

## VIII. CONTRIBUTION OF THE ICPD PROGRAMME OF ACTION TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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### A. INTRODUCTION

The third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is to promote gender equality and empower women. Although the target for this goal focuses on gender parity in education, the indicators for the goal go beyond education and literacy to include the labour market position of women and their political representation. Insofar as each Millennium Development Goal is intended to summarize critical areas for action identified at major UN conferences, the third MDG clearly has a broad reference. The Declaration and Platform for Action to which the UN member states agreed at the Fourth World Conference on Women (United Nations, 2001), held in Beijing in 1995, refers to 12 critical areas of concern that cover virtually every aspects of human rights, human capacity, opportunity, voice and resources.<sup>1</sup> According to this document, promoting gender equality and empowering women involves significantly reducing inequalities between males and females in most aspects of social, economic and political life.

This paper answers the question, will fulfilling the Programme of Action to which UN member countries agreed at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, help to meet the third Millennium Development Goal? The paper has three sections. The first section reviews the ICPD Programme of Action and answers the question being posed; the second section discusses the impact of gender equality on the other MDGs in order to identify further MDG impacts of fulfilling the ICPD Programme of Action; and the third and final section discusses the importance of one section of the Programme of Action—actions to promote reproductive rights and reproductive health—for achieving the third Millennium Development Goal.

### B. THE ICPD PROGRAMME OF ACTION AND THE THIRD MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL

Chapter IV of the ICPD Programme of Action is titled, Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of *Women*. It outlines a wide range of actions that governments, the private sector, international organizations and non-governmental organizations should take to promote gender equality and equity and women's empowerment. The areas for action include, among others, women's participation in political life, education, fulfillment of women's rights, enabling women to earn income, eliminating violence against women, including female genital mutilation, eliminating discrimination against women in the work place and in international organizations, facilitating women's ability to combine work with child rearing, enforcing national laws and international conventions concerned with women's rights, ensuring women's property rights and legal rights to inheritance, providing infrastructure and other investments that will lessen women's domestic burdens, and strengthening women's civil society groups.

In addition to the actions identified in Chapter IV, the Programme of Action outlines numerous areas where a special focus on the needs of women or girls is required. Examples include improving women's status as part of the actions to address population growth (Chapter VI); meeting the special

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needs of young women as part of promoting the well-being of children and youth (Chapter VI); paying special attention to the needs of elderly women (Chapter VI); ensuring that reproductive health care systems meet the needs of women (Chapter VII); recognizing women's physical and socioeconomic vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and giving special attention to women and girls in programs designed to prevent the spread of these diseases (Chapter VII); supporting women's role as primary custodians of family health (Chapter VIII); promoting breast feeding and ensuring safe motherhood (Chapter VIII); offering special protections to displaced women (Chapter IX); eliminating discriminatory practices against women migrants and specifically protecting women who migrate as family members from abuse or denial of their human rights (Chapter X); and providing particular support to refugee women (Chapter X).

The ICPD Programme of Action thus provides a remarkably comprehensive plan for promoting gender equality and empowering women. The short answer to the question posed in this paper is therefore, yes, fulfilling the ICPD Programme of Action will, indeed, help to meet the third Millennium Development Goal. The main unresolved issue is that of timing. Unlike the actions called for in the Programme of Action and Beijing Platform for Action, the MDGs involve time-bound targets. In the case of the gender equality goal, the target is to achieve gender parity in primary education, preferably by 2005, and gender parity at all levels of education by 2015. Recent estimates suggest that 2005 deadline for achieving gender parity in primary education is likely to be missed in many countries. Whether the target for 2015 will be met is more difficult to judge, although the prospects are not very rosy. If all of the actions recommended in the ICPD Programme of Action were implemented fully within the next 3-5 years, however, there would be appreciable movement toward meeting the third MDG, with the possibility of achieving it by 2015 in a majority of developing countries.

### C. THE INDIRECT IMPACT OF THE ICPD PROGRAMME OF ACTION ON THE OTHER MDGs<sup>2</sup>

Implementing the ICPD Programme of Action will not only help to meet the third MDG, but by meeting this MDG will facilitate meeting the other MDGs as well. This section describes some of the evidence suggesting the importance of gender equality for achieving MDGs 1-2 and 4-7.

#### 1. *Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*

Although we do not know precisely how many of the world's women are poor, there is considerable evidence that women tend to be at greater risk of falling into or remaining in poverty than men are (World Bank, 2001a; 63-69). Explaining this greater risk of poverty are such realities as labour market discrimination, women's obligations with respect to child care and unpaid domestic work, low levels of female education, poor access to health care for women and girls, violence against women, and men's control of household assets and resources. Countries that reduce gender inequality thus stand a better chance of eradicating extreme poverty than countries that fail to educate girls, provide women with health care, reduce labour market discrimination, and the like. Promoting gender equality thus helps to eradicate poverty by reducing the number of poor women.

Gender equality also helps to reduce poverty indirectly by enhancing economic growth. Growth of the economy has been shown to be a necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for sustained poverty reduction (World Bank, 2001b; Chapter 3). Indeed, some studies have found that increases in average per capita income in a country typically raise the incomes of the poor proportionately (Kray and Dollar, 2002). Gender equality promotes economic growth through a variety of pathways. More equal investments in the human capital of girls and women improve overall levels of labour productivity and have particularly positive intergenerational effects (World Bank, 2001a; Chapter 2). Improving women's access to productive resources also tends to increase overall economic productivity. For example, studies

of farmers in several sub-Saharan African countries have found that redistributing agricultural resources from male to female farmers would likely increase agricultural outputs by 5-20 percent (Saito and others, 1994; Tabajuka, 1994; Udry and others, 1995). Investments in female schooling also tend to slow population growth (Jejeebhoy, 1995), which in turn gives Governments in poor countries an opportunity to deepen human capital investments and helps to preserve natural resources in fragile environments (Ahlburg and others, 1996).

Research also suggests that promoting gender equality is likely to lessen hunger, among both women and children. In cultures where women and girls eat last, poor women and children (especially girls) often are malnourished (World Bank, 2001a; Chapter 2). In most developing countries, women's education is a strong predictor of children's nutritional levels. Indeed, one study conducted on a sample of 63 countries found that gains in women's education were by far the most important determinant of reductions in children's malnutrition between 1970 and 1995, far more important than improvements in food availability or the health environment (Smith and Haddad, 2000). Thus, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment helps to meet both the poverty and hunger aspects of the first MDG.

## *2. Achieve universal primary education*

Although there are countries in which more girls than boys are enrolled in school, inequalities in school enrolments and completion occur predominantly because girls are less likely than boys to be in school. Indeed, worldwide, girls constitute 54-57 percent of all out-of-school children, and in some regions, constitute two-thirds or more of them (United Nations Millennium Project, forthcoming). Clearly, universal primary education cannot be achieved unless all girls, as well as all boys, enroll in school and remain to complete a basic education. Gender equality in educational investment is essential to achieve the second MDG.

## *3. Reduce child mortality*

A large literature points to the importance of mothers' education and income for child health and survival. For example, a study of 25 developing countries estimated that as little as three years of maternal schooling would reduce child mortality by approximately 15 percent compared to a 6 percent reduction associated with paternal schooling (Kirk and Pillet, 1998). Recent evidence also suggests that income in the hands of mothers enhances child survival far more effectively than does income in the hands of fathers. One study estimated that the marginal effect of female income on child survival is almost 20 times as large as the marginal effect of male income; female income's effect on nutrition indicators (weight for height, and height for age) was found to be between four and eight times as large as male income's effect (World Bank, 2001a; Chapter 2). Thus, reducing gender inequalities in schooling, access to productive resources, employment, and earnings would help to achieve the fourth MDG.

## *4. Improve maternal health*

Maternal mortality is one of the most intractable health problems faced by women in developing countries, where it is estimated that a death associated with pregnancy or childbirth occurs every minute. Globally, maternal mortality rates have changed little since ICPD, although there has been progress in some countries (UNFPA, 2004; Chapter 7). The Safe Motherhood initiative estimates that for each woman who dies of complications of pregnancy or childbirth, another 30-50 suffer illness, injury or disease. Pregnancy-related complications are one of the leading causes of death among women of childbearing age in developing countries (Safe Motherhood Initiative website, [www.safemotherhood.org](http://www.safemotherhood.org)).

Most of the injuries, illness and deaths associated with pregnancy and childbirth in developing countries are preventable, as is evidenced by maternal mortality rates in wealthy countries that are a

fraction of those found in developing countries. In developing countries, less than two-thirds of women deliver with the assistance of a trained midwife or doctor, and only two in five give birth in a hospital or health center (World Bank, 2003). The persistence of unacceptably high risks to women associated with pregnancy and childbirth thus reflects a lack of adequate care. Where women are better educated and have a stronger voice in household decisions, maternal health and nutrition is improved. Thus, both at a systemic and an individual level, empowering women tends to improve maternal health. However, access to adequate health care facilities in case of pregnancy complications remains a key factor in reducing maternal morbidity and mortality in the countries where both are high, and such access is largely determined by factors other than the empowerment of women.

#### 5. *Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases*

AIDS has an increasingly female face. The most recent statistics show that half of the people living with HIV are female; in sub-Saharan Africa, the figure is 57 percent. As UNAIDS notes (UNAIDS, 2004; 3),

women and girls also bear the brunt of the impact of the epidemic; they are most likely to take care of sick people, to lose jobs, income and schooling as a result of illness, and to face stigma and discrimination. There is an urgent need to address the many factors that contribute to women's vulnerability and risk—gender and cultural inequalities, violence, ignorance.

Clearly, reducing gender inequality in incomes and livelihoods, access to resources and violence would help to reduce the growing HIV epidemic among women, their children and the entire population.

Reducing gender inequality would also help to stem the ravages of malaria, tuberculosis and other communicable diseases. In many parts of the world, poor women are particularly vulnerable to these diseases because of their low nutritional status and limited access to education and employment, which may put the costs of treatment beyond their reach. They may also face discrimination in treatment (World Bank, 2003). Improvements in women's status would therefore help to reduce the spread of these diseases and the risks of mortality associated with them.

#### 6. *Ensure environmental sustainability*

There are several ways in which greater equality between the sexes would likely contribute to preserving environmental resources and ensuring access to safe drinking water, two of the specific targets associated with this goal. One way is by improving women's land tenure. Women typically have insecure land tenure, and this tends to undermine sustainable agricultural practices, either because they are unable to access the credit, labour-saving technologies, advice and improved seeds needed for sustainable agriculture or because they have little incentive to make improvements in land to which they have insecure claim (Mason and Carlsson, 2005).

Another pathway linking gender equality to sustainability of resources is through harnessing women's knowledge of "neglected" species. Typically, in developing countries, men are cash crop experts, but often women are aware of and use forest products and other species for which a potential to earn income exists. Where women have a greater say in household decision-making, their interest in preserving the neglected species can contribute to maintaining genetic diversity (World Bank, 2003).

In addition, as women gain more power in decision-making, especially with regard to development issues, improved supplies of safe water for domestic use is likely to result. In most parts of the world, obtaining water for domestic use is a female responsibility, and is something that often is

costly to women's time (World Bank, 2001a: 20). A recent study of local governments in India showed that when these bodies were headed by a woman, they were more likely to prioritize improvements in domestic water supplies than when they were headed by a man (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). Women's empowerment would thus likely contribute to ensuring sustainable access to safe drinking water.

In summary, it is quite clear that meeting the third Millennium Development Goal would help to meet the other goals, particularly those that pertain to the developing countries. Thus, fulfilling the ICPD Programme of Action would directly and indirectly help to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

#### D. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND HEALTH

Both the ICPD Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action argue that many changes must be made if we are to move toward gender equality and women's full empowerment. This view is also reflected in the MDG 3 report of the Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender, which identifies seven strategic priorities for achieving MDG 3.<sup>3</sup> None of these documents argues that there is a single, most critical change needed to empower women. Rather, they identify a complex of changes that, together, are needed to empower women.

Although the idea that many changes are needed if gender equality is to be achieved has great currency, there is also a basis for suggesting that giving women full control over their reproductive lives is a *sine qua non* for their empowerment. The basis for this claim is admittedly speculative, and is most obviously valid in countries where women do not have full reproductive and sexual rights and health. In the world's rich countries, for example, most women currently enjoy a very high level of control over their sexual and reproductive lives (United Nations, 2004). Gender equality, however, has yet to be fully achieved in these countries (Willemsen, 2002), and given high rates of contraceptive use, it is doubtful that further improvements in women's control of their reproduction would add much to their empowerment. If one takes a broad historical view, however, or focuses on the countries where women's control of their reproduction remains tenuous, then it is much more plausible to think that the first and most important step to empowering women may be to enable them to control their reproduction.

The basis for arguing this is two-fold. First, at an individual level, an inability to control one's reproduction means that women are unable to know when their activities will be constrained by the demands of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation. This may make investing in careers that are likely to conflict with pregnancy, childbirth or lactation seem irrational to women and to the family members who guide their choices. It is also likely to reinforce the view that men should be heads of households and control family property, because women's work lives are likely to be interrupted or constrained by the (often unexpected) advent of children.

Second, at the level of the cultural traditions that groups develop over time, women's inability to control their reproduction may underlie a normative gender-based division of labour that assigns to women responsibility for childbearing, household maintenance and relatively sedentary, safe economic activities while assigning to men the more mobile and dangerous areas of endeavor, including hunting and warfare (Lancaster, 1975; Chapter 5). Because the specialties assigned to men tend to be power-bearing more than the specialties assigned to women (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981; Rosaldo, 1974), the inability to control reproduction indirectly results in women's lack of empowerment relative to men. Historically, then, women's ability to control the timing and numbers of their pregnancies and births may be one necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for undermining the traditional gender-based division of labour that results in men's dominance over women. Certainly, feminists in the West during the 1960s believed that this was so, and some social observers have attributed the marked changes in gender roles in the West

during the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in part to the invention of oral contraceptives and their widespread adoption by young women starting in the 1960s.

To the extent that these arguments are correct, they suggest that fulfilling the ICPD Programme of Action is particularly important for meeting the third Millennium Development Goal because of the emphasis the Programme of Action places on women's reproductive and sexual rights and health. The remarkable spread of contraceptive use over the past five decades is consistent with the idea that women everywhere would like to be able to control when they have children and the number they have (United Nations, 2004). So, too, is the continuing "unmet need" for contraception that is found in many developing countries (Ross and Winfrey, 2002). Thus, fulfilling the ICPD Programme of Action can be seen as critically important for meeting all of the MDGs, including the MDG on gender equality and women's empowerment.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The 12 areas of concern are (1) women's poverty, (2) educational inequalities, (3) health care inequalities, (4) violence against women, (5) women and armed conflict, (6) economic and resource inequalities, (7) power and decision-making inequalities, (8) insufficient mechanisms to promote women's advancement, (9) abrogation of women's human rights, (10) stereotyping and inequalities in the media, (11) natural resource management and environmental inequalities, and (12) discrimination against the girl child.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the material in this section comes from World Bank (2003).

<sup>3</sup> The seven priorities are: (1) strengthening opportunities for post-primary education for girls while simultaneously meeting commitments to universal primary education; (2) increasing adolescents' and women's access to a broad range of sexual and reproductive health information and services; (3) investing in infrastructure designed to reduce women's time burdens; (4) guaranteeing women's and girls' property and inheritance rights; (5) eliminating inequality in employment by decreasing women's reliance on informal employment, closing gender gaps in earnings, and reducing occupational segregation; (6) increasing women's share of seats in national parliaments and local government bodies; and (7) significantly reducing violence against girls and women (United Nations Millennium Project, forthcoming).

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