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A fact I should have tapped into long ago – well before Nichols College created the Institute for Women's Leadership – hit me hard when I became more involved in lending to female entrepreneurs in emerging and frontier markets via Kiva.org, a non-profit organization with a mission to provide micro-lending to alleviate poverty around the world. Throughout my 25 years plus of international management consulting to small and medium-size companies around the globe, many of them Fortune 1000 (and after reviewing a plethora of research, including some spearheaded by Carly Fiorina, former CEO of Hewlett Packard and founder of the One Woman Initiative), I have come to realize one irrefutable fact: a sustainable way for African countries to improve the outcome of its development efforts and bring greater prosperity and stability to Africa is to invest more in women leaders and entrepreneurs.

The Chinese saying: "women hold up half the sky," is more aspirational than factual, especially in the emerging and frontier markets. Despite some significant gains in many of these economies, women still lag behind men in terms of education, access to healthcare and political participation. Cognizant of these critical deficits in female human capital, Goldman Sachs and the World Bank have sought to benchmark the magnitude of potential economic improvement that could be achieved in a world of greater gender parity.

Supporting women-led enterprises is a huge opportunity, as the World Economic Forum (WEF) has consistently found a strong correlation between gender equality and national competitiveness. Every year, WEF measures the degree to which women experience less economic participation, political empowerment, educational advancement and health and survival than their male counterparts in various countries. Sadly, the gap is particularly extreme in Africa. Interestingly enough, the continent has some examples of fine women leaders and entrepreneurs; however, women leaders in government and the business sector are still few.

Women currently run just one-third of the world's small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) in the formal sector, with a wide variation across countries and plenty of scope for growth, particularly in Africa. I strongly believe investing in women has one of the highest returns on investment opportunities available in Africa.

Suffice it to mention some of the African women leaders that come to mind: Liberia's Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Joyce Banda of Malawi – they are the only two African women presidents. Other noteworthy examples include Fatou Bensouda of Gambia, who became the first female African Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC); Zainab Hawa Bangura of Sierra Leone, a special representative on sexual violence in conflict at the level of Under-Secretary-General; Dr. Nkosana Dhlamini-Zuma, who became the first female Chairperson for the African Union Commission; Leymah Gbowee, the Liberian peace activist responsible for leading a women's peace movement that helped bring an end to the Second Liberian Civil War in 2003; Kenya's renowned professor Wangari Maathai, the first woman in East and Central Africa to attain a doctorate and the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, fighting for and serving the children of Kenya for better governance, environmental protection and empowering women at the local level to participate in decision-making.

These women, and the groups of women they lead, succeeded when no one thought they would, becoming the conscience of the ones who had lost their way in their voracious quest for power. They became and embodied the soul of their nation, bravely confronting warlords out of moral duty, standing as mothers fighting the perils of war in order to protect the lives of their children, all while defending their land and their future.

There are myriad examples of female leadership during such struggles where women have risen to the challenge. For instance the Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) organization recently participated in a Right to Water civic society coalition march last November in Bulawayo. These women were voicing their protest against the installation of prepaid water metres, which civic society leaders viewed as a violation of international resolutions covering the right to water. Their courage in the face of arrest and torture, and for being the voice and face of the suffering Zimbabwean people, is beyond praiseworthy.

Throughout Africa, both women and girls suffer disproportionately from high rates of violence and extreme poverty during times of conflict. The women of the Democratic Republic of Congo have endured some of the

Nkosana Dhlamini-Zuma, Chairperson, African Union Commission

worst acts of man's inhumanity toward women. The DR Congo, where peace has been re-established in most parts of the country, has grappled with wars, civil strife and multiple rebellions since 1996, and women and girls, particularly in the country's eastern provinces, still suffer from gender-based violence. The use of rape and sexual assault to terrorize women, their families and their communities is rife. Worse still, it is exacerbated by the pervasive culture of impunity. Violence against women and girls extends beyond armed groups to society as a whole.

The first lady of United States, Michelle Obama, astutely pointed out that "no country can ever really flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half of its citizens." Driven by the same ideals, the women leading the Women for Women International – Democratic Republic of the Congo (WfWI) have been continuously educating women to help them earn and save more money, to enhance their health and well-being, and to exert more influence at home and on their communities. The WfWI has done this by creating and connecting to social networks for support and advocacy. Their success is in the numbers: since 2004, they have served more than 80,000 women.

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In only seven countries, (surprisingly three in Africa), Panama, Thailand, Ghana, Ecuador, Nigeria, Mexico and Uganda, women take part in business at rates equal to men; in some countries, like Pakistan, they barely take part at all. Onboarding more women into the labour force could significantly boost per capita income and gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Goldman Sachs's research reports that women's higher propensity to use their earnings and increased bargaining power to buy goods and services that improve family welfare can create a virtuous cycle: female spending supports the development of human capital which fuels economic growth in the years ahead. Given these significant benefits, the role of women-owned SMEs in raising labour force participation and boosting economic growth would be substantial.

At the same time, economic growth would continue to bolster gender and income equality, both critical to sustainable development. Even in the most developed economies, GDP would be increased by as much as 16 percent if the gender gap were closed. In Africa, such an impact would be even more significant.

However, women-owned SMEs face grave barriers to entry and business growth. Access to finance is typically identified as a »

Nigerian popular fashion entrepreneur, Tara Fela-Durotoye

critical constraint. While financing is almost always a challenge for SMEs, the difficulties are often intensified by gender-related factors, including women's lack of collateral, weak property rights and discriminatory regulations, laws and customs. The International Finance Corporation estimates that as many as 70 percent of women-owned SMEs in the formal sector of emerging economies are unserved or underserved by financial institutions, representing a financing gap of about USD 285 billion.

Closing the existing credit gap for women-owned SMEs in emerging and frontier economies, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and N-11 countries (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Turkey, South Korea and Vietnam) over the next few years could also yield real income per capita growth rates. Goldman Sachs argues that if the credit gap can be closed by 2020, incomes per capita might be on average circa 12 percent higher by 2030 across the BRICs and N-11 countries. Goldman Sachs's research also shows that this gain could be as large as 25-28 percent for Brazil and Vietnam, where the credit gaps are currently widest.

Why Africa has not done enough to close this gap is an enigma to me, especially considering the outrageous fact that of the estimated 2.5 billion people worldwide who are living on less than USD 2 a day, 70 percent are women. How can it be that the burden of poverty, trauma, and subjugation still falls hardest on women? It seems that African governments and policymakers from around the world are avoiding looking squarely at a dilemma that is so ubiquitous and omnipresent, such that the appropriate actions to take are not so obvious. Instead, it seems, the temptation is to leave the issue to the aid community. However, if you were to review the numbers – I am referring to the World Bank or Goldman Sachs research to name merely a few sources – talk to these women or to people who know them, or, as I did, get involved with organizations such as Kiva.org where you can learn about the struggles women endure daily in order to make ends meet, I believe you would grab the first chance (to try) to make a difference via micro-lending.

The imperative to take action and empower female leaders in Africa is very clear. If I were to think about the multinational companies I know and the business people behind them, it is abundantly clear that they have the resources to support these women. In fact, in many of these companies, it makes good business sense to do so. As argued by Fiorina in a Harvard Business Review article, "when Coca-Cola invests in training thousands of women leaders and entrepreneurs in Africa it directly benefits from a stronger base of distributors and marketers."

Nevertheless, we should not rely solely on the big multinationals. When people like you and I decide to micro-lend to women entrepreneurs in Africa, the long-term impact is immense. Take for example a group I micro-lent to in Mali via Kiva.org, the Ep Bayago Group. Madame Mbila is Vice-President of the Loan Association EP Bayago. At 71 years of age, she is the mother of eight children, a teacher and married to a human rights activist. She had requested a loan to allow her to improve her house. Better housing means better health, sanitation, and even educational outcomes for children. A house can also be much more than a house for entrepreneurs who run businesses out of their homes.

Investing in African women leaders and entrepreneurs will foster benefits that go well beyond the bottom line. These women will inspire other women to pursue their dreams. They may also find it easier to balance work and family outside the traditional corporate world. It is a well-known fact that in emerging markets, women reinvest 90 percent of their earnings in their families and communities – which means that investing in women is an investment in Africa's (and the world's) collective future. Hence, I believe the single greatest point of untapped leverage in Africa today is women who can be leaders and entrepreneurs. Women are undoubtedly crucial to economic growth around the world. They see the world through a different lens and, in turn, do things differently. African nations need women entrepreneurs, and women entrepreneurs need not only Africa, but also all of us. As the African proverb goes, "if you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a nation."

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