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Panel on Women and Education

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To start with I would like to make a few obvious points.

Education is vital to all, both men and women. But women's education is more important and I would even say: strategic. Because it impacts the whole family and their wellbeing across generations. And this is true across all cultures.

An educated grandmother or mother will be most likely to invest in their own children's education. Girls who have been educated are likely to marry later and to have healthier children and smaller families. Educated mothers are more likely to have jobs, contributing to the family income and are less likely to be in poverty. Education helps girls know their rights and to gain confidence.

As a result, there are benefits for the individual, the family and the broader community and this brings high value to society. However, women's literacy rates are still significantly lower than that of men in most developing countries - as we just heard.

Women lack access to education. This is the reason why both humanitarian aid and development agencies run special programmes aimed at contributing to the closure of the gender gap in education. In the case of International Federation Red Cross and Crescent Societies – the world's largest voluntary social service network – some of our member national societies run education projects explicitly designed for women and girls. For example, the vocational training centre for women run by the Jordanian Red Crescent provides both traditional and modern skills such as sewing, handicrafts, hair care and beauty, typing and computing. The courses are recognised by the Ministry of Education.

In addition to such special projects, our worldwide network of 189 national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies contribute to women's education by placing emphasis on non-formal and informal education through our volunteering and youth programmes as well as in community-based health services and disaster risk reduction activities.

Based on these experiences, I would like to make three points.

First, if there is less access for women to formal education this does not mean that they cannot have other opportunities to learn and acquire much needed knowledge and skills.

Our Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was born on a bloody battlefield, more than 150 years ago, in Solferino, in Northern Italy. Some 7 000 female volunteers were mobilised to provide care and relief to wounded soldiers no matter which side they fought on. Women volunteers were, thus, at the very foundation of our Movement. Today, according to the preliminary findings of our ongoing global review on volunteering we have at least 17 million volunteers of which 53% (or 8 million) are female. Most of them are involved in service delivery.

Through volunteering, women and girls are able to contribute, and also gain diverse skills, build connections and networks, and obtain practical experience that put them in good stead to increase their employment prospects and economic opportunities. They learn life-saving first aid, leadership skills, project development, fund raising, financial management, use of social media, social enterprise, and much more. There are also other significant positive impacts on the personal development of individual women and girls, including their self-confidence and esteem.

The contribution of these women to society is huge. In 2011, the IFRC conducted a study on the economic and social value of Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers. Findings showed that the economic value of the 13.1 million volunteers at that time was in the order of six billion US dollars. This means that more than half of this six billion was the value added by female volunteers.

Our message is that non-formal and informal education can play an important role in women's education. But we must make more efforts and do better.

My second point is that non-cognitive skills development can be a powerful tool for personal development of young women and also attitude and behaviour change of men in general.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent places great emphasis on such education through the Youth as Agents of Behaviour Change programme, a flagship of the IFRC.

This initiative takes a peer-to-peer education approach and targets both young men and women. Peer educators follow standard modules for a week long training. The aim is to develop knowledge and awareness on issues such as non-discrimination, non-violence, equality, cultural diversity and social inclusion. It has also a strong component on interpersonal skills development such as communications and mediation as well as critical thinking and personal resilience. The programme helps young women to increase their self-confidence and gain skills that will advantage them to enhance their opportunities in life.

Today we have some 900 peer educators in 113 National Societies, and the programme continues to expand.

As we know, gender issues and norms are deeply rooted in culture and require transformation at individual and societal level. Such change should come from within. External aid can help but will not do the transformation itself. Targeting young people, especially men, to change their mind-sets, attitudes and behaviours and, at the same time, empowering young women through skills development can be a sustainable step towards such transformation.

We also believe that public policy on education must consider more such non-cognitive skills development in general.

My third point is on the role of women themselves in taking the initiative to create spaces for their own advancement and the importance of on-the job training, coaching and mentoring.

In the developed world, women and men have equal access to education but when it comes to employment opportunities and moving up the career ladder, there are still less women at the top. Women tend to be less assertive or confident in their own abilities, while men are more aggressive in pushing themselves. This is well known and researched – and the humanitarian sector is not an exception as discussed extensively during last two days.

To promote gender equality and equal opportunities for men and women, aid agencies, international NGOs, the United Nations funds and programmes have made enormous efforts over the past two decades. One of their central tools has been gender training to raise awareness within their organisations. Such specialised training has helped to bring about many changes in staff attitudes and behaviours. These have brought positive impacts by making their aid and service delivery to be more gender sensitive, taking into account the differing needs, vulnerabilities, coping strategies and capacities of men and women.

We in the IFRC and in our National Societies also invest a great deal in such training. Investments since the mid-90s have included the development of scores of manuals and tools as well as trainers. The value of such capacity building must not be underestimated. However we also know that there are still big challenges. Most trainers and trainees have been women and often not much has happened in-between training events. Consistency of leadership commitment remains a challenge and gender imbalance is still prevalent at top and senior levels. So these efforts have to continue.

Now, there seems to be a new welcome momentum. It appears that more emphasis is being put on individual on-the job training, coaching and

mentoring. Women are also learning to organise themselves and support each other in the workplace. We, in the Red Cross and Red Crescent have an example – our women’s club created as an informal network three years ago, known as RED VIWO – “Red Cross Vision Women”.

RED VIWO is a group of likeminded women from senior and middle management in the IFRC secretariat and European National Societies, united behind the purpose to promote equal opportunities for men and women at all levels of Red Cross and Red Crescent work. Inspired by the International Federation’s Strategy 2020, RED VIWO aims to contribute to “striving for equality in our organization and work, namely by ensuring that there is no gender-based or other discrimination in our policies and practices“ through leadership, advocacy, practical work and expertise.

RED VIWO is semi-formal, meets regularly every 3-4 months over weekends. We target three levels of effort:

- i. Individual level: to provide a platform of trust where members support each other, and also empower and promote qualified women;
- ii. Organizational level: to influence organizational culture, mind-set and behaviour in order to ensure gender balance and equality;
- iii. External level: to reach out to external partners, and share knowledge and experiences.

Recently, in line with our motto to “start with ourselves” we started an empowerment programme through a buddy system and mentoring. It is very much hoped that this initiative will produce a good model and practice on women’s empowerment through mutual support in the work place. We find that trustful relationships to discuss professional blockages, challenges and concerns linked to being a woman in a male dominated business environment is extremely important. This also facilitates women’s collective leadership which was raised yesterday at the session on Women and Development. If an individual woman leader tends to adopt a male style in order to be able to survive or succeed, then collective efforts and leadership might help women to “remain as women”, and bring female leadership perspectives.

We would like to know if others present here have similar informal or formal initiatives in the workplace and, if so, how do they work and what can be learnt?

In conclusion, we in the humanitarian aid and development business could contribute a lot to addressing women's lack of access to education: not only in formal terms but also through non-formal and informal approaches that are even more important to those who have missed out on earlier opportunities. Civil society groups, national NGOs and women's organizations are well placed to help here and governments have much to do to enable their work.

To finish, I am reminded of Khaled Hosseini's words in his book *A thousand splendid suns* – "Marriage can wait, education cannot!"