

The Breakthrough Initiative

Project of the La Pietra Coalition to Advance Women and the World

Background

The world has reached a moment when the time is right to take major steps to advance women. The moment is what compelled Vital Voices to convene a group of leaders in La Pietra, New York University's campus in Florence, last year. At that meeting the consensus of those assembled was to move forward as a Coalition that would make the economic case for women's empowerment.

There is growing realization that the world's progress — whether measured in economic growth, peace and stability, higher standards of health and education, enjoyment of human rights or overall well-being of a population — is intrinsically related to the status of women in a society. And that investing in women will help us realize our more overarching goals. Nearly six decades of humanitarian aid and international development has helped bring us to this moment — an abundance of anecdotal evidence has been joined by a gathering body of evidence from the field and the data are increasingly reflected in the statistics. The evidence is also mounting that we can't afford not to do this.

The UN has played a role in this as well, first with the attention its world conferences on women brought, culminating in Beijing in 1995, and then, especially, with the boost given by the Millennium Development Goals for the year 2015. Countries feel pressure to meet the MDGs and are concluding that achieving them depends greatly on women.

Development spending is increasingly gender-focused, sometimes directly, within the overall familiar goals of gender equality and women's empowerment, and sometimes through more broadly-based development programs that target women. There is significant spending on girls' education, maternal mortality, reproductive health, microfinance, and to a lesser extent on women's political participation and entrepreneurship.

We need to seize this moment and work to ensure that the current attention to investing in women is more than a trend or an isolated boutique issue but moves firmly to a central place in development policy and strategy.

This is a time when we can dramatically move forward into a sustained, growing global movement. Working in coalition we can convince the larger society and its leaders who make the decisions that investing in women's empowerment and gender equality is not only a matter of addressing old injustices but of taking advantage of economic opportunities.

Thus, the Coalition. Partnering with other organizations — non-governmental organizations, the corporate sector, foundations, academic institutions and religious organizations — will allow us to move faster and achieve our goals sooner. It will strengthen our credibility, our voice, and ultimately our impact. It will deliver the breakthrough that we need.

The Breakthrough Initiative will be the core activity of the Coalition.

Goal of the Coalition

The Coalition's over-arching goal is, working together, to make the economic case for women's empowerment to decision-makers and the larger society, by framing the message and the arguments appropriately, and by launching initiatives that empower women, thus leading to stronger economic growth for all.

Plan of Action

We are partnering with the Economist Intelligence Unit whose recently published (June 2010) Women's Economic Opportunity Index will provide the policy framework for the next Coalition meeting at La Pietra and our work going forward.

The priority issue areas that will be discussed at La Pietra, as outlined in the Index, will be labor policy and practice; access to finance; education and training; and legal and social status. By now, in broad terms, we know what works; we know what to do, and how to do it. It is not so much a matter of inventing new programs although innovation is always needed and improvement necessary. But the Coalition will not attempt to reinvent the wheel; we will identify and use the proven best that is out there and waiting to be put to use, often to better or increased use.

We will propose specific, achievable goals for issue area discussants to adopt, revise or build on. For example, we will propose as goals:

- Under labor policy and practice that governments without such laws enact an equal pay law and/or enforce an extant equal pay law;
- Under access to finance that governments and/or financial institutions create outreach programs to women that target the provision of financial services; that educational curricula include "financial literacy" services to introduce women to what for most is an unfamiliar and intimidating world;
- Under education and training that governments double the number of women who are literate; that governments and/or private entities create programs offering SME support and training;
- Under legal and social status that governments enact laws guaranteeing equal property ownership rights for both men and women and/or enforce extant laws; enforce laws protecting women against violence and trafficking in persons.

Currently, we are making these goals more concrete and specific, and identifying potential model examples for the working groups to consider and use as guides for their sessions in October. We will develop strategies for achieving the above goals by involving as many as possible Coalition partners.

Use of the Index

Essentially, the Index is a tool and its value to us lies in its providing the substance for framing appropriate messages for targeted audiences such as the business sector, government leaders, and the public itself. The Coalition will be the vehicle for moving the Index and our goals into the public sphere where demand for women's empowerment must reside.