Merged Cultures to Empower Women

The 55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) of the United Nations (UN) closed last month with little fanfare, but there was cause for celebration. For the first time, the CSW, traditionally a forum to examine improvement of women's rights and gender equality, merged this broad interest with issues of science and technology (S&T). This makes sense because empowering women as scientists and engineers, supporting girls' education in science, and valuing women as builders of economic development all contribute to gender equality. The merger of these two areas produced recommendations to governments and nongovernmental entities that go far beyond what either group would likely have developed independently.

The Agreed Conclusions of the CSW member states* recognize the importance of S&T in every sphere of human existence, from combating malnutrition, the spread of disease, and environmental degradation, to building a more peaceful, secure, and prosperous world. Moreover, they acknowledge gender disparities in S&T at every educational level and in every sector of employment. The Agreed Conclusions emphasize how the use of S&T in poorer nations can free time for women to attend school or generate income. They also value women's indigenous knowledge in agriculture, health, and other sectors. The CSW member states call on governments, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations to consider how both genders—and all ages—are affected differently by initiatives; to promote transparent and objective policies to recruit and retain women in science at all levels; and to create safe and gender stereotype–free school environments, thereby supporting girls who are interested in science, engineering, and math. They recognize the important role of media in cultivating societal attitudes as well as girls’ and women's self-images; these attitudes can affect future career choices. The Agreed Conclusions are forward-looking and create a platform for action.

If the Agreed Conclusions are to be more than an idle document, then governments and nongovernmental stakeholders must take concerted action. Gender experts should boost efforts to develop and monitor S&T as well as innovation policies, programs, and practices. Funding entities must require analyses of the gender impact of projects, such as the development of new therapeutics or emergency preparedness measures. Science and engineering communities everywhere will need to draw upon the knowledge, language, and cultural ties of women scientists and engineers in diaspora communities—working with community-based groups to share knowledge and develop strategies that empower women in the various roles they play in their families, communities, and countries. As one example, the African Women in Agricultural Research and Development program (supported by the United States Agency for International Development, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) strengthens skills of African women agricultural scientists, helping them to work effectively with many groups, including policy-makers and women farmers. UN bodies—including the recently launched UN Women, led by former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—will be critical partners in moving this global agenda forward. And women’s rights groups and science organizations will need to collaborate in creating a dialogue that builds on each others' strengths, advancing an agenda of common interests to drive meaningful action and change.

Women’s rights, empowerment, economic development, and scientific talents are inextricably linked to the development of each nation. Only when all countries provide women with the tools they need to be equal partners will all nations flourish as part of a global community sharing a fragile planet.

— Kerri-Ann Jones, Shirley Malcom, Sharon Hrynkow†

*www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/55sess.htm †The authors were members of the U.S. delegation to the 55th session of the UN CSW. Other delegates are listed at www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/02/156814.htm.
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