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Women: The Solution to Global Poverty

Over 50% of the world lives on less than \$2 a day (World Health Organization). Poverty is a global problem. Ending global poverty and exacerbating world hunger are first on the agenda for the United Nations. This goal is number one on the list of the Millennium Development Goals. Held & McGrew state, "Poverty is endemic. Some say globalizing markets will solve the problem; others claim only national governments are capable of reducing global poverty," (Held and McGrew, 125). Globalists and sceptics can continue to argue whether free markets have more or less power than the state, but the solutions arising from such debate have proven futile. Numerous measures have been taken to eradicate poverty, yet the problem still exists. Only recently have organizations turned to much more promising solution: the education and empowerment of the world's women. Organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme have made considerable headway using this tactic. Therefore, it can be concluded, that educating and empowering women is necessary to combat poverty in developing countries. Unfortunately, this strategy has not yet been employed on an international level, as the global political arena continues to be dominated by men.

While poverty is a global issue, women are disproportionately affected by it. "Poverty has emerged as a markedly feminine phenomenon throughout the world," (Chinkin, 97). Women account for 60% of the world's poor (United Nations Development Programme). They own only 1% of the world's assets (Siegel, 8). Women are barred from well-paying jobs, under the guise

of “special protection” regulations (e.g. working at night.) They are often relegated to domestic work that is not only unpaid, but unappreciated, (Chinkin, 97). The UNDP approximates two-thirds of women in the developing world fall into this category (United Nations Development Programme). When women are able to obtain jobs, they are subject to horrible working conditions. In many countries, employers are not required to provide job security, nor are such places of employment subject to routine health inspections. Women are often sexually abused or accosted by their male superiors (Chinkin, 97). Women also earn less money for the same work. In the United States (a country that maintains a higher degree of gender equity than most,) women earn \$0.77 for every \$1.00 men make (Siegel, 8).

Economic inequality not only disadvantages the women who are underpaid, their families suffer as well. Oftentimes, the oldest daughter must drop out of school in order to help her mother care for the other children. “Thus, deprivation carries from one generation of women to the next, leading to the feminization of income poverty,” (Buvinic). This cycle of poverty is circuitous; it will not end until policies are put in place to end it.

Organizations can start by implementing policies that call for the mandatory education of women. Women around the world are in dire need of further education; illiteracy rates are much higher among women than men (Chinkin, 97). As of 1990, there were only 74 literate women for every 100 literate men. It’s no surprise, as 77 million girls (ages 6-11) are not attending school, compared to 52 million boys. This gender gap actually widens when overall dropout rates, absenteeism, and grade repetition are accounted for (Buvinic).

Maria Eitel, president of the Nike Foundation, acknowledges the importance of female empowerment, as a necessary tool for escaping poverty. She claims education alone is not enough; women must be given an opportunity to make money. Eitel says this “has to start early,

when girls are in their teens, before they are forced by social and family pressures to marry and have children,” (Elliot). When young women are provided with microloans, they are seen as economically beneficial to their families. As a result, these women are less likely to be forced into marriage at a young age (Elliot).

This dualistic strategy of educating and empowering women to do more with their lives is also employed by the United Nations. As set forth in Millennium Development Goal 3, the UNDP aims to both “promote gender equality and empower women.” The goal is to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education,” by 2005 and at all levels by 2015. Measures of success include: an even ratio of girls to boys in all levels of education, a comparable share of women’s employment in wage-earning jobs outside of the agricultural sector, and an equal proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. Unfortunately, the world is far from meeting this goal (United Nations Development Programme).

The United Nations Development Programme is attacking gender inequality in several ways. The organization is working to include women in “hard power” decisions (budgeting, policy-making, etc.) They also promote economic rights for women, collect and publicize detailed data on gender inequalities, and address the gender dynamics of HIV/AIDS. They advocate for the inclusion of gender equality in national development plans (including recognition of unpaid work) and follow-up with promises that public services will be distributed equitably among genders (United Nations Development Programme). Economically, the UN is helping women strengthen their legal rights to both property and land ownership. This is an important issue, as women own a mere 1% of the world’s land (Kristof and WuDunn, 195). The UNDP has launched initiatives that provide skills training, business management, and literacy workshops as well. Several initiatives have shown signs of success, including the Gender and

Economic Policy Management Initiative in Africa, which analyzes poverty reduction strategies to endure gender equitable application, the Gender Needs Assessment tool, which assesses needs and estimates costs of programs for gender equality and female empowerment, and the Gender and Taxation Initiative, which analyzes the nature of tax reform (United Nations Development Programme).

The UN is not the only organization that realizes gender equity is the key to eradicating poverty. Isobel Coleman, director of the Council on Foreign Relations' Women and Foreign Policy program believes it is becoming common knowledge.

Over the last several decades, it has become accepted wisdom that improving the status of women is one of the most critical levers of international development.

When women are educated and can earn and control income, a number of good results follow: infant mortality declines, child health and nutrition improve, agricultural productivity rises, population growth slows, economies expand, and cycles of poverty are broken. (Coleman, 3)

Furthermore, Barbara Herz, a former member of the World Bank Women in Development Division and Gene B. Sperling, the director of the Center for Universal Education co-authored a book which includes proven research that educating women reaps numerous benefits. Herz and Sperling found educating girls produces higher wages. For every additional year of education beyond the average, women receive 10-20% more money for their work. If the percentage of women with a secondary education increases by 1%, per capita income growth goes up 0.3%. The 43% reduction in global malnutrition from 1970-1995 can be attributed to better educated women. Children of educated women in India study, on average, two hours more per day than the children whose mothers are not well educated. Other outcomes of properly

educating women include: decreases in family size, child mortality, chance of contracting HIV, rates of domestic violence, and an increase in levels of democratic participation (Herz and Sperling, 1). One study based in Nigeria quantified the decrease in family size, finding that for each additional year of primary school education, women had 0.26 less children (Kristof and WuDunn, 171).

Michael Enright, a consultant and business professor at Hong Kong University suggests we look to China for advice. He says, "Whenever I'm asked what a country can do to compete with China, I say, 'The first thing is, educate your women.'" He goes on to explain his point and applaud the success of such initiatives. He contrasts the two rapidly developing economies of India and China and makes it clear which country he feels will succeed. "Give Mao some credit. Even in the darkest days of unreformed communism, China educated its women, with the consequence that it now has an adult female literacy rate of 90%. India's is just 54.5%," (Elliot).

Educated women bring increased levels of prosperity to their families as well as their communities. Studies have shown that when women (rather than men) control household income, it is more likely to be spent on family health, nutrition, and healthcare for children (194). This is especially true in African nations. "When resources are scarce, priorities are essential. Many African and Indian men now consider beer indispensable and their daughters' education a luxury," (193). This selfish attitude also adds credence to the argument that men and boys are negatively affected when there is an absence of gender equality in the household. If a woman raises her son in a manner that permits him to feel "biologically superior," it can be assumed there is less of a need to work hard; this results in decreased levels of economic contribution to society (160). Therefore, if we refuse to educate and empower women, we not only remain economically stagnant, we contribute to further economic regression.

Multinational corporations have jumped on the proverbial bandwagon as well. Goldman Sachs' 2007 Research Report stated, "Encouraging more women into the labor force has been the single biggest driver of Euro-zone's labor market success, much more so than 'conventional' labor market reforms," (Kristof and WuDunn, 198). In 2008, Goldman Sachs started "10,000 Women," a five-year, \$100 million global initiative, which aims to educate women in developing countries in business and entrepreneurial strategies (Coleman, 4). Nike created the Nike Foundation which has given \$100 million since its inception in 2004 to health, education, and leadership programs for girls in developing countries (4). Even Wal-Mart is strongly considering purchasing more products from women-owned businesses. If Wal-mart pledged to buy 1% of its products from businesses run by women, "it would channel billions of dollars toward women's economic empowerment— far more than what international development agencies could ever muster for such efforts," (Coleman, 5). Of course, these multinational corporations aren't developing such initiatives because it's the right thing to do; they're making a profit! 75% of companies who have employed female empowerment programs, have seen in an increase in their profits as a result, and the ones who haven't, are expecting to see an increase in the near future. Not only are profits going up, but the talent pool has increased by no longer excluding half of the population (4).

Today's experts in international policy claim nations would do well to follow the lead of multinational corporations. "For two decades, economists at the World Bank have been making the case that girls' education and women's economic empowerment are among the best investments that the developed world can make to reduce poverty and stimulate growth in the developing world. As Robert Zoellick, president of the World Bank, frequently says, 'Gender equality is smart economics,'" (Coleman, 5). In fact, "investing in women offers policymakers

the highest economic and social returns at the lowest cost,” (Buvinic). The World Bank has published research that upholds this assertion. A case study of Pakistan concluded a tripled return on investment in women’s education. \$30,000 was used to send 1,000 Pakistani women to attend school. Results showed a 20% increase in wages for these women as well as \$88,500 in medical cost savings (due to the 60 child deaths, 500 births, and 3 maternal deaths averted) (Buvinic). Once again, these statistics prove the education of women positively affects both the economy and the health of the population.

Unfortunately, all of the policies that have been proven to lift families out of poverty and vastly improve the health of communities around the world are not being implemented on a large scale. Perhaps this is because men are in control. Women may have a say in UN Development initiatives, but men dominate the “hard power” arena. As of 2009, only 11 countries had female heads of state, and women held a mere 16% of national legislative seats around the world (Kristof and WuDunn, 196). In the history of modern politics, only 24 women have ever been elected heads of state (Chinkin, 96). The majority of these women were wives or daughters of previous heads of state, and only took over following the assassination of their male relative (Werhane). The United States’ gender equity rating is particularly pathetic. In 2007, only 16% of Senators, Representatives, and members of Congress were women (Siegel, 7).

It should come as no surprise that many women don’t vote; politicians simply do not address issues relevant to the female gender (Siegel, 12). Hard power trumps soft power in the male-dominated political arena. Even Sunday morning talk shows prefer to talk about men, as 86% of the guests on these shows are male (8). In many countries, it is illegal for adult women to vote (Chinkin, 96). “Women, and women’s gender interests, remain marginalised from government decision-making; therefore, participatory processes provide their main opportunity

for input. However, participatory processes in most countries have hardly been either participatory or gender sensitive,” (Zuckerman). Once considerable effort is made to put women in positions of political power, this will cease to be a problem.

Women are not only absent from positions of political leadership, multinational corporations are rarely headed by women. Despite the increasing percentage of women in MBA programs, the percentage of female CEOs has remained low. In 2006, out of all Fortune500 companies, only eight had a female CEO (Werhane). When less prestigious businesses are taken into consideration, the gender equity rating goes up, but not by much. According to a graph from March 2004, Norway boasted the highest percentage of female CEOs at 22%. The same graph puts the US at 13% (Economist, 161).

There is a great need for female leadership in the United States and around the world. As long as men remain in power, women’s issues (and soft power issues in general) will go unaddressed. Recently, the US government has erased several government-sponsored women’s agencies. Such organizations include the President’s Interagency Council on Women (mandated by UN after Beijing Conference) & the Office of Women’s Initiatives and Outreach in the White House. Under President George W. Bush, critical health data for women was removed from government websites and replaced with religious teachings on sexuality (Siegel, 164). If women gained control, the health of women and their families would become a priority. Several studies attest to this fact. One experiment in India gave women 1/3 of the village chief positions, and monitored the differences in spending according to gender. The study found women spent more on public services (installed more water pumps,) and were far less likely to accept or demand bribes from their constituents (Kristof and WuDunn, 197). Several studies throughout the United States found that more legislation benefitting women, children, and families was passed in cases

where women were in positions of political power (Werhane). In the early 1920's, maternal mortality rapidly decreased, while funding for public health programs increased. This significant improvement in women's health was a result of the empowerment of women; they received the right to vote in 1920 (Kristof and WuDunn, 198).

At the Second UN Conference on Women, held in Copenhagen in 1980, the Women's Convention was introduced. Articles 7 & 8 addressed the need for political participation, while Article 10 stressed the importance of educating the world's females (Chinkin, 103). A multitude of scholars agree with the principles expressed in this document. Not only would the well-being of the world's population increase dramatically, the global economy would benefit as a result. Study after study has proved this to be true. Investing in the education and empowerment of women leads to better health care for women and children. Experts in the field agree; John Stuart Mill's perception of the situation nearly 150 years ago is the same as the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. Both know that excluding half the population from contributing to society will only slow development. The insertion of women into the workforce pays off; women have the power to lift the world out of poverty, and nation-states must realize this. Buvinic states, "This feminization of poverty should be considered a legitimate foreign policy concern. Because women are increasingly economic actors and heads of households as well as mothers, their poverty slows global economic growth. Moreover, in poor countries, their disadvantage feeds a destructive spiral of poverty, population growth, and environmental degradation," (Buvinic). To continue to ignore the blatant human rights violations that result from global misogyny, nation-states are not only inhibiting the progress of women, they are inhibiting the physical and fiscal health of the global population as well.

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