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Submission for International Women of the Mountains High School Student Workshop

The Benefits Mountainous Communities Can Achieve Through Women and Education

It is no secret that today's society faces many new problems due to changes in the world's political tendency, economy, and social structure. These problems manifest themselves in many aspects of our society and in turn affect us as individuals. Recently, the economic downturn and the "centralization" of the world's political dialogue have caused people's attention to shift to the issues that affect their nation as a whole. While national issues deserve people's scrutiny and thought, it is my belief that our culture's belief in individualism has its roots in the fact that real political change and problem-solving begins at the individual level. That concept is the reason that people in our country should be more informed about and involved in the issues that shape their particular communities specifically; issues that have a more pronounced, urgent and direct effect on their lives should be looked at with a sense of awareness and responsibility. This feeling of commitment to an important cause must be used to create a global network of leaders who care for their community and wish to advance its interests. That is the reason that the International Mountain Partnership has been created. People of the mountains realize the issue of sustainable development deserves their direct attention due to the consequences their communities could possibly face if the issue is ignored. This issue has prompted grassroots action that has spawned a global network of leaders and concerned people from all walks of life that have made much progress and have raised awareness to the importance

of active participation in the crucial issue that is sustainable mountain development. This movement is now part of the agenda of the United Nations and is beginning to gain real attention in communities worldwide. The new attention that it is receiving has created new debates and ideas that deserve our consideration and involvement. Among the various discussions that relate to sustainable development, there is one issue that is considered by many to be the defining subject in the campaign for increasing awareness about sustainable development and creating significant change. That issue is women and their role in contributing to their mountainous communities around the world. Due to many of our institutions and important dialogues' status as creations of the overwhelmingly male mind, it is important that mountainous communities become inclusive and cross the threshold that many other issues and those associated with them have failed to cross. Women must be recognized and lauded for their contributions to mountainous regions of the world. The best way to improve women's opportunities and raise awareness to their potential in our communities is education. Women and their education determine what the workforce looks like, the level of community moral and productivity their community has and most importantly increases community involvement in regions that need reform. The creation and maintenance of a global community of mountainous societies could be greatly helped by a greater amount of women being involved in the process. An inclusive process must be created for women to have equal opportunity and outlook in their mountainous communities. In order for this to happen, global education for girls must be improved. There are two main issues that must be resolved to further women's educations in mountainous regions of the world. These obstacles are funding and accessibility in relation with social equality in school from an early age. If these issues are addressed appropriately, women's standing in the world

will be greatly increased and mountainous communities will reap the benefits of a more educated demographic in their efforts to engage the issue of sustainable development.

In most mountainous regions of the world, funding for education is low. This disturbing fact is made more significant when one considers another disturbing fact: one in three women or girls in the developing world live on less than two dollars a day and “more than 60% of the 110 million children out of school are girls.”¹ In order for this to be changed, local governments must be made aware of the situation. Students at Utah Valley University have been showing leadership on that front. Recently, due to the efforts of Utah Valley University and its students, Salt Lake City made an official commitment to join the mountain partnership. Under the umbrella of this alliance, women’s issues in our community are being given vast consideration and recognition on an international level. Today’s new economy and flat global workplace is opening opportunities for a large and diverse group of people. But women in mountainous regions worldwide are still at a disadvantage to take these opportunities for a variety of reasons. All must be done to affect change in our communities on this issue.

When literacy is thus used to corroborate entrenched social practices and positions, reading and writing lessons can shepherd girls into an adult world that they may have little ability to challenge or change...demonstrating their acceptance of the sanctioned norms for reading and writing can be a crucial means by which girls establish their understanding of the social order and earn the right to participate in it.²

¹ *Girls and Education Initiative*. worlded.org. World Education. Thursday, February 24, 2011.
<http://www.worlded.org/WEInternet/gwe/index.cfm>.

² Greer, Jane. *Girls and Literacy in America: Historical Perspectives to the Present*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC CLIO, 2003. Print.

Girls and women often feel underrepresented in their communities and thus are forced to adapt to the institutions set forth by those in power. If we are looking to make an improvement in women's educational lives, the mindset of limited opportunity that has been implanted in too many women's minds must be changed, and that change can be greatly advanced through increased funding for schools low on supplies so that educators, administrators, and parents can help their children excel. This may begin in funding for primary education and a fund to help the transition a girl faces socially in secondary school and beyond. If more resources are given to educators and educational administrations, there is more ability to teach, more personal relationships and a sense of personal attention that is lacking. Children, girls in particular, need this chance. Funding is an important way to start. Issues like this can be achieved on a worldwide scale through the use of international non-governmental organizations or humanitarian projects and missions. Such projects exist and happen in many places, but, unfortunately, due to a lack of information about this important issue and the disturbing statistics it entails, many people are not aware of the grave issue many women face worldwide. As mentioned before, the imperative fact that women are more likely than men to never enter an educational system or to successfully progress through that system in many cases due to insufficient funds must be discussed in more societies. The international mountain partnership and events like the International Women of the Mountains Conference can help increase awareness and can lobby with organizations (non-governmental or governmental) to help women all over the world have the chance to achieve an education. Increasing funding and awareness is imperative, as the Task Force on Gender Equality has stated, "investments are needed to help girls complete secondary schooling and

support their transition from education to work in order to ensure safety in their future.”³ This is the case in the vast majority of mountainous communities where funding and community placement along with male-oriented economic opportunity limit a woman’s ability to achieve an education. If funding is increased for education in mountainous communities worldwide with an emphasis on increasing female literacy, the potential these communities have will be released and the regions will be more prosperous economically, safer politically, and more stable socially. That is something that will affect us all in a positive way.

When dealing with the issue of sustainable development for mountainous communities, it is common knowledge that because of the simple issue of terrain and geography, many institutions lag behind other communities in development and convenience. That is especially apparent in the accessibility mountainous peoples have to educational programs. This translates into a lower standard of living in that particular society. It is a social tragedy that translates into less economic opportunity, less technological advancement, and in most cases a less satisfactory standard of living. Addressing this would require increased funding, as discussed before. But, assuming funding is sufficient, and physical barriers can be overcome, there is another issue that poses more of a threat to woman’s ability to access to education than any other obstacle. The funding may be there, the facilities and basic institutions may be available. But if a culture is reluctant to woman establishing herself as able to take a role in her particular community that has not been deemed appropriate by that region’s history, the problem will remain and the opportunities in the community will largely be ignored. This assumption is based on studies

³ Grown, Caren, and Gupta, Geeta R., and Kes, Ashlihan. *Taking action: achieving gender equality and empowering women*. London: Earthscan, 2005. Print.

many organizations and individuals have conducted. Every study has come to accept a set of principles to increase opportunity for women worldwide.

Every mission statement that I have been able to find that relates to promoting a woman's right to an education includes *availability* and *accessibility* as two of the primary goals of their respective organization.

Education is included in all major international human rights treaties. All countries in the world have signed onto one, if not more, of these documents, thus accepting to bear duties in realising education as a right. In practical terms, this means recognising that education is not merely a policy goal but consists of entitlements, obligations and freedoms.⁴

When recognized as a human right, education's importance is highlighted and people can work with different cultures to create the environment necessary for educational nourishment. In developing countries, where women's education faces the severest situation, certain cultures, for one reason or another have the woman placed in a set of social norms that limit her growth economically, socially, and educationally. If these cultures are to be made aware of the mistake being made in not integrating women into the workforce as equals, much prosperity and stability in unstable mountainous regions of the world that *could be* will be nonexistent. Women's education affects the global network that must be created to garner recognition in institutions that can help our cause and increase awareness in our communities. Culture and religion, in countries that are affected by fundamentalist values or traditions must be engaged. The approach that must be taken is a cordial one based on engagement and mutual respect with cooperation. The widespread mindset that women belong in a specific place, or have specific duties must be challenged. Primary and secondary educators must work toward making education accessible to

⁴ *Right to Education Project*. Amnesty International. 23/2/2011. <http://www.right-to-education.org/node/113>.

girls, and that the education is not partial and does not endorse the mindset that has made social inequality the norm in so many cases.

We need more women who are willing to speak with leaders, organize and take up the cause that influences their sometimes suppressed interests. We need more people like Martha Chavez; a worker who came to Utah after studying to become a teacher in Mexico. Martha spent several successful years teaching young children in Mexico how to read and write and decided to leave her country to come to the United States to create a better future for her family and become an asset to her community. She arrived in Utah with little material possessions, but her will and desire to help her new homeland carried her to success. Martha has become an essential part of our mountainous community. She teaches every day at a school for other immigrants, who, like her came to our community with hope, and nothing else. She works with immigrants who need to learn English. She teaches with patience all those who come to her, but in particular, finds it important to help women with a background that would limit them due to their gender. Martha teaches them how to deal with this community; she teaches life skills; she teaches communication; she teaches how to overcome, not tolerate circumstances that limit women. But what becomes the most important part of her being an educator is her personification of the “needed educated woman” that has been discussed throughout this paper who fights for her rights and contributes to her mountainous community in a spirit of humility and service to increase accessibility and opportunities for education to her fellow women and anyone else who needs her service. The pay is not what it could be, but the lasting effect Martha knows she will have on her community is worth the work. Mountainous regions need to meet the requirements set forth by their own community in educating women. Women play a key part in our society. If

The International Women of the Mountains Conference achieves anything, it must be the projection of *this* idea to as many as we can: **women play a key part in the development of global society. Mountainous regions all over the world must acknowledge that similar to most other problems that take hold of any society, gender inequality can be combated to a high degree with education. There is a problem with providing a high quality education for women. That must be addressed.** The two things that we can influence and help provide in furthering women's education are funding and accessibility. This help will be very effective in advancing the cause of increasing the standard of living for women of the mountains everywhere. Organizations and conferences like the one this essay is being submitted for are good indicators of progress. This global network must be reinforced. Those involved must remember the extraordinary women already making a difference in the world. There are women like Martha all over the world. Their stories must be heard, their service must be appreciated. We must remember them, and above all, we must follow in their lead.

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