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The potential in Hillary Clinton's global campaign for women

No other secretary of State has so focused on women's rights. It's a powerful shift.

the Monitor's Editorial Board

When Hillary Rodham Clinton traveled to Africa last month, she visited war-racked eastern Congo to speak out against widespread rape by militias. She choked up after meeting with two rape victims and promised more US help – \$17 million for medical treatment and security for victims.

Now she's taking the issue to the United Nations, where the US is leading an effort to shore up a resolution to end sexual violence against civilians during armed conflict. The Security Council passed Resolution 1820 last year, but follow through is sorely lacking.

Women's rights are becoming a signature issue for America's top diplomat. In her official travels, Mrs. Clinton talks with women, meets with female activists, and presses the twin challenges of women's rights and abuse with political leaders. She wants US development aid to focus more on women, and has appointed the first US ambassador for global women's issues.

The Bush administration, too, championed women's rights, especially in Muslim countries such as Afghanistan. But no secretary of State has sought to make women as high a priority as Clinton is attempting. It's a potentially powerful shift. If she can pull it off.

Obstacles abound, including the unruly thicket of US aid programs. But the greatest challenge is the deeply rooted culture in countries that oppress women and girls – often violently and even to the point of enslavement, sexual and otherwise. Honor killings, child brides, female infanticide – all of these accepted customs need to be realized as unacceptable.

As it seeks to promote women's rights, the US faces a paradox: The push could backfire if it comes off as a lecture or is perceived as another modern Western idea that will cause societal upheaval. But Clinton is wisely framing the issue in terms of countries' own interests.

Her pitch: Healthcare for women, especially maternal care, makes for healthier children and families. Schooling for girls contributes to economic progress. Microloans to women pay handsome dividends as women pay them off and invest further in businesses and their families' welfare. (The majority of the world's small-holder farmers are women.)

Some experts also see a link between the oppression of women and the problems of extremism and terrorism.

"It is a very-well-researched fact that women are key to economic progress and social stability," Clinton said in India this summer.

Global aid groups, the World Bank, the US military, and economists agree. "Gender inequality hurts economic growth," reports Goldman Sachs.

Attitudes in male-dominated countries can change once men see the monetary benefits of female empowerment. Writers Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn give a convincing example of this in their new book, "Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide."

They tell of Saima Muhammad, a poverty-stricken wife and mother near Lahore, Pakistan, who suffered daily beatings from her jobless husband. For lack of food, she had to send her daughter to live with an aunt. When her second child, a girl, was born, Saima's husband was urged by his mother to take a second wife so he could father a son.

Then Saima got a loan of \$65 through a Pakistani group that lends exclusively to women. She started an embroidery business that now employs 30 families in the neighborhood (including her husband). She paid off her husband's debt (more than \$3,000), kept her girls in school, and upgraded her house, adding running water and TV.

The authors write that Saima's husband is now more impressed with girls. They are "just as good as boys," he says.

Of course, women's rights are human rights. They don't need to be justified for any other reason than that. But in many countries, the path to that realization may well begin with economic self-interest, and Clinton is right to recognize this.

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