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COMBATING POVERTY FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

“Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women.”¹

Introduction

The persistence of poverty serves as an affront to human dignity, particularly during our contemporary era of unparalleled technological advancement and material wealth for hundreds of millions of people around the world. While poverty is all too common to all age groups and in virtually every country around the world, it far too frequently looks out on the world through female eyes. The persistent feminization of poverty is the result of both governmental and societal action and inaction and of overt and covert forms of discrimination. Recent analyses indicate that reducing and/or eliminating poverty for women and girls is one of the most critical dimensions of any comprehensive sustainable development strategy. UNIFEM must continue to coordinate multistakeholder dialogues on the fundamental issue of reducing, and eventually eliminating, poverty for women and girls.

Scale of the Problem

The severity of the problems posed by poverty for women and girls is often greater than initially recognized. Women and girls experience poverty at a higher rate than men and boys all over the world, in large part because the educational and economic opportunities for women and girls are frequently limited. Reliable statistics on the feminization of poverty are not always readily available; not all governments routinely collect such data or analyze it by gender but according to *The Economist*, “some estimates 70% of the world's poor are women.”² Women frequently earn less than men and a significantly higher percentage of women are either unemployed or work in jobs and professions that do not pay monetary wages than men. Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen notes that “while women work long hours every day at home, since this work does not produce a remuneration it is often ignored in the accounting of the respective contributions of women and men in the family's joint prosperity. When, however, the work is done outside the home and the employed woman earns a wage, her contribution to the family's prosperity is more visible.”³ Ensuring that men and women's contributions are equitably distributed and recognized, as well as ensuring that women receive equal pay for equal work, is an essential element to reducing poverty for women and girls.

¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* Anchor Books New York 2000 p. 203.

² *The Economist*, “Jobs for the girls” March 3, 2007.

³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* 2000 p. 194.

In some countries, women do not enjoy the same property rights as men. Discrimination in the courts, legislatures, schools, and workplaces all contribute to persistent inequalities. Economist Jeffrey Sachs, Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's), notes that the exclusion of women from the labor force as well as denying them their rights "results in cascading problems. Most important, perhaps, the demographic transition from high fertility to low fertility is delayed or blocked altogether. Poor households continue to have six or seven children because the woman's role is seen mainly as child rearing, and her lack of education means that she has few options in the labor force. In these settings, women often lack basic economic security and legal rights; when they are widowed, their social circumstances turn even more dreadful, and they are left completely impoverished without hope for improvement."⁴ In any viable multistakeholder dialogue on combating poverty for women and girls, international organizations, including the UN System and related bodies such as UNIFEM, national governments, non-governmental organizations (NGO's), and relevant civil society representatives must address the unequal nature of employment and property rights.

Overcoming poverty through education

As the educational opportunities for women and girls are far too frequently less than those for men and boys, women and girls confront the job market with far fewer prospects. In many countries, especially in the developing countries and Least Developed Countries (LDC's), women and girls typically attend school for half as long as men and boys, with correspondingly low rates of graduation and literacy. Focusing on the education of women and girls from both a results-oriented perspective as well as a rights-oriented perspective is essential. Educating women and girls is fundamental to creating and sustaining long-term economic growth and human development in societies and excluding women and girls from education violates their human rights. UNICEF recently released *The Gap Report* for its Gender Achievement and Prospects in Education Program (GAP) and the researchers concluded that "**None of the Millennium Development Goals will likely be met unless there is significant progress in girls' education.** Educating girls is a surefire way to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutritional status and health, reduce poverty and wipe out HIV/AIDS and other diseases. All other development goals hinge on meeting the goals of gender parity and universal quality education."⁵

Empowering women and girls through improved educational opportunities must be a key priority for all relevant stakeholders. Governments can dramatically improve access to education for women and girls by eliminating school fees for public education; when school fees were eliminated in Uganda in 1997, school attendance for girls doubled within 3 years.⁶ UNIFEM also advocates that governments implement gender-responsive

⁴ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* The Penguin Press New York 2005 p. 60.

⁵ UNICEF, *The Gap Report* 2006. Found at: <http://www.ungei.org/gap/educationClock.php>

⁶ *BBC News*, "School fees 'barrier for girls'" September 5, 2005.

budgets where governments analyze their comparative expenditures on women and girls versus men and boys. These gender-responsive budgets will not only analyze comparative expenditures on education but also on all other elements of government spending that impact the lives of women and girls. Ensuring parity in terms of government expenditures on education will reduce the sustained disparities between boys and girls in terms of access to education and will enable far more women and girls to complete their studies and graduate. A further critical step in overcoming discrimination is ensuring that all countries sign and ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Expanding economic opportunities for women and girls

Education alone will not lift hundreds of millions of women and girls out of crushing poverty if there are no jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities available after graduation. Governments must take the lead in improving employment prospects for women by implementing legislation that prohibits discrimination in hiring practices as well as salaries and wages.⁷ According to the most recent International Labor Organization (ILO) statistics, more women are earning wages and salaries outside of their homes than at any previous point but 81.8 million women and girls remain unemployed and millions of others are “stuck in low productivity jobs in agriculture and services or receiving less money for doing the same jobs as men.”⁸ Women frequently make up a majority of part-time and temporary workers and thus earn lower salaries and wages and also receive far fewer benefits such as health care and pension contributions. Women and girls also often work in the informal sector of the economy, including prostitution, and are afforded few, if any, legal protections and benefits. In 2003, Selim Jahan of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) noted that “women’s share of non-agricultural wage employment approaches to that of men (in the range of 45-55%) in 39 out of 87 countries for which data are available.”⁹ If women continue to earn only half as much as men, efforts to end the feminization of poverty will not succeed. Governments and related stakeholders further need to ensure that women and girls are promoted equally to men and boys once they enter the workforce. It is not enough merely to increase the number of women who break through the so-called “glass ceiling” in the workplace; the whole ceiling must be removed entirely.

Women also need access to credit and loans as they are frequently excluded from utilizing their talents or implementing their ideas because they do not have a sufficient store of capital. The highly touted institution of microfinance, most notably associated with 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winners Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, has been critical in helping millions of the world’s poor, especially women,

⁷ International Labor Organization (ILO), “Global Employment Trends for Women 2007: ILO study warns on the increasing feminization of poverty” Geneva, Switzerland March 7, 2007.
Found at: http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/ampro/cinterfor/temas/gender/news/gl_tren.htm

⁸ International Labor Organization (ILO), “Global Employment Trends for Women 2007: ILO study warns on the increasing feminization of poverty” Geneva, Switzerland March 7, 2007.

⁹ Selim Jahan, “Reorienting Development: Towards an Engendered Employment Strategy” November 2003 p. 5.

to overcome the crushing grind of poverty by extending smaller loans to poor people with entrepreneurial concepts. Since 1999, the International Development Agency (IDA) of the World Bank Group has operated, in partnership with the UN Capital Development Fund, Canada's International Development Desjardins, and the European Commission, the Microfinance Project in Madagascar which now has over 150,000 members, 45% of who are women.¹⁰ While microfinance has acquired considerable gravity and weight within the development finance community, Holly Lard and Isabelle Barres argue that "microfinance can reduce the vulnerability of the poor but it is not a poverty cure-all."¹¹

Development strategies, whether designed at the international, national, or local levels, must become more comprehensively engendered strategies if they are to promote long-term successful economic, sustainable economic and human development. Selim Jahan, Senior Advisor for Employment for Poverty Reduction at the UN Development Programme (UNDP), argues that "exclusion of women from development not only leaves women worse off, it impoverishes the whole society."¹² When donor governments provide Official Development Assistance (ODA) to developing countries, they need to consider targeting that ODA towards development projects and programs that seek to reduce poverty for women and girls, including community-centered development projects such as wells and small-scale entrepreneurial initiatives. The need for effective and sustainable community-centered and human-centered development projects that are designed to help women and girls overcome poverty and resource deprivation is especially acute in rural areas. In rural Kenya, the Maasai Girls Education Fund has helped rural Maasai women finish their education and find work as nurses, providing their families with steady income and these women with sustainable economic opportunities.¹³

Lack of health care for women and girls

Women and girls are not only frequently denied education and employment opportunities but they also are far more likely than men and boys to be denied critical health care and medical treatment. In many parts of the developing world, women have shorter life expectancies from birth than men and they regularly confront serious obstacles when seeking critical medical care. Amartya Sen points out that "the main

¹⁰ International Development Association (IDA), "Microfinance in Madagascar Boosts Small Clients', Women's Savings" February 2007.

Found at:

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/IDA/0,,contentMDK:21227724~menuPK:3266877~pagePK:51236175~piPK:437394~theSitePK:73154,00.html>

¹¹ Holly Lard and Isabelle Barres, "Maximizing Microfinance" *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* Summer/Fall 2007 p. 57.

¹² Selim Jahan, "Reorienting Development: Towards an Engendered Employment Strategy" November 2003 p. 2.

¹³ Kenya Environmental and Political News Weblog, "Empowering Rural Women Sure Way to Combating Poverty" October 18, 2007.

Found at: <http://kenvironews.wordpress.com/2007/10/18/empowering-rural-women-sure-way-to-combating-poverty/>

culprit would seem to be the comparative neglect of female health and nutrition, especially-but not exclusively-during childhood. There is indeed considerable direct evidence that female children are neglected in terms of health care, hospitalization and even feeding.”¹⁴ In resolution 60/210 (A/RES/60/210), the UN General Assembly (UNGA) asserted that “access to basic affordable health care, preventive health information and the highest standard of health, including in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, is critical to women’s economic advancement, that lack of economic empowerment and independence increases women’s vulnerability to a range of negative consequences,...and that the neglect of full enjoyment of human rights by women severely limits their opportunities in public and private life, including the opportunity for education and economic and political empowerment.”¹⁵ Providing equal health care to all people, regardless of gender, will be a crucial step towards overcoming the persistent feminization of poverty. Governments can play highly constructive roles by increasing investments in health care for women and girls as well as ensuring that these expenditures are distributed equitably.

Motherhood can also increase inequality because women frequently face discrimination in the workplace when they have children; in many countries, including the United States, women may be able to take up to 3 months of unpaid maternity leave without being fired but poor women are far less likely to be able to take this leave. In Norway and Sweden, women are entitled to either 10 months of fully paid leave or 12 months at 80%, funded by the government.¹⁶ Governments that do not have the financial capacity of Norway or Sweden might seek to design more flexible maternity leave legislation than already exists in their countries, particularly in concert with businesses in an effort to share the costs more evenly. Even more disturbing is the fact that every year over 500,000 women die during or immediately after childbirth and over 90% of these deaths occur in the developing world. Experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) have asserted that “Tackling female health would not only save millions of lives but reduce global poverty.”¹⁷

Protecting women and girls from exploitation

Reducing or eliminating poverty for women and girls will also protect women from some of the worst forms of exploitation, including sex trafficking and forced prostitution. Sex trafficking and forced prostitution are not confined to any region of the world; these exploitative industries generate billions of dollars in revenue for organized criminal gangs. Poor girls and women form a disproportionately high number of the victims of sex trafficking and forced prostitution. In Kenya, refugee girls from Ethiopia and Somalia are easily targeted and coerced into sexual slavery and forced prostitution.¹⁸ In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, poor girls and women are routinely trafficked into sexual slavery and forced prostitution with tens of thousands of girls and

¹⁴ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* 2000 p. 106.

¹⁵ A/RES/60/210, “Women in Development” March 22, 2006 p. 1.

¹⁶ *BBC News*, “Norway’s welfare model ‘helps birth rate’” March 28, 2006.

¹⁷ *BBC News*, “Women’s health fuelling poverty” October 12, 2005.

¹⁸ Steve Schifferes, “Fighting the sex traffickers” *BBC News* February 25, 2003.

young women being sent to Western Europe, Canada, and the United States every year.¹⁹ Creating viable economic and educational opportunities for these girls and women will prevent thousands of young women being forcibly trafficked into prostitution and sexual slavery every year. In Vienna, Austria, representatives from national governments and non-governmental organizations met in February 2008 to combat human trafficking and forced labor, including prostitution.²⁰

Conclusion

Eliminating poverty for women and girls is not only a moral imperative but also a practical requirement if the international community hopes to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) by 2015. No long-term development strategy that marginalizes or ignores the legitimate concerns and problems of half the world's population will be ultimately successful. Ending the feminization of poverty and providing real opportunities for women and girls are not only ethically correct but it is also quite sound economically. The UN System, its member states, women's groups, non-governmental organizations, employers, labor unions, and related civil society representatives must work cooperatively to fashion and implement truly comprehensive solutions to reduce and/or eliminate poverty for women and girls.

Guiding Questions:

How can the international community persuade countries that have not signed or ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to sign and/or ratify the Convention? What changes do national governments need to make in terms of their domestic legislation to ensure that women and girls enjoy the same opportunities in terms of education, employment, and health care as men and boys?

What initiatives and programs has your government enacted to reduce and/or eliminate poverty for women and girls? How close is your country to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) targets by 2015? If your country is currently unlikely to achieve its MDG targets by 2015, what changes can your government implement now to improve the likelihood of achieving the MDG's by 2015?

What kinds of development strategies have worked in reducing poverty for women and girls, particularly in rural communities? What microfinance and community-centered development initiatives has your country enacted to combat poverty for women and girls?

Resolutions:

A/RES/62/205 "Eradication of poverty and other development issues: women in development"

¹⁹ *BBC News*, "World urged to fight sex slavery" April 23, 2006.

²⁰ <http://www.ilo.org/global/lang--en/index.htm>

A/RES/62/140 “The girl child”

A/RES/62/136 “Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas”

A/RES/62/135 “United Nations Development Fund for Women”

A/RES/61/214 “Role of microcredit and microfinance in the eradication of poverty”

A/RES/61/213 “Implementation of first UN Decade for Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006)”

A/RES/60/210 “Women in Development”