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International Women's Day Event University Success Program for Ethiopian Young Women

Remarks by U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Patricia Haslach
(*As prepared*)
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In-de-men a-de-ra-chu and good morning! It is a real pleasure to join you all this morning at this event to commemorate International Women's Day. Thank you to my colleagues from USAID and Addis Ababa University for inviting me to participate and to speak about the important issue of women in development.

It has been more than 100 years since Women's Day was established internationally to honor the movement for women's rights. Since that time, a lot has changed for women in society. We continue to see incredible recognition and awareness of the profound role women must play if countries hope to advance.

Global stability, peace, and prosperity depend on protecting the rights of women and girls around the world. Additionally, research shows that progress in women's employment, health, and education can lead to greater economic growth and stronger societies. And when women and men are equally empowered as political and social actors, governments are more representative and effective.

In fact, great improvements have been made to advance the role of women in the world. There are more women serving as role models in corporations, politics, medicine and in every aspect of life. But more gains are needed.

As we all know, Ethiopian women face many challenges. Gender based violence including child marriage, female genital mutilation, rape, abduction, and abuse is still prevalent in Ethiopian society. These forms of violence have serious and enduring life, health, social and economic consequences. Although early marriage harms women's physical and psychological well-being and curtails their education and future income-earning potential, the fact remains that 63 percent of women in Ethiopia between the ages of 25 and 49 were married before they reached age 18. And according to independent estimates, over 70 percent of women are affected by female genital mutilation.

In health, Ethiopia has one of the world's highest rates of maternal deaths and disabilities in the world. Women have a one-in-52 chance of dying from childbirth-related causes and a baby whose mother dies during childbirth rarely survives. Additionally, poor maternal health is a huge detriment to the well-being of a household.

Economically, Ethiopia's women disproportionately bear the burden of poverty because of the gender-based division of labor and lack of access and control over resources. For example, the gender productivity gap in Ethiopian agriculture is one of the highest in sub-Saharan Africa, with female farm managers 23 percent less productive than their male counterparts.

And according to the 2014 World Economic Forum's Gender Statistics, Ethiopia ranks 139th out of 142 countries in overall educational attainment for women.

However, these challenges can be overcome and the Government of Ethiopia is strongly committed to gender equality. Later on in the program, we will hear from several prominent Ethiopian women, who will share their professional and personal life experiences, and how they rose above these challenges to become extremely successful.

Women like Bethlehem Tilahun, the risk-taking founder of soleRebels, who launched her first store in the United States several months ago in the heart of Silicon Valley the global hub for innovation, technology, and business incubation. We will also hear from Dr. Eleni Gabre-Madhin, an economist and the main driving force behind the development of the Ethiopia Commodity Exchange, Seble Hailu, the president of the Association of Women in Business in 2014, and other prominent Ethiopian women.

With the Government's investment in women's education and health, and the tremendous contributions of women like Bethlehem, Eleni, and Seble, Ethiopia has made progress in advancing the employment, health, and education of its female population.

Through continued efforts, Ethiopia is making progress to ensure gender equality. And it is the individual and collective successes that we can all celebrate here on this International Women's Day.

The first area to celebrate is the success of the USAID-funded University Success Program, which has been instrumental in providing support to females in their first year of undergraduate studies. Through the program, more than 2,250 female students, some of whom are in the audience this morning, received training and mentoring necessary for them to complete their university education.

The program has been successful, in part, because of the strong collaboration between USAID and its implementing partners, Education Development Center and FHI 360, and as a result of the unique contributions of the British Council and the Peace Corps. But more importantly, the success is a result of the contributions of the Jimma, Addis Ababa, and Adama Science and Technology universities who have been at the vanguard of this project and who are committed to improving the status of women in society and the success of female university students. Thank you all.

Economically, Ethiopia today is home to many women-owned small- and medium-sized businesses. In agribusiness, bold women are delving into producing, processing, trading, and exporting agricultural products by overcoming problems related to women's access to markets and credit and allowing their businesses to grow.

In health, increasing the availability of services like skilled birth attendance and essential newborn care/treatment is reducing maternal, neonatal, and child mortality rates. In 2014, Ethiopia reached the MDG of reducing the maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters since 1990.

And the Ethiopian education system is advancing in terms of empowering women. Today, more than 47 percent of primary and secondary school students and almost 34 percent of first year university students are female. Those percentages will continue to grow if Ethiopia remains true to its commitment to support quality education for all children.

As Nelson Mandela said in Johannesburg in July 2003, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." That statement is true, not only for Ethiopia, but everywhere.

It was certainly true for me. The greatest influence in my life was my late father. He was really committed to education and his view was that women can do anything. He was the inspiration and the one who enabled me to pursue my graduate studies. He led me to believe that I can be anything I want to be and he provided me with the tools to succeed.

As I stand here today, I am proud that I can take what my father stood for and incorporate that into my life, and I am proud that I have been able to use his inspiration to work on women's empowerment during my career, including here in Ethiopia.

As ambassador, I can say that the U.S. Government is committed to working with the Government of Ethiopia, other donors, non-governmental organizations, and civil society organizations to help empower women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors.

Looking at our young and enthusiastic audience today, I see future business owners, future ministers, future ambassadors, future mothers, and future role models and mentors.

With your contributions, Ethiopia will become a middle-income country.

Ethiopian women will have a better life expectancy.

Ethiopian women will be successful in agriculture and business.

Ethiopian women will excel in education.

And women will help lead Ethiopia into the future.

You can make a difference! You can "Make it Happen."

Don't ever forget that there are thousands of Ethiopian girls and women who are looking up to you and to everything you have already achieved. You are inspirational to them. You can accomplish anything you set your sights on, whether that is here in Ethiopia or on the world's stage.

In closing, I leave you with these inspirational words from Eleanor Roosevelt, a famous American woman, former ambassador to the United Nations, and a key driver in the drafting and passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

I wish you all the best. Thank you.

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