

Editorial

Human development and the legacy of women

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Hagar was a mother who struggled alone in the desert to ensure the survival and nourishment of her infant son Ismail. Khadija single-handedly developed and ran a successful business. The queen of Sheba was a powerful leader who ruled by consultation, consensus and reason, as mentioned in the Quran. These are but a few well-known examples in the Eastern Mediterranean Region of courageous, innovative and strong women who overcame obstacles and left rich legacies for the communities to which they belonged. Yet many of their inheritors, the women of the Region today, have far less opportunity to contribute to their own communities. This is especially true for women at lower socioeconomic levels, who have less social space, fewer options and less access to resources with which to navigate their lives. Without their contributions, however, sustainable human development cannot be achieved.

Men and women are partners in life and enter and leave this world on equal terms. Accordingly, they must be equally nourished and provided with resources to build and protect their communities. Assumptions have sometimes been made that result in greater opportunities for boys in accessing education, employment and leadership opportunities, in part because it is reasoned they will carry the economic burden in their adulthood. And yet, who has nurtured these boys throughout their childhood, tended

to their illnesses, distributed household medications, determined their nutritional needs, and taught them hygienic practices? Can anyone deny the mother's comprehensive need for education to successfully accomplish these tasks, which have lifelong consequences on the well-being and health of boys as well as girls? In fact, educational attainment of women has been found to be the single most influential factor in reducing child morbidity [1]. Education for women results in their greater capacities in directing family matters, less fatalistic attitudes in responding to children's illness, and greater awareness of health risks and behaviours that reinforce health.

Women directly impact the productivity of the population through their promotive and preventative health care roles and yet are insufficiently recognized for this crucial contribution. An unhealthy population cannot be productive. Macroeconomic calculations rarely consider the reproductive sector in the growth equation of economies and yet populations are maintained by the reproductive sector. The interaction that the mother has within society, the resources that are available for her use, and the roles that are expected of her form the background for her parenting abilities and influence the outcomes of her children's health and social, educational and economic development.

And yet we must be cautious not to assign women only to the reproductive

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role. This denies and suppresses their other talents and contributions to society. It also amounts to an injustice to women who do not marry or who marry but for various reasons do not, or cannot, have children. By linking the woman's role only to motherhood, we condemn those women not filling this role to a social vacuum, vulnerable to social exclusion by their communities. This is especially true in societies where women are valued only for the number of children, especially boys, that they can successfully give birth to.

Consigning and providing resources for women only in fulfilling the reproductive role in society ignores the economic reality many communities face, and fails to account for the economic productivity that women can contribute to societies. Limiting access to resources for women based solely on their assignment in the reproductive role leaves women with a life-long dependency on others for their income and unable to take care of themselves should their support for any reason fail. For example, many women find themselves the heads of household because of the unemployment of their spouses, death of their spouses, or abandonment by their spouses. Lack of education, lack of capacity in management skills, and lack of experience in the formal labour market means female heads of households have few viable employment options. While juggling household responsibilities, they must often turn for economic support to the informal labour market, where they are vulnerable to exploitation, receive insufficient compensation, and are not entitled to social protection measures such as health insurance because the informal market is not regulated.

Women must be given the resources necessary to navigate through life and to be equally prepared alongside their male partners for the challenges which life brings.

To ensure successful and sustainable development, women must be involved as decision-makers in community development committees and must be equal recipients of social sector projects and income-generation projects, including vocational training and micro credit support. Vocational skills for women should not be limited to gender stereotypical skills such as handicrafts, which are often not sustainable and provide limited market opportunities. Women and men must be equal recipients of capacity-building, including both health and academic literacy, and both men and women should have the responsibility to volunteer and contribute to the health of the community.

To deny women the skills and capacities to face life properly equipped is to deny them their human rights. The denial of equal resources and opportunities for women impedes the success of any sustainable human development programme. The needs and contexts of both men and women are essential components of any development measure and both voices must be heard from the conception to the planning, implementation and monitoring of development programmes.

Governments must recognize the necessity of building human capacity to ensure economic growth and must not limit capacity-building to only half their populations. To do so is to deny the contributions women make to their communities and to deny the rich heritage of their cultures.

References

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