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Freeing Women from Exploitation and Despair

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Imagine a terrible plague—a devastating disease—descending on and ripping apart the fabric of your community, killing, crippling, or otherwise disabling half of your friends, family, and neighbors.

Beyond the human pain and suffering this would cause, consider the incredible impact it would have on your community's ability to thrive. How could the economy grow? How would societal institutions function? How stable could things possibly be? The world would be compelled to action.

Yet in far too many places around the world today, there is indeed a plague holding back many communities and keeping untold millions from reaching their potential. It is a plague the world must face, not only because it is the moral thing to do, but because the cost for ignoring it is simply too great. What is this plague? It is the systematic and violent exploitation of women. This exploitation takes many forms, depriving women of their most basic freedom, robbing them of their health, keeping them from the education they need and deserve, and condemning them to lives without economic opportunity.

No country can prosper when women's voices are silenced, their bodies exploited and their rights violated. Around the globe, the oppression of women goes hand in hand with failed societies. Nations, like women and their children, have the best chance to thrive where fundamental freedoms, human rights, and property rights are ensured for all.

Talking Points

- The United States has been the world's leader in helping to guarantee the human rights of women and children.
- Over half of the 42 million people living with HIV/AIDS are women. President Bush has mounted major initiatives to prevent transmission of HIV from mothers to their newborns prevent new infections, and treat and care for the victims of HIV/AIDS.
- Each year more than 500,000 women lose their lives to easily preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth. U.S. efforts are aimed at increased access to skilled birth attendants, antibiotics, and other available technology.
- Education is essential to ending women's vulnerability, and U.S. training programs are notably successful in Afghanistan and Iraq. These women will be empowered to become part of the economic and political life of their countries.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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The United States has been the world's leader in helping to free women from exploitation and despair. Guaranteeing the human rights of women and children is essential to the creation of stable, democratic, and prosperous societies. This is not only in keeping with the deeply held values of the American people; it is strongly in the United States' national interest as well.

As Americans, we take our rights for granted. We cannot conceive of being sold into sexual slavery, forced into an arranged marriage at age 5, subjected to female genital cutting as a rite of passage, systematically raped as a weapon of war, or killed with impunity in the name of honor—by a father or brother.

As the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, I have seen how women in many parts of the developing world, especially in regions of conflict, face these very threats today. It is inconceivable that in the 21st century so many women still lack legal protections for basic human rights.

Plight of Refugees

No group is in greater danger than the large number of women refugees and internally displaced persons. They are often single-handedly responsible for the survival of their children, even when their own survival is at stake. Every day provides challenges that increase the risk of physical danger: finding cooking fuel, carrying water (often for miles), obtaining sufficient food at distribution sites, and accessing primary health care for themselves and their families.

They are also exposed to violence at every stage in their flight. Secretary Rice has expressed deep concern with the rape of displaced women in Darfur when they venture out to gather food or firewood, a story brought to light in a July U.N. report.

Sexual violence and exploitation, associated psychological trauma, and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, are among the terrible dangers confronting refugee women today.

Violence takes many forms—trafficking in persons, domestic violence, rape, and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation

and honor crimes. It shatters the most fundamental human right to which every woman is entitled: the right to be safe.

Modern-Day Slavery

The most egregious violation of human rights is the modern-day slavery of human trafficking, which affects hundreds of thousands of persons each year, mostly women and children, depriving them of basic freedom and inflicting unspeakable physical and emotional harm.

Ambassador John Miller, director of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons notes that 80 percent of trafficked persons are female and nearly half are children. He states "Sex slavery ... is the dominant form ... then domestic servitude, both of which are largely women or girls. What was once a race issue has become primarily a gender issue."

Women are particularly vulnerable in post-conflict societies with economies in shambles. Faced with lack of opportunity at home, they are easily lured by false promises of well-paying jobs abroad. Many are then coerced into lives of prostitution, domestic servitude, or other types of forced labor.

As President Bush told the U.N. General Assembly in 2003, "Nearly two centuries after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, and more than a century after slavery was officially ended in its last strongholds, the trade in human beings for any purpose must not be allowed to thrive in our time."

The Bush Administration has provided more than \$295 million to support anti-trafficking programs in more than 120 countries, including a special \$50 million initiative that the President announced at the U.N. This funding helps countries to develop laws, investigate cases, rescue and voluntarily repatriate victims, build emergency shelters, run awareness campaigns, and mount rehabilitation and vocational training programs.

Combating trafficking successfully requires educating people on prevention. One such program is run by the U.S. Agency for International Development. USAID/Ukraine's Trafficking Prevention Program has seven regional centers offering job skills training, hot lines, crisis prevention,

and referral services to vulnerable women. More than 30,000 women have used the services provided by these centers.

We must remember that without buyers women could not be sold. That is why at the 2005 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, the United States introduced a resolution on eliminating the demand for trafficked women and girls. This was the first U.N. resolution addressing how demand—particularly for commercial sexual exploitation, or prostitution—fuels human trafficking. Certain countries do not want to acknowledge the important link between commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking in women and girls. However, the resolution was adopted by consensus with over 50 co-sponsors.

Sadly, women are not just abused by strangers. On a trip to three Central American countries, I found that domestic violence afflicts an astonishing percentage of women and families. In a sample survey of over 300 women in Santiago and in Managua, reports of domestic violence reached 40 percent and 52 percent. I heard the same concerns from women in Latvia and the Republic of Georgia.

In many countries victims of domestic violence confront laws, or the absence of laws, that make it difficult or even dangerous to pursue justice. Many countries do not explicitly criminalize domestic violence, and even where they do, police and judges often treat it as a private or family matter and penalties are not enforced.

The United States funds education of law enforcement officers, judges, and medical personnel on the problem, trains attorneys in domestic violence prosecutions, and contributes funds for shelters and crisis centers for victims of domestic violence in many countries.

Attacking HIV, Mutilation

Inequality and violence against women contribute to women's vulnerability to many things—including HIV/AIDS. Women who suffer at the hands of an intimate partner, who are raped during times of armed conflict and political instability, or are trafficked for sexual purposes are at high risk of contracting HIV. Women known or suspected to be

HIV positive are especially vulnerable. They may be abused, abandoned, or even killed. Even when women are not living with HIV themselves, they bear the brunt of caring for those with the disease.

Over half of the 42 million people living with HIV/AIDS today are women. Worse, among young people living with AIDS, nearly two-thirds are female. Over 2 million infected women give birth each year, transmitting HIV to newborns. Nearly 2,000 babies a day become infected with HIV during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding. Most of these children will die before their fifth birthday.

Because reducing mother-to-child transmission is a major U.S. priority, President Bush announced his \$500 million International Mother and Child HIV Transmission Initiative, which dedicates funding specifically to prevent transmission of HIV from mothers to their newborns.

The United States' five-year, \$15 billion program known as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief is working to prevent millions of new HIV infections, provide antiretroviral therapies to millions living with HIV/AIDS, and care for millions of HIV-infected individuals and AIDS orphans. The plan supports HIV/AIDS programs in 123 countries with a special focus on 15 countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia representing more than half the world's infections. It also encompasses bilateral programs in nearly 100 other countries.

Women's health receives too little attention in the developing world. Each year more than 500,000 women (99 percent in developing countries) lose their lives to easily preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Childbirth is the leading cause of death of women in Afghanistan, where the lifetime risk of maternal mortality is 1 in 15. The majority of maternal deaths are preventable through increased access to skilled birth attendants, antibiotics, and other currently available technology.

Last year I chaired a panel discussion at the U.N. aimed at increasing the political will so sorely needed to address this issue.

The United States has launched a \$5 million initiative (REACH) to provide health-related

accelerated learning and basic literacy training for women and girls in Afghanistan, including the training of midwives.

Worldwide, over the last four years, USAID has provided more than \$475 million for maternal health, family planning, and reproductive health programs.

A harmful traditional practice that also threatens the health and violates the human rights of women is female genital mutilation or female circumcision, believed to prevent daughters from being unfaithful to their future husbands. Medically unqualified persons usually perform the practice—without anesthetic—on infants and girls. It may cause massive and fatal bleeding, and lead to chronic infections, sterility, and other complications.

USAID has supported activities to eliminate female genital mutilation in a number of countries. This includes training health care providers about the long-term implications of female genital mutilation and educating local communities to abandon this cultural practice.

Valuing Women's Education

Education is essential to addressing or averting every aspect of exploitation and despair, from reducing vulnerability to disease, maternal mortality, and violence to enhancing economic opportunity.

The ability to read and write is fundamental for life in today's world. Some one-sixth of the world's population is illiterate; two-thirds of the illiterate are women. Female education is strongly linked to economic development and health. For example, maternal and infant mortality is much higher—sometimes two to three times higher—among children of uneducated women compared with women with at least some secondary education.

President Bush has said, "Literacy and learning are the foundation of democracy and development. Indeed, educating women and girls raises every index of development."

When you educate a man you educate an individual; when you educate a woman you educate a whole family.

Many cultures do not place value on education for women. Her value to her family is her "bride

price." Parents contract a future marriage relationship for their very young daughters. A man, often much older, may pay a bride price to the family of a girl 5 to 7 years old, with a commitment to marry when she becomes "of age"—puberty.

The high dropout rate of girls in primary grades is partly explained by this practice of early marriage and pregnancy. It also encourages seeing the girl as property. Like human trafficking, treating women and girls as commodities is dehumanizing.

Some 120 million children, most of them girls, do not attend school, in part because of hunger or malnourishment. They are expected to stay at home, care for their siblings, and do household chores. Often the distance to a school poses a threat to girls' safety.

The United States leverages food aid to do more than reduce hunger. The 2003 McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program provides children with nutritious meals as part of their education. In 38 countries around the world, this program feeds 7 million children at school. In countries where education for girls is not inherently valued, when schools provide nutritious meals, parents have more incentive to allow their daughters to be educated.

Some of the greatest education needs are found in post-conflict societies like Afghanistan and Iraq. Today, it is so hopeful to see young girls—who were forbidden by the Taliban to leave their homes unless accompanied by a male relative; who had to hide their books under their burkas—now studying math and science.

With U.S. support and the efforts of the Afghan people themselves, nearly 5 million Afghan children are enrolled in school. Of those schoolchildren, about 40 percent are girls—many more than at any point in Afghanistan's history. A new Women's Teacher Training Institute/Afghan Literacy Program, announced by our First Lady, opened in Kabul in September 2004. The Institute trains cadres of Afghan women to teach literacy throughout Afghanistan.

Similar progress is being made in Iraq, where the U.S. has renovated thousands of schools. Female attendance now exceeds pre-war rates, with girls

making up some 45 percent of all primary students. U.S. programs are training teachers, and training Iraqi women in media, entrepreneurial, and democratic skills.

In 2002 President Bush launched the five-year Africa Education Initiative—to increase support for Africa’s education programs by \$200 million to provide 250,000 girls with scholarships and to offer teacher training.

The importance of education to securing women’s rights was very evident during my recent visit to Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa. I went to train members of the recently formed Women Leaders Caucus of Côte d’Ivoire in leadership skills and the nuts and bolts of political campaigning. The women participating were well-educated professionals—professors, scientists, lawyers, pharmacists, etc., living in the capital city. They were highly motivated to run for political office and have an impact on the kind of society they live in.

By contrast, in what seemed like a time warp, we visited rural villages where the promise of education is an elusive dream. Women in these villages have little if any schooling, are married at 12 and 13, and live as little more than chattel. There, we found illiterate women hoeing fields, gathering firewood, and hunting clean water for their children. Picture women, babies on their backs, struggling under heavy loads of pineapples, water jugs, or baskets of firewood carried on their heads. Picture the dispossessed homeless widow with several small children in a culture that denies her the right to inherit her husband’s property. These women—lacking education, ownership of property, or access to credit—can never be secure.

Political and Economic Rights

When women are educated, they are far less likely to fall victim to violence, poverty, or the scourge of AIDS. Women who have control over their economic assets are better able to avoid risky sexual and abusive relationships.

One key element in U.S. efforts to reduce women’s vulnerability is promoting property and inheritance rights for women, which we do on the ground in many countries and in U.N. deliberations.

In many ways we support entrepreneurship and women’s integration into the mainstream of economic life. One of our greatest commitments is to micro-finance programs. Over the last few years our investment in these small loan and technical assistance programs—about three-quarters of which go to women—has topped \$130 million. This simple tool—which may be a \$100 loan to stock a stall in a market or acquire a sewing machine—gives millions of women the means to better their own lives, the lives of their families, and the economy of their countries. Huge gains for women can come from tiny investments.

To have an impact on the legal and social structures of any country, women must be a part of the political process. My own greatest accomplishment has been developing and leading negotiations at the U.N. General Assembly for a U.S. resolution urging countries to expand opportunities for women to participate in the political process. The resolution, passed by consensus with 110 co-sponsors, offers concrete steps countries and civil society can take to help reach this goal. Now I am helping to implement it in many countries.

President Bush has said, “respect for women is both a non-negotiable demand of human dignity and a foreign policy imperative of the United States.”

In my work, I have seen things that have shocked and saddened me. I have met women who have energized and inspired me. And I am very proud of the work that the United States is doing to increase hope, human rights, and fundamental freedoms for women and their families.

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