



BREAKTHROUGH

OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES TO EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

a report of findings and a coalition for action



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Introduction

Beijing



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This year, 2010, marks the 15th anniversary of the United Nations Fourth World Conference in Women, held in Beijing, China, in September 1995. It was a milestone event that caught the world's attention. For the community of 189 nations that convened and adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, it was a time of commitments to advance the status of women as a means towards "equality, development and peace." For the 50,000 women who gathered there, and for millions of women and their organizations around the world, it was a transformative event. It signaled solidarity for a worldwide movement for women's empowerment and gender equality. Women left Beijing inspired and connected to each other, and they stayed connected, thanks to the exponential growth of communications technology.

Many new organizations were founded in the wake of the Conference, founded by women inspired, energized and filled with resolve by their experience at Beijing. One of those organizations was Vital Voices; one of those women was then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, whose name will be forever linked to the Conference, where she declared: “Human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights.”

Vital Voices was started by Hilary Clinton in 1997 as the Vital Voices Democracy Initiative. It was a follow-up commitment to the Beijing Conference, a foreign policy initiative of the U.S. State Department that served to promote the advancement of women as a foreign policy goal. In 2000 it was re-established as a nonprofit organization, Vital Voices Global Partnership. Vital Voices has remained deeply conscious of its roots in Beijing and its connection to Beijing is never more palpable than when it is in contact with the women in its global network, women for whom Beijing still resonates and for whom the Beijing Platform serves as both map and compass.

Perhaps because of these beginnings and its lasting connections to the Beijing Conference, Vital Voices viewed the 15th anniversary as an opportune time to step back, take stock of how far women have come, acknowledge the progress made and identify the unfinished business that remains. It was a time not only for revitalizing our own voices and our own commitment; it was more than that. It was the right moment for a breakthrough.



In anticipation of the 15th anniversary, Vital Voices convened Breakthrough: Overcoming the Obstacles to Equality, Development and Peace. From October 31 to November 2, the global working session met at Villa La Pietra, New York University’s campus in Florence, Italy. The Breakthrough working session’s purpose was to assess the current status of

women, note progress made since the Beijing Conference, identify both persistent and new challenges to women’s empowerment and gender equality, and determine what needs to be done to move forward.

The working session resulted from Vital Voices' belief that moving forward on women's empowerment and gender equality requires engaging new voices to demand and galvanize political support for gender equality. Vital Voices believes it is necessary to enlist a larger and broader base of stakeholders, including men, private-sector leaders and religious leaders, who



consider these goals to be pragmatic, beneficial to their own concerns and essential to the world community — not simply a matter of justice for women. To this end, Vital Voices brought together a diverse group of about 50 activists and thinkers, who serve as leaders of government, civil society and the private sector. These leaders, both women and men, included those who are actively engaged in the movement for women's empowerment and those from a much broader base, whose primary focus has not been the status of women. Some were high-profile leaders; others were not well-known, including young, emerging women leaders who are part of Vital Voices' Global Leadership Network.

The world is not on track to women's empowerment, yet the women's movement is strong and its goals are attainable. To empower women and improve our world, it will take a societal shift from indifference, vague regret and outright opposition to women's empowerment to a sense of urgency and commitment. Women's empowerment must not be seen as a matter of women versus men but as a matter of better outcomes for all. This shift will require new thinking, a true breakthrough.

Rather than proceed issue-by-issue, as did the Beijing Platform (e.g., education, health, the economy, human rights, political participation and violence), the working session's agenda started with a review of the current situation of women and proceeded to discuss the following: *What has worked and what has not? What, and who, has been missing? How do we move past the obstacles? What new players, different approaches and innovative actions will move us forward? In short, what will it take to convince a much larger community of institutions and individuals to see themselves as stakeholders in the achievement of women's empowerment and gender equality?*

Over the course of two days, participants agreed on three underlying structural impediments to women's empowerment and also, although it was not the primary focus of their discussion, identified several major problems with *how* advocates for women's empowerment try to make change happen. These two concerns, structural and methodological, simultaneously characterized the discussions.



The group at La Pietra agreed on three major roadblocks, concurring that whatever the particular problem confronting women or affecting them negatively and disproportionately — poverty and hunger, lack of decent employment, economic opportunity, lack of political power, HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality, violence, climate change — all challenges stem from the same, deeply rooted, systemic and structural causes. The roadblocks can be

attributed to the historically inferior status of women, the lack of political will and the need for alternative economic opportunities.

As for *how* to achieve women's empowerment and gender equality, all agreed on the need for several things: developing a better language to reframe the issues among diverse stakeholders, developing sustainable partnerships, building a broader coalition in order to make an evidence-based case for change, and leveraging the current economic crisis to make the connections between economic development and women's empowerment.

Status of Women. Perceptions must change and the status of women must advance around the world. Women are undervalued by the institutions of society and sometimes considered downright inferior. Whether the source is legal, social, customary, traditional or attitudinal, these perceptions have consequences which impede the full and equal participation of women and subject women to continuing discrimination and even escalating violence. This is the greatest piece of unfinished business of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. The case must be made that societies cannot afford this type of discrimination, which deprives them of half of their potential contributing members.

Political Will. Governments around the world must strengthen their resolve to enact policies and legislation and commit resources to advance women's rights in their countries. Political will derives from the people in a society and what they demand of government. Not enough people, especially people of influence, demand that government act to advance the status of women. There is urgent need to widen the base of stakeholders

who perceive the empowerment of women to be to their own advantage. Men, leaders in the private sector, youth and religious leaders, are among those who must galvanize political will.


Economic Opportunities. Alternative economic structures where women can thrive must be developed. Women work hard and some women work all the time. Nevertheless, their disproportionate share of unpaid and uncounted (or unmeasured) work — such as caretaking, child rearing, farm labor, hauling water and food — and the lack of access to decent, paid work leave too many women on the margins of the economy, often in the informal economy, subject to low pay and unsafe and insecure jobs. Their lack of property rights, access to credit, relevant education and training, limits their entrepreneurial ability. However, as they enter their countries' economies increasingly, they are proving to be drivers of those economies. The case must be made for women's empowerment as one of economic necessity.

The consensus was that the current economic crisis is where we can begin to turn things around. If there was one overwhelming message to emerge about what needs to be done and how it needs to be done, Alyse Nelson, Vital Voices' CEO, summed it up in the final session, challenging the group, the nascent La Pietra Coalition: "The economic crisis offers an opportunity, because women offer a solution as an economic opportunity not being utilized. The economic argument is the strongest one to make. How do we link all other issues to this one? How do we package this and create a stronger economic argument?"

Not only is the economic crisis universal in reach and urgency, it is one of the few major concerns where the evidence supporting women's positive impact has been building and where those in positions of power have begun to get the message.

Both U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Verveer and Kim Azzarelli, Vice President for Corporate Engagement at Goldman Sachs, commented on this. Verveer recalled a panel discussion at the recent Clinton Global Initiative in September: "The heads of ExxonMobil, Goldman Sachs and the World Bank — all men, all men of power — were talking about how investments in women are absolutely critical," she recalled. Kim Azzarelli added, "I believe this is the tipping point. When people like Goldman Sachs economists see the value of women, the world will see the value."

"There are already signs it is more than lip service," Beth Brooke, Global Vice Chair for Ernst & Young, added. If the highly competitive private sector gets competitive over who can do more to empower women, so much the better. As a member of the Global Private Sector Leaders Forum, an initiative of the World Bank Group's Gender Action Plan, Brooke recounted how, at the Forum's annual meeting in



Turkey, the representatives of Goldman Sachs, Belcorp, and Standard Chartered Bank seemed spurred to action by each other, building on Goldman Sachs' 10,000 Women initiative. (Launched in 2008, this is a set of actions that Goldman Sachs is taking to increase the number of women receiving business and management education, based on the firm's belief that expanding women's entrepreneurial and managerial talent in developing and emerging economies is one of the most important means to reducing inequality and ensuring more shared economic growth.)

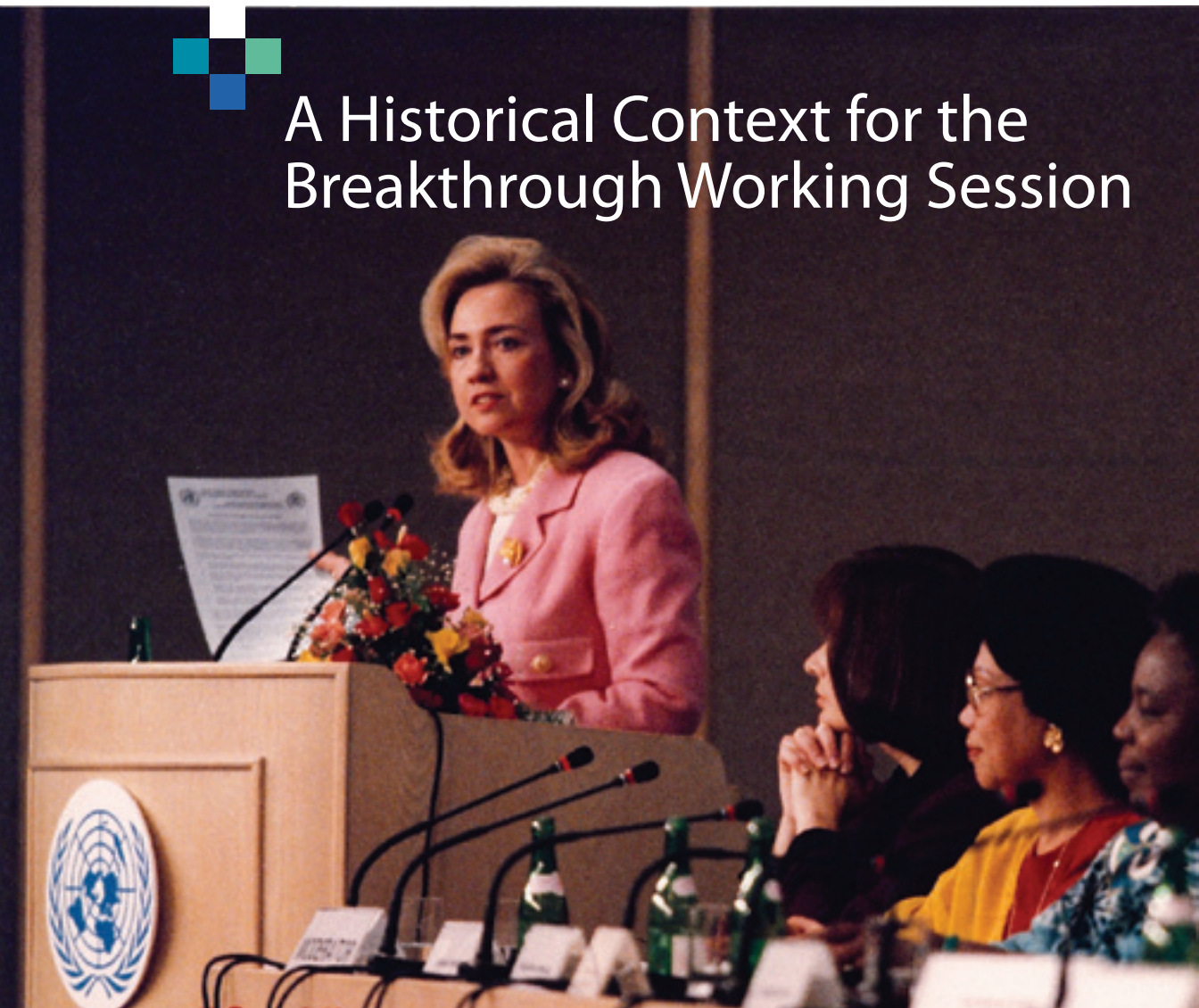
Those firms have begun to do what Carol Lancaster, Interim Dean of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, had cautioned was needed more broadly. It will not be enough to engage verbal support from business leaders. They will need to become "real agents of change" for women's empowerment.

As envisioned from the start, the La Pietra Coalition to Advance Women and the World has emerged as an outcome of the working session, with a mission to change the way the world perceives women, women's rights, and women's status in society, and to address deeply rooted, systemic and structural challenges to equality. The coalition's vision is to achieve the full and equal participation of women in society as a means to attain world equality, development and peace.

On an annual basis, Vital Voices Global Partnership will convene the Coalition to assess the progress made over the past year, identify the challenges to be met in the coming year and outline a course of action. Throughout the year, Vital Voices will support the working teams with communications and public relations assistance as they work to develop the message and "make the case" to the broader society. Vital Voices will also aid in recruitment of team members and coordination of activities. The La Pietra Coalition will not be a closed group; it will continually work to bring in new members as one way to strengthen its momentum.



A Historical Context for the Breakthrough Working Session



The 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (“Beijing Conference”) was the fourth and last in a series of conferences on women convened by the United Nations starting in 1975, all focused on raising the status of women and achieving gender equality. The Beijing Conference and its Platform for Action remain landmarks in the global movement for women’s empowerment. Not only did the world community of 189 nations agree to a powerful agenda and commit to its implementation, but the Conference and Platform served to mobilize and galvanize women and their organizations everywhere, and to solidify them into a global movement. Nevertheless, the end goals of empowerment and equality remain outside our grasp. *Just outside.*

Certainly, the world is not the same place for women that it was in 1975, and in fact there has been substantial progress since 1995 — in some regions and in some issues. Much progress has been incremental; however, the overarching impact is substantial and in many ways revolutionary.

Over the past 15 years, the gender gap in universal primary education has narrowed significantly: there is gender parity in primary education in over two-thirds of the world.¹ According to a UNIFEM report, nine out of 10 school-age girls worldwide are enrolled in primary school.² The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) reports that one out of every five candidates who won a parliamentary seat in 2008 was a woman.³ The *State of the Microcredit Summit Campaign 2007 Report* found that 79.1 million of the world's poorest women now have access to financial services through microfinance institutions and banks.⁴ Recently, the *Harvard Business Review* reported that women's \$13 trillion in total yearly earnings could soon reach \$18 trillion, making them the drivers of the global economy.⁵ These are all instances of real, if at times incremental, progress.

And yet. Momentum towards gender equality has stalled in some respects, and in some instances has slipped backwards, or grown worse. The most alarming example of this is the increase in violence against women — all forms of violence, from domestic to the systematic rape and torture of women as a strategy of war.

Also, since 1995 a number of issues have emerged or grown significantly that must be taken into account for their different impact on women and men. The globalization of the economy, the resulting waves of migration and of trafficking in humans, the exponential spread of information and communications technology, and the disruptive effects of climate change are tremendous forces having sometimes positive but often negative impacts, and often affecting men and women differently.

In considering the unfinished business of the Beijing Conference as well as the new issues that have emerged, it has become increasingly clear that there will always be issues that impact women disproportionately and negatively, impeding their advancement until there is a significant change in systemic problems underlying these issues. It was for these reasons that Vital Voices, in partnership with New York University's Villa La Pietra, convened the Breakthrough session at La Pietra and is now establishing the Coalition.

1 World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2009*.

2 UNIFEM, *Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009* (multimedia report), chapter 3.

3 Inter-Parliamentary Union, press release no. 220, Geneva/New York, 27 February 2006.

4 Daley-Harris, Sam. *State of the Microcredit Summit Campaign Report 2007*.

5 "The Female Economy." *Harvard Business Review*, September 2009.



A Review of Working Session Findings

The Breakthrough working session started with a review of the current situation of women and proceeded to discuss the following: *What has worked and what has not? What, and who, has been missing? How do we move past the obstacles? What new players, different approaches and innovative actions will move us forward? In short, what will it take to convince a much larger community of institutions and individuals to see themselves as stakeholders and demand women's empowerment and gender equality out of their own self-interest and a sense of the common good?*

Over the course of two days, the participants agreed on three underlying structural impediments to women's empowerment and also, although it was not the primary focus of their discussion, identified several major problems with the methodology of making the case for women's empowerment and gender equality and achieving the societal, structural shift that these goals imply. The three major roadblocks, structural and systemic in nature include: the historically inferior status of women, the lack of political will and the need for alternative economic opportunities.

Status of Women

The status of women is inferior to that of men because women are considered inferior and valued less. Almost universally this has been the case throughout recorded history and probably has its roots before that. As a result, the institutions of society — legal, social, cultural, traditional, attitudinal — ensure that women are inferior and remain so. The deeply rooted belief that values a female child less than a male child is at the crux of gender inequality.



Melanne Vermeer, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues

As U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Rights Melanne Vermeer put it at La Pietra, "The world is grappling with calculating the worth of a girl. Secondary education is still elusive [for most girls]. If we shortchange girls, we will shortchange the world."

Discrimination starts with conception and sex-selection abortions and continues throughout the life cycle. Many girls often are given less food at home; denied an education; subjected to harmful practices such as female genital mutilation; forced into unpaid labor at home; subjected, often forced or sold, into early marriage and high-risk early childbirth; subjected to domestic violence; denied property and inheritance rights as well as rights in the household; infected with HIV/AIDS by their husbands; and made destitute as widows.

Of the eight Millennium Development Goals for the year 2015, there has been the least progress in lowering rates of maternal mortality, which accounts for the deaths of 1,600 women each day worldwide. In fact, the journal *Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology* states starkly, "Maternal deaths in developing countries are often the ultimate tragic outcome of the cumulative denial of women's human rights."⁶

In short, women do not have power. What women do is not valued and as a result they themselves are not valued. These simple facts underlie the negative statistics and the harsh reality of many women's lives. Of course there are instances and areas where women have gained a degree of power; some women have enormous power, but overwhelmingly the status quo for women is powerlessness.



Eva Muraya, Head of Entrepreneurship, Women and Youth Programs at the Equity Group Foundation

Eva Muraya, head of Entrepreneurship, Women and Youth Programs at the Equity Group Foundation in Kenya, summed it succinctly: "It's our powerlessness as far as issues that concerns our health, our family, our place in society."

6 Fathalla, M. F. "Human rights aspects of safe motherhood." *Best Practice & Research: Clinical Obstetrics & Gynecology*, vol. 20, issue 3, pp. 409-19.

The Beijing Platform made it clear that member states had a sovereign responsibility to provide women equal rights, regardless of the institutions of their society — their political, economic and cultural systems. While it acknowledged the positive effect these influences, particularly religion, have often had on women’s status, it warned that gender equality cannot be achieved while cultural or religious beliefs and practices — particularly “extremist” ideologies and interpretations — continue to discriminate, oppress and justify violence against women.



Unfortunately, over the past 15 years, economic and cultural globalization has exacerbated a conflict between modernization and cultural or religious extremism; a conflict all too often played out on women’s bodies and self-determination. This has dissuaded some governments from promoting women’s empowerment and has driven women backwards in some instances.

At La Pietra, of the three roadblocks that emerged from the gathering, the status of women was almost a given and provoked the least debate. Without doubt, women are not equal to men in any society. Notably, religion’s influence on culture warranted caution, particularly as religious cultures have been widely criticized in recent years for encouraging or condoning discriminatory laws and practices against women and preserving the status quo. It is where culture, and especially the religions that have such bearing on the development of cultures, come into the discussion that sensitivities are high and people must proceed with caution, especially since in recent years, when the subject is women’s empowerment, culture and religions are often seen as having negative impacts on women, encouraging discriminatory practices and preserving the status quo.

Part of the problem is that “culture” is sometimes a word used by the developed or Western world that pertains only to negative practices and customs in developing countries, rather than any society’s collection of beliefs, customs, traditions and behaviors.

“Gender inequality is present in all societies. It’s not simply a ‘cultural’ issue,” said Gabriela Alvarez, Program Specialist for Latin America and the Caribbean for UNIFEM, describing a situation that has existed for thousands of years. “Power

relations between women and men have created violence against women, lack of education and opportunities for women, etc. This is not new, but now we're trying to change it. These are symptoms of structural inequalities in societies.”



Gina Barbieri, Executive Director of the African Initiative for Mediation

The inequalities that define the status of women are indeed universal and do not pertain to a single culture, but their manifestations are often cultural. Bob Shrum, Democratic Strategist and Senior Fellow at New York University's Wagner School, called culture “more powerful than politics.” Gina Barbieri, South African lawyer and Executive Director of the African Initiative for Mediation, who specializes in conflict resolution, commented, “The hardest conflicts to resolve are about values.” Emma Bonino, Vice President of the Italian Senate, called Italian cultural stereotypes of women “ingrained in women and ingrained in men. There are unintended consequences that make inequalities and discrimination deeply ingrained.”

People were saying that culture was powerful, not necessarily negative. Shrum observed that in many situations culture actually served as a more progressive force than politics. Also, several participants made the point that people can and should enlist religious and cultural leaders, not work around them. Having just traced some of the negative impacts of Christianity on women, writer and activist Marylouise Oates talked about the positive force it has been and can be, urging people to enlist religious leaders, especially women religious leaders, in their struggle.

Several Muslim women, American Laila Al-Marayati, Spokesperson and Founding Member of the Muslim Women's League, and Sadiqa Basiri Saleem, Founder of the Oruj Learning Center in Afghanistan, talked of approaching Islam in a similar vein. Al-Marayati described working with Islam “as a liberating force,” as it certainly was for women at the time of its founding, and talked of using it as the basis of arguments against violence against women, and for women's education and participation in the economy.

“We need to engage religious organizations as well,” Al-Marayati said. “The Catholic Church, Evangelical groups, etc., — they do good work, but they are not present at these conversations. In the Muslim community, there is the perception that the religious community is actually hurting women's agenda, for example, by encouraging women not to report violence. Now, we have much more active Muslim leadership in the U.S.”

Sadiqa Basiri Saleem described her success, working against the greatest odds in conservative, rural and dangerous Afghanistan, in working with men and religious leaders to join her in her campaign to educate girls and get them into schools, using the Koran itself to justify her positions.

Although the status of women has been largely defined by a society's culture, religion and traditions, participants said that while influences are deeply entrenched, they are not immutable and neither do they exist in a vacuum. As one participant, Marina Vaccari, Project Coordinator and Liaison Officer for the Arab World at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance in Rome, noted of the roadblocks to women's empowerment in general: "The obstacles are interlinked. The most significant is cultural. However, there is also the economic side. They are interlinked. All obstacles are linked to each other." And this can be an advantage.

Both Zainab Salbi, founder and CEO of Women for Women International, and Tim Hanstad, President and CEO of Rural Development Institute, stressed the interconnectedness of customs and economics. "One can find openings within custom," Hanstad said, stressing that it is necessary to be "context-specific" and not generalize: "Sometimes people think it's anti-women completely and that's not the case. Find out what's behind custom. Take, for example, the dowry. A law on the books makes it illegal in India, but it happens everywhere through South Asia. When a woman marries, she goes to live with her husband's family. So land is passed down to sons. Other personal property is left to women. That makes her property easier to commandeer. We've seen some encouraging things. Fathers are convinced that giving some part of their land to their daughters is important. It's important for a bride to bring that to the marriage."



Tim Hanstad, President and CEO of Rural Development Institute

In dealing with a cultural obstacle, Salbi commented, part of the challenge "is education; part is creating an alternative economic structure. A lot of these cultural practices are based on economics at the end of the day, whether it's dowry or child marriage, etc. My example is in southern Sudan, where cows are part of the economic structure. A woman gets married and typically offers a dowry of 40 cows. Girls were asking for an education — more schools getting built meant more education, especially primary and secondary. [They learned to make the case] that once they were educated, they would be able to get jobs that paid salaries — salaries that were valued higher than the cows. This was a tangible economic alternative, without interfering with culture. It's an example of changing how you think about change."

Economics can be a major influence on accepting change into a culture. As Mayra Buvinic, Senior Director for Gender and Development, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management at the World Bank, observed, "Between changing custom and culture, it's about finding an open door to progress." She gave an example concerning cash transfers to the poor families in Mexico. The government gives cash to a family to use as they wish, with one proviso: the girls must go to school. "School enrollment rates for girls have gone up....Girls' literacy rates increased as well. This model has been used around the world and it's very successful."

When daring to enter a culture and propose change, Sadiqa Basiri Saleem warned from her own experience, it is absolutely essential to work with both women and men, including men in positions of leadership and influence.



Sadiqa Basiri Saleem, Founder of the Oruj Learning Center

“You must raise awareness of men and women simultaneously. Educating women is not enough. You need fathers, brothers and sons. They should have equal opportunity to trainings and programs. [In Afghanistan] in 2003, there was so much interest in supporting women.” It led to Sadiqa being accused of being a “human rights person” and destroying lives. “Divorce rates rose when women knew their rights. But women were educated on rights, but were men? What was needed was common, mutual understanding; common, mutual respect.” Her advice is that “we need to establish trust by understanding dos and don’ts within a community, including especially bringing in the men and finding a way to bring them over to your position.”



Kakenya Ntaiya, Founder of the Kakenya Center for Excellence

In Kenya, Kakenya Ntaiya, Founder of The Kakenya Center for Excellence, learned a lesson similar to Saleem’s in overcoming village opposition to girls’ education and the girls’ school she wanted to build in her native village. She understood her community well. She did not march in with an agenda to overthrow all traditions; she selectively observed and respected healthy traditions such as those of dress. She was patient, and when men started to see her giving back to the community, she convinced them to donate land for the building. “I wanted them to be part of it. Everyone wants to be a part of something.”

Political Will

In order to strengthen the resolve of governments around the world to enact policies and legislation and commit resources to advance women's rights, their people must demand it. Not enough people, and especially not enough people of influence, demand that government act to advance the status of women. There is urgent need to widen the base of stakeholders who perceive the empowerment of women to be to their own advantage and to the advantage of their society. That means convincing and enlisting men, leaders in the private sector, religious leaders, young people and the media.

By now, often many people in decision-making positions, thought leaders and activists do understand this, but it is not necessarily a priority to them to do something about it. The challenge with finding a better way to make the case for women's empowerment and gender equality was succinctly described by Women for Women's Zainab Salbi.

Drawing a pyramid to illustrate her remarks, Salbi divided it into three sections. The top of the pyramid is populated by the world's leaders and decision makers and their institutions — government and political leaders, the G20, the major players involved in the Clinton Global Initiative, CEOs of businesses and chairs of boards of directors. These are the people who can enact laws, make reforms, enforce and implement them, and commit the resources to fund the solutions. The largest section of the pyramid, the middle, is where most of society and its institutions (media, businesses, mass public instruments such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook) reside. At the base, Salbi placed people like herself and many in the room — the grassroots activists, the practitioners, those for whom the empowerment of women and gender equality are the focus of their public lives.

“Change happens when people here, at the base of the pyramid, organize and build a structure. The leadership at the top can make the commitment to make the change happen but they will lack sufficient political will to do so until there is societal acknowledgement in the middle that decides ‘we need to change.’” That is who the base must reach, and of the middle section, Salbi said, “we're nowhere” with them. Until those in the middle understand the need for change and join with those at the base to demand it of leadership, there will not be sufficient political will to bring change.

If indeed we're nowhere in convincing the majority to demand women's empowerment out of their own self-interest, the observation served as one more indicator in the course of the discussions at La Pietra that the message was not getting out, that the message needed to be reframed, and that it had to be based on a convincing body of evidence. It is a huge communications task, and the role and use of media formed a large part of the discussions.



Zainab Salbi, Founder and CEO of Women for Women International



Luis CdeBaca, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons

U.S. Ambassador-at-Large Luis CdeBaca, director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the Department of State, offered security as an example of reframing an issue. “The notion of security, under the guise of rule of law, access to courts, police and prosecution, etc., is very important. It’s often thought of as a ‘hard’ issue — the domain of men, whereas empowerment is relegated to women as a ‘soft’ issue. Now, land title is a security.” He went on to say that domestic violence and sexual violence issues are increasingly viewed as at least having a security component, as evidenced by increased police involvement in these issues.

Tom Watson, Managing Partner of CauseWired Communications LLC, had a message regarding the huge communications task: The tools exist to widen the base of stakeholders. “Go online and read,” he advised. “There are 120 million people on Facebook, 30 million Twitter views a day, and this is where the young social activists and cause practitioners are.” Giving examples of online organizations committed to social change, such as KIVA.org and Change.org, he said, “Social entrepreneurs are finding different ways to communicate and act. People are organizing people from the bottom up, not the top down. They’re listening, not broadcasting. They’re joining the conversations.” They can create a virtual network of people around the world, and when they are noticed by mainstream media, the audience expands.

It comes down to stories and getting the stories out. Bob Shrum talked of the role of persuasion in influencing the culture, stressing the importance of getting stories out to the press and the media, even suggesting that the activists and practitioners “create an organization to bring together the stories of women and women’s issues. It is about the story being told.” He added only half-jokingly, gesturing across the room, “People at this table could send these stories to Tina.”



Tina Brown, Founder and Editor-in-Chief of The Daily Beast

Tina Brown, Founder and Editor-in-Chief of the on-line publication The Daily Beast, was ready and urged participants to do just that. “Once we have the stories, and they are packaged, we can disseminate them through various forms of communication, especially the Internet.” She described a new section she has launched called “Giving Beast,” which aims to make issues such as those under discussion at La Pietra “high-profile and hot.” She stressed the importance of stories. Stories of high-profile issues and causes, enhanced by photographs, she said, are popular and effective. “The personal stories are what encourage people to get involved. Sometimes I feel like a vulture trying to find these stories, but this is how you get people engaged.” She gave several more examples and then concluded, “Engaging the popular culture is the only way to crash through the window — the noise.”

Much of mainstream media, especially in countries where media are openly owned and controlled by political factions, is out of reach to grassroots activists and many others. Linda Swana, Executive Director of GuateAmala, a citizens' movement to empower the citizens of Guatemala, was a prime example of Tom Watson's description of the bottom-up communications movement. She shared an inspiring and ingenious story of her group's innovative use of media. Having finally seen a law passed that ensured more visible elections, GuateAmala wanted to seize the opportunity to address corruption, which was rampant in the country. They were confronted with the fact that people's knowledge and access to information was low, leading to low participation in elections.

Swana and her co-workers had to get the word out, but they realized early on that traditional news outlets were not open to them and that "we would have to do our own media and use our own methods — become our own reporters."

Their ultimate target was corrupt judges, and they created a young people's movement involving more than 20 organizations that used resources such as YouTube, videos, Twitter, cell phones and text messaging. They organized 30,000 people online, and through them reached people everywhere, communicating accurate information about the judges — who made what decision, who did what, who was corrupt — and about the elected officials who appointed them. So many people were involved, Swana said, that ultimately the mainstream media had to join in "because the people, the common citizens, were all interested."

The results were phenomenal, Swana said: "Twelve out of 23 judges were found corrupt; three resigned after being exposed; another six were dropped."

One elusive group of potential stakeholders is young people, even young women who do not see these issues as their issues. Carol Lancaster, of Georgetown University, had an innovative suggestion for preparing and sensitizing young women about what lies ahead. It has nothing to do with curriculum, she said. "We need to connect students to these women at the sessions [here — the young practitioners out in the field in their societies around the world], who are so inspiring. We could create a network of young people through universities," she said, again emphasizing that this was not a matter of curriculum, but of exposure and example.

The disastrous role corruption plays in too many places around the world was a major topic of discussion. It blocks any mustering of political will and either entrenches the status quo or, more often, reverses what progress has been made. At the very least, the Senior Director for Vital Voices' Global Women Artisan Export Development Program, Zoë Dean Smith of Swaziland, said, "Corruption gets in the way of collaborating with government and



Zoë Dean-Smith, Senior Director of Vital Voices' Global Women Artisan Export Development Program

stabilizing relationships of trust in order to uplift rural communities by generating income and bringing products to larger markets.”

Both Melanne Verveer and Laura Alonso, a newly elected Congresswoman in Argentina, called for transparency and accountability as prerequisites for fighting corruption.

“We must figure out ways to empower citizens, perhaps budget-related, so that governments will be responsive to the needs of the people. We need justice, but it won’t work where there is impunity,” Verveer said. Saying that “information is power” and a powerful way of fighting corruption, she told of the action Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala took as Finance Minister of Nigeria from July 2003 to June 2006. “Ngozi made information available on where the dollars were going. It was a tool to begin holding representatives accountable.”



Laura Alonso,
Congresswoman in
Argentina

Information can even be hard to get when one is in office, Laura Alonso said. She was one of several who had been stressing the need to elect more women into government, but now she asked: “What kills political will? Let’s think about democracy and government. We’ve been reforming governments and democracies for 10-20 years and we’re stuck in the same place. When you’re in power you [can soon] find that you don’t have the power. Something is blocking you and your ideas.”

She attributed it in part to the way government is set up, and, drawing upon her own experience in Argentina, advised women seeking elective office to pay attention to the both the formal, and informal, or backroom, processes of government, especially when it comes to the budgeting and allocating of funds. She described the status quo they often face: “Women are absent in discussions about budget and taxes. The structure of decision-making—late at night at men’s’ clubs, at times when women have to take care of their families—is not designed for women leaders.” Rather than accept that, she said, once aware of the system, they have to take these processes on, she said, and master “these tools to make an impact on policy. Let’s show politicians [not only] that women vote, but also that women can veto!”

Muhammad Yunus, the Founder and Managing Director of Grameen Bank and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, had perhaps the last word on corruption, admonishing people, “We can’t wait for the world to become perfect before we start working on problems. We succeeded in making the Grameen Bank [in Bangladesh] in the middle of so much corruption.”

At La Pietra, one major problem concerning the lack of political will that came up repeatedly was the gap between laws and policies and their enforcement and implementation. Many nations have new or revised constitutions and laws that advance equal-

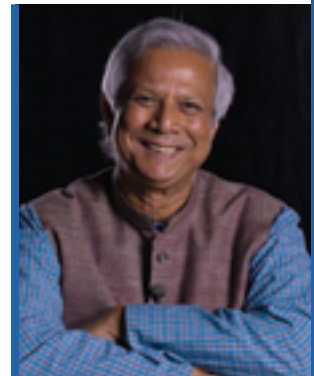
ity, but a large gap exists between legislation and implementation. This is particularly problematic with regard to domestic violence, for example. Many nations' constitutions guarantee gender equality before the law and nondiscrimination on the basis of gender. Some mandate affirmative action measures to remedy existing imbalances in social, economic, political and civil spheres of society. They remain on the books, unenforced.

The lack of political will to make good on the commitments made at Beijing is closely aligned with the failure to view women's empowerment and gender equality to be in the pragmatic self-interest of whole societies. Instead, gender inequities are often dismissed or marginalized as "women's issues," not cross-cutting societal issues of central importance to a nation and its progress and strength, as foreign policy and economic growth undoubtedly are. Yet, according to Melanne Verveer, what have historically been known as women's issues are actually "issues that affect all of us, that affect our national security — because no country can be free and stable, with a strong civil society, if half its population is left behind. These are issues that have to do with the kind of world that we want to live in."

"One point about laws — it is important to have them on the books even if it takes time to implement. At least they're there and we can work toward implementation. Also, we need to create the institutions that can make these changes happen," Muhammad Yunus stressed, saying in so many words that while government leaders have a responsibility to see that laws are implemented, laws are also there for the people to put to use by implementation, even forcing implementation through test cases if necessary.

Citing his experience giving loans to women with the bank he founded in Bangladesh, Grameen Bank, Yunus gave several examples: "Cow ownership is important. If a woman divorces and wants to take the cow [that she bought] with her, she cannot because the man says that anything in his house belongs to him. When she takes a loan from our bank, she has the documentation needed to prove she owns the cow and that paperwork is important."

Offering another example of a woman buying a house and having title to it, he stated, "With a loan, she is safe. She's also encouraged to save money, little bits each month. The woman gets to determine inheritance (usually to the youngest daughter). This is an example of a simple introduction of an idea in a system and how it helps women and their security." This in turn has led to women borrowers like her eventually owning a block of shares in the Grameen Phone Company, the country's largest. Yunus ended by restating the point of his comments: "The key is to develop institutions and design them in a way that no one can take [your share] away from you."



Muhammad Yunus, Founder and Managing Director of Grameen Bank and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

Economic Opportunities

Given the current financial crisis and the alarming impact that it is having across the globe, economics was a central topic of the working sessions. Participants agreed that this crisis could be seen as an opportunity and starting point for a breakthrough.

Regardless of the fact that the influences that keep the status of women inferior are deeply cultural, participants realized that this was not necessarily a promising place to start. Recognizing this danger, Zainab Salbi asked rhetorically, “What is the change that is not cultural? When someone says culture — that in order to change, you have to change the culture — for me as an Iraqi from the “Third World,” etc., that’s a problem. Focus on the economic issue. You can’t get women in decision-making if you don’t have economic empowerment. You can’t stop domestic violence if you don’t have it. You can’t have education if you don’t have it. It’s for all of these issues. You have to have men involved. For me, it’s positioning. In Iraq we got a *fatwa* from Sunni and Shiite imams, saying women’s access to economic resources is not only accepted in Islam, it’s encouraged in Islam. It’s pragmatic.”



Alyse Nelson, President and CEO of Vital Voices' Global Partnership

If there was one overwhelming message to emerge about what needs to be done and how it needs to be done, Alyse Nelson, Vital Voices' CEO, summed it up in the final session, challenging the group, the nascent La Pietra Coalition: “The economic crisis offers an opportunity, because women offer a solution as an economic opportunity not being utilized. The economic argument is the strongest one to make. How do we link all other issues to this one? How do we package this and create a stronger economic argument?”

Not only is the economic crisis universal in its reach and urgency, it is also one of the few major areas of concern where the evidence supporting women’s positive impact has been building. Research provides quantitative evidence that gender equality yields higher economic growth, a healthier and more educated population, and less corruption in governance. Women and girls invest more of their independent income in their households — 90 percent in comparison to men’s 30 to 40 percent — and are more likely than men to spend their incomes on the food, education and health care that enhance the welfare of their children and communities.⁷ The message is beginning to get out.

7 Phil Borges, with foreword by Madeleine Albright. *Women Empowered: Inspiring Change in the Emerging World*, New York: Rizzoli, 2007, 13.

Acknowledging this gathering force, Melanne Vermeer asked and answered: “Why is all this happening? No country can get ahead if half of its population is left behind. Today there is a growing body of evidence — data from multilateral organizations, corporations and foundations — that make the correlation between outcomes in poverty alleviation and investment in women and girls.”

At the World Bank, President Robert Zoellick often argues that motivation for investing in women’s empowerment goes far beyond basic fairness and decency. “Studies show that investments in women yield large social and economic returns,” he says. “The empowerment of women is simply smart economics.”⁸

That is part of a rationale that the World Bank has put into writing in simple, common-sense economic language: “Expanding women’s economic opportunities is smart economics. Women’s economic opportunities lag behind women’s capabilities achieved in education and health. This condition is inefficient, since increased women’s labor force participation and earnings are associated with reduced poverty and faster growth. Women will benefit from their economic empowerment, but so too will men, children and society as a whole.”

The World Bank is acting on its message. It is implementing its far-reaching Gender Action Plan, which seeks to advance women’s economic empowerment. Formally launched in 2007, it is directed by Mayra Buvinic, a participant at La Pietra. Zoellick himself announced six commitments on gender equality as part of the Plan the following year. One was the Private Sector Leaders Forum, convened for the first time in 2008, which engages private-sector leaders in promoting women’s economic empowerment.

Amanda Ellis, Lead Specialist for Gender and Development at the World Bank, was also at La Pietra along with Buvinic, as were Beth Brooke and Kim Azzarelli, from Forum members Ernst & Young and Goldman Sachs, respectively.

NGOs that focus on women’s empowerment, and the activists and practitioners who work for this goal, can and do deliver the same message — after all, they know it from their own daily experience. However, it has nowhere near the effect and impact that comes from having the same message validated and taken up by powerful financial institutions and leaders of the private sector. It was a prime example at La Pietra of what has been missing until recently and what must increase. The discussions at La Pietra led to the inevitable conclusion that this is the future direction that must be taken.

8 World Bank News & Broadcast. “Ministers, Bank President, Tout Women’s Empowerment as Key Development Goal.” April 12th, 2008.



Bob Shrum, Democratic Strategist and Senior Fellow at New York University's Wagner School

Listening to the economic case steadily being built by participants, Bob Shrum commented, “The more research there is showing an economic dividend to freeing women economically, the more attention the movement will get.” It is, he observed, likely to be more compelling to people than appeals to conscience would be.

Compelling as the evidence may be, however, it does not describe the reality of most women’s lives. Women work hard and some women work all the time. Yet their disproportionate share of unpaid and uncounted (or unmeasured) work — such as caretaking, child rearing, farm labor, hauling water and food — and the lack of access to decent, paid work leaves too many on the margins of the economy, often in the informal economy, subject to low pay and unsafe, insecure jobs. Their lack of property rights, access to credit, and relevant education and training, similarly limit their entrepreneurial ability.

Poor women either have no jobs at all or are stuck in low-paying, unstable and insecure jobs, a place where they are in no position to escape what the Beijing Platform calls “the vicious cycle of poverty.” They can’t afford the basics, such as housing, adequate nutrition and health care; they have no access to land, or to legal, technical and marketing assistance. As the Rural Development Institute, a land rights organization, has stressed, land is not just about farming; it is about asset formation — a convertible asset that can leverage credit or be sold to finance start-up costs of other income-producing activities.

“We started from the angle of poverty, not necessarily women. [Later] we realized that land and property rights laws are never gender-neutral and that they are the foundation of poverty alleviation,” Tim Hanstad, of the Rural Development Institute, said at La Pietra. “I am absolutely convinced that empowering women economically is key to solving so many of these problems. I’m also convinced that there is a massive amount of unfinished business on this issue [of land and property rights for women].”

Regardless of the obstacles, around the world women are entering the labor force. And as they increasingly enter their countries’ economies, they are proving to be drivers of those economies. As the barriers to women’s entry into the formal labor force continued to crumble, *The Economist* reported in 2009 that women now contribute more to global economic growth than either of the emerging giants India or China.⁹

The barriers have not crumbled completely, however, nor have they crumbled for all women. That is the case in Pakistan, where too many women are stuck in the infor-

9 “Women in the Workforce: The Importance of Sex.” *The Economist*, April 12th, 2006.

mal economy, according to Roshaneh Zafar, Founder and Managing Director of KASHF Foundation: “How do we embed women in the formal economy? We’ve done a lot of work in getting women into the informal economy with income-generating projects, but we’re seeing very little advancement to the formal sector. We don’t have the answers for this — maybe Muhammad Yunus has the answers and can tell us about them later.”



Roshaneh Zafar, Founder and Managing Director of KASHF Foundation

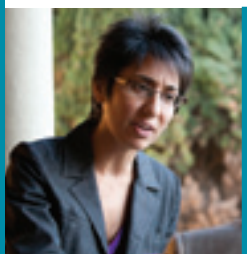
Yunus does have answers, and they come in the form of solutions, sometimes ultimately very big solutions (such as restructuring society) but composed of smaller, achievable actions or steps.

“I am the guy who does tiny things, but draws big conclusions from those things,” he told his fellow participants. “One, poverty is not created by the poor people, but the system we have created around us. To eradicate poverty, we must reconstruct the system. The people I work with are poor people. They are packed with unlimited capacity — simply, they never get a chance to unleash their capacity. How to fix that system, which is made up of policies and institutions and frameworks? I try to address problems whenever I see a problem. I immediately try to design a business to address the problem. So over the years, I have created over 30 businesses. I don’t own any shares because they were created to solve problems, not to be profitable.”

Yunus, who elaborated at length on “social businesses,” which put their profits into benefiting others, explained his premise as taking the reverse of the theory that business is for money-making only and that people operate out of selfishness. Without disputing that people are selfish, he maintains they are also selfless and act accordingly. Social businesses, he said, are tremendous vehicles for creating employment and benefiting even more people.

“Job creation can be the purpose of a social business,” Yunus said. “Unemployment is not built into people; it’s built into the system. So you change the structure. Change the structure and there is an enormous capacity to create jobs.”

Taking heed of Yunus’ message, Marylouise Oates urged everyone to remember to ask, “‘What do people need?’ Welfare fails, as it is not treated as a jobs issue. In planning governmental programs, we need to have women at these tables. The first question should be ‘What do people need?’ We need to be looking at problems like Yunus looked at them. He saw hunger as a problem and did not ask ‘Why are they hungry?’ so much as ‘How can I feed them?’ ”



Irshad Manji, Director of New York University's Moral Courage Project

Irshad Manji, director of NYU's Moral Courage Project, said this is a point she makes with her students, describing it in academic terms as the difference between critical thinking and generative thinking. "Critical thinking is 'If it doesn't work, tear it down.' But what do you replace it with? It's easy to get stuck. It's easy to say no. Generative thinking is about saying yes. It's about dismantling the pieces of the problem and creating an alternative."



Amanda Ellis, Lead Specialist for Gender and Development, The World Bank

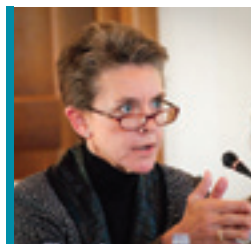
Social businesses are one very prime example of the "alternative economic structures" that many participants began urging. Amanda Ellis had wondered out loud if talking about poverty, of overcoming it or eliminating it, was too large a term to convince potential stakeholders to join them and that perhaps a narrower definition would help them come up with concrete actions. Salbi offered "lack of alternative economic structures," and Alyse Nelson agreed, saying, "Poverty is the end issue. Why can we not solve it? That's the issue at hand!"

Solving the issues at hand is what brought people to La Pietra and using the economic crisis as the way to get started involved much discussion that illustrated the "how" factors that kept coming up — language, evidence-based cases and forming powerful alliances to work together.

At times people talked about finding a common language that reminds people of a "common humanity," as Maria Pacheco, General Manager and Owner of Keij de Los Bosques, a marketing developing organization for indigenous women in Guatemala, worded it. At other times they talked about finding the right language for the right people, so that "it will resonate with the target audience," as Lorena Chambers, co-founder and CEO of Chambers, Lopez & Gaitán LLC, a political and consumer public relations firm in the U.S., described it. There was one constant in all the talk of language, however: It is time to stop talking about "women's issues." Not only are "women's issues" a hard sell, the words actually seem to turn the attention elsewhere quickly.

The main concern, however, was to reach and increase more leaders in the private sector, since the economic crisis is the focus. "We need to use the economic crisis as an opportunity to speak in language that the business sector understands," Judy Miller, Vice President and Director of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, said. "Make cases for addressing these issues without saying, 'This is a women's issue.'"

Beth Brooke elaborated on what language was needed, prescribing “an understandable language, highlighting the skills that are that business’s core competencies. This makes the idea marketable to the organization and sustainable in the long run. Timing is also important. The economic crisis is an optimal time to send the message that it is time for women to be more active in the economic sector. The validation concept is significant as well — having leaders from different sectors highlighting the accomplishments of people outside of their fields.”



Beth Brooke, Global Vice Chair for Ernst & Young

This means using the right language to build an “evidence-based case for change,” a phrase first used at La Pietra by Tim Hanstad and quickly incorporated into the conversation. Hanstad described the benefits of NGOs and research institutions, as well as government agencies, collaborating on gathering the evidence.

One benefit of the World Bank’s Gender Action Plan, Amanda Ellis said, was that the Plan had been disseminating the results of research and data. “The Gender Action Plan has begun to show that gender research is not an add-on, but is central to development.”

Both Beth Brooke and Kim Azzarelli stressed this need for evidence-based cases when approaching business. “Those in power (with land, resources and money) don’t fundamentally believe there will be better outcomes with women involved,” Brooke said. “It’s a different way of looking at culture. We therefore have to align economic interests. Then we can all have a common conversation about what to do. You have to meet the people where they are. Even the most enlightened men can believe this intellectually but they have to get it in their hearts. They have to experience something different.”



Kim Azzarelli, Vice President for Corporate Engagement at Goldman Sachs

Azzarelli gave several examples of appealing to the private sector, what she termed the “top stakeholders,” in language they would understand. “What is the benefit of ending violence against women in these areas? How do we align economic interests with progress? ... Talk of CSR [corporate social responsibility] is passé. Rather, show how these types of issues align with the core of the business.” She gave the example of cosmetic company Avon’s substantial support efforts to end violence against women. “Violence is a roadblock to the business. So this matters and it makes sense as a public company that they would want to impact supply chain and customer. Business metrics can be improved by doing good, but we need to explain how. Those are the stakeholders that can drive scale. Goldman Sachs’ [support of women’s empowerment] creates growth. It’s the power of the brand. They have many clients [businesses]. They show how investing in women creates growth. Put on the lens of business because it has figured out scale and how to drive scale.”

Lorie Jackson, Director of ExxonMobil's Women's Economic Opportunity Initiative, described the path that led to her company's decision to focus on women's empowerment, particularly in Africa.

"Why did Exxon become so interested in making positive social impact? We have a large footprint in these countries," she said. "We wanted to refine our focus on the end game, to figure out the best endgame and employ the best corporate competencies. For Exxon, this was women. Identifying projects that provide large, positive, sustainable impact is huge and investing in women and girls does that. We can engage employee talents and mentoring. We can bring in other partners."

ExxonMobil has concentrated its support on three main areas: efforts to scale up projects for the next generation of female entrepreneurs, mainly in SME or micro-based enterprises and businesswomen's networks; the reduction of barriers to women's economic participation — for example, in land issues; and the identification and deployment of technologies to improve the economic life of women.

These choices, Jackson said, "provide a platform for proven concepts and serve to get investors to bring them to scale. It's our intention to share ideas with other potential investors and collaborators so impediments can be addressed."

For Alyse Nelson, the signs are starting to proliferate that the message is getting out, the collaborations are being made and time is right to increase the momentum. "In the last five years, the private sector has really gotten involved in these issues. It's starting to get the attention of governments. Businesses are looking at their bottom line in evaluating the return on their investment. I think governments often just "check a box" and say it's done when now they're starting to measure their impact as well. This could work to push governments to do more."



Susan Davis, Chair of the Board of Vital Voices and Chairman of Susan Davis International

The working session at La Pietra ended on an energetic note. Susan Davis, Chair of the Board of Vital Voices and Chairman of Susan Davis International, a public affairs and communications firm, summed up the challenge for the future. "The single common denominator is the economic crisis. For the communications side of addressing these issues, it's the importance of having a strategy rather than a 'shotgun approach.' We need to leverage [an] evidence-based case for change in order to move forward. And then we need a tagline for an evidence-based economic approach."



The La Pietra Coalition to Advance Women and the World



After two solid days of one participant after another stressing the need for building an evidence-based case for change; getting the message out; forming coalitions and working in partnerships to do so; and widening the base to include representatives from government, the private sector, the media, activists and practitioners; the emergence of a coalition was almost a given and certainly perceived as an imperative.

As Alyse Nelson commented in closing, “We need to change the way we think about change. We need innovation. We will form a coalition from people in this room and others — a place for collective and individual actions. If we were all “chipping away” at barriers in our own way, had it on our agendas, as well as working in coalition, it would be an opportunity for great progress.”



Thus the Coalition, managed by Vital Voices Global Partnership, will consist of approximately 100 founding members in 2010 and will grow as momentum behind the coalition and its work progresses. Members will represent the public and private sectors and will be drawn from leaders in government, business, civil society, media and popular culture.

The Coalition will operate as a whole and through the coordinated efforts of smaller working teams, each assigned to address one of three major structural challenges to global women’s progress identified at La Pietra: the status of women, political will and economic opportunity.

As agreed at La Pietra, this is a time for working in coalitions, for finding partners and working together on an agreed cause or set of issues and goals. At Vital Voices we are aware that this coalition is forming at a time when other coalitions are forming, or have already begun, to promote women’s empowerment and gender equality. It is a welcome sign of the times. This is the moment for such action. Even as we begin, we remain committed to continuing our individual work as we pursue the extraordinary promise offered by the development of the La Pietra Coalition. We anticipate working both as a coalition and as the occasions demand in coalition with other groups. We all have an enormous job to do and the time has never been better to indicate that we have arrived together at a breakthrough moment.

For more information please contact pietracoalition@vitalvoices.org



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