News Release

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Empowering Women in East Asia Requires Cultural Changes, not just Economic Development

1 June 2012

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- Economic development alone is not enough to improve gender equality in the region
- Empowering women also involves educating boys and men about the benefits of reducing gender discrimination
- " Jumpstart " programmes – from education incentives to political quotas – can play a role in increasing gender equality in the region
- For more information about the meeting: http://wef.ch/EA2012

Bangkok, Thailand, 1 June 2012 – Despite a strong record of economic growth in recent years, East Asia still lags as a region in terms of gender equality, a panel discussion on " Asian Women as the Way Forward " concluded at the World Economic Forum on East Asia. Greater economic development alone is not enough to empower women in the region; instead, cultural changes are needed for societies to recognize the contributions that women can make – and want to make – in the region.

" Why are we not allowed to contribute? I think that women can contribute in every way, but we are not allowed to, " noted Aung San Suu Kyi, Chairman of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Member of Parliament of Kawhmu Constituent, Myanmar. " It ' s not economic development that brings about a narrowing of the gap. It ' s obviously cultural values. And I think these are what we have to address if we want to find out why we are not allowed to make the contributions of which we are capable. "

In Myanmar, for example, women play a visible and vital role in the nation ' s economy; however, this inclusion is not extended to politics. Politics remains a realm in which discrimination persists, and women are often reluctant to seek leadership roles.

Improving the situation for women throughout the region involves building on past successes, such as microfinance programmes that have elevated the status of women in Bangladesh. But these efforts cannot come at the exclusion of men. " If we don ' t engage boys and men, then, on the one hand, we may have changed the way a girl feels about herself, but we haven ' t changed the other side of the equation, " explained Helene D. Gayle, President and Chief Executive Officer of CARE USA. Meaningful empowerment of women requires educating entire families about the value of encouraging daughters to stay in school.

Numerous studies have shown that empowering women can have a multiplier effect on communities – improving health, raising literacy rates and reducing extreme poverty to a greater extent that conventional development initiatives. In Bangladesh, for example, such programmes have helped shift cultural norms in many parts of the nation such that women ' s contributions to the economy are well recognized, and barriers to accessing capital have been significantly reduced.

Given the persisting gender gap in the region, initiatives to " jumpstart " women ' s inclusion are essential. Specialized programmes – such as political quotas for women in parliaments, affirmative action in education and incentives to encourage families to keep their daughters in school – can make great strides towards changing cultures and reducing gender inequality.

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