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“We are not there yet,” says Executive Director, Birgit Van Hout, on International Women’s Day

March 8, 2007 – International Women’s Day is a timely moment to remember that achieving gender equality and improving women’s lives should be a goal in itself. As micro-credit programs in developing countries demonstrate, it is also the fastest way to build healthier, better educated and more prosperous communities.

While we have come a long way in improving women’s rights and closing the gender gap, we are not there yet. Numerous women are victims of systemic discrimination, living in poverty in our own country – often single mothers with children. Many women also do not have access to affordable healthcare.

Violence against women remains a sad reality, taking a devastating toll on women’s lives, their families and on society as a whole. We also continue to see high teen pregnancy rates. As a community, we are failing these teens who are victims of *abstinence-only* teachings and denied access to birth control education.

On a different level, many working women struggle to combine work, household and family care, with limited infrastructure and few support networks to reduce time and stress burdens.

Wage disparities between men and women remain very real. And women, who make up the majority of the population and control a fair share of the purchase power, hold only 8% of the decision-making power in our country. How can women’s rights progress without adequate representation of women at all levels?

Changing this reality requires challenging traditions and harmful stereotypes that stand in the way of women and girls. It requires the efforts of all of us – women and men – to work for enduring transformation in values and attitudes.

Birgit Van Hout is the Executive Director of Community Tampa Bay. Community Tampa Bay changes the world one person at a time, causing a ripple effect. We envision a community free from all forms of discrimination – including gender discrimination – in which every individual is treated with dignity and respect. www.communitytampabay.org