

Skyline725 Happenings

Information for Skyline Residents and Friends

Melinda Gates: When money flows into the hands of women, everything changes

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“I have spent many hours talking with colleagues in international development about how to tear down the barriers that block women’s progress around the world. Now, we’re confronting the fact that every sector, including our own, has a serious problem with sexual harassment and violence. The norms that allow these abuses are the same ones that disempower the poorest women, and only when they are dismantled across the globe will all women and girls be able to lead the lives they want.

“Practically speaking, though, what can a philanthropic organization like ours do to promote a goal—equality everywhere—that’s impossibly large?

“We’ve been investing in women’s health for a long time and seen significant progress. But as I spend more time visiting communities and meeting people around the world, I am convinced that we’ll never reach our goals if we don’t also address the systematic way that women and girls are undervalued. With a new focus on women’s economic empowerment, connecting women to markets, making sure they have access to financial services, and empowering them to help themselves, we aim to help tear down the barriers that keep half the world from leading a full life.

“We’ll spend \$170 million over the next four years to help women exercise their economic power, which the evidence suggests is among the most promising entry points for gender equality. Simply put when money flows into the hands of women who have the authority to use it, everything changes.

“First, their families benefit. One in three married women in the poorest countries have no say over major household purchases. Research shows, however, that women are much more likely than men to buy things that set their families on a pathway out of poverty, like nutritious food, health care, and education. In Niger, for example, when women had more financial autonomy, their families ate more meat and fish. One of the most astonishing statistics I’ve seen is that when a mother has control over her family’s money, her children are 20% more likely to survive. I am convinced that we’ll never reach our goals if we don’t also address the systematic way that women and girls are undervalued.

“Second, everyone starts to re-think the part women can play in their own communities. A recent study in India found that merely owning and using a bank account led women to work outside the home more. As a result, they earned more money, but they also changed men’s perception of them. By defying a social norm that confined them inside, they started to change it.

“Women acting on their own can do what all the philanthropic organizations in the world can never accomplish: change the unwritten rule that women are lesser than men. Our role, as we see it, is to make targeted investments that give women the opportunity to write new rules.

“First, our new gender equality strategy will seek to link women to markets. Hundreds of millions of women help run small farms across Africa and Asia, raising crops and livestock, but in most cases, they do so without knowing what is a fair price for their products. We want to help them overcome this barrier and prosper from their labor. To do so, we’ll support women farmers as they organize in collectives that aggregate produce from small farms and sell it to buyers at a fair price and, where possible, use mobile phone applications that provide real-time price information.

“We also want more women to use digital bank accounts. Many governments send welfare or safety net payments to low-income families, but this money is usually controlled by men. We will work on systems in eight countries, including India, Pakistan and Tanzania, to deposit it into accounts controlled by women. By defying a social norm that confined them inside, they started to change it.

“Finally, we’ll support self-help groups where women and girls teach one another about everything from launching a small business to raising healthy children—and reimagine their standing in society. In India, the more than 75 million women who already belong to such groups have proven a force for real progress. We want younger girls to have the same opportunity. During adolescence, parents place more restrictions on their daughters, and girls’ range of movement shrinks—in South Africa, for example, by more than half. Self-help groups can widen their horizons.

“I gained a valuable perspective on self-help groups when I spent an afternoon in Jharkhand, India, with Neelam Bhengra. She joined a group to learn how to increase the yields on her farm. But gradually, she organized the members to advocate for themselves with local government. “If I’m alone, I can’t do anything,” she told me. But with the support of her group, she said, “I will keep fighting for women until I die.”

“Neelam is a force for generations to come. She told me all about her children, who were going to school and planning for a future Neelam herself never imagined. The data says that their children, Neelam’s grandchildren, will be even more healthy—and more prosperous. We want to help more Neelams find their voice, seize opportunities, and change their world—and their children’s world—into what they dream it can be.”

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