

Flynn Coleman 2nd Adult category

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Imagine for a moment that I could tell you about one, just one, of the Millennium Goals, and that if this goal were achieved then the rest of them would be realized as well.

This hallowed hall, where you 192 Heads of State come together to decide the fate of your populations, is the only organ where all UN members have equal representation. Further, a majority of you represent most of the nations on this planet; namely, the developing ones. Now picture the whole world patterned this way.

On March 8th, the world marked the 100th International Women's Day. Women now earn half of the science degrees conferred, yet their share of academic leadership positions, Nobel prizes and high paying jobs in fields like computer science and engineering reveal a large discrepancy between their abilities and their ultimate rewards as compared to their male counterparts.

Women are the gatekeepers of their villages' environmentally sustainable techniques and the secrets of motherhood. They have a deep knowledge of their eco-systems and are the primary water gatherers, cooks, domestic organizers and healing agents for their families.

Yet these same individuals, who work the land and understand its bounty, rarely have access to it as landowners in the developing world, most often retaining no property rights whatsoever, even though their labor is what sustains its vitality. Colonialization may be fading, but its cultural, societal and legal effects still yield incredible force; and those who lost the most in that game were women, who sometimes held power in pre-colonial eras, like the elderly Bantu Tirki women of Western Kenya, who could ask for permission to express their opinions in dispute settlements.

When a mother receives a malaria net or a course on sexual education, she shares the net with her babies and an understanding of HIV/AIDs transmission with her partner and her friends. When we equip the millions of

single mothers with opportunities to nurture their families while joining the workforce, they will raise a healthy generation of powerful women and respectful men who understand the world around them.

When the baby does arrive on this earth, she is enormously more likely to be healthy and to flourish when her mother has received proper pre-natal care, often given by midwives and other women with a vast reservoir of expertise regarding infants. If she has an income, self-esteem and a voice in community decisions, she is more likely to be able to support her children and use contraception.

In fact, the UN already knows about utilizing the unique skill sets of women to instill peace and positive change; Nigeria and India have both sent record numbers of women to Liberia to serve as catalysts for diplomatic change in peacekeeping missions. Incidents of rape have decreased, and while the system is still evolving, the female presence is softening mentalities and lifting up a place ravaged by war, famine, violence and hate.

India has continued to pioneer the trend by taking the visionary step of allotting 1/3 of the legislative seats to women. The country will become a model for what can be achieved when women are intricately involved in the democratic process.

In Chile, women formed a collective in the wake of the era of disappearances in order to heal from their grief and to take part in business skills workshops. All the while they created arpilleras, small cloth swatches sewn with beautiful bold colors and designs, each telling a story of a mother's loss, a wife's pain, a sister's agony or a daughter's longing. These workshops allowed the women to find comfort in each other and to gain fulfilling jobs, while detailing the stories of their kidnapped loved ones so that the truth would prevent future atrocity.

Armed with a voice in community discussions, political decisions and leadership roles, women will rise above their poverty and their pain. Most importantly, they will bring their children, husbands, brothers, mothers and friends with them. Women will invest the skills they learn in business school

back into their towns and teach sustainable living to their children, ensuring environmental protection for the next generation.

In 1976, Wangari Maathai started planting trees to reverse deforestation and poverty. This community initiative, the Green Belt Movement, began to dramatically enhance the lives of the women involved. Maathai became the first East African woman to earn a doctorate and the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. The program created skills training along with lush vegetation and natural havens that decrease the hours that women need to spend collecting food and firewood; freeing time for learning, starting careers and even time to explore passions, not to mention precious time for the forests to regenerate. To date, 100,000 women have created these tree-planting collectives, and one tree has become 40 million strong.

In Rwanda, after the utter decimation of the genocide, the women took control to rebuild their society. Bruised and beaten, raped and destroyed, women slowly began to pick up the pieces, leading the way to a newly forged nation of more equal rights and status. Now they are cabinet members and storeowners, day laborers and policewomen, rewriting the laws and the history of a small war torn country that almost caved in on itself in 1994. Rwanda has gone from an annihilated culture to a model for allowing women to take leadership roles and letting them lead the reconciliation of a nation.

In South Africa, women were crucial to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that pulled the country from the evil depths of apartheid into a modern era of evolving potential. Through their brave testimony and facilitation of the reconciliation process, women have ushered in an era of progress that should serve as an example for other nations in strife, from Iraq to Darfur and from Burma to Lebanon.

Kiva.org and Grameen Bank are two examples of how micro-finance has reengineered the possibilities for growth when women are allowed to empower themselves. Given tiny loans, not only do women almost always pay back the loan, but they also invest the money back into their communities and can often make extraordinary progress from just a few dollars. They are likely to send their children to school, wearing shoes and carrying pencils. All we

need to do is make sure that schools are available to them, especially the little girls. All around the world, women are now entering the highest echelons of their trades and changing them for the better.

Greg Mortenson recognized the power of educating women; he moved mountains, starting with hiring local workers to build schools for girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan. As soon as the doors were open, there were smiling faces to greet them: the faces of future leaders. If we build a structure to house their dreams, girls will come to realize them, along with the dreams of their children, husbands, brothers and fathers.

Secretary Clinton recently spoke to the UN regarding the essential role of women's empowerment for US security, as well as other issues discussed here; Nicholas Kristof reiterated this fact in the New York Times, and has been a shedder of light on women's issues for many years.

Not every aspect is rose-colored. The demands of modern society place even more burdens on the women who already feed and raise their families while doing the lion's share of domestic work. A woman is supposed to remain beautiful, strong, disciplined, kind and polite while she completes the countless tasks that begin with each breaking dawn. We must fight not only for women's voices, but also for lives full of safe and dignified opportunities and protection for her spirit and mind.

Fathers, husbands and sons must be nurtured too, educated in the value of equality between the genders and given the same chance to thrive in the paternal role of hands-on father, hard-working student, proud worker and loving husband.

It is logical that a person intricately involved in the agricultural maintenance of a community should take part in its leadership; yet this disparity, forged in stereotypes, has prohibited women's advancement. It has also stunted her country's growth as a whole, because the most skilled individuals in terms of environmental sensitivities and natural expertise in diplomacy have been historically banned from the boardrooms and the decision-making processes.

If we can protect them from abuse and guide them to their own paths, women will lead the way for the rest of us to follow them to a more peaceful and prosperous future, especially in those countries still struggling with so much poverty and war.

What if I told you that I knew who held the key to a future free from the torture of hunger, the lack of schooling, the isolation of discrimination, the grief of infant death, the confusion of sparse pre-natal care, the agony of disease, the devastation of environmental degradation and the injustice in the developing world.

What if I told you, that it was your daughter.