WOMEN & THE ECONOMY

Ensuring an Equitable Future

By Susanne E. Jalbert

A small loan allowed this woman to go into business with her own fruit and vegetable stand in a Tbilisi neighborhood market. *USAID*

In 1995, activists from 189 countries pondered gender equity at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and the parallel nongovernmental organization conference in Huairou. They developed a plan to ensure a more equitable future for women with passion, foresight and intensive focus. Today we scrutinize how far we have progressed toward gender parity since the 12-point Platform for Action was introduced in Beijing. And we ask what can be done now to more efficiently promote women's economic potential and equalize their opportunities with those of men. There has been progress, but not enough.

More equitable economic engagement for women remains elusive. Women perform two-thirds of the world's work, especially in agriculture, for 10 percent of the income (InterAction, 2009); own only 1 percent of the assets (www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org); and constitute 70 percent of the world's poor (International Labor Organization). "Whether

women are working in industrialized nations or developing countries, in rural or urban settings, most women still carry the triple burden of raising children, performing household chores and earning an income for their family," was the finding of the 2010 Soroptimist International white paper "Women at Work."

Women's Earnings Still Lag Behind Men's

Women's earnings linger below men's worldwide. In Middle Eastern and North African countries, women's wages are around 30 percent of men's; 40 percent in Latin America and South Asia; 50 percent in sub-Saharan Africa; and 60–70 percent in East Asia and developed countries. In 2009, 134 countries were evaluated on five economic performance indicators which show that the Middle East has the widest gender gap in economic opportunity (The Global Gender Gap Report 2009).

Evidence from developed countries substantiates the possibility for fair economic expectations. According to Building Gender Balanced Business, in the United States, women make 80 percent of consumer goods purchasing decisions; in Canada, women start 70 percent of new small businesses; in the UK, women will own 60 percent of all personal wealth by 2025; worldwide today there are more female millionaires between the age of 18 and 44 than male. But current data gathered by the United Nations from developing, transitioning and conflict-torn economies indicate that women are still marginalized. They are either absent or poorly represented in economic decisions and policymaking.

Formulation of appropriate gender-neutral policy acts as a framework to support balanced, effective and good governance. It functions as a catalyst for healthy economic growth and cogent interaction of societies' three sectors: public, private and business. Most women have no equitable access to assets, credit, capital or property rights (International Center for Research on Women). Therefore, effective gender-neutral policies are needed.

In Chisinau, Moldova, founder and director of the International Center for Advancement of Women in Business Tatiana Batushkina has many policy concerns. They include creating an environment where women can interact with one another, know their full rights in society, share ecological concerns, solve economic obstacles and eliminate public resistance to women in business. In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, founder and director of the Women's Committee for Legal Change Bayan Mahmoud Zahran's Number 1 policy concern is to answer the question, "How can one enhance economic literacy and legal awareness to reach an apex of justice?" As a business owner in Ukraine, Elena Baryshnikova focuses on loosening the reign of restrictive commercial regulations. She is founder and director of Lex-Service Audit in Sevastopol, Ukraine, and Business Education Alliance (www.bea.com.ua) in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Progress in Closing Gender Gap

There are hopeful signs. Out of the 115 countries covered in the 2009 World Economic Forum's report, since 2006 more than two-thirds have posted gains in overall gender gap index scores, indicating that the world, in general, has made progress toward lessening inequities (The Global Gender Gap Report 2009).

Female participation in the private sector in large and small, formal and informal enterprises is a crucial economic driver for societies — anywhere in the world. "What should economic self-sufficiency look like?" pondered Nino Elizbarashvili, president of the Georgian Association of Women in Business in Tbilisi, Georgia, during an interview. Economic security can beneficially touch every facet of a woman's life and can manifest in a myriad of ways, including positive impact on the health, education and vitality of families, freedom to consume and produce and the ability to more fully contribute to civic and political transformation.

In Kurdistan Suzan Aref, director of the Women's Empowerment Organization (www.womenempowerment-iraq.com/index.htm), wondered, "Could we, as women, break more barriers? How can we better

A designer at the Leather and Shoe Research Institute in Hanoi, Vietnam, works to improve Vietnamese shoemakers' product lines and competitive edge. *Richard Nyberg/USAID*

promote security, women's rights as human rights, gender equity, political participation and economic engagement?" One specific step is to bridge the gender gap with women's economic empowerment and education by promoting inclusion of women in economic activities in elementary school. Other solutions are these: laws must be reformed, land allocation practices changed, access to justice enhanced and market entry obstructions eradicated. The economic benefits of scaling back barriers to women's engagement in the workforce are substantial; as observed in the Global Gender Gap Report, between 2006 and 2009, of 115 countries surveyed, 98 (85 percent) improved performance. When women acquire access to and control over economic resources, they increase productivity and their incomes. Their ability to feed, clothe and educate their families thereby increases.

Women's economic questions are wide-ranging, and the list of policy hurdles to be resolved is long. If we truly desire to live in equitable societies, we must act in this moment. At this moment, policy is top priority. Whether policy is decided publicly or in some secluded government chamber, the point is that policy is essential to determining the direction of our world. Women's voices must be heard to transform and improve current economic conditions. To promote progress, public, private and business sectors worldwide must unite in actionable policy agendas to ensure an equitable future.

Susanne E. Jalbert is a leading economic activist and the architect of the Iraqi Small Business Development Centers program. She champions women's business association capacity building worldwide. She publishes and speaks frequently on the role and impact of business associations, women entrepreneurs, anti-trafficking campaigns and entrepreneurial expansion programs.