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Asian University for Women Project

Introductory Comments

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In your joint family, I am known as the second daughter-in-law.

All these years I have known myself as no more than that. Today, after fifteen years, as I stand alone by the sea, I know that I have another identity, which is my relationship with the universe and its creator. That gives me the courage to write this letter as myself, not as the second daughter-in-law of your family....

I am not one to die easily. That is what I want to say in this letter.

- Rabindranath Tagore, "Letter from a Wife" (1914)¹

We not only want a piece of the pie, we also want to choose the flavor,

and to know how to make it ourselves.

- Ela Bhatt, founder, Self-Employed Women's Association²

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,

Were axioms to him, who'd never heard

Of any world where promises were kept,

Or one could weep because another wept.

- W.H. Auden, *The Shield of Achilles*

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to share with you the plans to establish the Asian University for Women and get your feedback in improving the planning and design aspects of this project. We are most grateful to UNDP for having arranged this meeting and helping with the planning process of this new enterprise in a myriad other ways. I am delighted to see so many of you have chosen to give your time to us today. As you know, the UNDP Administrator, Mark Malloch Brown, has volunteered to join the board of the Asian University for Women. I am pleased to report that he has also enthusiastically taken on the task of persuading some key actors such as the president of the Asian Development Bank and the executive director of UNICEF to join him on the Board. We are also grateful for the Administrator's pledge of UNDP support in orchestrating the feasibility study for the establishment of the university and, hence this meeting, and providing a trust fund mechanism to finance and manage the completion of the feasibility study and the master plan of operations for the university as expeditiously and effectively as possible. Mr. Pasha's timing for joining UNDP recently could not be more opportune for us: His experience as Minister of Education and as Vice Chancellor of the University of Karachi in Pakistan makes the professional link to our effort all that much more rewarding for us – and, I hope, for him as well.

In laying out these issues, let me make it clear that while the vision for the Asian University for Women will not deviate from its core premises, we intend to practice a wholly pragmatic approach in planning and executing this project. We expect optimistically to achieve what John Rawls has called a “reflective equilibrium” -- a process through which our initial ideas, thoughts and designs are modified by our responses to practical problems and issues.

The Asian University for Women is conceived as a residential four-year liberal arts college to be established in Bangladesh as an international, public-private collaborative, drawing students from South, South East and West Asia. Open only to women, the university will also pursue a curriculum that is gender-sensitive and gender-critical. The Government of Bangladesh has agreed to host the university, provide it with a land grant and a charter that will endow it with a UN-like status with full guarantees of institutional and academic freedom. The Bangladesh Prime Minister co-chairs the International Support Committee for the University with Madame Lone Dybkjaer, First Lady of Denmark and Member of the European Union Parliament. Mamphela Ramphele, the World Bank's Managing Director for Human Development and Mark Malloch Brown of UNDP are currently the other two members of the Committee. A proposal of this type inevitably raises some fundamental questions such as *Why Higher Education? Why, you may ask, a Women's University and not something else?* While many of you have labored with me in thinking about this project and thinking through these issues and the related planning process, there are a few people here who are new to the conversation. At the risk of being repetitive to some, let me therefore quickly run through some of the threshold issues and questions relating to this project so that we may focus our subsequent discussion appropriately.

Why higher education?

Development is severely restrained when a society lacks competence to apply modern science and technology, to negotiate with the outside world with some understanding and strength and to anticipate and prepare for the challenges of tomorrow. Good governance, strong institutions and a developed infrastructure are all essential for economic progress – and none of these is possible without highly educated people. A country unable to mobilize sufficient intellectual capability to narrow, if not close its knowledge gap, cannot possibly withstand the competition in world markets. It is the differences in education that account in a large part for the current inequities in the distribution of wealth within and between countries. Economic globalization has, and will continue to enhance the role of the education factor in determining trends in economic development. For, access to knowledge and the capability to harness it will increasingly determine who succeeds and fails in the race for prosperity.

Already, the World Bank estimates, that more than half of the GDP in the industrialized countries as a whole is accounted for by the production and distribution of intangible knowledge.³ The winners in this knowledge-based economy will be those with skills and assets and the losers will be those without. While poor people in poor countries start off with a massive disadvantage, there are nonetheless immense opportunities. The emergence of Bangalore and Hyderabad in India as major centers of IT-related job creation is a testament to that potential. But so are the threats. Educational inequities persist at a time when economic globalization and the revolution in information technology have greatly boosted the returns on education. Bakunin's admonition of more than a century ago about the "reign of scientific intelligence" and a "world ...divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge and an immense ignorant majority. And, then, woe unto the mass of ignorant ones" seems ever more real today. Higher education has never been as important to the future of the developing world as it is now. It cannot guarantee rapid economic development as the experience with the "Development Universities" in the 1960s has amply demonstrated – but sustained progress is impossible without it.

Why a women's university?

According to UNDP's *Human Development Report*, there is no country that treats its women as well as it treats men. The particular predicament of women in Asia is probably most graphically captured by Amartya Sen's dramatic presentation on the "missing women".⁴ It is estimated that 44 million women are "missing" in China, 36.7 million in India, 5.2 million in Pakistan, 3.7 million in Bangladesh, 4.3 million in West Asia and 2.4 million in South East Asia.⁵ I mention about the "missing women" only to underline the context in which the idea of a women's university has been developed.

In this climate of pervasive institutional, social, and economic discrimination against women, it is often difficult for women to find their own voice and space for social and intellectual growth. The development impulse for women's education too often suggests

a litany of instrumental purposes in educating them. It says, “Educate a woman because she will then educate the whole family”, or it says “If you educate a woman, she will learn to keep her family small or immunize her children” and so on. Martha Nussbaum has persuasively argued for a capabilities approach that “treats each as an end and none as a mere tool of the ends of others”.⁶ The Asian University for Women, it is hoped, will provide successive groups of women drawn from many parts of Asia, across a diverse spectrum of social, economic and language backgrounds, to come together in a women-centered setting to enhance their own knowledge capabilities and reflect on their individual and collective roles in reshaping the values, the economic and social structures and mores that inhibit the actualization of their full potential.

The concept of a women’s university is not novel in Asia. Japan, South Korea, India and Pakistan all have a history of women’s colleges. What is different in the case of the proposed Asian University for Women is that it is not intended to mimic and imprint upon the students the prevailing social ethos with respect to women in the society. Quite the contrary, by bringing women from across Asia it proposes to introduce a range of perspectives with respect to women’s role and position in society and provide a space where each could be critically and reflectively examined in an environment that is supportive of women and their particular concerns.

Even though the university will stand as a separate institution for women only, it will not cause to seclude the students from the real world. The focus on development issues will ensure its relevance and engagement with the broader society. In this connection it should be noted that the establishment of the Asian University for Women is being contemplated within a context of plurality of institutions. Development is after all about broadening choices. Women who wish to pursue education at a co-educational setting will continue to have those opportunities. In fact, we would expect the students of this university to compete and collaborate with other women’s or co-educational universities in various academic and extra-curricular activities.

The experience of women’s colleges in the United States, a topic on which we will hear more from Alice Ilchman at lunch, greatly supports the case for a separate institution. A study that examined the achievement of women graduating from women’s colleges in 1910 and later found that high achieving women in the United States were more likely to have graduated from women’s colleges than from co-educational institutions.⁷ In another study of women who had attended women’s colleges between 1920 and 1973, graduates of women’s colleges in the United States

were twice as likely to have obtained doctorates as were women graduates of coeducational colleges.⁸ Research suggests that at least a part of the disproportionately higher achievement of graduates of women’s colleges may be explained by the explicit commitment of the leadership of the institutions to the advancement of women.

A World Bank report that investigated barriers to women’s higher education concluded that in countries like India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and many sub-Saharan African

countries, the creation of single-sex institutions were both necessary and justified in addressing the disparity in women's higher education in these settings.⁹

It is projected that at its peak enrollment the university will have a total of two thousand undergraduates, which may be supplemented by students at other levels and programs. The language of instruction will be in English. Options to reach a much wider community through the use of Web-based or other open learning channels will be systematically explored and developed. The two thousand figure has been arrived at through consideration of cost-effectiveness and other pertinent issues relating to what's required for an optimal educational exchange. While the students will be all women, the faculty and staff will be of both sexes and will be drawn from wherever talented people could be persuaded to join such an effort. A four-year curriculum will be designed: the first two years of which will combine development studies with the more traditional liberal arts and the basic sciences while the second two years will be geared toward developing a specialization of the student's choice from a select group of disciplines such as information technology and management that would make graduates of the university eminently qualified to enter the modern sector job market wherever they go.

Recognizing the crucial role of science and technology in the transformation of societies, the science content of the curriculum will be significantly more enhanced than what is ordinarily seen in liberal arts colleges in the US. We believe that a science and technology orientation to the liberal arts and development studies training will not only strengthen the student's technical proficiency but will also empower them to engage more adeptly in the great sociological and moral reasoning imperatives facing humankind. This has been a key weakness of many a liberal arts education (certainly my own). Almost thirty years ago Lionel Trilling commented:

"(Physical) science in our day lies beyond the intellectual grasp of most men.... This exclusion of most of us from the mode of thought which is habitually said to be the characteristic achievement of the modern age is bound to be experienced as a wound given to our intellectual self-esteem. About this humiliation we all agree to be silent; but can we doubt that it has its consequences, that it introduces into the life of mind a significant element of dubiety and alienation, which must be taken into account in any estimate that is made of the present fortunes of mind?"¹⁰

We intend to save the graduates of this university from the specter of this "unacknowledged wound" through a carefully planned science training.

While the Asian University for Women will strive to establish itself as a center of excellence and provide an educational experience that is as relevant as it is vigorous, it will spare no effort to identify, prepare, recruit and graduate women from communities and circumstances that make university enrolment difficult to attain. David Lockwood of UNDP has come up with the idea of establishing a network of partnerships with pre-selected secondary schools. A mapping exercise would identify in each of the participating countries secondary schools (or their equivalent institutions) that are

promising grounds for recruitment of students. A partnership with these selected secondary schools that help improve the quality of teaching in these schools through various case specific interventions as well as acquaint the younger students early to the university could yield positive results.

The greatest challenge in planning a new university in a setting like Bangladesh is in recruitment and retention of faculty. There is a very limited pool of locally available talent. The experience of the private universities demonstrates that establishing new universities does not automatically coax bodies into talented teachers. Fortunately, there appears to be a relatively large supply of Asian PhDs in North America and elsewhere. The success of the university will be in a large measure a function of its success in mobilizing Asians and others from outside the country or even the region to join the university effort. To test the potential of attracting talented faculty members to join such a university, we held a conference with over 30 highly successful Asian graduate students in the US. To this group at least the idea of setting up a new university was compelling enough to make them seriously consider foregoing an alternative career in the US to join such an effort. Satisfied but still curious, we asked, why? The answers could only be explained by an overwhelming urge on the part of these students to do something useful and inspiring in an area where they felt competent in and in an environment in which they could possibly thrive in by building something new and enduring. This story, I suspect, is not wholly different than the story of the founding of, say, the Hebrew University in Israel. While a whole list of issues came up that could make the proposition of joining a new university in Asia attractive, three factors set the floor in this context: reliable health care, educational opportunities for their children and personal security.

A university can have excellent faculty, talented students and a fine physical facility. But in the absence of the right governance and management structure, it can easily fail and usually does fail. In our discussions with the Government of Bangladesh, we stressed the need for two things in particular: institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Fortunately, the existence of the International Center for Diarrheal Disease Research in Dhaka provides a model on which the mode of governance and management could be structured. The Bangladesh Prime Minister has assured us that a UN-like status will be granted to the university and that it will enjoy complete academic freedom. A duly constituted international board of trustees will succeed the current International Support Committee for the University. By situating the university outside of the Private University Act in Bangladesh, the Asian University for Women will set a new framework for government-university relationship in Bangladesh that could be a model for the whole region.

When a new project was brought for approval to Mayor LaGuardia of New York once, he reportedly said that “Well, there are at least five good reasons why it should happen and only one reason why it can’t happen. The one reason is there is no money for it. And the other five don’t matter.” So, let me now address the issue of financing the new university. Even ten years ago one would have had to be profoundly pessimistic about mobilizing sufficient resources for establishing a new university in Asia. We believe the international

environmental for higher education has now dramatically shifted. There is a much more acute awareness of the crisis in higher education in developing countries and the implicit threat to core governance and capability issues resulting from a collapsing higher education system. We estimate the Asian University for Women to cost somewhere between \$75 million to \$100 million, nearly one half of which would be in capital costs for plant and equipment and the remainder for an endowment to provide support for recurring costs. We are exploring with a series of bilateral and multilateral sources as well as private sources options for generating sufficient resources for the capital costs of the university. At this point, we believe that it is likely that sufficient resources would be available for that purpose from such sources. Raising funds for an endowment poses a more harrowing task. The most likely source for such support would be wealthy individuals and private foundations. Under the leadership of Boston philanthropist Charles Merrill, we are orchestrating a serious effort to persuade philanthropic leaders from the US and elsewhere to join us in making an endowment possible for the university. If it works and we are determined to make it work, this will in all likelihood represent an additional component in development aid, for our target philanthropists while familiar and responsive to the world of higher education had seldom ventured in the past into international development. We also expect to establish national support committees in key source countries to provide a long-term institutional support structure to this project.

Over time tuition fees will also generate an important fraction of the revenues for the university. While the Asian University for Women will strive to have at least fifty percent of its students from families which will require a large part, if not the entire cost of education, to be borne through financial aid, we will expect each graduating student -- whether on sponsored scholarships or endowment financed aid -- to enter into a contract with the university to repay to the university the cost of her education over a ten to fifteen year period. If the student upon graduation goes into public service with low pay, the amount due each year will be waived for the year she stays employed in such a capacity. But every student who goes on to well paying jobs will be expected to contribute back to the university the cost of her education so that others like her may have the chance to obtain an education. We realize that there would be few opportunities to enforce such a contract. However, if the education provided by the university is effective, we suspect there will be that willingness to support the future generation of students. Indeed, this will be an important reflection of the kind of community we build of students, faculty, alumni, and others we serve.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have an opportunity here to create an institution which if successful could make an enduring contribution to the cause of women's advancement in Asia by producing leaders of diverse backgrounds whose life experiences will combine with an extraordinary education to help them bend the charts that now capture the debilitating status of women in our societies. We are hoping that this meeting will help us identify some promising paths in the critical areas of planning and launching this initiative. Our hope is that at the course of this exercise today we will have some guidance from you on the issues raised by this proposal so that we can at least frame

the right questions for the feasibility team to investigate. By the end of today, we hope we can get your input on some of the key planning issues. David Fraser will speak from his own experience in conducting a feasibility study on what are some of the key questions and issues that one will need to address in our case as well. We are eager to hear what you see as our true challenges, where you see opportunities and risks. If you are able to direct us to specific resources, be they people, institutions or just money, we would be most grateful.

¹ Quoted in Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women & Human Development* (Cambridge: 2000)

² Ibid.

³ As reported in F. Cairncross, *The Death of Distance* (London, 1997), p.212

⁴ Demographic and nutrition data attest that in cases where equal nutrition and health care are provided to men and women, women live, on average, slightly longer than men and, thus, explaining the slightly larger female presence in a normal population. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, the sex ratio in the population is 102.2 women to 100 men. Many countries have a significantly lower sex ratio, suggesting serious discrimination against females. Amartya Sen investigated the demographic data in various countries by asking how many more women would have been in such a country if it had the same sex ratio as in Sub-Saharan Africa. The resulting figure is what he called the number of "missing women".

⁵ These statistics are derived from Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger & Public Action* (Oxford, 1989).

⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women & Human Development* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 5

⁷ M. Elizabeth Tidball et al, *Taking Women Seriously: Lessons and Legacies for Educating the Majority* (Phoenix, 1999).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ K. Subbarao et al, *Women in higher education: progress, constraints, and promising initiatives* (The World Bank: 1994).

¹⁰ Lionel Trilling, *Mind in the Modern World* (New York, 1972), pp.13-14.