

Women and Girls: Empowerment and Progress

Unleashing the power of women and girls will accelerate progress on all fronts.

In a world of 7 billion, every person should enjoy equal rights and dignity. We cannot afford to lose the full potential of half the world's population. Investing in women and girls is cost-effective and essential to solving the world's most challenging problems. When women are healthy and educated and can participate fully in society, they trigger progress in their families, communities and nations.

Yet women continue to face widespread discrimination and violence. They lag behind men in access to land, credit and decent jobs, and hold far fewer policy-making roles. Their social roles are often justified by culture or religion, but not biologically determined. These are societal arrangements which vary widely by locality and change constantly.

Advancing women's education, reproductive health and rights will enhance their well-being and productivity, improving prospects for current and future generations. Most of the money women earn is spent on their families' food, education and health care. Thus, investing in girls and women pays: it boosts national security by strengthening families, which promotes economic growth and community peace and stability.

The Situation

- In 1979, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a landmark treaty that offers a practical blueprint for achieving human rights and equality for women around the world.
- Laws and customs often deny women and girls the right to schooling, to own land, inherit property, get credit, receive training or move up in their field of work. Laws against domestic violence are often unenforced. Achieving gender equality will therefore require the support of men, who exercise most of the power in these areas.
- Of the world's 776 million illiterate adults, two-thirds are women.ⁱ
- Women perform some two-thirds of the world's work and produce half of all food, but they earn only 10 percent of the world's income and own 1 percent of the property.ⁱⁱ
- More than 134 million women are "missing" worldwide – because of a preference for boy babies that leads to sex-selective abortions and neglect of infant girls.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In sub-Saharan Africa, girls and women age 15-24 are twice as likely as men their age to become infected with HIV, in part because of economic and social vulnerability.^{iv}
- Despite increasing coverage, HIV antiretroviral drugs reach only half of women in need.^v
- Up to 70 percent of women experience violence in their lifetimes.^{vi} Gender-based violence kills or disables as many women age 15-44 as cancer does.^{vii}
- More than 101 million primary-school-age children are not attending school, and more than half of them are girls.^{viii}
- Poor reproductive health is the leading cause of death and disability among women 15-49 in developing countries.^{ix}
- More than 350,000 women die each year—one every 90 seconds – from complications of pregnancy or childbirth. Nearly all these deaths (99 percent) are in developing countries.^x

The Trends

- The 186 countries that have ratified CEDAW report every four years on their progress for women and girls. The treaty has been a guide for success in reducing sex trafficking and domestic abuse, providing access to education and vocational training, ensuring the right to vote, improving maternal health care, ending forced marriage and child marriage, and ensuring inheritance rights, among other benefits worldwide.
- Nearly all maternal deaths are preventable with cost-effective measures developed countries take for granted, such as access to basic and emergency health care before, during and immediately after delivery.
- Providing women with a full package of family planning and maternal and newborn care would reduce productivity losses related to pregnancy and premature death by 66 percent.^{xi}
- Stereotyping of gender roles and gender based discrimination begins in childhood, so efforts to support gender equality must start there, by addressing the roles of girls and boys and men and women in the household.

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- iii UNDP, the United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2010*, New York, 2010, p. 76: <http://www.weforum.org/issues/water>, Accessed 4/20/11
- iv UNFPA and UNICEF, op cit., p. 12
- v United Nations, *Millennium Development Goals: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – Progress Chart 2010*, New York, p. 2: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2010/MDG%20Report%202010%20%20Gender%20Brochure%20En.pdf>, Accessed 4/20/11
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- vii UNFPA and UNICEF, op cit., p. 12
- viii UNFPA and UNICEF, op cit., p. 18
- ix The World Bank, "Maternal Mortality and Morbidity," *Health, Nutrition and Population: Topics*: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTHEALTHNUTRITIONANDPOPULATION/EXTPRH/0,,contentMDK:20201062~menuPK:548481~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:376855,00.html>, Accessed 4/20/11
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