

IMPROVING WOMEN'S LIVES: PROGRESS AND OBSTACLES

In the last 10 years, the lives of women and girls around the world have, on average, improved due in part to concerted action by the international community and national governments and in part through the actions of women and girls themselves. Today, there is greater awareness that gender equality is important for economic development and poverty reduction, and there is a greater commitment to promoting gender equality almost everywhere. But declaring victory would be premature. Gender inequalities still prevail in many countries, as evidenced by such indicators as high and unchanged maternal mortality, disparities in access to secondary education and basic health services, and women's underrepresentation at all government levels. At the same time, the challenges to achieving gender equality have evolved as a result of such forces as increased globalization and the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Global trends in improving girls' and women's lives are outlined below, and remaining areas in need of action are highlighted.

GLOBAL PROGRESS

In the 30 years since the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City, the world has witnessed significant improvements in women's status and in gender equality in most developed and developing countries.

Improvements in Girls' Education

With few exceptions, female education levels have improved considerably. In South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, girls' primary enrollment rates doubled in the second half of the 20th century, rising faster than boys' enrollment rates and substantially reducing gender gaps in schooling (World Bank 2001a). In several regions, primary enrollment rates have flattened out at high levels: in East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe and Central Asia, gross enrollment rates for females have reached or surpassed 100 percent (World Bank 2001a). In 2000, the global gap in the numbers of girls compared to boys enrolled in primary education was five percentage points, compared to 16



percentage points in 1975. By 2000, the gender gap in primary completion rates in low-income countries was 13 percentage points, compared to 18 in 1990 (World Bank 2004a). For example, girls' gross enrollment rates in The Gambia more than doubled between 1980 and 2000, rising from 36 to 75 percent; in Guinea, the gross enrollment rate for girls increased from 19 percent in 1990 to 63 percent 11 years later (Kane 2004).

Progress in Women's Life Expectancy

Another area of progress is women's life expectancy. Better diets, safer water, and control of communicable diseases have improved health and longevity in many parts of the world. Since 1970, average life expectancies have increased by 15 to 20 years in developing countries (World Bank 2001a). The expected biological pattern of greater female than male longevity has emerged worldwide: by 1990, female life expectancy exceeded male life expectancy in all developing regions. For the first time, women in South Asia now live longer than men (World Bank 2001a). This improvement in women's longevity is an indicator of better treatment of women and girls and a valued outcome that the Beijing Platform for Action identified.

Improvements in Women's Labor Market Position

There have also been improvements in women's labor market position in some regions and countries. Since the 1970s, women's labor force participation has risen an average of 15 percentage points in East Asian and Latin American countries (World Bank 2001a). The female share of non-agricultural employment has also increased. Between 1990 and 2002, 81 countries (of 111 studied) experienced increases in the female share of non-agricultural employment, while 30 countries saw declines (most of the latter were countries in Europe and Central Asia or the Middle East and North Africa, which were experiencing economic slowdowns) (ILO 2003). Globally, South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa have the lowest female shares of non-agricultural employment, although in some countries in these regions, women's employment share is relatively high (UN MDG Task Force 2004).

Although labor codes vary widely across countries, some countries have revised their labor codes to establish more equal treatment of men and women in the labor force. Examples include the extension of state benefits to informal workers in Chile, South Africa, and Thailand; new government policies in Jordan and the Philippines that set minimum standards for migrant contracts that include life insurance, medical care, workplace protections, and rest days (UN MDG Task Force 2004); and policies to increase female representation in highly skilled technology positions in Brazil, India, and Malaysia (Gurumurthy 2004).

Improved Property Rights and Political Representation

Since Beijing, women's property and inheritance rights have also improved in some countries. One example has been the introduction of joint husband-wife land titling in several Latin American and Asian countries. In some countries, women have made notable progress in political life, sometimes through the introduction of quota systems to increase women's representation in political governance structures. For example, India adopted constitutional amendments in 1993 that required that one-third of local council seats be reserved for women. Similarly, in Pakistan, the 2000 Devolution of Power Plan reserved 33 percent of local legislative seats for women. And in Rwanda, the post-conflict reconstruction era brought significant increases in female political representation, the establishment of women's councils at all political levels, and the promotion of affirmative action in local administration (Rwandan Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2002).

Over the past three decades, women's issues have gained prominence on the international and national development agendas. Attention went not only to the plight of poor and disenfranchised women in developing countries, but also to the unfinished gender agenda in more developed countries, such as addressing women's underrepresentation in higher-paying jobs and management positions and reducing the prevalence of gender-based violence.

PERSISTENT AND EVOLVING CHALLENGES

Despite these advances, the Beijing Platform for Action has yet to be fully implemented. Progress in improving women's lives has been highly uneven across countries and regions, and there is no region where women and men enjoy full equality in social, economic, and legal rights. In many countries, women still lack independent rights to own land, manage property, or conduct business. And in most countries, women are underrepresented in political decision-making bodies. Progress in some of the "critical areas of concern" identified at Beijing does not necessarily guarantee progress in others. Some countries display considerable advances in women's health and education, yet still have not addressed women's overrepresentation in the informal labor market or low representation in politics.

Limited Progress on Many Health Indicators

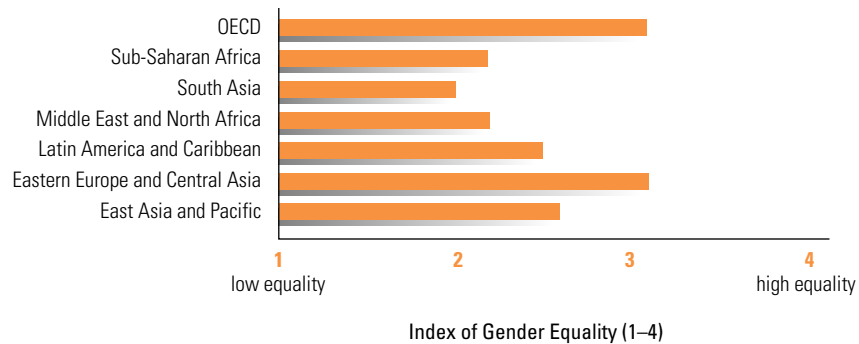
Although many health indicators in developing countries have improved over the last two decades, maternal mortality ratios have shown little change. Only the Middle East and North Africa region is on target to meet the maternal mortality MDG, which sets out to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters between 1990 and 2015 (World Bank 2004f).



Every year, more than 500,000 women die from preventable pregnancy-related causes, and for every woman who dies, millions more survive but suffer a debilitating injury, often with lifelong consequences (UNFPA 2004). Only 58 percent of women in developing countries deliver with the assistance of a trained midwife or doctor, and only 40 percent give birth in a hospital or health center (World Bank 2003). There continues to be a high unmet need for affordable, accessible, and sustainable reproductive health care, including family planning.

Women continue to suffer other health problems, such as malnutrition and respiratory infections. Millions of poor households in developing countries rely on traditional biomass fuels for cooking and domestic heating, and suffer a disproportionately high burden of ill health from exposure to indoor smoke as a result. In particular, indoor air pollution causes acute respiratory infections in children and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in women. For example, an estimated 500,000 women and children die in India each year due to indoor air pollution-related causes (Smith 1999).

In No Region of the World Are Women and Men Equal in Legal, Social, and Economic Rights



Source: World Bank 2001a.

Note: A value of 1 indicates low gender equality in rights and a value of 4, high equality. The rights indicators used in figure 1 are an average of three indexes of gender equality in rights collected for more than 100 countries. The three indexes focus on gender equality in political and legal rights, social and economic rights, and rights in marriage and in divorce proceedings. The indexes are constructed using a consistent methodology across countries in which the extent of rights is evaluated against rights as specified in several human rights instruments of the United Nations.

Figure 1.1

Globally, women account for 48 percent of adults infected with HIV/AIDS, but infection rates are increasing more rapidly among females than among males. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 57 percent of those infected are women (UNAIDS 2004). In many African countries, females aged 15–24 have prevalence rates three times higher or more than those of males of the same age (UNAIDS 2004). And in many Caribbean countries, women are the majority of new HIV cases. Women also continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for caring for sick family members, including those ill with AIDS.

Gender-Based Violence Remains Prevalent

Gender-based violence occurs in all countries. Rooted in gender inequalities, violence against women, including domestic violence, is often tolerated and sometimes even condoned by community norms and unprotected under the law. Results from 50 surveys across the world estimate that 10–50 percent of women have been victims of physical violence by an intimate partner at some time in their lives (Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottemoeller 1999). Women's exposure to violence is amplified in post-conflict-settings. One study found that one-quarter of Burundian women in a Tanzanian refugee camp had experienced sexual violence since becoming refugees (Nduna and Goodyear 1997).

Slow Improvements in Secondary Education

Although there has been a clear trend towards gender equality in education in the last decades, the gains have been slow and uneven. In 2000, girls constituted more than 57 percent of the 104 million children aged 6–11 not in school (UNESCO 2003) and women were almost two-thirds of the 860 million non-literates worldwide (UNESCO 2003). On average, women in South Asia have only half as many years of schooling as men. And in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 60 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school, far short of the 100 percent called for in the Millennium Development Goals (World Bank 2003). Secondary education statistics paint a bleaker picture. Current estimates predict that only 22 of 128 countries studied will reach gender parity in secondary education by 2015 (UNESCO 2003). Boys' secondary enrollments have not reached 100 percent either, with only small gains having been made in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, and there are countries in which girls' secondary enrollments exceed boys' (World Bank 2004g). But in most countries, the secondary education deficit remains particularly acute for females.

Persistent Labor Market Inequalities

Increases in women's educational attainment relative to men's have not translated into gender equality in earnings. Large gender gaps in earnings persist in most countries. On average, female employees worldwide earn about three-quarters of what men earn. Gender differences in education, work experience, and job characteristics explain only about one-fifth of this gap (World Bank 2001a). In the East Asian countries that have grown rapidly, in part because of exports produced with female labor, gender wage gaps remain large and have worsened in some cases (Seguino 2000). Worldwide, women also remain underrepresented in higher paying jobs, including administrative and managerial jobs.

Across developing regions, female-run enterprises tend to be less well capitalized than those run by males. Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, female farmers have less access than male farmers to machinery, fertilizers, and extension information. With a few notable exceptions, female-managed enterprises—farm and non-farm—continue to have relatively less access to credit and related financial services.

Persistent Inequalities in Property Ownership, Civil Rights, and Political Representation

In all regions of the world, there is evidence of significant gender disparities in land ownership. For example, data for five Latin American countries (Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru) show that women constitute one-third or less

of all landowners (Deere and León 2003). In Brazil, women are only 11 percent of the landowners, while in Paraguay—which has the highest percentage of female landowners among the five countries—women make up 30 percent of all landowners (Deere and León 2003). In the Latin America and Caribbean region, where gender disparities in most human development indicators are relatively small and inheritance laws relatively egalitarian, gender differences in land ownership stand out. In many Sub-Saharan African countries, women obtain land rights chiefly through their husbands, losing these rights when they are divorced or widowed. The spread of HIV/AIDS has exacerbated the problem of widows losing their rights to land.

While noticeable gains have been made, women nonetheless continue to be vastly underrepresented at all levels of government, with limited power to influence decision making. In 2004, the proportion of seats that women held globally in national parliaments was 15.6 percent, up by less than 2 percentage points since 1990 (IPU 2004).

Thirty years after the First World Conference on Women, despite significant commitments to improve women's and girls' lives and impressive gains in some areas and countries, gender inequalities remain common. Policies and programs need to address the ongoing gender inequalities in resources, rights, and voice. The next section illustrates some of the World Bank's contributions to improving women's and girls' lives since the Beijing Conference.