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Gender inequality is an age-old problem, and it manifests in many ways. But today more than ever, we have the means and the momentum to substantially improve the status of women and girls. And when we look at developing countries that have already made significant progress in advancing equality, we see that empowering women economically is a consistent and tangible factor in achieving that progress.

That's why the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is launching our first-ever gender equality strategy with a specific focus on women's economic empowerment. Our role, as we see it, is to make targeted investments that enable women and girls to act and engage as equals in society.

We're starting the strategy with \$170 million invested over the next four years, primarily in Kenya, India, Uganda, and Tanzania. During that time, we will focus on the specific areas where we believe our foundation can make the biggest difference for women and girls. These include programs that increase women's access to and use of digital financial services; provide more ways for women to participate in the marketplace, particularly through the agricultural sector; and enhance the support networks that help women and adolescent girls to save money, develop skills, build power, and encourage each other to reimagine their standing in society.

Our new strategy complements and incorporates our other efforts to expand equality by closing gender data gaps, improving SDG accountability for women and girls, and strengthening grassroots women's movements and campaigns. This work will continue, as will our support for the Women and Girls at the Center of Development Grand Challenge learning agenda and our ongoing internal efforts to help other foundation teams apply a systematic gender lens to their work.

A woman in charge of her economic future is a woman with power over her own life. If we can ensure women and girls have tangible control over their futures and well-being—if we can ensure they no longer earn less money, have less power, and make fewer gains—we can help create a world where women, girls, and the men and boys around them have a better chance to thrive.

WHY ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT MATTERS

We're focusing on women's economic empowerment for three reasons. First, the old saying "a rising tide lifts all boats" doesn't always hold true for women. While prosperity continues to increase overall, the poorest women and girls are disproportionately left behind.

Second, when women can access and control their own assets and property, they have greater control in their lives overall. They have a say in the material choices affecting them and their families. They have agency and a sense of self that is largely unavailable to them when they're unable to make choices over their own assets.

Finally, empowering women economically has huge spillover effects at home, at work, and in society at large. In Bangladesh, for example, growth in the garment industry brought many women into the formal workforce, leading to declines in child marriage and early motherhood.

As women's economic power grows, communities' power and potential grow as well. It's one way that equality for women and girls creates something greater for everyone.

OUR APPROACH

To determine the right approach to our strategy, we interviewed experts and analyzed evidence from nearly 100 countries around the world. The research pointed to 13 pivotal factors in helping women and girls overcome economic barriers, including education and the alleviation of unpaid care work. All of them are important, but to be effective we knew we had to focus our efforts.

We looked at which of these factors the foundation is **BEST POSITIONED** to enhance—based on where philanthropic investments, in general, can have the most impact, where we in particular had the right experience, and where a strategy like ours could be bold and take risks that others might not be able to take.

In the end, we identified three priority areas to kick off our work:

INCLUSION: ENSURING WOMEN CAN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MOBILE BANK ACCOUNTS AND OTHER DIGITAL FINANCIAL SERVICES.

When women use their own financial tools and accounts, they can choose how to manage their finances, pay for schooling and nutritious foods for their families, and save and borrow money to bolster their futures. We are taking a three-step approach to accelerating this trend. First, we are working with governments to digitize social protection payments to women. Next, we are working to ensure funds are directed into an account personally held by the woman beneficiary, so she has control over the account and how the funds are used. And third, we want to ensure the payment system and social protection program are designed so that they contribute to economic empowerment of the beneficiaries, which could include things like financial training or education.

OPPORTUNITY: CONNECTING WOMEN TO NEW MARKET OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE THEIR PROFITS AND INCOMES, ESPECIALLY IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR.

The majority of women in emerging economies make their living through agriculture. The second area in our strategy focuses on ensuring their livelihoods are as stable and profitable as possible. Building on our existing work in Agricultural Development, we'll seek out ways for women to join and grow their role in the farming economy, exercise more control over their work in that economy, and receive more of the gains coming out of it.

SUPPORT AND CONNECTION: PRIORITIZING SELF-HELP GROUPS AS CRITICAL PLATFORMS FOR BRINGING WOMEN TOGETHER AND BUILDING UP THEIR COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE, ECONOMIC POWER, AND VOICE.

Self-help groups have long been an effective way for women to learn about health and social issues, save money, and unify their energy to make change. The third priority for our strategy is building on this foundation of support by testing a next-generation model. This "self-help group 2.0" model will help expand self-help groups, test how digital technology can play a role in connecting women, and arm them with a range of skills to accelerate change in their communities. Groups will make a point to include adolescents and young women, who are at a critical age for developing and embracing their agency. What we learn from these efforts will inform our model as we expand our investments in India and test new and different approaches in Africa.

The foundation will also engage in a modest learning agenda to better understand how owning assets, such as land, could help increase and diversify a woman's opportunity to earn an income. Governments and partners can devise ways to ensure more women have a stake in ownership.

ONWARD

We're proud to join the many organizations, large and small, around the world that champion increased opportunities of women and girls worldwide. For more information about our vision and strategy, visit:

www.gatesfoundation.org/What-We-Do/Global-Growth-and-Opportunity/Gender-Equality

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