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**From Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala,
Managing Director,
World Bank**

Dear Colleagues,

Over the past decades I have had the opportunity to look at development from a variety of perspectives, including as a development economist, as Finance Minister and as Managing Director. One essential observation pervades my experience; development is held up without the economic empowerment of women.

Multilateral financial institutions and governments of developing countries have historically been slow to embrace women's economic empowerment as a core strategy to reduce poverty. But lately, a growing number of governments, international organizations, NGOs and private sector partners have begun putting emphasis on the potential economic gains of increasing gender equality. They maintain that gains in recent decades in women's education and health levels can be converted to faster poverty reduction and development. This new interest to invest in women's access to productive employment and agriculture, entrepreneurship and financial services has helped forge new and sometimes surprising partnerships that straddle traditional divides, such as between the private and public sectors.

The World Bank's Adolescent Girl Initiative, which will be launched on October 10, 2008, is one example of such an innovative approach and partnership. The initiative began as a US\$3 million public-private sector partnership between the Government of Liberia, the World Bank Group and the Nike Foundation. In a pilot-phase, it will expand to at least six other low-income or post-conflict countries with new donors, governments, foundations and corporations participating. If successful, we hope to see the (cont. on p. 2)

Shining a Light on Women's Productivity in Lao PDR



Grayson C. Heffner/World Bank

The villagers of Phon Phang, a rice-growing community in the rural Savannakhet Province of Laos, will have opportunities for higher incomes and a better quality of life once connected to the electricity grid.

By Morten Larsen and Helene Carlsson Rex

In Lao PDR, many poor, primarily women-headed rural households find it impossible to connect to the electricity grid. A major obstacle for these households is the connection fee of about US\$100. In some areas, up to 40 percent of households have been unable to mobilize money for the connection cost and are thus left without access to electricity even though the grid is passing right through their village.

This lack of access to electricity is a large stumbling block for poverty reduction efforts. Evidence suggests that electricity not only helps extend hours for both productive and leisure activities in Lao PDR, but it also translates into better educational outcomes, improved social and community services, and better security. Surveys of newly-electrified rural households also show that grid electricity has

been used for income-generating activities such as water pumping for vegetable gardens, household industry like mat and basket weaving, and the use of refrigerators for small-scale entrepreneurship serving tourists, such as ice cream vending.

Moreover, electricity has been shown to help close gender gaps by reducing time spent on cumbersome chores, such as fetching water, and by allowing for greater flexibility in organizing household activities. The literacy gap between men and women is smaller

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Inside:

Zoellick Makes MDG3 Commitments	3
Tracking Gender Impact at IFC	4
In Brief	4
Women in Agriculture	5
Innovative Approaches in LAC	6
Low-Skilled Macedonian Women	7
Retirement Gap in Vietnam	8

