



Global Partners in Action: NGO Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Development

ICPD@15 International Conference on
Population and Development

Berlin, Germany | 2-4 September, 2009

www.globalngoforum.org

Gender Equality, Equity and the Empowerment of Women

While women's status remains appallingly low in much of the world, women have made substantial progress in achieving more education and positions of power in the political and professional areas. Women's rights are now part of the human rights agenda, and women and girls are increasingly recognized as indispensable for advancing development.

Many international agreements recognize women's human rights, but pervasive gender bias means women are much more likely than men to be malnourished, poor and illiterate, and to have less access to health care, property ownership, credit, training and employment. They are also more likely to be victims of violence, and they remain grossly under-represented in political and decision-making bodies.

The Situation

Empowered women are more free to be creative, to contribute to the health and productivity of their families and communities and to improve prospects for the next generation. Gender equality, one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (#3), is intimately linked to achieving the other seven MDGs.

- > In all regions, women are gaining access to literacy and education and at a faster rate than men. About 90 countries are on track to meet global goals for ending gender inequality in primary education by 2015.¹
- > Women perform 66 percent of the world's work and produce 50 percent of the food, but earn only 10 percent of the world's income and own 1 percent of the property.²
- > Discrimination against females – such as gender-based violence, economic discrimination, health care inequity and harmful traditional practices – is the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality.
- > Preference for sons has led to sex-selective abortions, higher child mortality rates for girls and skewed sex ratios in India and several other countries. Mothers' education has proven to be the single most important factor in reducing son preference.³
- > Disparities in treatment of girls and boys begin early in life and are at the root of many health problems and development challenges. Socially constructed gender roles may give girls little say about their own aspirations and hopes, and restrict them to being wives and mothers.
- > Social norms often press girls to marry and begin bearing children before they or their bodies are ready.
 - Child marriage jeopardizes girls' health and limits their opportunities, usually disrupts their education and often violates their human rights.
 - Married adolescent girls often find it difficult to obtain reproductive health services. In some countries, forced marriage to older men makes girls more vulnerable to HIV infection.
 - Despite a shift towards later marriage in many parts of the world, 82 million girls in developing countries who are now between age 10 and 17 will be married before their 18th birthday.⁴
 - Early childbearing is linked to obstetric fistula, a devastating tear in the birth canal that leaves women incontinent, leading to infection, odor and social ostracism.
 - Children of teenage mothers are more likely than others to suffer from low birth weight, malnutrition and anaemia, and are less likely to attend school.
- > Young women face more reproductive health vulnerabilities than men. Their risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections during unprotected sexual relations is two to four times that of men.⁵
- > Adolescent girls are often exposed to various forms of gender-based violence, from harmful traditional practices such as female genital cutting to the growing problem of sexual trafficking.
- > The first sexual experience for many girls is forced, often by people they know, including family members.
- > Dire poverty may lead parents to "sell" young girls to traffickers or force girls into sexual relations as a survival strategy.

- > Women occupy 18 percent of parliamentary seats around the world. In Nordic countries, women occupy 41.4 percent of seats, while in Arab states they hold only 9.6 percent.⁶
- > Several countries – including South Africa, India, Finland, and Argentina – have established quotas for women’s participation as elected officials, increasing women’s participation to 30-40 percent.⁷

The ICPD Commitment

The empowerment of women and improvement of their status are important ends in themselves and are essential for the achievement of sustainable development. Cairo Consensus objectives were to achieve equality and equity between men and women, to enable women to realize their full potential; to involve women fully in policy and decision-making processes and in all aspects of economic, political and cultural life as active decision-makers, participants and beneficiaries; and to ensure that all women as well as men receive the education required to meet their basic human needs and to exercise their human rights.

Participating countries agreed to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child, to eliminate the root causes of son preference, to increase public awareness of the value of the girl child and to strengthen her self-esteem. Leaders at all levels were urged to speak out and act forcefully against gender norms and discrimination based on preference for sons, and to establish special education and public information efforts to promote equal treatment of girls and boys in nutrition, health care, education and social, economic and political activity, as well as in law and custom and equitable inheritance.

Men play a key role in bringing about gender equality: in most countries they exercise preponderant power in nearly every sphere of life. Governments should encourage men to view the world through women’s eyes and to take responsibility for their own sexual and reproductive behaviour and their social and family roles.⁸

Areas for Action

- > Comprehensive education for girls must be provided as a powerful lever for their empowerment, as well as for reducing poverty. Education helps girls to know their rights and claim them for themselves and their families, and translates into economic improvement for them and their societies.
- > Mechanisms for women’s equal participation and equitable representation should be set up at all levels of the political process and public life. Governments must promote women’s education, skill development and employment; and eliminate all practices that discriminate against women, including those in the workplace and those affecting access to credit, control over property and social security.⁹
- > Countries should move to eliminate all forms of exploitation, abuse, harassment and violence against women, adolescents and girls, including genital mutilation, female infanticide, sex-selective abortions, trafficking of girl children and use of girls in prostitution and pornography.
- > Development interventions should take better account of the multiple demands on women’s time, with greater investment in lessening domestic responsibilities, and with attention to laws and policies that will enable employees of both sexes to harmonize their family and work lives.
- > Governments should develop an integrated approach to the special health, education and social needs of girls and young women, and should strictly enforce laws to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
- > Governments should move to ensure that parents give children appropriate financial support and should consider changes in law and policy to ensure men’s support for their children and families.

¹ Except where noted, facts and figures on this sheet are from "Gender Equality: A Cornerstone of Development," UNFPA, New York, 2009, <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/index.htm> (accessed Aug. 3, 2009)

² UNICEF, "Gender Equality – The Big Picture," 2007, http://www.unicef.org/gender/index_bigpicture.html (accessed Aug. 11, 2009)

³ International Center for Research on Women, *Son Preference and Daughter Neglect in India*, Washington DC, ICRW, 2006, p. 2 http://www.icrw.org/docs/2006_son-preference.pdf (accessed Aug. 11, 2009)

⁴ UNFPA, "Gender Equality: Giving Special Attention to Girls," UNFPA, New York, 2009, <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/girls.htm> (accessed Aug. 12, 2009)

⁵ UNFPA, "Gender Equality: Giving..." (accessed Aug. 12, 2009)

⁶ International Women’s Democracy Center, "Women’s Political Participation," fact sheet, International Women’s Democracy Center, Washington D.C., June 2008, http://www.iwdc.org/resources/fact_sheet.htm (accessed Aug. 18, 2009)

⁷ International Women’s Democracy Center, "Women’s..." (accessed Aug. 18, 2009)

⁸ United Nations, "Summary of the ICPD Commitment: Chapter IV, Gender Equality, Equity, and Empowerment of Women," United Nations Department of Public Information, New York, 1994, <http://www.unfpa.org/icpd/summary.cfm#chapter4> (accessed Aug. 5, 2009)

⁹ Remainder of "Areas for Action" taken from United Nations, "Summary..." (accessed Aug. 5, 2009)