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## HelpMeSee launches global effort to combat cataract blindness and empower women in low-income countries

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### Key Takeaways

- Cataract blindness is a global socioeconomic crisis, disproportionately affecting women and perpetuating gender inequality and poverty cycles.
- HelpMeSee's collaboration with Empowered aims to raise awareness and empower women in low- and middle-income countries through training initiatives.

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*HelpMeSee has partnered with new initiatives to address the global cataract blindness crisis, focusing on empowering women in low- and middle-income countries. Through training and education, the organization aims to reduce gender inequality and improve socioeconomic outcomes worldwide.*

Bonnie An Henderson, MD, president and CEO of HelpMeSee, emphasized that increasing access to cataract surgery is essential to curbing the cataract blindness crisis.



(Image credit: Adobe Stock/Pokobchuk Olena)

"Vision loss due to cataract is far more than a medical issue; it is a socioeconomic crisis that disproportionately affects women," Henderson noted. "Often, the family member suffering from cataract is confined to the home, which frequently forces the youngest female in the family to give up work or education to provide care."

This, Henderson added, "deepens cycles of gender inequality and poverty, impacting not only individual families but entire communities."

Nicoletta Fynn-Thompson MD, director of medical training at HelpMeSee, told *Ophthalmology Times* that one of the collaboration's goals is to bring public awareness to this global cataract crisis. According to Fynn-Thompson, the collaboration will provide a platform for the organization to empower women in low- and middle-income countries to benefit from the HelpMeSee mission.

"Cataract is the leading cause of blindness worldwide," Fynn-Thompson said. "Globally, approximately 17 million people are blind due to cataracts. Women are more likely to develop cataracts and are thus more likely to experience cataract-related blindness."

Evidence also shows women are less likely to seek or receive treatment for cataracts, she added, creating a cyclical issue that affects entire families.

"Younger girls cannot attend school because they have to fill the roles their mothers, grandmothers, or aunts are unable to do," she explained. "It propagates a negative cycle that is difficult to break."

HelpMeSee is reaching out through its training programs to develop the next generation of female leaders.

"We offer simulation-based training for female cataract specialists," Fynn-Thompson said. "Once someone feels confident in a leadership role, they can inspire those most affected."

The HelpMeSee Simulation-based Training Program is conducted through an instructor-led course on the HelpMeSee Eye Surgery Simulator, which allows cataract specialists to hone their MSICS skills and gain confidence in a safe, risk-free environment.

"Rather than practicing on animal eyes in wet labs, our trainees can practice hand-eye coordination and muscle memory repeatedly while getting objective feedback on their progress," she said. "Their confidence grows as they see their skills improve."

In many low- and middle-income countries, cataract blindness affects individuals at a younger age. This includes men in their prime, who often serve as family breadwinners.

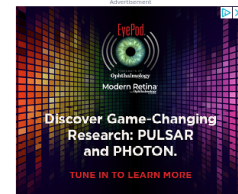
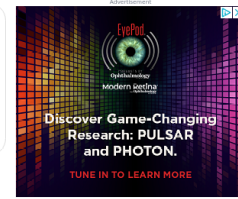
Manual Small Incision Cataract Surgery (MSICS) is the procedure of choice in low and middle income countries because it less dependent on expensive equipment that is often out of reach for a significant portion of the population.

"MSICS has excellent visual outcomes without the complexities and technological demands that can increase costs of surgery and care," Fynn-Thompson said.

Working with *Empowered*, hosted by Meg Ryan, was an ideal partnership due to the alignment of objectives in highlighting important issues. "Her involvement allows us to disseminate crucial information about communities with limited resources for the cataract blind and visually impaired," Fynn-Thompson noted. "It's remarkable to see how their productions inspire and connect us to a larger community, increasing awareness of this global issue."

Fynn-Thompson, herself a cataract specialist, added that following simulation-based training, the importance of transitioning to a supportive environment to implement these learned skills is essential for continued success. "To perform live cataract surgery, surgeons need access to appropriate surgical instrumentation, well maintained operative theaters and, most importantly, mentorship during their initial transition to live cataract surgeries," she said. "A simulation-based trained cataract specialist may not succeed if support in their transition to live surgery is lacking."

*Empowered* can also drive support for the fight against preventable blindness.




"This is a global issue. We all stand to benefit by raising awareness and contributing to the fight."


Ultimately, Fynn-Thompson concluded, success will be measured by the number of people whose vision is restored.

"If you can change one person's life, that is success," she said. "Training one cataract specialist who will perform vision restoring surgeries for 20 years can impact countless lives. Please support our global mission by visiting our website, donating, volunteering or educating your community on the crisis impacting 100 million people today."


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