



2010 United Nations Private Sector Forum on the Millennium Development Goals Thematic Discussion Briefing Note: Empowering Women and Achieving Equality

Introduction:

Investing in gender equality and women's empowerment is key to accelerating progress on internationally-agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The "multiplier effect" of gender equality has been increasingly acknowledged. Current research underscores that reducing the social, economic and political barriers faced by women and girls keeps children in school longer, decreases child mortality and fosters greater economic activity, putting more resources in households and communities. Yet, despite some promising overall progress, gender inequality remains a great challenge, perpetuating poverty and exclusion in countries worldwide.

The private sector can play a crucial role in empowering women and alleviating gender discrimination. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has emphasized the importance of the "innovative spirit of the private sector and public-private partnerships" in achieving sustainable progress in this field. Current research demonstrating that gender equality and diversity helps business perform better signals that business interests and common interests can come together.

This interactive discussion will center on innovative policies, actions and tools to bolster the business contribution towards the achievement by 2015 of the MDGs related to gender equality and women's empowerment.

Key challenges:

- *Putting gender equality at the heart of decent work:* Despite signs of progress in gender equality over the past 15 years, there is still a significant gap between women and men in terms of job opportunities and quality of employment.
- *Increasing women's participation and leadership in business operations at all levels,* including boards of directors and the CEO-level.
- *Eliminating gender-based violence and harassment of women in the workplace:* Violence against women has been documented as causing high levels of lost productivity. Despite existing international conventions, greater awareness and practical strategies to prevent and address violence against women are needed.
- *Facilitating access to affordable services critical to women's empowerment,* such as health, education, sanitation, water, communications, energy, etc.
- *Opening opportunities for women's engagement in economic activities:* Although evidence shows that self-employed women — such as traders, entrepreneurs, or SME owners — have higher re-payment rates for loans than their male counterparts, they are often unable to access formal financial services due to cultural and procedural barriers.

Solutions:

Ensuring the inclusion of women's talents, skills, experience and energies requires intentional action and deliberate policies. Large businesses and micro-enterprises must not only comply with national and international agreements, but must go beyond. Businesses should examine internal policies and expand or revise where needed to include more women, work to empower women in the communities where they operate, and partner with civil society and other stakeholders to advance — and finance — gender equality.

Discussion question:

What are the greatest opportunities for the private sector and the public sector to take action to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and/or community, thus advancing development as well as business?

UN–business partnerships and initiatives that advance these issues:

1. **Business Call to Action (BCtA):** A global initiative that seeks to harness the power of business investments to reduce extreme poverty and improve the lives of millions of people. In more than 20 countries, BCtA companies are spearheading efforts to provide low-income communities with the tools and resources they need to succeed, and promoting job and opportunity creation to benefit many more. (bcta-initiative.org/join-bcta/)
2. **Girl Up:** This new United Nations Foundation campaign is designed to encourage girls from developed countries to invest in the lives of girls in developing countries. The campaign raises awareness and funds for programmes of the United Nations in five key areas: education, health services, safety, leadership and data collection. The campaign also engages the private sector and foundations to leverage their expertise and resources. (www.girlup.org/)
3. **Results-Based Initiatives (RBIs) - UNIFEM, World Bank and ICRW:** These RBIs are innovative pilot programmes that advance and measure the impact of women’s economic empowerment in six countries: Kenya, Peru, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Egypt and Liberia. They cover a range of issues, such as strengthening women’s entrepreneurship, access to markets, linking agricultural productivity and food security, and making gender central to private sector human resources management. (www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/results_based_initiatives.php)
4. **Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) – *Equality Means Business* - UNIFEM and UN Global Compact:** The WEPs offer practical guidance to businesses on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community. Informed by real-life business practices, the WEPs help companies to survey and analyze current initiatives, benchmarks, and reporting practices and tailor existing policies and practices — or establish needed new ones — to realize women’s empowerment. (www.unglobalcompact.org/Issues/human_rights/equality_means_business.html and www.unifem.org/partnerships/womens_empowerment_principles/)

Further information on these and other UN–business partnerships that could benefit from additional corporate engagement and support can be found at business.un.org.