

## *Patience Stephens*

Excellencies  
Distinguished guests,  
Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to speak with you today on “Promoting the Empowerment of Women in Arab Countries.” I bring greetings from Ms Rachel Mayanja, the Assistant Secretary General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women. I also bring greetings from the newly established United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). As you may be aware, the Secretary-General last month appointed Ms Michele Bachelet, former President of Chile to head UN Women. Under her leadership, UN Women expects to more effectively provide support to all Member States including Arab Countries to implement their policies and programmes on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

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The title of this colloquium specifically refers to the empowerment of women, but our discussion over the next two days is not only about women and girls. It is about the development of communities and Nations. Considering the 22 members of the League of Arab States, we are talking about a population of some 360 millions persons. Women constitute approximately half of this population, yet their full potential as agents of change, particularly in the realms of political and socio-economic development, has not been reached.

Women have the potential to make meaningful contributions to society, but empowerment is the missing link: often, women and girls lack the means and the tools to harness that potential. Women and girls may be more motivated to accept the challenge of bringing change to their societies when they have the support of their communities. To ensure this community-wide investment, all of its members – women and girls, men and boys – must be engaged from the start. The success of women will then be the success of the community, and the community would be empowered to take ownership of their progress.

This colloquium coincides with the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which specified 12 critical areas of concern for women. Many of those 12 areas will likely arise in our discussions over the next two days. But as we open this forum, I would like to touch on two particular areas in which women’s opportunities still lag behind that of men – Women’s and girls’ opportunities in Education and in the Economy.

First education: Education is an essential part of any community's development. Quite simply, education is empowerment. And let us recall the adage that says that educate a man and you educate an individual; but educate a woman and you educate a whole nation.

Colleagues,

If education is to best serve the goal of development, it must be accessible to all. It must allow girls and boys the opportunity to develop their capacities in all fields and at all levels. By education I refer not only to formal education, but also informal education and vocational training. Education enables children and adults to attain knowledge about how the world works, about their value in society and about how they can positively contribute to their families and communities. In that regard, education policies and programmes should work around existing constraints and institutional barriers to find ways to make education of girls and women a top priority in all our development efforts.

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Let me turn to the area of employment.

Women have historically been the foundation of the home and caretakers of the family. Some might suggest that women are more suited for such work than men, as they tend to be more outwardly compassionate and sympathetic toward others. A logical question is how we convert this strength into opportunities that empower women in both formal and informal ways. How does society allow women and girls to rise to the highest levels in the fields and areas that they are passionate about? How do we support the development of women and girls in the areas in which they demonstrate so much skill? Surely if women are the best caretakers in the home, if they provide quality care for the sick in the home, they must have a skill that they can also use as doctors, as anesthesiologists, as surgeons to transform medical systems and the care they provide to both males and females.

Many Arab countries like many other world regions, continue to face persistently high levels of unemployment. This unemployment is particularly high for women, especially young women. Financing has become difficult to secure in the face of shrinking opportunities for business development. Public sectors which previously provided the best and most stable employment are no longer able to offer employment to the large out of school populations. The resulting unemployment is severe, particularly for young women.

For both women and men, innovative opportunities for employment are needed. Developing entrepreneurial programs that provide start-up capital and technical assistance will prepare women to engage in the economic sector and help bring real change

where their communities need it most. Such programs could also specifically target young women who may not have previously received a formal education.

Engaging and supporting women entrepreneurs through targeted programs would do more than benefit the women who participate in such programs. Businesses run by women can contribute to job creation by hiring more women and men. Women have proven to be among the most astute business owners and entrepreneurs.

Women's status as income earners would enable them to actively contribute to the development of their communities. For families living in poverty, a second income could mean the difference between having food to eat or suffering from hunger. It could mean the difference between living in a safe area or one that is plagued with violence. It could enable families to send all of their children, including their daughters, to school. It could facilitate the empowerment the next generation.

Within the past ten years, programs to support the education of women and their economic empowerment have been effectively established in parts of the Arab world. For instance, an evidence-based skills-building program for adolescent girls called Ishraq has been implemented in parts of rural Upper Egypt. The program provides literacy and life-skills training as well as sports and recreation opportunities in a safe, girls-only context. It contains a community outreach component to galvanize support for the program and its girl participants. The program has been successful at both empowering girls and promoting positive changes in community norms about girls' abilities.

A model program of economic empowerment of youth is INJAZ al-Arab, an achievement program that has expanded to at least 11 nations including Tunisia. INJAZ al-Arab provides opportunities for young entrepreneurs – male and female – to receive mentorship and guidance in developing their own businesses from professionals in the business world. Over 500,000 students have been involved in the program since 2004.

Distinguished guests,

Empowering women to take a more visible role in society will permit them to contribute not only to the improvement of their families, but also to wider society. Women have great potential that, if harnessed, can enable them to make great contributions. They can serve as an asset to the Arab world. The world is full of examples of women who have proceeded to make remarkable contributions to economic, social, cultural and political life. For example, four cabinet ministers of the United Arab Emirates who are women – including Sheika Lubna Al Qasimi, Foreign Trade Minister and former Minister of Economy Planning, who was on Forbes magazine's 2007 list of the 100 most powerful women in the world. And there are many more to be discovered.

The key challenge is to find unique and innovative ways to build on women's strengths and on their capacities while exploring new ones. I am optimistic that this colloquium will produce meaningful and practical recommendations for ensuring that women are

empowered to achieve their full potential and to contribute to the development of a region whose potential and contributions are so vital to global development.

Thank you