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BACKGROUND PAPER

“Empowering Women to Change the World: What Universities and the UN Can Do”

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Introduction: What Is “Women’s Empowerment” and Why Is It Necessary?

Women’s empowerment enables women to reach their full potential, to manage their own lives, and to influence key decisions that shape their lives and families. Empowering women promotes equal access to education and healthcare; equal sharing in the distribution of resources; equal opportunities for financial independence through work or entrepreneurship; and proportionate political power and social influence. Empowering women -- and the gender equality that will flow from it -- is not only a moral obligation, but it is also fundamental to human progress and sustainable development.

Women’s potential -- the potential of half of the human race (and, thus, one half of the potential global workforce) -- to contribute to economic, political, and social advancement continues to be squandered by deeply ingrained discrimination, refractory inequalities, and -- still too often -- gross injustices. Gender equality remains a necessary goal for all nations. Since 2006, the three highest ranking countries in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report -- Iceland, Finland and Norway -- have closed a little over 80 percent of their gender gaps, while the lowest ranking country -- Yemen -- has closed less than half of its gender gap.

Because of the central social role played by women, society’s progress depends on eliminating gender inequities. Women are the backbone of families and communities. They play multiple and critical roles as mothers, leaders, students, decision-makers, farmers, voters, and workers, among many others. Without their engagement, empowerment, and contributions, we will not be able to successfully overcome the universal challenges of climate change, food insecurity, violent conflict, lack of education, inadequate healthcare, and poverty (Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi, 2009).

In most of the world, women remain an untapped (and, in most cases, inequitably compensated) resource. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn write, “In many poor countries, the greatest unexploited resource isn’t oil fields or veins of gold; it is the women and girls who aren’t educated and never become a major presence in the formal economy. With education and with help starting businesses, impoverished women can earn money and support their countries as well as their families. They represent the best hope for fighting global poverty” (Kristof and WuDunn, 2009).

If women have the opportunity, they can raise the standards of living for their families and their communities. The not-for-profit organization CARE has coined the term “Girl Effect” to describe the

transformative socio-economic results of the entrepreneurial empowerment of women and girl-children. If women and girls are educated, healthy, and able to live without fear of being sold, raped, or forced into pregnancy, they can help stop the vicious cycle of global poverty – for example, by starting small businesses with the help of microfinance loans, enabling them to feed their families and employ others (Rigdon and Brown, 2009).

The Millennium Development Goals

There is global recognition of the centrality of women and the necessity of empowering them to change the world. This recognition is manifested in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Endorsed by all 192 of the United Nations member states and announced in 2001, the MDGs were intended to galvanize world leaders to form partnerships to improve the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world and ensure basic human rights by 2015. Gender equality in education, maternal mortality, and the empowerment of women are central to the MDGs.

By all indications, most of the MDGs have not yet been achieved in most of the world. In September 2010, world leaders reconvened at the United Nations in New York to review progress made over the past decade. Although some progress has been made in the efforts to reduce poverty, disease, and environmental degradation, “six out of ten of the world’s poorest people are still women and girls, less than 16 percent of the world’s parliamentarians are women, two thirds of all children shut outside the school gates are girls and, both in times of armed conflict and behind closed doors at home, women are still systematically subjected to violence” (UNDP, 2010).

Who Is At Risk?

The gender divide puts women socially, culturally, and biologically at higher risk for morbidity, mortality, and an inferior quality of life. Three groups of women who are particularly vulnerable to these risks, as a result of gender discrimination and disempowerment, are:

- **Girl-Children:** Girl-children suffer the most from human trafficking, violence, sexually transmitted diseases, genital mutilation, child labor, bride selling/trading, unwanted pregnancies, “honor killings,” and lack of access to education and healthcare. They are exploited in the labor market as maids, carpet weavers, errand girls, and prostitutes, and too often unable to mature and thrive to become full participants in the political, economic, and cultural lives of their societies.
- **The Female Aging Population:** Women tend to live longer than men. In 2019, the expected differences in female and male life expectancies will mean that older women will far outnumber older men (International Labor Office, 2009). Therefore, women are increasingly either the caregivers of older spouses or family members, or they are living alone with limited resources for their own care. As they age, they also become vulnerable due to limited or fixed incomes, isolation, dehydration, limited access to healthcare, and climate extremes.
- **Women Migrants and Immigrants:** Globalization drives people to migrate to centers of employment, contributing to the dislocation and separation of families. For some women, migration provides opportunities to lead productive and fulfilling lives in welcoming, safe, and healthy urban environments and, therefore, is worth the sacrifices and the difficulties of separation from family, language, culture, and country of origin. For other women, the migration experience is filled with risk, fear, abuse, exploitation, and significant damage to their physical,

mental, and social health and well-being. Women migrants and immigrants are more vulnerable than men due to gender inequities, because they tend to have lower paying jobs and higher illiteracy rates due to lack of education. These issues cause major financial and social stressors that can profoundly affect their health.

What Global Trends Put Women and Girl-Children At Risk?

Changes in role expectations of women and men in the households, markets, and societies in which they live continue to accelerate due to globalization. Gender equality cannot be achieved when societal and cultural constraints impede women's potential for functioning and producing up to their full capacity. Attempts to change embedded cultural and societal mores create tensions that are sometimes magnified by rapid globalization. Women may experience the manifestations of these tensions in their households, in their search for jobs and participation in the labor market, or in obtaining credit, technology, and other assets as they continue to perform their traditional social roles. While some women benefit from new opportunities, many are forced to continue with traditional gender roles and consequently suffer from increased burdens and stress.

- **Urbanization:** Urbanization is an increasing global phenomenon with negative as well as positive effects. As urbanization increases, the number of urban poor will continue to rise (United Nations, 2008). Many of these poor will be women moving from rural to urban areas or across countries, with dreams of finding better lives, more educational and health resources, and fewer restrictions on individual freedoms. While urbanization creates new opportunities and choices, it is hazardous to women and to their health. The process of urbanization contributes to a scarcity of resources, lack of infrastructure, and deprivations in social structure. In urban areas, women face new health risks caused by poor sanitation, lack of electricity, pollution, stress, crime, and traffic accidents (United Nations, 2008 and 2010). In congested cities, women also face an increased risk of communicable diseases and infections. Women *are* the most compromised under these urban conditions, due to gender inequities and a lack of awareness among urban developers and policy makers of their specific needs and concerns.
- **Poverty:** The “feminization of poverty” is an increasingly global phenomenon. Women and girls suffer the most from poverty. According to a report issued by the World Bank in 2008, approximately 829 million people living below the poverty line were female (girls, young adults, and older women), compared with about 522 million males in similar situations (International Labour Office, 2009).
- **Lack of Access to Education and Healthcare:** Women are at risk of inequity and exploitation when they are uneducated and lack adequate access to health services, including sexual and reproductive health. Universal access to contraception alone would prevent a third of maternal deaths (World Health Organization). Education and improvements in the health status of women stimulate economic growth and productivity, and enable women to achieve their full potential. The Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, led by the United Nations Secretary-General, calls for a global investment to ensure women will have universal access to comprehensive, integrated healthcare services through innovative approaches and accountability.
- **Pregnancy:** More than 350,000 women and adolescent girls die annually from preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth, including hemorrhage, infections, hypertension disorders, obstructed labor, and unsafe abortion practices. Infections, such as HIV, significantly

increase the risk of maternal mortality and morbidity. Limited access to antenatal care, skilled birth attendants, and skilled maternity services contribute to the inability to significantly reduce maternal mortality rates, particularly in developing countries. The failure to prevent maternal mortality and morbidity is a significant barrier to the empowerment of women and girls.

- **Work:** “Women’s work” is also an important source of risk for women. The nature and volume of work that women traditionally engage in tends to be devalued and veiled. In many parts of the world, particularly the lower resource countries, women produce, raise, or cultivate a major portion of the staple foods on which populations subsist, including the rice and wheat that are the main staples in Asia and Africa (Messias, Regev et al., 1997; Meleis & Lindgren, 2001). Women tend to raise the majority of farm animals, including those raised for consumption. According to Inter Press Service, “On a global scale, women cultivate more than half of all the food that is grown. In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, they produce up to 80 percent of basic food stuffs. In Asia, they account for around 50 percent of food production. In Latin America, they are mainly engaged in subsistence farming, horticulture, poultry and raising small livestock (Shah, 2010). These facts are reflected in an African proverb: “Without women, we would all go hungry” (Daulaire, Leidl, Mackin, Murphy, & Stark, 2002). Much also has been written about “women’s work” in the home - cooking, cleaning, carrying water, cleaning barns, sewing, baking, and caring for their families. Although that work has intrinsic value in the lives of women and their families, its intrinsic value does not translate into monetary compensation or benefits, nor to being counted in gross economic indices, partly because of lack of awareness and partly because of difficulty in reflecting the economic value of such work (Daulaire et al., 2002).
- **Violence:** Women and girls around the world suffer emotional, sexual, and physical abuse at the hands of intimate partners, family members, casual acquaintances, and strangers alike. Each year, an estimated 5,000 women are killed in the name of maintaining their families’ honor (WHO, 2009). According to Kristof and WuDunn, “women aged fifteen through forty-four are more likely to be maimed or die from male violence than from cancer, malaria, traffic accidents, and war combined” (Kristof and WuDunn, 2009).
- **Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations:** Rape is a weapon of war, often effecting the majority of the surviving female population (e.g., a quarter to half of the women in Rwanda’s genocide were raped). In conflict situations and in their tragic aftermaths, violence against women and girls is particularly rampant and brutal, with systematic rape being employed as an intimidation tactic during civil wars and other armed conflicts. Often, women are abducted into the army itself, or as army ‘wives,’ and the incidence of HIV/AIDs then is particular high among female populations in conflict areas. These violent conflicts also make women widows. In countries such as Angola, Mozambique, and Kosovo, widows accounted for as much as half of the adult female population when the conflict ended (Stewart, 2010). Widowhood leaves women with the burden of not only raising, but also supporting families, often without adequate education or job training, and they suffer most from the decay of social services. As a result, women often resort to prostitution to support their families. Finally, in most contemporary conflicts, civilians—mainly women and children—constitute approximately 80 percent of the total casualties (Bouta, and Frerks, 2002).
- **Climate Change and Natural Disasters:** Natural disasters and the environmental and climatologic changes brought on by global warming, pose special risks to women and girls. In the devastation that follows natural disasters, violence against women and girls is common, as

civil authority disintegrates and emergency efforts take weeks and months to mobilize effective security measures. Women are more likely than men to die in climate change-related disasters, and to bear increased workload, loss of income, health problems, and violence and harassment in the aftermath of such events. They also are more likely to be displaced, or encounter problems when other (usually male) family members migrate for economic reasons; to experience increased burden of water and fuel collection, and resulting health problems, due to increased incidence of drought or other changes in climate; to feel the effects of rising food prices most acutely, and be the first to suffer during food shortages; to suffer exacerbated health inequalities; suffer from violence, including sexual violence, in resource conflicts; to be expected to, and need to, adapt to the effects of climate change, increasing their workload; and to suffer as a result of intended solutions to the problem of climate change, such as forestry projects and biofuel production (Haigh and Vallely, 2010).

- **Discrimination:** Discrimination against women and girls occurs in every country and across the entire lifespan. In its 2007 report on state of the world's children, UNICEF reported that "Where there is a clear economic or cultural preference for sons, the misuse of [pregnancy diagnostic tools] can facilitate female feticide" (UNICEF, 2007). This means that in parts of the world, like China, parents will abort their child or put the child up for adoption because it's a girl. In childhood, it is mostly girls who are deprived of basic healthcare and primary or secondary education on the basis of their gender. During adolescence, sexual abuse, economic exploitation and human trafficking; child marriage and premature parenthood; domestic violence; female genital mutilation/cutting; and the absence of vital knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, including HIV/AIDS, continue this pattern of discrimination. As adults, even in the U.S., women are still paid only 72 cents for every dollar a man earns, according to US Department of Labor statistics. Each year more than half a million women—roughly one woman every minute—die as a result of pregnancy complications and childbirth, 99% of which occur in developing countries. Elderly women often face double discrimination on the basis of both gender and age and are plunged into poverty at a time of life when they are very vulnerable.
- **Political and Economic Leadership:** Women remain systematically underrepresented in positions of political power and economic leadership around the world. In the United States, women now constitute the majority of the American workforce, holding 50.3% of non-farm payroll jobs, but they earn only 80 percent of what their male counterparts take home. Only 13 of the 500 largest corporations in the world have a female Chief Executive Officer, and, according to the Catalyst research group, almost one-third of Fortune 500 companies have no women executive officers at all in their highest ranks. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations, in October 2010, the world average of women members across all chambers of parliament reached an all time high of – only – 19.1 percent. Women comprise a critical mass – over 30 per cent – in the lower or single house of their national parliament in only 23 countries. Worldwide, on average, only one in six cabinet ministers is a woman. Only 14 women in the world currently hold either Head of State or Head of Government positions. (IPU, 2010 and UNDESA, 2010)

Challenges in Advancing the Empowerment of Women

Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment requires that women have a voice at all levels of policy-making. Women's empowerment and gender equality are the keys to building stable, peaceful, healthy and productive societies (UN Secretary-General, 2010). US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's

increased focus on improving the status of women and girls in developing nations is an indication of the vital role women play in reducing poverty and promoting economic growth and diplomacy. She maintains that the advancement of gender equality is necessary to elevate the “three d’s” – diplomacy, development and defense. Heads of state continue to recognize that women play integral roles in positive post-conflict and post-disaster interventions. In 2005, the Millennium+5 Summit maintained: “We stress the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building. We also underline the importance of the integration of gender perspectives and women’s equal participation and full involvement in all efforts to maintain and promote peace and security, as well as the need to increase their role in decision-making at all levels” (UNDP, 2008).

The Role of the UN in Advancing the Empowerment of Women

Recognizing that -- after ten years of dialogues and recommendations – insufficient progress has been made in empowering women around the world, in July 2010 the United Nations General Assembly approved the establishment of UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, to accelerate progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. The office is now responsible for promoting gender equality, expanding opportunity for women and girls, and tackling gender discrimination around the globe. This entity is headed by former President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, and merges four of the world body’s agencies and offices: the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues, and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW). The creation of UN Women culminates UN progress on the empowerment of women that started with the 1946 creation of the Commission on the Status of Women; the 1952 General Assembly adoption of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women; the 1963 Comprehensive Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; the four UN World Conferences on Women (1975 in Mexico City, 1980 in Copenhagen, 1985 in Nairobi, and 1995 in Beijing); and the 1976 creation of UNIFEM. Under Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the UN has developed a Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health; launched the UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children; launched the “Unite to End Violence against Women” campaign, the “UN’s Stop Rape Now” initiative; established a Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict; implemented a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment; advocated for increasing the share of gender-related allocations in official development assistance; called on Member States to increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions; and significantly increased the number of women in high UN management positions.

The Role of Universities in Advancing the Empowerment of Women

The world’s research universities have an enormous role to play in advancing the empowerment of women: as enablers of individual women through education, as centers of research and discovery, and as exemplars of gender equality, diversity, and full communal participation. It is, first and foremost, through education that women are enabled to enter the professional and leadership roles that have too long and in too many places been denied them. It is through empirical research that we have come to understand the dimensions of the oppression and inequality imposed upon women and girl-children and to identify the socio-economic and cultural forces that work against their empowerment. It is through medical research and high-quality health care, often available only through academic medical centers, that many of the threats to women’s health and wellness can be reduced. It is through the study of history, literature, philosophy, and religion that we become aware of the moral dimensions of gender discrimination and disempowerment. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our universities serve as

the crucibles in which societies can model the full participation of all their members and work through the often difficult adjustments of attitudes and traditions that will enable the wider world to follow our lead towards full gender equality for women.

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