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### **Kenya: Women Empowerment for a Stronger Nation**

“It doesn’t matter who you are, or where you came from. The ability to triumph begins with you. Always,” states the iconic Oprah Winfrey. For women living in rural Kenya, they are not always able to see that this can be a reality for them. In our lives, there will be times in which you feel helpless and hopeless like all the doors around you are closed. This was true for Mary, the woman who’s family is about to be described, as well as her neighbor mentioned later. After her daily life is depicted, her barriers to escaping hunger and poverty are examined and are eventually resolved in the course of two years through the implementation of programs by Free the Children, The Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and The United Nations Population Fund.

Mary lays restlessly in her bed, hungry. She knows her children, Felix, Jane, and Stephen lay hungry as well and this brings tears to her eyes. Mary remembers her eldest daughter, who passed away only two years after moving away due to AIDS. As much as she tries to forget, she can’t help but notice the absence of her husband, laid to rest after malaria took its toll on his body. Her children are a part of the 20% of Kenyan youth that have never stepped foot in a school (KIHBS). Instead, her kids help maintain the small maize farm they reside on. Mary and her children spend countless hours hand weeding their field before their single oxen pulls a plow to create a row in which they will manually plant seeds about two inches deep. These children are hungry after a day of work in the field, and will remain so until harvest season. After rationing out food for the family, there will be little or no leftovers remaining to sell for profit, the definition of subsistence farming, which is the primary agricultural practice of rural Kenya. Because they inhabit a maize farm, this is the staple of Mary’s family’s diet. They occasionally trade harvests with their neighboring farms, adding beans, kale, and carrots to their diet. Poor access to quality food rich in vitamins is exacerbated by lack of medical care. There are only 1,000 doctors working in public practice in the country of Kenya (Free the Children), and few of them are located in rural areas leaving Mary’s family unable to access adequate health care that could have saved her husband or delayed the death of her oldest daughter. There is little that Mary can do to change these unfortunate circumstances her family faces every day because she is a woman, looked upon as incapable, by her very own male dominated community.

Mary’s life is a series of road-blocks. She is unable to gain adequate employment and wages because she lacks education because of her gender. Because she cannot earn money, she cannot invest in better technology to increase the crop yield of her small farm to better feed her family of four. Having a large handful of children, Mary realized, has made having enough food for everyone difficult. She wonders if there is any way that her newlywed friend and neighbor, Adhra, could avoid this problem by having a smaller family. As for Mary’s family, if alternative income methods for women were presented to her, her family may be able to escape poverty and hunger.

Women’s inability to neither acquire employment nor practice family planning methods leave rural Kenyans starved and malnourished. In 2005, 40,000 children were in need of immediate nutrition intervention or death was imminent (UNICEF). More recently, in 2011, half of a million children under five-years-old, as well as pregnant mothers were suffering from acute malnourishment (Murunga). No mother wants to see their child starve, but when they cannot gain money to purchase food, they often have no choice. While urban women have the opportunity to participate in the workforce at a wage significantly lower than their male counterparts, rural families have little to no access to most industries. When positions do arise in rural areas they are given to men because of the ideals that a women’s role is

to be solely domestic (Institute of Economic Affairs: Kenya). This takes away all income opportunities for Mary's family, as well as the potential for two-parent families to supplement their revenue. Women have been found to reinvest 90% of their earnings back into their family, as compared to 30-35% of a man's (Girl Rising). These earnings would likely go to the enhancement of the family's diet to add nutritious food purchased from markets that were previously unavailable. Women contributing to family income would have no adverse affect on pollution, energy demand, or climate change in urban areas because the jobs available would be less industrial. While the factor of women's employment is improving rapidly in urban areas, rural areas are drastically lagging behind.

In the past 80 years, Kenya's population has skyrocketed from 2.9 million to 37 million inhabitants (Heinson). Lack of access, education, and cultural factors have prevented family planning from being widespread amongst the rural population. While the United Nations expects the average children per family to sink from 5 to 3.7 by the year 2030, this is not soon enough (Graff). 700 illegal and unsafe abortions are occurring every day in Kenya (Planned Parenthood). One in every four married women has an unmet need for family planning services. The United Nations also states that for every one dollar invested into family planning, two to six dollars are saved to be put towards other endeavors, such as solving the hunger crisis (Graff). Fewer children simply leads to fewer mouths to feed in rural communities. A lower global population will decrease the undesirable effects caused by climate change, energy demand, and pollution. When women are allowed equal economic opportunity and access to family planning, less Kenyans will go to bed hungry and Mary won't have to cry herself to sleep anymore.

There are ways to resolve these issues. There are existing organizations already fighting for resolution and other ideas yet to be implemented widespread. Because you cannot change a culture overnight, Free the Children has implemented *Alternative Income Projects* for women in Kenya as a portion of their Adopt-A-Village Model plan. The Planned Parenthood Federation of America has many alliances with groups to protect women's reproductive rights and health and also implements peer education programs. Extensive education on the rhythm method of family planning is not present in Kenya and may serve as a culturally sensitive solution to population control. Progress is possible.

One pillar of Free the Children's adopt-a-village model focuses on sustainable income, especially for women. Because rural Kenyan women are largely uneducated and illiterate, non-traditional projects serve as empowering money makers. Free the Children supports artisan projects, helping women have the resources to create beautiful hand-made works of art to be sold in local markets and marketed abroad via their sister organization Me to We's website. An example of a said project includes beading jewelry, especially in the Maasai region of Kenya (Fuki).

Free the Children also trains women in how to properly harvest honey from colonized hives for alternative income. Free the Children then takes the raw honey and puts it through the process of pasteurization, bottling, and sell the honey giving the majority of the profits directly to the woman who collected it, but using some to help another woman begin the same process. They also help to implement livestock programs, which provide protein-rich food and calcium-filled milk as well as creating income by the eventual sale of bred livestock (Fuki).

In addition, the non-profit organization, Free the Children, also provides vocational training and merry-go-round sessions. Their vocational training includes skills in financial literacy, micro-economics, conflict resolution, and leadership. After this training, Free the Children may provide a small business loan (\$150 USD) to help women start their own businesses, such as a small garment construction company, providing other women with work as well. A merry-go-round session is when women meet and each contribute a small amount of their own Kenyan shillings. After each meeting, one woman takes home "the pot." It is to be used for things such as school fees, rain catchment systems, or purchasing

livestock. This cycle continues until each woman has had the opportunity to take home “the pot.” These simple solutions provide women with more money, to purchase more food (Fuki).

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America is very active in Kenya. Through the partnership with the Kenyan Reproductive Health Rights Alliance, Planned Parenthood helps to vouch for legislation for reproductive health laws and general improvement in maternal healthcare. They have also partnered with youth to become peer educators in reproductive health as well as HIV/AIDS. They educate others and have access to distribute the simple contraceptive device of condoms (Planned Parenthood). Lastly, they work with Kisumu Medical Education and Trust. The Kisumu Medical Education and Trust organization supports health-care providers to provide safe abortion procedures and post-abortion care through helping them obtain proper medical equipment and protect the security of their patients (Planned Parenthood). This is important because under Kenyan law, abortion is only permitted when the mother’s physical or mental health is at stake. Two medical opinions must state this and a woman must have her husband’s permission to undergo this procedure (Mucai-Kattambo, Kabebere-Macharia, and Kameri-Mbote). For those who wish to have this operation performed, their options are very limited causing unsafe abortions at the rate of 700 a day, as mentioned above (Planned Parenthood). If the 500 million women in the developing world with an unmet need for contraception’s needs were met, 105 million abortions could be averted (Snarr). Through education, contraceptive and abortion services, Planned Parenthood is contributing to a decreased population resulting in less people to go hungry.

Contraceptive use and abortion is not always a culturally acceptable solution to population growth within Kenya and the world. Something lacking in Kenya is vast understanding of the rhythm method of natural family planning. Through the simple tools of either a calendar or a thermometer, one can utilize the rhythm method. This involves tracking the woman’s menstrual cycle through dates or basal body temperature so one is aware of their ovulation and can abstain from intercourse during this time (American Pregnancy Association). This method is approximately 76% effective (Planned Parenthood). A fallback of this method is that it relies heavily on the cooperation of the male partner. This means that a special focus must be placed upon educating males on the benefits of family planning, as well as providing empowerment for women (Masinde). While the results are not immediate, the best form of empowerment for women is education. After seven years of education, a woman will marry four years later (Girl Rising). Also, the creation of a climate in which both male and female children are attending school equally will lead to a future in which neither gender will see each other as inferior or superior to each other. To send a child to primary school in Kenya requires funds to pay for the service of a head shaving, a uniform, and supplies. For secondary school, all that was previously mentioned is necessary as well as a tuition fee. This is a huge financial toll on Kenyan families, where 58% live on less than \$2 a day (KIHBS). To resolve this lack of resources, online crowdfunding could be utilized to collect funds from people all over the world to provide scholarships to female students, who are less likely to be sent to school because “why would you educate someone who is going to stay home and have children?” (Snarr). Education lowers family size by itself. A single year of formal education decreases women’s fertility rates by 10% (Stoltz) while 7 years of education results in women bearing 2.2 fewer hungry mouths to feed (Girl Rising). On-the-job training and communication with coworkers can bring about informal education, which may have a less effective percentage, but might still work towards bringing down Kenya’s fast-growing population. Natural family planning and women empowerment is a more culturally sensitive approach to the same issue and important, because many men do not understand contraceptives. A quotation by Damascus Chemonges of Kisumu, Kenya, stating, “I hear that it makes women give birth to children without ears and eyes,” demonstrates this lack of understanding of contraceptives (United Nations Population Fund).

The United Nations Population Fund already collects data to combat overpopulation, but they need to do more. The need is present for them to put into operation family planning education in a widespread manner. Pamphlets could be one tool, but must not be the only source of delivery of this information due

to Kenya's high illiteracy rates, especially amongst women, who need the information the most. Talks within clinics are already happening, but men refuse to attend because those clinics are a woman's domain (United Nations Population Fund). Lectures must be given in schools and to entire villages by qualified family planning educators in such a way that reaches every man, woman, and adolescent. Helpful traits of the educator to improve reception include endorsement from the elders of the community and/or being a trusted community member themselves. Overall, education about population control needs to increase for Kenyans to have control over their family size so it is a size that they are capable of feeding.

The projects of Free the Children, The Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and The United Nations Population Fund finally reached Mary's family and her neighbor Adhra's. Mary was provided with a few goats from Free the Children as well as a merry-go-round-pot amongst her neighbors that paid the school fees for all three of her children. Her children Felix, Jane, and Stephan are all receiving an education that will give them qualifications to earn a living and not go hungry in the future. Mary downsized her maize field to a manageable size for herself to and is focusing on raising goats. Jane is a member of a peer reproductive health/AIDS education group and takes pride in educating herself and others on the disease that she lost her beloved sister to as well as preventing young women from unwanted pregnancies. She will face fewer barriers to future success than her mother due to her educated status. Only two years later from when we were first introduced to Mary, she now sits around a dinner table with dishes of goat meat, maize, and carrots and a pottery vase (purchased from her artisan female neighbor) of goat's milk while her children all eat their fill recalling their stories and newly acquired information from their school day. Mary now falls asleep with a smile upon her face. Adhra and her husband received education in natural family planning and utilize the body temperature rhythm method to prevent pregnancy due to their financial instability at this time. Her thermometer was purchased with her turn at the merry-go-round pot. These two rural Kenyan families are helping themselves prevent their own hunger and poverty with a hand up, not a hand out.

Kenya has great potential to lift itself out of poverty and hunger when given basic resources. In many areas of Western urban Kenya, this has already happened (KIHBS). With up-scaling of Free the Children and Planned Parenthood programs already in existence and the implementation of a stronger presence of the United Nations Population Fund in family planning education, women could be empowered to alleviate hunger from their family by the year 2015, the year of completion of the Millennium Development Goals. The plans before you represent each of these goals. Educated, working women using their choice of family planning will eradicate extreme poverty and hunger from their family, promote gender equality, move towards universal primary education, reduce child mortality rates and improve maternal health, while combating specifically AIDS to lead to a smaller population to help environmental sustainability creating members of society ready to participate in a global partnership for development. Let no man, woman, or child starve in Kenya again.

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