

# Toward Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women



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Many decades of organizing and advocacy by women's organizations and networks across the world have resulted in global recognition of the contributions that women make to economic development and of the costs to societies of persistent inequalities between women and men. The success of those efforts is evident in the promises countries have made over the past two decades through international forums. The inclusion of gender equality and women's empowerment as the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is a reminder that many of those promises have not been kept, while simultaneously offering another international policy opportunity to implement them.

Toward reaching Goal 3, the international development community has set this year as the deadline for achieving a first milestone: eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. Unfortunately, progress has been slow and this first target will be missed in 19 countries for primary education and 24 countries for secondary. But it's not too late to pick up the pace by building women's capabilities, improving their access to economic and political opportunity, and guaranteeing women's safety so that the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment can be met by 2015.

Because gender inequality is deeply rooted in entrenched attitudes, societal institutions, and market forces that vary from community to community, different steps are needed in different countries. The U.N. Millennium Project's Task Force on Education and Gender Equality has outlined seven strategic priorities that require action today if Goal 3 is to be met within the next decade. These interdependent priorities can be applied in any setting, and are the minimum action necessary to alter the historical legacy of disadvantages against women. They include:

1. Strengthen opportunities for secondary education of girls while meeting commitments to universal primary education;
2. Guarantee sexual and reproductive health and rights;
3. Invest in infrastructure to reduce women's and girls' time burdens;

4. Guarantee women's and girls' property and inheritance rights;
5. Eliminate gender inequalities in employment by decreasing women's reliance on informal employment, closing gender gaps in earnings, and reducing occupational segregation;
6. Increase women's share of seats in national parliaments and local governmental bodies; and
7. Combat violence against girls and women.

The world community has the knowledge and technology to reduce gender inequalities and empower women. Moreover, many developing country governments and communities already are taking the necessary steps to put these priorities into action. But to avoid missing the 2015 mark, political commitment at the highest international and national levels is needed to institute policies and allocate the resources necessary to achieve a world where women are healthy, safe, and empowered to control their own destinies.

## Millennium Development Goals

**The empowerment of women and gender equality must be integrated into each of the MDGs if all the development goals are to be met.**

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| <b>Goal 1</b> | Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger         |
| <b>Goal 2</b> | Achieve Universal Primary Education          |
| <b>Goal 3</b> | Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women    |
| <b>Goal 4</b> | Reduce Child Mortality                       |
| <b>Goal 5</b> | Improve Maternal Health                      |
| <b>Goal 6</b> | Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Other Diseases |
| <b>Goal 7</b> | Ensure Environmental Sustainability          |
| <b>Goal 8</b> | Develop a Global Partnership for Development |

## Strengthen Girls' Secondary Education

To date, global commitments to girls' education have focused on primary education. As a result, during the past decade girls' primary school enrollment rates have increased in most regions. This focus must continue, and international commitments to universal primary education must be met because primary education results in positive health outcomes for both girls and women. However, research shows that secondary or post-primary education has the greatest payoff in terms of women's empowerment. So in addition to universal primary education, the Task Force is calling for a focus on girls' secondary education as well.

Many insights and lessons have been learned during the past two decades on how to eliminate gender disparity in education. The Task Force identifies four strategies that can be used in a variety of countries:

- Make girls' schooling more affordable by reducing fees and offering targeted scholarships;
- Build schools close to girls' homes and allow for flexible class schedules;
- Make schools girl-friendly by improving the safety, design, and policies of schools, such as building latrines for girls and allowing married adolescents to attend school; and
- Improve the quality of education by training more women as teachers, especially in secondary schools, using gender-sensitive textbooks, and developing curriculum for girls that is strong in math and science.

### **Cash-for-education Program Shows Quick Results**

In Mexico, the government – concerned by evidence that showed girls dropping out of school at high rates after primary school – initiated in 1997 a cash-for-education program called Progresá. Using an award system that grants girls incrementally higher payments as they progress through primary and secondary school, the program increased girls' primary school enrollment by 1 percent (to 94 percent) and increased secondary school enrollment by between 3.5 percent and 5.8 percent (to between 70 percent and 73 percent). Even small program changes can improve education for girls in short time.

## Guarantee Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Currently, women's reproductive health remains poor, and in many developing countries, women's reproductive rights are not being fully realized. As a result, maternal mortality rates are high. A woman's chance of dying from pregnancy-related complications is nearly 50 times higher in developing countries than in developed countries. Women also are increasingly vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, particularly HIV. Many sexually active adolescents do not

use contraception. Of the roughly 260 million women ages 15-19 worldwide, both married and unmarried, about 11 percent (29 million) are sexually active and do not want to become pregnant but are not using a modern method of birth control. To ensure the health of women, children, and families in developing countries, women must be guaranteed universal access to sexual and reproductive health services through the primary health care system, including full access to sexual and reproductive health information. Comprehensive sexuality education programs also are needed outside of the health care system.

Nearly half of maternal deaths in the developing world occur during labor, delivery or the immediate postpartum period. Access to skilled care and emergency obstetrics services during these periods is critical. However, about two-thirds of births worldwide occur outside of health facilities. Consequently, increasing women's access to emergency obstetric care is crucial to ensuring maternal health. Skilled birth attendants also are needed. In Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo, special training of nonspecialist medical personnel, such as medical assistants and nurses, has led to lower maternal mortality rates.

A key lesson learned in the fight against HIV and AIDS is that single-purpose programs almost always fail to reach women. Instead, counseling, prevention, and treatment services for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections need to be integrated with other reproductive health services and made available through the primary health care system. Such an approach best helps the most vulnerable girls and women, such as poor women and adolescents. Moreover, when it comes to HIV and AIDS or any other reproductive health issue, men are important allies in improving women's health. They should be engaged both as partners and agents of change.

## **Infrastructure To Ease Time Burdens**

Women's and girls' ability to go to school and participate in civic activities often is limited by their responsibilities at home. Routine tasks such as drawing water, collecting firewood or walking to a market can take hours, not minutes. One study found that women in Zambia spent more than 800 hours a year collecting firewood and an additional 200 hours fetching water (Malmberg Calvo 1994).

The time burden on women and girls can be dramatically reduced with the appropriate infrastructure: efficient energy sources, accessible and affordable transportation, and water and sanitation systems. Cooking fuels such as kerosene and liquefied petroleum gas are recognized as good substitutes for traditional biofuels because of their higher thermal efficiency and relative lack of pollutants. Feeder and main roads can greatly expand women's opportunities, especially when combined with accessible and affordable modes of trans-

portation. Finally, increasing women's participation in the design and implementation of infrastructure projects can help overcome obstacles to access and affordability.

### **Diesel Engine Saves Women Time in Mali**

In Mali, the U.N. Industrial Development Organization and the International Fund for Agriculture worked with communities and women's groups to design and create platforms with a 10-horsepower diesel engine that supplies power for various activities, including agricultural milling and de-husking, lighting, welding, and pumping water. Between 1999 and 2004, some 400 platforms were installed across the country, reaching 8,000 women. A study of the impact in 12 villages found several beneficial impacts. Women were able to save time and labor and shift into income-generating activities, leading to an average daily increase of \$0.47. More girls also stayed in school until grade 5, and women's health improved because they were able to visit local clinics more often (Modi 2004).

## **Guarantee Property and Inheritance Rights**

People who own and control assets such as land and housing have more economic security, are more likely to take economic risks that lead to growth, and receive important economic returns including income. Yet women in many countries are far less likely than men to own or control assets. Ensuring women's property and inheritance rights is a crucial step in empowering women.

Since 1995, there has been growing awareness and policy attention to this issue. But there is no easy fix. Interventions must be context-specific and considered carefully. To begin, countries need to identify the points at which discrimination occurs, including complex and archaic legal systems, deep-rooted social and cultural norms, and a persistent lack of awareness of individual rights and legal protections.

Within countries, several types of changes are necessary to ensure women's property rights: amending and harmonizing statutory and customary laws, promoting legal literacy, supporting women's organizations that can help women make land claims, and recording women's share of land or property. In areas that are moving toward formal land registration systems, joint titling can enhance women's access to land, helping to guard against capricious decision making by a spouse and protecting against the dispossession of women due to abandonment, separation or divorce.

### **New Family Laws in Vietnam Help Women Secure Land Rights**

In Vietnam, marriage and family laws were revised in 2001, requiring both the husband's and wife's signature on any document registering family assets and land use rights. This significantly changed the former policy where certificates only had space for one signature – typically the husband's – and women could only claim their rights in the presence of their husband (Prosterman and Hanstad 2003; Ravallion and van de Walle 2004; World Bank 2002).

## Reduce Gender Inequality in Employment

In the past two decades, women increasingly are employed in part because of global economic changes. Between 1990 and 2002, women's share of non-agricultural employment increased in 93 of 131 countries. Yet women's status in the labor market remains significantly inferior to men's. The preferential hiring of men, occupational segregation, and women receiving lower pay for equal work are all examples of ongoing gender inequality in employment. Not only do such inequalities contravene women's right to work, but they are costly for women, their families, and their communities.

Interventions to address employment barriers and constraints take many forms, but they should be focused on reducing women's reliance on the informal market, closing the gender gap in earnings, and reducing occupational segregation. Expansion of national policies and programs to provide support for care—of children, people with disabilities, and the elderly—is an important intervention to enable women to participate in paid employment. In addition, broader economic and social policies are needed, such as supporting employment-enhancing economic growth in low-income countries, providing social protections like health and disability insurance, enforcing equality opportunity legislation, and reforming pension systems to reduce gender inequalities. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Decent Work initiative provides an international framework for promoting equal access to and treatment in employment.

## Increase Women's Seats in Government

Ensuring that women can participate in decision making on equal footing with men in all political arenas is key to empowering women. In the past decade, some countries have made notable progress in increasing women's representation in political bodies. Still, in only 14 countries do women hold 30 percent or more of the seats in their national parliaments. Three factors have proven successful in boosting women's participation in parliaments and local bodies. Gender quotas and reservations are an effective policy tool to increase women's representation. Strong women's movements and government policies that reduce women's multiple burdens also can facilitate women's political participation.

### **Citizens' Movement Helps Women Secure Parliamentary Seats**

Prior to the first post-independence parliamentary election in Timor-Leste (formerly East Timor), women's organizations and their U.N. advisers considered setting quotas for women's participation. The Timor-Leste Women's Network (REDE), comprised of 14 women's organizations, advocated mandatory quotas of 30 percent. The United Nations opposed the institution of quotas, arguing that winning seats in an open election would provide more sustainable and effective representation of women's interests in the long run. Still, the REDE campaign led to the United Nations providing funds and training to women candidates. In the end, 27 percent of the parliamentary seats went to women.



## Combat Violence Against Women

Violence against women occurs in epidemic proportions in many countries around the world. Surveys in various countries have found that between 10 percent and 69 percent of women report having experienced domestic violence. Though no single intervention will eliminate violence against women, a combination of infrastructural, legal, judicial, enforcement, health, and other service-related actions can significantly reduce it and its consequences. First and foremost, however, violence against women must be viewed as unacceptable. The Task Force recommends that the U.N. Secretary-General, alongside heads of state, spearhead a global campaign establishing this norm and mobilizing resources and support to implement national plans to end violence against women.

### Lending Programs Can Help Curb Domestic Violence

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has helped reduce domestic violence through its lending programs. Since 1998, the IDB has approved more than \$123 million in lending for the control and prevention of domestic violence in five countries: Chile, Columbia, Honduras, Jamaica, and Uruguay. These loans raised substantial domestic counterparts in the five countries. Some loans also integrated gender concerns within projects such as providing victims treatment; and ensuring that domestic violence data are collected in national crime information systems, police are trained to handle domestic violence cases, and the courts train judges and probation officers on intrafamily violence. Some funding also goes to women's nongovernmental organizations that specialize in the research, advocacy, and treatment of violence against women (Prepared by Mayra Buvinic, Inter-American Development Bank, 2004).

## Making It Happen

Although no country has successfully addressed all seven strategic priorities, some countries have shown that significant progress can be made to empower women and reduce gender disparities. The problem is not a lack of practical ways to address gender inequality but rather a lack of change on a large and deep enough scale to transform the way societies define and organize men's and women's roles, responsibilities, and control over resources. To make change happen, countries need:

- *Political Commitment* – Political leaders must be committed and help mobilize individuals and institutions at all levels of government and within international bodies;
- *Technical Capacity* – Leaders and others need technical expertise and knowledge of how to mainstream gender concerns into development policies and programs;
- *Institutional and Structural Change* – Women's groups, civil society, and government agencies need to push for change in the rules, structures, and processes that specify how resources are allocated and how tasks,

responsibilities, and values are assigned in institutions and society more broadly;

- *Adequate Resources* – Government and nongovernmental organizations need adequate funding for direct interventions, and to build capacity, collect data, and evaluate programs and policies for gender equality and women’s empowerment; and
- *Accountability and Monitoring* – Governments, international institutions, and civil society organizations need systems and best practices to ensure that fundamental change is broad-based and lasting.

Moreover, costs do not have to be a barrier. The Task Force collaborated with the U.N. Millennium Project to create a needs assessment methodology to help countries and organizations calculate the costs of fulfilling the different strategic priorities. Though not exact, the estimates provide a guide to the level of investment needed to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. Results from the assessment in Tajikistan – though preliminary – are illustrative, suggesting that the cost of universal primary and expanded secondary education would be roughly \$20 per person annually. The cost of setting up a primary health care system for child and maternal health, major infectious diseases, and sexual and reproductive health would average about \$29 per person annually. The cost of gender-specific interventions to meet Goal 3 in Tajikistan is estimated at \$10.56 million each year, which is 0.003 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and contrasts with Tajikistan’s debt-servicing payments, which accounted for approximately 4 percent of its GDP in 2001.

The next 10 years provide a new window of opportunity to take action on a global scale to achieve gender equality and empower women as part of meeting the MDGs. Governments and international organizations must set the tone and create the environment to make this possible. With adequate space and resources, women’s organizations can help transform societies in ways that remove women’s constraints, guarantee their rights, and allow women to fulfill their potential.

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This brief includes excerpts from *Taking action: achieving gender equality and empowering women*, the 2005 report of the U.N. Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality. The Task Force was commissioned by the U.N. Secretary-General to identify strategies that low- and middle-income countries can adopt to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of gender equality and women's empowerment and to make recommendations to the international community on how best to support countries toward that end. The Task Force was led by Nancy Birdsall, president of the Center for Global Development; Geeta Rao Gupta, president of the International Center for Research on Women; and Amina Ibrahim, Education for All coordinator in Nigeria's Ministry of Education. Members included presidents and directors of nongovernmental organizations in India, Nigeria, Senegal, the United States, and Zambia; leaders of activist groups in the Dominican Republic and Kenya; scholars in Luxembourg, Mexico, Senegal, and the United Kingdom; parliamentary and government officials in Brazil, Nigeria, and Uganda; and senior staff and education experts of the U.N. Development Programme, the U.N. Children's Fund, the U.N. Development Fund for Women, the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the International Labour Organization, the World Food Programme, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Bank.

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