

“Transforming Lives Today for Tomorrow and Beyond”
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I feel very much at home here, and in tune with the purpose of your meeting.

I have been among the first women in several positions, which was not always easy, including certain minor inconveniences: when I became a Member of Parliament in the Netherlands in 1981, there was only one toilet – for the men – near the Plenary. When I became a member of the World Bank Board of Executive Directors in 1991, it was the same: One labeled “Gentlemen” in the antechamber of the Board Room – I had to walk a corridor to the “Women”...

On a more serious note: throughout my career I have benefited incredibly from organizing and networking with my – alas, always few - female peers. In the early 1980’s as an MP; as Ambassador, in Geneva, I initiated the group of women Ambassadors – which still meets - and as Development Minister I co-founded the so-called “Utstein” Group, including Clare Short, Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul, the German Development Minister until last year, and Hilde Johnson from Norway, now with UNICEF.

The information sharing, mutual support and friendship was truly empowering. Forming women caucuses and alliances is so important: the degree of women’s organization matters much more than their sheer numbers. Of course – you need to *have* female colleagues to be able to do so - as a Member of the Board of the World Bank I had to wait until the number of female Executive Directors doubled: from 1 to 2...

But at least during my tenure there, even that institution, dominated by male hard-nosed economists came to the conclusion that the best investment in developing countries is investing in their women, particularly by sending girls to school – even if the Bank continued to insist on charging user fees for primary education for some more years, impeding poor girls’ access.

Indeed, no country ever developed while stifling the energy, productivity and creativity of half of its population. And today nobody disputes that gender equality in capabilities and access to opportunities accelerates economic growth. It took another few years for women to make their impact on the World Bank’s Governing body, the Development Committee, traditional dominated by male-only Central bank Governors. But with Clare, Heidemarie, Hilde and me, during a few years 4 out of 24 Members were women. And we organized ourselves well: coordinating our interventions, agreeing in advance on points to push, speaking order and division of labor. We were so effective that a Finance Minister of a Very Important Country, while walking out of the meeting, sighed: “I am all for gender equality, but this is too much...” Well – we were 4 out of 24. Now – alas – it is back to 2: France and Indonesia...

All through my career I have worked on Global Poverty, and it has been incredibly motivating to be acknowledged as a role model in that field. You visit villages in Africa or Yemen and see the little girls in school recognizing that I am a woman too. So women can do it! And while I was

-serving on the Board of the World Bank, a young professional in one of my colleagues' offices jotted me a little note saying that: "My country would never have sent a woman if you had not pestered the boss all the time saying why don't you have any women in your office here?" These experiences have been very inspiring.

But on content, I believe the most important mile stone I have contributed to, is the agreement at the UN's Millennium Summit which gave birth to the Millennium Development Goals. These Goals are pre-eminently about "*Transforming lives today for tomorrow and beyond,*" as they comprehensively deal with the multiple facets of the daily struggle of the poor

Women's equality and rights are central to the Millennium Declaration, and, while this is elaborated in Millennium Goal 3, all the goals are about women:

- Goal 1 – reducing poverty: most of the world's poor are women: poverty is not gender-neutral – neither is power or wealth;
- Goal 2 – education – particularly of girls;
- Goals 4 and 5: regarding child mortality and reproductive health: speak for themselves;
- Goal 6: the AIDS-pandemic has a female face – and not just in terms of in the burden of care: most newly infected, particularly in Africa are women (so women need empowerment to negotiate safe sex);
- Goal 7 regarding the environment: it is women who are generally the care takers of biodiversity and the primary manager of domestic energy resources.

I will come back later to Goal 8, which is specifically about what rich countries need to do.

These Goals are interrelated. We need progress on ALL of them to "*transform lives for tomorrow and beyond*". Not one Goal can be achieved in isolation from or without progress on the others. Take health for example: If people are sick they are less productive and able to lift themselves out of poverty and hunger (Goal 1); sick kids do not go to, or learn less at school (Goal 2); and lack of reproductive health damages women's opportunities (Goal 3). But all these goals are in turn essential to meet the Health Goals: poverty prevents people from seeking care; lack of nutrition causes many diseases (Goal 1); literacy (Goal 2) is needed both for prevention campaigns to be effective and for patients to understand treatment; unsafe drinking water (Goal 7) is the biggest killer of infants, while poor water management is also the main cause of malaria spreading; and poor countries will simply not be able to invest sufficiently in their Health systems, without donor support (Goal 8).

BUT NONE OF THE GOALS WILL BE ACHIEVED WITHOUT RADICAL PROGRESS ON GOAL 3.

Gender equality is a moral imperative, as across the globe women are abused from cradle to grave:

- At least 60 million girls are missing from the statistics because of selective abortion, infanticide or neglect, especially in India and China;

- Rape and sexual violence are increasing;
- Every year, two million girls between the ages of five and fifteen end up as sex workers;
- Another 2 million girls undergo genital mutilation – joining the 120 million women who have undergone that harmful practice;
- Domestic violence against women is widespread in most societies;
- Every year, blood vengeance claims thousands of young women's lives

But – as the World Bank discovered more than a decade ago, there is also the economic imperative: Reducing gender inequality has significant returns; empowering women by improving their living conditions and enabling them to actively participate in the social and economic life of a country is the key for long-term sustainable development. And in countries where fewer girls than boys go to school per capita GNP is much lower. Some studies even suggest that women's participation in government would also reduce corruption.

But to empower women, we need progress on the other goals.

Again, let me give an example of these inter-linkages:

Girls' education is an outstanding example of "*Transforming lives today for tomorrow and beyond*", as a mother's education is a strong and consistent determinant of the number of children she will have but also of her children's school enrollment and attainment and their health and nutrition, which define their lives as adults.

In Uganda, farmers who have had 4 years of primary education produce 7% more than those who have no education. If a Zambian mother completes her primary education, her children have a 25% better chance of surviving. In Bangladesh, educated women attend political meetings three times as often as women with no education. And girls who have completed their schooling are far less likely to contract HIV.

But, for girls to be able to go to school, we also need progress on the Poverty Goal – even without user fees, education has a cost, be it uniforms or pencils or just the absence for household chores.

And progress on the health goals: who takes care of the siblings when the mother is sick or dies? The girls- who then cannot go to school.

And on the AIDS goal: the present teacher mortality because of AIDS in parts of Southern Africa is such that teachers are dying faster than they are recruited: what's the point of building schools without teachers?

And progress on the safe water target under the Environment Goal: Who has to walk for miles to get water for the family? In poor rural areas investment in water supply is often the surest way to increase enrolment of girls.

And most definitely we need progress on Goal 8, the Goal containing rich countries' commitments. The gap this year between aid committed (at the G8 Gleneagles Summit 5 years ago) and actual aid given is some \$ 17.5 billion. Regarding my example of girls' education: many developing countries have vetted plans ready to be implemented, but lack sufficient financial support.

And under Goal 8 rich countries did not just make commitments to increase and improve aid; they also promised to open up our rich consumer markets for poor countries' products and to eliminate trade distorting agricultural subsidies. This would be particularly relevant for women.

Two thirds of the world's poor live in rural areas and depend on agriculture. They will not be able to lift themselves out of poverty as long as we – rich countries, and particularly we Europeans, continue with distorting trade in agriculture with our lavish agriculture subsidies. And not only are the majority of the world's poor women, small farmers and unskilled rural workers dominantly are female: they grow the tomatoes, pick the cotton and tend to the cows.

Also more market access for products from developing countries in general helps women: from Bangladesh to Madagascar, from South Africa to Vietnam, women have been benefiting from employment in their export sectors. Even if labor circumstances and wages need improvement, for these women, trade offers opportunities which are far better than the alternatives they have as unpaid laborers in the rural sector or working in the urban informal sector, including as sex workers, and these opportunities help to lift them out of poverty through economic empowerment.

The world was on track to achieve at least the first Millennium Goal of halving the number of extreme poor, and the proportion of people, who suffer from chronic hunger and we **were** close in several other goals. Tremendous progress has been made in education: more kids go to school than ever in human history. And deaths of children, although still very high, **have** declined. This has happened in some of the poorest countries, demonstrating that the MDGs are indeed achievable with the right policies, adequate levels of investment, and international support.

I am personally very optimistic regarding the progress we made on gender issues. I remember in Mexico, during the first UN conference on women in the 1970s. African governments were making statements that they did not accept Western feminism to export alien values to their countries. But now you can not go to a conference without hearing African presidents recognize the role of women in their countries, even if it is only lip service from some of them. For something that is so deeply imbedded in our DNA and in our cultures, I think the gender issue has been quite a success story, within just one generation.

Alas, the present economic crisis is wiping out some of that hard fought progress. While some big economies like China and India are recovering fast, most developing countries, which are

least responsible for the crisis, are still paying for its impact: there is more hunger as people can afford less food and less nutritious food; more disease as people cannot afford to visit the clinic; less school enrolment and more child labor as people take their children out of school to work; and girls go first; and governments are forced to slash budgets, including for health.

Women always benefit last when things improve – but they certainly are the first to bear the brunt, when the economic situation deteriorates.

But the main reason for the shortfalls in progress towards the MDGs is not because they are unreachable or because the time was too short, but rather because of unmet commitments, including inadequate resources.

The real problem is the habit of governments to send their leaders to international conferences, make moving speeches, sign beautiful pledges and declarations, and return home to “business-as-usual”. They can get away with that without being held to account, as no international organization, definitely not the U.N., has any means to enforce such agreements.

We live in a world of sovereign nation states in which only national citizens can hold their politicians to account. And in many rich countries - while opinion polls show large majorities care about world poverty – the vocal and educated constituencies on these issues are weak. Their strengthening could provide the essential ingredient for achieving the Millennium Goals: political will.

Here again, it is women making a difference. Across the U.S. and Europe it is often women who founded development ngo’s decades ago, and women still are the volunteers in their Church or Oxfam shop. I count on them raising their voice now, as the UN Secretary General called for Summit in September this year to discuss progress on the Millennium Goals and agree to an Action Plan to get back on track.

Let me end with a quote that I was reminded of instantly when I read the theme of this meeting: “today for tomorrow and beyond”.

In fact it is a quote of an 8 year old Dutch girl at the time I was in a classroom as a Minister launching the campaign for “Education for all by 2015’. Her question after my speech was: “Madame Minister: why wait until 2015, why not NOW???”

By now, indeed, the 100 million kids that did not go to school that year are today’s illiterate adults...

Indeed: Why not now?

The one and only question in my career I did not have a ready answer for.

And still wouldn’t know how to answer when my granddaughter would ask me in a few years...

