

Efforts to address gender inequalities must begin at home

Inequality between men and women around the world is widely recognised as one of the main drivers of poverty, yet it remains a constant feature of all societies, spanning political, social, and cultural rights. Investment in policies to address these injustices has benefits far beyond the wellbeing of individual women. But the potential of such policies to stimulate economic activity, improve health, and decrease population pressure has so far failed to convince leaders in countries where inequalities are widening, most notably in south Asia. This resistance must end. As the UN Family Planning Association reiterated in its *State of World Population 2005* report, released last week, unless gender inequality is addressed, none of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will be reached by the 2015 target.

International organisations have long preached the value of greater equality. Reports issued this year by the World Bank, the UN Development Fund, and WHO, in addition to the UNFPA, all emphasise the continued importance to antipoverty efforts of improving the status of women. These pronouncements continue a global trend of pro-equality rhetoric, which began in 1979 with the adoption of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women at that year's UN General Assembly. This declaration was followed a decade later by a legal definition of governments' responsibilities to end gender discrimination, enshrined in the Convention on Rights of the Child. But it was not until 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, that a plan of action emerged.

10 years on from that landmark event, what has been achieved? A review of the past decade's progress in gender equality, which was presented at the UN General Assembly meeting in September, found that there have been several positive developments. Women are taking an increasing proportion of posts in elected assemblies and state institutions worldwide. Gender gaps in primary education, and to a lesser extent secondary and further education, are narrowing, although there is still a long way to go. More women are working for money and fertility rates are generally getting lower.

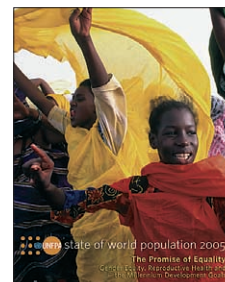
But not all of these changes have brought the predicted economic benefits. For example, while women are becoming a larger part of the workforce in many countries, this change is associated with a drop in pay and

conditions because women are typically paid less than men for similar work. Furthermore, the higher profile of women in legislative assemblies does not necessarily correspond to national levels of poverty. Some countries with high proportions of women in elected assemblies also have problems with persistent poverty—eg, Rwanda, which overtook Sweden earlier this year as the country with the highest proportion of female MPs. And, whereas several countries have enacted legislation to promote gender equality, the low political priority afforded to these issues means these laws are frequently left unenforced.

Achieving the MDGs, and in particular the first goal to halve extreme poverty, requires a strategic focus on education, economic opportunities for women, and reproductive health. The benefits are clear: every year of education for mothers corresponds to a 5–10% drop in mortality rates in children under 5 years old; economic output could increase by up to 20% in some countries if more women had control over land; and better reproductive health leads to lower fertility rates, leaving women with fewer dependants to support. On a country level, the last-mentioned benefit equates to slower population growth and reduced pressure on natural resources.

The fact that girls continue to end up with less education, worse access to health care, and fewer skills than their brothers is justification enough for a renewal of efforts to prevent gender justice slipping down the global agenda. However, genuine change will require a longer-term commitment—both political and financial—than is apparent now. All countries must embrace policies to address gender inequality including: campaigns against violence against women; promoting women's property and inheritance rights; expanding access to reproductive health care; and ensuring that women are involved in policymaking.

But while most efforts to resolve inequalities encourage states to redistribute resources and implement policies that promote equality for women, eliminating the causes of discrimination will require policies that tackle the power gap between men and women in each household. Decisions about education, health, nutrition, child-bearing, and money are made within the family. It is this dynamic that policymakers must understand and influence if the fundamental gender inequalities are to be addressed. ■ [The Lancet](#)



See <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/english/ch1/index.htm>