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PANEL V

**Future perspectives on the promotion of gender equality:
through the eyes of young men and women**

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* The paper has been reproduced as submitted.

“I do not mind living in a man’s world, as long as I can be a woman in it.”

A few years ago these words were relayed to me by a revolutionary woman who, at the time, was deemed by our mutual male acquaintances as a controversial nuisance. Admittedly, my knee-jerk reaction was to simply turn a cold shoulder over her convictions; I had found contentedness in my blind ignorance, and saw no particular reason to go about eradicating gender inequality which I believed was intangible, out-of-context, and perhaps even inexistent.

From that moment on, I’ve regretted having done so. Throughout my adolescence, I often find myself randomly returning to what she had said, and each relapse brought forth in me a stronger drive to elicit meaning in her words, to breathe in the ardency that fanned her flames.

It took me, without exaggeration, my entire teenage life to understand what being a woman in a man’s world meant. It means that she must never settle with what is presented to her. It means that she must be perennially devoted to enacting change, both within her immediate surroundings and foreign hemispheres. And ultimately, it means that she must be unafraid to spark revolutions and stand faithfully by them.

I’ve taken these dreams to heart and formulated somewhat of an ambitious plan-of-action that I want to see implemented in my lifetime. I want to strive for a world in which women feel cheated out of their birthright if not granted the essential human rights to which they are entitled to. There is no doubt in my mind that our foremothers have made massive strides in women’s empowerment, but it is far too soon to rest on our laurels, when millions of women still remain impoverished, uneducated, and endangered. Being together in the struggle not only enriches and empowers the experience of womanhood itself, the process essentially becomes a part of the human condition.

In order to overthrow centuries of gender inequality, we must first confront the root of the problem. The question isn’t whether or not sexism exists in today’s world; regardless of how civilized and developed a society claims itself to be, there are nevertheless discrepancies between how its men and women are treated, and this is true of virtually every culture in existence today.

Perhaps one of the most notorious perpetrators of gender inequality is mainstream media which, saturated with blatant chauvinism and female degradation, contributes largely to the perpetuation of sexist stereotypes. I am, frankly speaking, ashamed of the pop culture which my generation has fueled and fostered. On the one hand, it serves a greater historical purpose: the media certainly is a wonderful gauge to use when peering into the milestones of an era. But unfortunately for women of my generation, we will be remembered as those who were incredulously subordinate to men’s standards, nonchalant gender-role conformists. Women my age are the ones who will probably go down in history textbooks as individuals that set back feminism by several decades.

So what precisely comprises the image that is portrayed of women in today’s mainstream media? It is my opinion that what matters most is what she is *not* portrayed as: an intellectual, self-assured human being. Magazines and television shows are bombarded with makeover features in which women are encouraged to embark on monthly pursuits for physical perfection. We are constantly being told that if we put just a little more effort into it, shed just a few more pounds, or add on just another layer of

lipstick, our lives will magically transform into oblivion. Quite obviously, these are fake promises, and it is my sincere hope that young women my age are aware of the flagrant lies behind gender propaganda. However, it is simply not enough to ignore the mainstream media, because the word 'mainstream' in and of itself entails large masses subscribing to what sexist TV shows and magazines endorse. We simply cannot allow teens to be exposed to such messages, because they trivialize the intellect and overemphasize the importance of the superficial self. We simply cannot proceed with this dire, shockingly apparent lack of respectable female role-models in the public eye. What it has ultimately come down to is the cold, hard truth that the greater half of women on TV serve as puppets to perpetuate chauvinistic agendas, catering to a predominately male audience – men, after all, are 97% of the entertainment world's directors.

We are hereby witnessing the commodification of women. Strongest evidence of this can be found in the dismemberment of the female form in television shows and music videos: in these, cameras pan down across a woman's body, gradually isolating each section – legs, buttocks, lips, hips, breasts – while shooting from voyeuristic angles. The woman is now no longer a human being, just a sum of her body parts. She has, put simply, become a product for consumption.

These grossly degrading images are harmful in and of themselves, but worsen when the following statistic is considered: even in developed countries, women account for an average of only 38% of all characters onscreen. If let's say 40% of these were portrayed in a vulgar, sexually-indecent manner, that would dwindle the number of feminism-friendly role models to 23%. Moreover, research shows that men are three times more likely than women to be featured in television appearances that enhance their strong convictions, martyrdom, and resistance against a worthy cause. Girls, on the other hand, are four times more likely than boys to be in the limelight for their frivolous emotions, soft-spoken gentility and romantic self. Granted, there are touchy girls and rebellious boys, and there is nothing inherently wrong with having them represented in the media. The problem arises, however, when personality traits become associated with gender; borne of this pairing are harmful stereotypes which are increasingly endorsed by the mainstream media and, consequentially, young people like myself.

A Kaiser Family Foundation poll showed that, when asked to choose their favorite TV role model, there was a significant discrepancy between young boys and girls. While 80% of the boys chose male role-models, only 59% of girls chose female role-models. These numbers, sadly, fail to startle me. With the absence of respectable female role models who else can young girls aspire to become? While young boys are taught to dream boldly, and to dare to reach, young girls are left gazing at a glass ceiling. Young boys dream of becoming kings; young girls dream of marrying one.

And yet who could blame them? Year after year, statistics consistently show that women do, indeed, reap a significantly lower income than men do: while they comprise 75% of the world's work, they earn only 10% of the world's wages and own a mere 1% of the world's property. One must ask, what exactly constitutes the global workforce? Contemporary economists – heavily influenced by the Marxist notion that a livelihood should be worked and earned for - are responsible for misleadingly categorizing jobs into either one of two categories: 'productive' and 'unproductive.' While the former is done for money, the latter yields no dollars. It is for this very reason that one can often find

women who say, “*I don’t work, I’m just a housewife*”. They are, quite bluntly, mistaken (or dangerously modest, at the very least). Such a statement blatantly dismisses all the important tasks these women do at home as trivial. I am in no way implying that we should revert to backwards marital divisions of labor in which women remain faithfully at home, while men bring bread to the table. I am simply saying that feminism is a matter of choice. And the power of choosing, indeed, is a role model in and of itself.

It is absolutely crucial that we inform young people of their basic human rights which, of course, simultaneously include gender rights as well. Two things need to be done in order to achieve this:

First, we must encourage governments to push for gender-fair education. Girls in rural outskirts should have the exact same equal access to education as boys in urban areas do. In the past, governments have ignored the lack of *any* form of education amongst the former, let alone sex and female rights education. Now is the time for them to adopt the notion that schooling is *the* quickest means to economic, social, and personal progression in a highly gender-biased world.

Secondly, the education itself needs to undergo a series of reformations and changes. That is, it should aim to highlight women’s rights as issues of primary importance. As a global community, we have a moral obligation to see to it that the universal definition of female abuse does not only encompass incidents at the most basic levels (i.e: visible scars of battery), but also includes mental and emotional brutalities. We cannot begin to foster a sense of responsibility to gender equality in young men, unless we inform them precisely what such equality entails. Granted, the primitive knowledge of women’s rights is present, but often times is an archaic, more distant concept, as removed and old-fashioned as chivalry is. To rectify this, school administrators and parents alike simply may not make allowances for what already is a dangerous lack of serious gender rights implementation in young boys’ immediate surroundings. Moreover, young girls need to be taught that female abuse, as a holistic category, is fundamentally intolerable. The truth is, few girls in neglected corners of the globe know that misogyny is morally-wrong and globally-condemned. Such is a world in which relationships between men and women, put simply, are economic sanctions: if the bride (product) is packaged in unsatisfactory packaging, the groom (buyer) may alter and discard her as he sees fit.

This is not to say that the urbanized and developed world is unaffected by gender stereotypes. In any given culture, there are intricate layers of oppressions that span from sexism to racism to classicism; these are just simply more apparent and magnified in developing countries due to harsh economic circumstances. It is for this reason that we must stress the importance of inter-cultural communication between women from both worlds. While it is true that western solutions cannot be applied to Eastern problems, and Eastern solutions cannot be applied to Western problems, the exchange in and of itself is a wonderfully resourceful means to female empowerment.

Allow me to relay some of my own personal experiences with the inter-merging of both hemispheres: as an only daughter of a diplomat, I have had to immerse myself in all sorts of nations, each with their own distinct socioeconomic and gender status. In the earlier part of my life, I lived in the upscale neighborhoods of Brussels and attended

summer school in the picturesque, well-to-do regions of France; sexism of any sort was conveniently tucked away from my view. Only a few years later, I moved to a remote part of Brazil, where wife-beating and homelessness were literally outside my front porch. The juxtaposition between one economic extreme and another struck me as disturbing, but it soon became apparent in my mind that regardless of where I lived and what I witnessed, there existed gender issues that millions of poor *and* rich women have to endure.

So it truly is a shame that the majority of young girls I grew up with had the preconceived notion that when women come to the United States, they magically transform into one of those happy, lucky people who lead luxuriously carefree lives. The first world, to them, already carried with it an envy-worthy mystique; it was thought to be a swanky, glamorous place in which women moved freely in laissez-faire metropolises with soaring salaries.

I never once subscribed to these notions; female oppression does, indeed, exist in the first-world as well, and women of the third-world like myself, economically disadvantaged as we are, still carry the moral obligation to keep close watch of this.

In spite of assimilating to new surroundings every three years, I never once forgot the repercussions of being a woman from a third-world country. My gender has and always will be a reminder of the larger obligations I have to the women of my homeland. When leading a migratory lifestyle like mine, it is quite easy to neglect all that is wrong in your temporary surroundings, and to shirk your responsibilities as a world citizen – or more specifically, a *female* world citizen. It is quite easy to lead an ignorant life, punctuated by a lack of social consciousness and moral apathy.

But I am strongly adamant about leaving this easy path behind. If a mother in Timbuktu is in dire need of drinking water for her five children, it matters to me. If a virgin accused of adultery in Kabul is being subjected to public stoning, this resonates an anger in me. If a working woman from Montreal is filing a law-suit against gender discrimination in the office place, I will take this very personally.

Because what disadvantages them, disadvantages me. I need to *be* involved in the struggle, because I necessarily *am* involved. Just as female rights abuse does not translate neatly across all cultures, feminism is also not a one-size-fits-all solution. There are multitudes of worldwide injustices that we – as a human race – choose to ignore every single day; in my opinion, the correct formula for gender equality is incomplete without the careful consideration of these injustices. A laudable example of this is Western expatriate women in Thailand, who have indeed proven to be valuable resources to the poorest of our country's hill-tribes women. They hold the power to request assistance from first-world countries and/or feminist political organizations they have networked with, ones which most women residing in rural territories would not have had access to at all.

We cannot settle for anything less than complete and total intercultural cooperation. It is mind-boggling to me that we exist on the same planet, yet so apparent are the injustices and the disparities that exist both within a continental and global scale. Gender is, indeed, one of the most predominant ones, but we must not overlook the fact that it is a jigsaw piece to a larger matrix of oppression. We cannot confront sexism without coming face-to-face with this matrix: and as we peel each layer – gender, race, color, age, religion, class – carefully examining their detriments, only then can we begin

to understand what true equality is. We must see to it that these oppressions do not snowball over time, tiding over to the next generation.

“Why were men better than women when you were young? Why were there so many inequalities when you were young?” my daughter will ask me. I will not know what to tell her.

I’ve dedicated the greater bulk of my political agenda to procuring an answer for her. And so after years of fruitlessly turning to dead-ends and undelivered promises, I found the answer right where I began: my own self, or rather, my generation. I am utterly convinced that, ironic as it is, though we are the primary culprits of gender stereotype perpetuation, in us also lies a long-term solution.

The Beijing Platform for Action gave specific consideration to issues of young women in nine out of twelve critical areas of concern. These numbers are solid proof that the world has invested in the staying power of youth initiatives. At no other point in history have young men and women commanded such leverage over governmental agencies and mainstream media. At no other time have youth-based groups so effectively and ardently shattered barriers, spread influence, and demonstrated such relentless drive. This, I say, is the dawn of an era for change.

It is a glorious thing to be young and feminist. In my right hand, I hold the bitter, almost stoic awareness of the gender inequality which most adults I know, numbed by years of sexist injustices, have come to terms with. But my left grasps a very firm grip of childhood naivety, the kind which believes with wholehearted genuineness that I can change the world. It is my left hand that speaks to you today.

After having said all of this, you may be surprised to find that I absolutely refuse to subscribe to a ‘Feminist Movement.’ In my opinion this an inappropriate phrase, for the suffix ‘movement’ implies transience, a lack of permanence. Feminism, on the contrary, is a way of life. One must make a conscious, educated commitment to upholding the ideals of anti-misogyny and women’s empowerment.