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Productive and Reproductive Rights

In ignoring or discounting half of the world population, half of the innovation, half of the opportunity, half of the creativity, half of the global development is equally discounted and ignored. If there is one, most pressing, aspect of international concern and frustration it is poverty. So prevalent, in fact, that it keeps its grasp on at least 1.4 billion people around the world, arresting the necessary economic and social development, as well as creating an increasingly stratified society¹. But how does that involve demeaning half of the world population? The fact of the matter is that, of the many origins of poverty, the devaluation of women is one of the first and foremost. In such an increasingly globalized world, can any culture, nation, or even economy spare the brains of any of its citizenry? Many may think that women's rights are only an issue in countries where religion is law, or even worse, no longer an issue at all. However, the world is seeing that it is the complete opposite, as former General Secretary of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, asserted in his address at Women 2000, "More countries have understood that women's equality is a prerequisite for development."² Furthermore, increased emphasis on the rights of women implies educational gains, ensures more women's rights specific legislation, and heavily addresses the epidemic of poverty, and it is thus I, as a global youth citizen, identify equality between men and women as the most concerning topic within the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

Of the many new priorities in continuing the development created by the Millennium Development Goals is a good education, and as the child of two Nigerian immigrants who

relocated to the United States primarily for the educational opportunities, the promise and necessity of education is not lost on me. Putting further emphasis on the increasingly disadvantaged prospects of women in education, girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school early, and consequently, of the 110 million children not in school, two out of three are girls². In order to address and solve the problem of gender inequality, creation of a good education, and improvements in the quality of are provided for. As UNICEF's 2000 report entitled "Defining Quality in Education" points out:

*"Within schools and classrooms, a welcoming and non-discriminatory climate is critical to creating a quality learning environment. In many countries, attitudes discouraging girls' participation in education have been significant barriers to providing quality education to all students... girls... may experience both direct physical threats and more subtle assaults on their confidence, self-esteem and identity (Pigozzi, 2000)... At school, teachers often require girls to do maintenance work while boys study or play, and allow boys to bully girls. Girls must often sit at the back of the classroom, where teachers may call on them infrequently. In some cases, extreme physical assault, including rape, may be perpetrated against girls at school. The threats that come in the form of unequal treatment, harassment, bullying and undervaluing girls harm them in profound and long-lasting ways."*³

No more prevalent example can be found than the case of Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani girl who on October 9th, 2012 was shot on the left side of her forehead by Taliban associates over her persistent struggles to educate herself, and many girls in her area. Access to good

education for both sexes and a quality learning environment shouldn't be subject to such physical threats or assaults on one's confidence and self-esteem.

In some countries, it is argued that the push for gender equality has gone too far. In Sweden for example, from 2008 to early 2012 the Swedish Department of Education spent 110 million Swedish Crown, or \$16.3 million, on creating equality within schools. Opponents have rationalized "It is important to have your gender confirmed to you as a child. This does not limit children; it makes them confident about their identity.... Children ought to be allowed to mature slowly and naturally. As adults we can choose to expand and change our gender identities."⁵ Whether this is truly the case or not, the estrangement and stratification of genders has empirically been seen to harm equality and lead to further discrimination. The American Psychological association point to the division of sexes as a clear harm to social skills and working together, the formation of ideas that one gender is superior, and long lasting bigotry that can detrimentally affect the development of adult relationships. What's more the Swedish national curriculum for preschools agrees, "Preschools should counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles. In preschools, girls and boys should have the same opportunities to test and develop abilities and interests without being limited by stereotypical gender roles."⁴

The result of such educational equality would be more gender equality in positions of leadership, whether in business, government, or other areas. The right to ownership of one's body is not merely a women's rights issue but a human rights issue, similarly, freedom from fear, fear of oppression, fear of violence, fear for one's life, is a human right's issue that women seem to be increasingly, and disproportionately taken from them. Annan pointed out in his Women 2000 address that, in like manner, it is more often women pushed into human trafficking as a result of

lack of education and need to migrate to escape physical and economic oppression, despite the sheer amount of legislation prohibiting such trade².

Going further, legislative positions for women would focus more attention on the unacceptably high maternal mortality rates and female feticide in various global regions, addressing the goal of better healthcare. Globally, 47 million babies were delivered without skilled care in 2011, and only half of women in developing regions receive the recommended amount of health care they need. In India, which provides some of the most in-depth analysis of these phenomena, the BBC points to the prenatal selection and selective abortion was causing the loss of 500,000 girls a year despite the fact that sex selective abortions have been banned in India for more than a decade. Consequently, female trafficking has increased in areas where female feticide has created a depression in the female population, creating a tragic and increasingly harmful cycle. As Annan poignantly described, “The fact that [women] have productive as well as reproductive roles is still all too rarely recognized;” which naturally questions how would gender equality solve for poverty and abate the aforementioned issues²?

In the status quo, women are more often forced to become agricultural and household laborers, once again due to the lack of higher education, yet are unfairly restricted from equal payment, equal right to credit, equal land ownership and inheritance, and equal household decision-making². While it is true that progress has been made, it is also true that the state of gender equality is dismal, and the gender divide is still widening. Such economic inequities do not create stability for economic or social development for anyone in the country, and in this case the stem of such instability can be easily identified and interrupted. Gender equality in education becomes the fount of long-term economic, and social solutions that create prosperity which allows, rather than fights, development, while supporting an ebb in poverty and upholding

goals to protect freedom from discrimination and persecution on the basis of gender. Yet these are all pie-in-the-sky ideas, if not pragmatically addressed.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, though a non-binding agreement, has been agreed upon to become an international guideline for the treatment of all peoples everywhere. The Declaration points to the inherent equality of each person regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender and locale. And it is on this basis the Millennium Development Goals, which sought to ameliorate the situation of those most infringed upon, were created. Looking past 2015, and facing the problems that will persist in the stage of dynamic global interplay, idealism gets one nowhere, which is why it is fundamental to look first at what has worked empirically before advocating a plan of action. What has seemingly worked in Rwanda, Bangladesh, India, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Yemen is increased partnership with UNICEF and Every Woman, Every Child to give more education to midwives and increase health care availability by building clinics on conditional cash bases. Past 2015, the United Nations should put further emphasis on the development of its Every Woman, Every Child program and enlist the support of more local governments, and private corporations as partners.

As Second General Secretary of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold, wrote in a personal journal, “Never, for the sake of peace and quiet, deny your own experiences or convictions.”⁹ It is in the same spirit that we, as an international community, have a responsibility to fight for those whose experiences and convictions are denied, and not to protect this right for only half of the world’s population.

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