It’s a great honor and privilege for me to be here today with all of you. I want to first thank you for all the important work you do around the world. We do much of this work together and I know that I speak for everyone at the World Bank Group in thanking you for being such great partners in tackling poverty, lack of access to health care, disasters and many other issues we care so much about. I want to especially thank Helene for inviting me here today. Helene and I have worked together for years, most intensely during the AIDS movement, and as recently as last week when we were part of a larger group of civil society representatives talking about building a movement to end poverty. Helene, your inspiring leadership in so many realms has been a gift to all of us and a gift to the poor. I’m honored to be here with you today.

As we approach International Women’s Day, it’s important to celebrate the ways in which the world has improved for women and girls. In many countries, primary and secondary school enrollment rates are the same for boys and girls. Women on average are living longer, healthier lives. Most policymakers agree that no country can lift itself out of poverty or achieve its potential when half its citizens are denied equal rights and opportunities.

So many development issues force us to face tough choices. Developing countries need energy, but at what cost to our environment? Many of the world’s poorest live in countries rampant with corruption, so how do we help them without also lining the pockets of a self-serving regime? In the midst of all this complexity, the great news is that gender equality doesn’t require trade-offs; it only has benefits. And the benefits accrue to everyone, not just
women and girls. Societies benefit and as even MEN are beginning to understand, economies benefit, too.

That’s good news for all of us. The governors of the World Bank Group have set ambitious goals to end extreme poverty by 2030 and to boost shared prosperity for the bottom 40 percent of the population in developing countries. If we are to reach those goals, investing wisely in women and girls needs to be a major part of our work. But even with the steady progress we’ve seen over the past few decades, one of our biggest challenges today is to avoid falling prey to a sense of self-satisfaction. We don’t deserve to, not yet.

We need a renewed sense of urgency and a clearer understanding of the remaining obstacles. When it comes to improving the lives of women and girls, we have blind spots. That’s not to say we don’t see the problem clearly, but sometimes we overlook something that’s right in front of us, especially if we are too close to it. Our brains are wired to automatically fill in blind spots so that the picture is whole. But the picture is not whole. We have so much left to do.

For example, we have made impressive gains in achieving universal access to education, but what we’re failing to see is that girls who are poor -- those who are the most vulnerable - - are getting left behind.

It’s true that the gender gap in education has shrunk. Two-thirds of all countries have reached gender parity in primary enrollment, and in more than one-third, girls significantly outnumber boys in secondary education. Furthermore, these gains have been rapid: in primary education, for example, Morocco achieved in just over a decade what the United States took four decades to achieve.

But the situation is much worse for poor girls. While wealthier girls in countries like India and Pakistan may be enrolled in school right alongside boys their age, among the poorest 20 percent of children, girls have on average five years less education than do boys. In Niger, where only one in two girls attends primary school, just one in 10 goes to middle school, and stunningly only one in 50 goes to high school. That’s an outrage.

That leads me to a second blind spot. Even if girls in some countries are receiving more education, that education is not translating into opportunities in the workforce.

Let’s look at the Middle East and North Africa. There, on average, only one in four women is in the workforce. The rate of increase has been glacial —less than zero-point-two
percent annually—over the last 30 years. At this rate, the region will take 150 years to catch up to the current world average.

A study last year finds that women’s low economic participation creates income losses of 27 percent in the Middle East and North Africa. The same study estimates that raising female employment and entrepreneurship to male levels could improve average income by 19 percent in South Asia and 14 percent in Latin America.

Latin America offers a glimpse of promise for the future. There, rising education and falling fertility have expanded women’s economic opportunities. This increased economic activity among women has translated into a reduction in poverty by about 30 percent and has helped insulate their households from the recent financial shocks.

And, finally, maybe the biggest blind spot is the failure to see that it doesn’t matter if we educate girls or try to create jobs for them if they aren’t safe in their own homes.

One of the devastating realities about our world is the violence against women during wars and conflict. It’s an unacceptable and relatively well documented problem of epidemic proportions. But the kind of violence we are not talking about enough is domestic violence.

Globally, the most common form of violence women suffer is at the hands of their husbands, boyfriends, or partners. Worldwide, almost one third of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced such violence. That’s also an outrage.

Part of the reason that domestic violence has been such a big blind spot is that many people view it as a private matter. I would argue that domestic violence is a public matter, and that we have to consider it as a major challenge for all of us who work in development. If domestic violence continues to receive inadequate attention, it tells women they have less worth and less power than men. It undermines their ability to make choices and act on them independently, impacting not only them, but their families, communities, and economies.

Conservative estimates of lost productivity resulting from domestic violence are roughly equal to what most governments spend on primary education.

For me, the economic case for giving women and girls the same opportunities as men and boys is crystal clear. Last year Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe put his support behind “womenomics” – a term asserting that the advancement of women in society improves productivity, as the best talent can be employed regardless of gender. But a strong,
evidence-based economic case, no matter how irrefutable, won’t necessarily sway the hearts and minds of people for whom gender inequality is justified as a “cultural norm.”

As an anthropologist, I see cultural norms as social constructs that are contested, embedded in unequal power relations, and, ultimately, changeable. But in so many societies, cultural norms can yank the rug from under women and girls just as they start to gain their footing. A math class can teach girls multiplication, but their male teachers and, tragically, their mothers and female relatives can teach them to have limited aspirations. As a result, many women enter into a small range of jobs which have lower barriers to entry, but offer less stability and lower wages. Overwhelmingly, girls and women perform the unpaid work of caretaker, penalizing them with poverty when they grow old.

Worst of all, cultural norms can become institutionalized discrimination.

In 128 countries, legal differences in how men and women are treated constrain their economic opportunities. This includes laws that make it impossible for a woman to independently obtain an ID card, to own or use property, to access credit, and to get a job. In 15 countries, husbands can even prevent their wives from working. Cultural norms can become deeply entrenched but we know -- based on enormous evidence from all around the world -- that customs and attitudes can change, sometimes very quickly.

One good example is son preference. Countries where parents show a strong preference for sons report some 1.5 million fewer female births every year than demographers would predict. But look at South Korea. In the 1990s it had one of the worst sex ratios at birth in the world – more than 116 boys born for every 100 girls -- but now the ratios at birth are close to normal.

What are our next steps? What’s the plan? Clearly, we need to address our blind spots. We need to draw more attention to the major constraints for women and girls that are right in front of us.

Just last week, I spoke out against the implementation of draconian laws against gay and lesbians in 83 countries that have made homosexuality illegal. Institutionalized discrimination in all forms is bad for people and bad for societies. Discrimination against women, against gays and lesbians, against minorities, against people of color, against indigenous people, is not only morally wrong, it is bad for economies. At a time when countries are looking for ways to boost their economic growth in this competitive, unforgiving and interconnected world, their discrimination policies are holding them back.
Prejudice kills hope and profit. Prejudice destroys promise and economic opportunity for some of the potentially most productive people on earth.

We cannot allow this to continue. We need to find ways to confront discrimination wherever we see it, in whatever form it appears. In particular, we need to further energize the movement for equality for half of the people on this planet, for all women and girls – a movement that goes hand-in-hand with the movement to end poverty. As Helene and I and many of you here today know, social movements can change the world. But we also need a plan and we need to commit ourselves to very specific outcomes with very specific deadlines. We are completely committed to building that plan with all of you and we must commit even further to hold ourselves accountable for the real progress we know we can and must achieve.

Last October, I had the great privilege of hosting at the World Bank a remarkable Pakistani teenager, Malala Yousafzai, a year after she was shot in the face because of her public advocacy for girls' education. This brave young woman drew one of the largest crowds I’ve seen at the World Bank. More people came to see Malala than had come to see Bono. She was funnier than Bono, too!

During our conversation, Malala told me how she had started a social movement around education for girls first in Pakistan, and then around the world.

She said, and I quote: “The first thing is I believe in the power of the voice of women. And then I believe that when we work together, it’s really easy for us to achieve our goal. When I was in Swat, only a few of us were speaking, but still our voice had an impact. And now, not only I, but millions of girls are raising their voice and they are speaking. So I believe that through our voice, through raising our books and our pens, we can achieve our goals, and as soon as possible.” End quote.

If given the chance, women and girls are their own best advocates. We need to hear their voices. We need to bring in more men and boys in the movement for gender equality. We also need to make it more and more difficult for anyone to invoke culture or religion to justify oppression or human cruelty. For so many of us here in this room who enjoy many privileges and comforts, what would it mean to confront gender-related oppression and cruelty with the same fearlessness that Malala showed in the face of the Taliban gunman? If we can even begin to move together with that kind of resolve – given the
evidence we already have about the role of women – the world will be more peaceful, more prosperous, more just and worthy of the mothers who gave birth to us all.

Thank you very much.