUNTRY AT-A-GLANCE: Tibet



- ❖ **Geographic size:** 2.5 million square kilometers, one fifth of the People's Republic of China
- ❖ **Population:** 6 million; 2.7 live in the Tibetan Autonomous Region
- ❖ **Illiteracy Rate:** 50%
- ❖ **Percentage of students enrolled in junior high:** 1.5%
- ❖ **Tibet is the highest region on earth with an average elevation of 16,000 ft.**

**Brief Background on Tibet:** Tibetan-populated areas of China are divided into the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties in the provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan.

TAR comprises less than half of historic Tibet and was created by China in 1965 for administrative reasons. It is important to note that when Chinese officials and publications use the term *Tibet* they mean only the TAR. Tibetans use the term "Tibet" to mean the area traditionally known as Tibet before the 1949-50 Chinese invasion.

### Other glimpses into Tibetan history:

- Between the 17<sup>th</sup> century and 1959, the **Dalai Lama** was head of the Tibetan government.
- In 1959, the Dalai Lama sought **asylum** in India and organized the Tibetan government, now called the Central Tibetan Administration. Tibet now considers itself an independent state under illegal occupation.
- Since 1959, exiled Tibetans have continued to seek peaceful solutions to regain their country and preserve their identity and heritage. They also seek ways to help Tibetans living in the TAR region.
- The **government** in exile is parliamentary whereas the Chinese government is communist.
- Since Chinese occupation, over 111,000 Tibetans have sought refugee status around the world.
- In 1989, the Dalai Lama won the **Nobel Peace Prize**.
- Today, forced to denounce the Dalai Lama, Tibetans must pledge their allegiance to the Chinese government. Failure to do so can result in imprisonment or other forms of punishment. Possessing an image of the Dalai Lama is illegal in Tibet.
- The continued population transfer of Chinese to Tibet in recent years has seen the Tibetans become a minority in their own land.
- Approximately 45% of the Tibetan population is **rural** while 40% is nomadic or semi-nomadic, and only about 15% live in **urban** areas.
- More than 70% of Tibetans in the TAR region now live below the **poverty** line.
- The harsh **climate**, inhospitable and rugged mountainous **terrain**, and lack of **infrastructure** in vast parts of the TAR are adverse factors contributing to the isolation and dire living conditions for the overwhelming majority of the population.

**WHAT DINING FOR WOMEN WILL SUPPORT:** Provide solar-generating electricity panels to 90 households in the Cuozhou, Jiajia, and Duoja townships and 50 solar-generating electricity panels to Jasta Village (all in Qinghai Province). These projects aim to reduce the economic burden of the impoverished nomads and to improve their living conditions and their health. With these panels, families can save the expense of candles and kerosene, which amounts to over 200rmb (10% of the average family income). This project will generate local income by permitting more work to be done at night, and it will improve participants' health conditions by drastically reducing the amount of kerosene smoke in their households.

**HOW PROGRAM SUCCESS IS MEASURED:** Shem Group Members return to the villages served and conduct interviews and evaluations with villagers. Shem members also evaluate their group and the courses that they take.

**FINANCIAL PROFILE:** In 2008, Shem Women's Group spent 1,087,885 RMB(\$159,259.) on Shem's projects, 81% of their total expenses. It directed 208,567 RMB (\$30,532.9), 19% of their expenditures, to administration.

**DFW HISTORY WITH PROGRAM:** New program

**SOURCES AND RESOURCES:**

<http://www.shemgroup.org>

<http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php> Official website of the Tibetan Government in Exile

<http://www.tibet.com/glance.html>

[http://www.diningforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Shem\\_Women's\\_Group\\_Yearly\\_Report\\_2008.pdf](http://www.diningforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Shem_Women's_Group_Yearly_Report_2008.pdf)