

CGD Award

December 7, 2011

Thank you, Nancy and Susan! I am deeply honoured to be the recipient of this award from Foreign Policy and CGD. It is fortunate that my greatest champion, my father, could be with us this evening – and unfortunate that my other two champions could not be here today – my husband and my daughter – but they are here in spirit. And I know that my late mother is out there somewhere looking on and feeling very happy for me – not acknowledging that it is **her** efforts that are being recognized!

I know that I would not be the recipient of this award if not for two very important ingredients:

First, the work and commitment to women and development of the previous president of ICRW, Mayra Buvinic, and the risk that she took in appointing me president of ICRW;

And second, the dedication and hard work (often for very little reward) of the staff that I had the privilege to lead for more than a decade at ICRW and the board of directors who so ably guided and supported our efforts.

So let us raise a toast to Mayra and the staff and board of ICRW, past and present. It was our combined efforts, together with the leadership of our many global partners, that helped shaped the world that we are in today:

- a world in which key policy actors and decision-makers recognize girls and women, particularly those in poverty, as contributors to and the rightful beneficiaries of development;
- And, a world that acknowledges investments in girls' and women's rights, education, economic opportunities and health as fundamental to stronger, more equitable and more sustainable economic growth.

Cheers to all of you!

Another factor that deserves recognition today is India, the country of my birth, whose education and economic opportunities benefited me greatly. As I often say, growing up as a woman in India, one cannot be anything but angry at the inequities and indignities that characterize the lives of women, especially those in poverty – who, despite their labour and contributions to society, are forgotten in the development equation. But India is also home to one of the strongest national women's movements, comprised of articulate women researchers and activists who made the case for women's empowerment with passion and rigor. They made me see that data combined with passionate advocacy was the only way forward. That is what led me to become what I describe as an activist in researcher's clothing for the cause of women's equality!

When circumstances brought me to the US, all roads led to ICRW – it was the only organization in town that did the work that I wanted to make my career. In fact, it seemed

almost fated that I would work in ICRW! When I was teaching in India, the only available book that dealt with the issues that my colleagues and I wanted to teach in our Women's Studies course at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences was the book by Mayra Buvinic: "Women and Third World Poverty". It was the book that I taught from. Little did I know that one day I would be working with and directly learning from Mayra!

My mother taught me that it is absolutely okay to brag in front of family (because otherwise you may be tempted to do so externally and that is not acceptable!). Since I'm in the company of ICRW's development family tonight, I'm going to take this opportunity to celebrate a few of the impressive results that ICRW and its staff achieved over the years:

- The early work on women farmers and their lack of access to key resources – work that ICRW is using today to inform the renewed interest in smallholder farmers;
- A ground breaking paper on how well-intended microenterprise programs for women failed because they were designed based on gender stereotypes -- teaching women how to weave baskets and sew, rather than produce goods that met market demand and generated income;
- Pioneering research on the high prevalence of women headed households and the disadvantages they face because policies are based on a fictitious norm of male-headed households;
- A research program that demonstrated that the vulnerability of women to sexually-transmitted HIV was because of their socio-economic status – followed by pioneering work on the high costs of the AIDS-related stigma;
- Evidence on the prevalence and costs of violence against women in India, which if recognized as a public health problem would qualify as an epidemic;
- The Millennium Development Project report on gender equality that convinced the UN General Assembly that Goal #3 had to be about more than just education targets and women in non-agricultural labour; and
- More than two decades of work on adolescents and the resulting advocacy on the consequences of child marriage and what to do about it.

I could go on and on but I must stop because that much bragging is too much, even for family!

ICRW's greatest impact has come from a stealth strategy that has remained a secret until today: the strategic placements of staff and board members in key positions in mainstream development organizations, many of whom are with us today - Caren Grown, formerly ICRW's senior economist, now in USAID; Mayra, ICRW's previous president, formerly in the IDB and then the World Bank (there is a reason that the Bank devoted its WDR to gender equality!); Nancy Birdsall, ex-Chair of ICRW's board while at the IDB, and now at CGD; Susan Levine, also a former Chair of the ICRW Board, now a board member for CGD (we got you covered, CGD!); Julie Katzman, current ICRW Board member and also at the IDB; Moises Naim, past ICRW board member while at Foreign Policy Magazine; and please don't let UNICEF know that I have an agenda! 😊

As we look ahead, ICRW, under the leadership of my successor, Sarah Kambou, and the broader gender and development community needs to be vigilant about two consequences of our combined success:

First, efforts to economically empower girls and women have contributed to a huge surge of investment in women's entrepreneurship. While this investment is clearly beneficial, let us not kid ourselves into believing that it is going to help the millions of women who live in desperate poverty. Entrepreneurship programmes are about small and medium sized businesses and as a result, are targeted to women who live above the poverty line. Our goals for gender and development must stay focused on women who live in poverty, and the pro-poor policies and social protection programmes that will give them a more just return on their labour and an opportunity to survive and thrive as individuals. Admittedly, this is a complex challenge. But, it is our job and it remains incomplete.

Second, our effort to make the "return on investment" case has gained considerable traction. But let us not get too carried away with this approach. There is a human rights rationale for gender equality and the empowerment of women that is much more powerful and universal than the instrumental argument. Navi Pillai, the UN Human Rights Commissioner recently issued a wake-up call to all of us within the UN. Referring to the Arab Spring, she made the point that some of the most dramatic revolutions occurred in countries such as Tunisia; countries that had recently received high marks for progress toward development goals. She reminded us that our work in development is often too narrowly focused on growth, on markets, and on private investment, with relatively little attention to equality or human rights. As Ms. Pillai said, and I quote, "We did not get the answers wrong; we just never asked many of the most important questions." It is important to remember that, and I quote again, "participatory development is more sustainable, accountable development is more efficient, non-discriminatory development is more equitable, and the empowerment of women, minorities and marginalized communities mobilizes vastly more development resources to the cause." End quote.

I could not agree more. Yes, they give us economic benefits but equality and freedom are goals in their own right...goals that are worthy of our collective pursuit. To ignore them is a disservice to our mandate and a betrayal of our commitment to the rights and well-being of women and children.

With those words of caution, thank you very much for this great honour!