

No ceilings: The full participation report^[1]

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Full report (pdf)^[2]

Blog: Time for child care: The need to improve access to quality care is long overdue^[3]

Introduction

There has never been a better time to be born female. Women and girls today have a much greater chance to live healthy and secure lives, and their fundamental human rights are now protected by law in many countries throughout the world. Women and girls have access to educational and work opportunities that were previously unimaginable. More and more, their needs and contributions are considered and measured, and more and more they have a seat at the table, able to act as full participants in determining our collective future.

The historic United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was a critical turning point in this progress. In Beijing, delegates from 189 nations agreed to a Platform for Action that called for the "full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life." These leaders agreed to an ambitious action plan spanning 12 areas, including health, education, violence, the economy, and the environment. At that event, the world spoke with one voice to declare: "Women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights."

We've achieved significant gains, but major gaps remain

On the 20th anniversary of that historic event and the eve of the adoption of a new set of global development goals, it is time to assess the gains for women and girls and the gaps in progress over the past two decades.

We have seen significant gains since 1995. Advances have been made in legal rights-through international agreements, groundbreaking UN resolutions, and constitutional and legislative change. Health and education for women and girls have improved significantly. The rate of maternal mortality has nearly halved. The global gender gap in primary school enrollment has virtually closed. These achievements prove that progress is possible.

In other areas, the pace of change has been far too slow. Security is tenuous for women and girls, even in their own homes. Critical barriers-including legal restrictions and limited access to resources-undermine women's economic opportunities. And women's voices are still underrepresented in leadership positions-from legislatures to boardrooms, from peace negotiations to the media.

Even in those areas where we have seen progress, too many obstacles limit the full participation of women and girls. Many countries still lack laws safeguarding women's rights and even where laws are strong, implementation and enforcement often lag. Social norms, an equally important influence on gender equality, are hard to change. And recent gains for women and girls have not been shared by all. Geography, income, age, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and cultural norms, among other factors, remain powerful determinants of a woman's chance at equal rights and opportunities. For example, a girl born in Latin America has a far greater chance of finishing secondary school than a girl born in Sub-Saharan Africa. A woman in the United States may struggle to care for a newborn and keep her job while a woman in Europe is entitled to paid maternity leave. Women and girls who face compounding challenges, like poverty and isolation, are most at risk and may drop out of school, marry young and live in fear of violence. While we have made progress over the past 20 years, not all women and girls have seen these gains in their own lives-and much unfinished business remains.

We stand at a critical moment

The year 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the Beijing conference and Platform for Action, as well as the 15th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on the impact of war on women and their role in resolving conflict. Importantly, it is also the year that UN member states will adopt a new set of global sustainable development goals. The experience of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) suggests that setting priorities, identifying goals, and measuring results matter. We have made substantial progress in areas such as maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, and primary school enrollment-all issues that were measured and track by the MDGs. These advances tell us that with commitment, resources, political will, and accountability, progress is possible.

The opportunities to accelerate progress have never been greater

Movements to support gender equality-from the grassroots to the world stage-are active around the world. A vibrant civil society is advocating for change and holding governments to account. In many countries, leaders are taking action-by speaking out, adopting laws

and policies, and increasing financial investment to support gender equality. Institutions such as the UN, World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and regional bodies including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and the African Development Bank, among many others, are working to support progress. Twenty-first century tools, particularly technology, can accelerate change, and the engagement of a diverse range of partners-including the private sector and religious leaders-allows us to leverage more talent and resources. And more men and boys are taking a stand for gender equality.

When women and girls succeed, everyone benefits

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that gender equality is not only important to women and girls-it is critical to communities, economies, and societies. When women and girls are healthy and educated, their children and families prosper. Research shows that investing in women and girls has multiplier effects: Even one extra year of schooling beyond the average can increase women's wages by about 10 percent, and a World Bank study suggests that raising the share of women with secondary education is linked to increases in economic growth. Educating women causes a ripple effect, leading to increased educational attainment across generations among both girls and boys. Women with more education have a lower chance of dying during pregnancy and childbirth and have healthier children; half of the reductions in child mortality between 1970 and 2009 can be attributed to increased educational attainment in women of reproductive age. Women's access to quality health information and services, particularly family planning, is essential to broader economic and health development goals.

The benefits of expanding women's economic opportunities are equally clear. When women participate in the economy, poverty decreases and gross domestic product (GDP) grows. It is estimated that closing the gap in women's labor force participation across OECD countries will lead to average GDP gains of 12 percent by 2030, including about 10 percent in the United States, almost 20 percent in Japan and Korea, and more than 22 percent in Italy. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) forecasts that if women farmers had the same access to productive resources as men, total agricultural output would rise, and the number of hungry people in the world could be reduced by up to 150 million.

In addition, women's leadership strengthens both public and private institutions by bringing a diversity of perspectives to the table. Women's participation in legislatures, corporate boards, and peace negotiations can affect policy choices and make institutions more representative and inclusive. A study of 31 countries found that a higher female presence in legislatures is correlated with higher perceptions of government legitimacy among both men and women. Research also shows a positive correlation between the number of women on boards and corporate profits. Evidence shows that when women participate in peace processes, they are more likely to raise issues such as human rights, security, justice, employment, and health care, which are fundamental to long-term peace and security. Advancing full participation for women and girls is certainly a matter of human rights, fairness, and justice. But it is also a strategic imperative-one that we cannot afford to overlook in our efforts to promote prosperity and security in the 21st century.

Region: International ^[4]

Tags: gender ^[5]

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