

## ICPD Beyond 2014 Issue Brief: Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

The hallmark commitment of the ICPD to women's empowerment and gender equality was not only an aspiration for dignity, but pivotal to creating the enabling conditions in which half the global population will have the possibility to define the direction of their lives, expand their capabilities, and elaborate their chosen contributions to society. The ICPD Programme of Action drew historic and overdue attention to the intimate relationship between women's relative freedoms in marriage, sexuality and reproduction, their gendered position in society, and their lifetime health and well-being. Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human rights imperative that is key to social and economic development. Empowered women are able to claim their rights and contribute to the health and productivity of their families and communities and, in so doing, improve the prospects of the next generation.

In the years since the ICPD, many governments have established institutions to promote women's empowerment and gender equality. Yet, despite progress made, the empowerment of women and girls and gender equality remain unfulfilled and discrimination against women is evident in all societies and across all sectors. Many women continue to suffer from violence, lower wages than men, disproportionate burden of the consequences of poverty, and unequal access to education and health services. Further, many people are socialized to embrace subordination of women to men, and to adopt gender values that hold ideal femininity to be incompatible with independence, power or leadership. In certain regions, women's agency may be further compromised by early or forced marriage, unintended pregnancy and early childbearing.

### ***Productive and Reproductive Roles***

**In the labour market, women continue to be paid less than men for equal work, to be substantially over-represented in vulnerable and informal employment where jobs are less secure and provide fewer benefits.** While women's paid employment has risen since 1995, they are under-represented in positions of power and decision-making. It is estimated that, in all regions, women spend at least twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic work; and when paid and unpaid work are combined together, women's total work hours are longer than men's.

Only 1 in 5 countries for which data is available have promulgated and enforced laws on all of the following: preventing workplace discrimination against women; enabling maternity and paternity leave; enabling the needs of breastfeeding mothers in the workplace; and facilitating compatibility between labour force participation and parental responsibilities.

**Gender equality in the home and the workplace demands involvement of men and**

**boys in reproductive roles and household chores to reduce women's double-burden of responsibility,** and to allow them to realize their full and fair participation in both productive and reproductive life and to enjoy equal status in society.

**Gender equality in education, skill development, and equal access to all sectors of employment is beneficial for economic growth** and can result in broad productivity gains and increased profitability; improved well-being of women and their families; and more inclusive institutions and policies.

### ***Education***

Despite notable gains in parity at the primary school level, **secondary education remains a challenge for adolescent girls in many regions,** especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia due to factors that include gender discrimination -both inside and outside of schools, including family and social pressures for girls to devote more time to household labour-, early marriage, potential increases in emotional and physical dangers as girls face

risks of sexual harassment and assault, lack of bathrooms, families' unwillingness to pay school fees for girls, and the potentially unsafe daily journey to school.

Education of all children increases their capacity to participate socially, economically and politically, but when girls are educated it reduces the likelihood of child marriage and delays childbearing, leading to healthier birth outcomes. **Female literacy is associated with increased use of contraception, lower fertility, healthier families and stronger GDP growth.** Greater educational attainment also shapes attitudes of both girls and boys to gender equality.

### ***Gender Values***

While belief in and commitment to gender equality is not universal, data suggests that **values of gender equality have been trending upwards in most countries** since the mid-1990s, with key exceptions. In most countries, the majority of people no longer believe that a university education makes a difference only for boys. Yet, data show that men are considered better business and political leaders by 50% or more people in almost half of countries surveyed, and there has been a measurable decline in the proportion of males who endorse specific justifications for physical intimate partner violence.

### ***Gender Based Violence***

Despite positive changes in values towards violence, **an estimated one in three women worldwide report they have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse**, mostly at the hands of an intimate partner. A recent UN multi-country study in Asia and the Pacific found that nearly half of the 10,000 men interviewed reported using physical and/or sexual violence against a female partner, and nearly a quarter reported perpetrating rape against a woman or girl. Half of those who admitted to rape reported a first perpetration when they were teenagers. Of those men who admitted to rape, many expressed a belief that men have a right to sex with women regardless of consent and the vast majority had experienced no legal consequences.

**Gender based violence has serious short- and long-term social and economic costs for societies**, including direct costs through health expenditures; indirect economic costs on workforce participation, missed days of work, and lifetime earnings as well as indirect costs to the long-term health and well-being of children.

### ***Harmful Practices***

**Harmful practices, such as early, child and forced marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) remain prevalent, despite advances in legislation.** An estimated 125 million women and girls live with the consequences of FGM/C worldwide, with approximately 3 million girls, the majority under age 15, at risk of undergoing FGM/C each year. Despite a global rise in the age at first marriage and legislation in 158 countries recognizing 18 years as the legal age of marriage, an estimated 34 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 in developing regions had been married or in union before age 18 in the period 2000-2011. Girls from the poorest households, with the least education and living in rural areas bear the greatest risk.

### ***Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights***

The promotion and protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are instrumental to the achievement and enjoyment of human rights. **The ability to fully exercise one's SRHR can mean the difference between life and death for millions of women and adolescent girls:** the difference between dying during pregnancy or childbirth from preventable causes and delivering safely; the difference between an unintended pregnancy and the possibility of pursuing an education and an autonomous life; and the ability of any individual, irrespective of their social condition, identity or status, to enjoy a safe and satisfying sexual life free from violence and coercion and without fear of illness, disability or death.

Many women and adolescent girls face severe barriers exercising their sexual and reproductive health and rights. **An estimated**

**222 million women in developing countries who wish to avoid pregnancy are not using modern contraception**, most of them in the poorest countries, in the most disadvantaged groups. **800 women still die from pregnancy or childbirth-related complications each day**, despite a 47% decrease in maternal mortality ratio between 1990 and 2010. Women in developed countries have a one in 3800 lifetime risk of dying of maternal causes, compared to one in 150 in developing regions. Further, for every maternal death, there are 20 maternal morbidities.

Adolescent birth rates are highest in poor countries, and in all countries clustered among the poorest segments of society. Worldwide, more than **15 million girls age 15 to 19 years give birth every year. A significant proportion of adolescent pregnancies result from non-consensual sex, and most take place in the context of early marriage.** Pregnancies occurring at young ages have greater health risks for mother and child, and many girls who become pregnant drop out, are dismissed or unable to return to school, drastically limiting their future opportunities.

#### ***Ageing***

Due to longer life expectancy among women, elderly women outnumber elderly men in most societies. **Integrating gender into policies and support for older persons is critical**, including in health and other types of care.

#### ***Access to property and land***

**Women around the world continue to suffer from having limited access to property, leading to disproportionate poverty** in households led by women, being denied inheritance, and/or left to rely on relatives in the case of widowhood or divorce. While most countries allow property ownership and do not legally differentiate between men and women, in practice enormous numbers of women are denied their rights to land ownership. Whether in rural areas of developing countries where they produce the large majority of food but hold title to almost no land, or in urban areas where women-headed households are

common and formal land ownership is particularly scarce for the poor, enormous numbers of women lack the security of home and livelihood for which land tenure and property rights are so critical. Furthermore, as access to formal credit relies heavily on asset-based lending, women's reduced access to land limits their access to credit and economic opportunities.

#### ***Mobility***

**Increasingly, women are migrating on their own or as heads of households and principal wage earners**, both internally and internationally. Urban contexts may hold an appeal for young women, who regard the move to urban areas as an opportunity to escape traditional patriarchy and experience new freedoms. Approximately half of all international migrants worldwide today are women. While greater mobility may provide greater economic opportunities, women also may experience increased vulnerabilities.

#### ***Key Messages and Areas for Action***

**The unequal progress in advancing gender equality urgently demands strengthened actions to ensure women's leadership in public spheres, equality before the law and in practice, elimination of all forms of violence, and empowerment of women in exercising their sexual and reproductive health and rights.**