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International Women's Day 2016: Time is Now for Global Gender Equality and to (finally) Close Gender Gap

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Today is International Women's Day. Each year on March 8th, women celebrate the progress we've made while continuing to advocate for change regarding gender equality and women's rights. Around the world, celebrations range from very simple demonstrations of respect, appreciation and love towards women to elaborate events that honor our economic, political and social achievements.

International Women's Day is believed to have originated on March 8, 1908. On that day, thousands of women marched through the streets in New York City publicly calling for better working conditions, higher pay and the right to vote. The first National Women's Day was held the following year. In 1910, women from around the world gathered in Denmark for the second International Conference of Working Women, where the idea for International Women's Day was proposed. As a result, the first international celebration was held one year later in 1911.

This year's theme is "Pledge for Parity". The "Pledge for Parity" calls for complete gender equality and the closing of the gender gap in social, economic, political, and other situations. In light of this year's theme, let's look at some of the recent statistics regarding gender equality.

1. According to [US Aid](#) around the world:
 - Approximately 62 million girls are not in school.
 - One in three women will experience gender-based violence in her lifetime.
 - In the developing world, one in seven girls is married before her 15th birthday.
 - Although constituting 40 percent of the agriculture labor force, only 3 to 20 percent of women are landowners.
2. On March 3, 2016, the [Economist](#) published its "glass-ceiling index" listing the countries where women have the best chance of equal treatment at work. The Nordic countries of Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland were ranked 1-4. Interestingly, in these countries, women are present in the labor force at rates similar to men. For example, in Iceland, women have 44% of the seats on listed-company boards. By way of comparison, the U.S. and Great Britain are ranked 20th and 25th respectively. Japan, Turkey and South Korea were the three lowest-ranked countries of the 30 countries in the list.
3. In February 2016, a [white paper](#) by the Peterson Institute for International Economics presented the results of a global survey of 21,980 firms from 91 countries. The survey found that approximately 60 percent of respondents (13,017 firms) did not contain any recorded female board members. Additionally, over 50 percent of the firms (11,802 firms) did not contain any female executives. Of the remaining half, 57 percent had only one female executive. Only 945 firms, less than 5 percent, had a female chief executive officer.



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These statistics are alarming in view of the paper's conclusion that the presence of women in corporate leadership has been shown to improve firm performance. Specifically, the paper noted that the presence of women in corporate leadership was positively correlated with firm characteristics such as size, the absence of discriminatory attitudes toward female executives and the availability of paternity leave.

4. The results of the survey described in the white paper by the Peterson Institute were not terribly surprising in view of the 2015 [Women in the Workplace](#) report published by Lean In and McKinsey & Company. Sadly, the report noted that women remain under-represented at every level in the corporate pipeline and that women continue to face greater barriers to advancement and a steeper path to senior leadership. While the report showed that women leave organizations at most levels at a lower rate than men, it also showed that women advance far more slowly from one level to the next. The report noted that the uneven playing field between men and women has taken a toll on women in leadership. According to the report, senior-level women are markedly less satisfied with their role, opportunities for advancement and career than their male counterparts. Bottom line, according to Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and Co-Founder of LeanIn.org, at the current rate, it will take more than 100 years for women to reach equality in the workplace. Moreover, Ms. Sandberg said, "If NASA launched a person into space today, she could soar past Mars, travel all the way to Pluto and return to Earth 10 times before women occupy half of C-suite offices. Yes, we're that far away."
5. According to [UN Women](#):
 - As of August 2015, only 22 percent of all national parliamentarians were women (in contrast to 11.3 percent in 1995).
 - As of August 2015, there were only 11 women serving as Heads of State and 10 as the Head of a Government.
 - There are wide variations in the average percentages of women parliamentarians throughout the world across all chambers (single, lower and upper houses). For example, as of August 2015, the number of women parliamentarians was 41.1 percent in the Nordic countries, 25.5 percent in the Americas, 24.4 percent in Europe (excluding the Nordic countries), 23.0 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, 18.4 percent in Asia, 17.1 percent in the Middle East and North Africa, and 15.7 percent in the Pacific.

After reviewing and digesting the above statistics, I believe it is very easy to become frustrated (and even angry) with the slow pace at which women are achieving global gender equality. After all, isn't increasing gender equality about harnessing the talent, creativity, emotional intelligence, courage, compassion and passion that women have to ensure a better world and future for everyone? When viewed that way - eliminating the gender gap isn't just the right thing to do - it's the smart and economically sensible thing to do.

Many of us, myself included, tend to look at women in positions of power and influence (such as Sheryl Sandberg, Melinda Gates, etc.) to lead the way in championing the changes needed to achieve global gender equality. However, it simply is not enough. Each one of us needs to take personal responsibility to do what we can push for change and advance gender equality. Quite frankly, at this stage, no effort is too small. So what can you do? Consider volunteering or donating to organizations that are dedicated to helping educate girls or women around the world (such as [CARE](#), [Global Fund for Women](#), [Girls Education International](#) and [60 Million Girls](#)).

Build your confidence and eliminate your fear of speaking up or of "leaning in". Don't be afraid to take risks and work on promoting yourself. However, at the same time, be supportive and encouraging of other women and help them to build their confidence and promote themselves. As Madeline Albright said at the *Celebrating Inspiration* luncheon with the WNBA's All-Decade Team in 2006, "There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women."

Consider becoming an entrepreneur. If entrepreneurship is not for you, then support a female-owned start-ups and local businesses.

Become a mentor. Women need mentors. Women need that supportive advocate who guides and says, "Don't give up. Stay the course". A mentor is critical because it is that person you can have a frank conversation with who will listen to your tough questions and give you honest answers.

Encourage your employer to build a workplace of inclusion and respect. Studies have shown that workplaces that openly communicate their values and strategies on equality, human rights and inclusion, are able to attract a wider pool of talent and have greater success in retaining staff. As such, women should not be afraid to encourage human resource initiatives that promote gender quality such as increasing the number of female hires, providing flexible work schedules and options for working at home. We should not be afraid to use the avenues within our institutions to voice our concerns in an attempt to hold senior leadership accountable for failing to

actively and aggressively promote gender equality, such as by using employee surveys, team and all-employee meetings, etc.

“A woman with a voice is by definition a strong woman. But the search to find that voice can be remarkably difficult.” – Melinda Gates

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