



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT & FAMILY PLANNING

Key to Global Development

It has been said that “women hold up half the sky.” Around the world, women play a vital role in providing for families, sustaining communities and managing natural resources. Yet too many lack the means to improve lives and shape the planet’s future. Empowering women through better education, economic opportunity and healthcare – including family planning – is pivotal to world progress, with far-reaching benefits for families, communities and the planet. This year, Rio+20, the London Family Planning Summit, and UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) processes all present transformational opportunities for us to turn things around.

Recent decades have seen a greater awareness of the importance of women’s empowerment, but much remains to be done. For example:

Education. Despite significant progress toward universal primary education, only 87 out of 100 children in developing countries complete primary school — and more than half of those not in school are girls.¹

Employment. More than a half-billion women joined the global labor force between 1980 and 2008; now four in ten of the world’s workers are women.² But, on average, women still earn one-third less than men.³

Environment. Women are disproportionately affected by environmental impacts such as climate change-induced drought, sea-level rise or severe storm damage. Yet they are glaringly under-represented in debating, negotiating and environmental decision-making at all levels. At past meetings on the global environment, women led only

10% of delegations, and some 40% of delegations were comprised of men only, a number which has actually risen in recent years.⁴



Family planning. More women have access to family planning and reproductive health services: contraceptive use in the developing countries has grown from less than 10% in the 1960s to 60% today.⁵ But too many still lack access: around the world, 215 million women want to prevent pregnancy but are not using an effective method of contraception.⁶

WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The great challenge of the 21st century will be to lift billions from poverty — in a context of climate change and severe environmental degradation — without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Empowering women contributes to both the human and environmental dimensions of sustainable development:

“Sustainable development isn’t sustainable if it doesn’t include empowering women to plan their families, educate themselves and their children, and have a voice in government at all levels.”

—Musimbi Kanyoro,
Global Fund for Women



Human well-being. Because women typically invest more in their children than do men, helping women has significant benefits for families. Improvements in women’s education and health have been linked to better outcomes for children in countries as varied as Brazil, Nepal, Pakistan, and Senegal.⁷ And women’s empowerment helps communities as well: In India, giving power to women at the local level led to increased provision of public goods, such as water and sanitation.⁸

Environmental protection. Around the world, women play an important role as resource managers. Women grow 80% of the food eaten in Africa, and collect 90% of drinking water in rural communities in developing countries.^{9,10} But too often, women — who own less than 2% of the world’s titled land — have little real control over the resources on which they depend.¹¹ Where women have that control, they often manage resources more sustainably. For example, in Gujarat, India, when women were well-represented on community forest committees, forest conditions improved markedly.¹²

EMPOWERING WOMEN: FAMILY PLANNING IS KEY

What will it take to empower women? A range of legal and social measures are needed: primary and secondary education for girls; enforcing laws and human rights standards that prohibit child marriage and gender-based violence; and improving women’s access to credit, land, employment, and training.

In addition, experts tell us that family planning and reproductive healthcare is one of the most cost-effective and powerful strategies to empower women and improve their lives.¹³ The ability to choose whether and when to have a child is a fundamental human right; it is central to women’s health, well being and — in many cases — survival.

Ensuring that all women have access to family planning and reproductive health services would have numerous benefits for women, families and societies. Women who are empowered to make choices about childbearing are more likely to seize economic opportunity and invest in their children’s education; they and their children are less likely to be poor.¹⁴ The health benefits would be dramatic: universal access to reproductive healthcare could prevent two-thirds of unintended pregnancies, 70% of maternal deaths, 44% of newborn deaths, and three quarters of unsafe abortions.¹⁵

FAMILY PLANNING AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Ensuring access to family planning has positive impacts on the environment, as well. Where women are able to choose the number and spacing of their children, population growth slows — which can reduce pressure on stressed ecosystems and resources. For example:

Water scarcity. Today, population is growing most rapidly in poor countries where water is scarce. In low-income countries where water shortages are most acute, average total fertility is nearly twice the global average, and populations are expected to nearly double by 2050.^{16,17} Slower growth could give those countries the time and resources they need to cope with looming water crises.

“[Family planning is about] giving women the power to save their lives, to save their children’s lives, and to give their families the best possible future.”

—Melinda Gates
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Climate change. Slower population growth can help mitigate climate change. A study by the National Center for Atmospheric Research found that stabilizing world population around eight billion, rather than nine or more, would reduce emissions by more than one billion tons of carbon dioxide per year by 2050 — an impact equivalent to completely eliminating deforestation.¹⁸

A COST-EFFECTIVE INVESTMENT

Addressing the unmet need for family planning and reproductive healthcare is an essential tool for achieving women’s empowerment and sustainable development. Moreover, family planning is a cost-effective investment: every dollar spent on family planning and reproductive health reaps savings of up to \$9 in other development sectors.¹⁹ And the resources needed to provide universal access to family planning are relatively modest: an additional \$3.6 billion annually.²⁰ Other urgent development priorities are considerably more costly; for example, providing universal access to clean water and sanitation would cost \$30 billion.²¹

At the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), in Cairo, the world’s nations pledged to ensure universal access to family planning and reproductive healthcare. Unfortunately, nations are not on track to meet that target. Indeed, a recent analysis shows that progress on enabling women and girls to access contraception has stalled over the last two decades, and falls far below country objectives.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

Today, the global community has several key opportunities to change that trajectory, and to revitalize our shared commitment to women’s empowerment and access to family planning. These include:

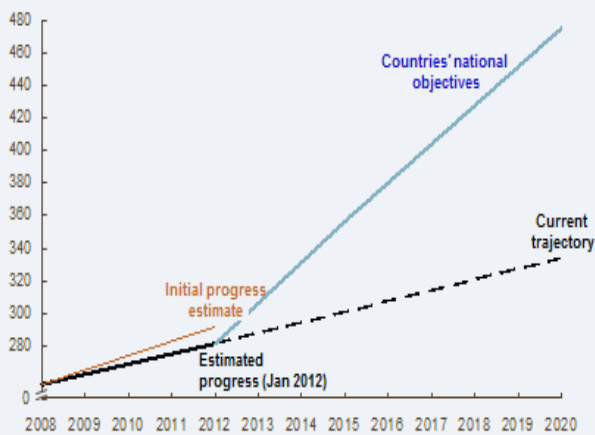


The Rio + 20 “Earth Summit.” At the June, 2012 [Earth Summit](#) in Rio de Janeiro, conferees will discuss strategies to reduce poverty, advance social equity and ensure environmental protection. However, of the seven priority areas set for discussion, none include a focus on women’s health and empowerment. Women are mobilizing to change that: A global coalition is advocating for women’s and girls’ education and employment; family planning and reproductive health; and for women’s inclusion in debating, negotiating, and achieving sustainable development at all levels.

“Universal access to reproductive health is just one of the ways we can build gender equality. Women must have the right to choose when and where to have children, and have access to skilled care before, during and after childbirth.”

—Joy Phumaphi
Former Minister of Health, Botswana

Progress toward meeting the unmet need for family planning has largely stalled, falling far below country objectives



Women using modern contraception, estimated progress to 2020, poorest countries

Source: UK DFID

Family Planning Summit. In July, 2012, the U.K. Government and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with the support of the United Nations Population Fund and other partners, will host a groundbreaking [Family Planning Summit](#) in London. The Summit will launch a global movement to give an additional 120 million women in the world's poorest countries access to lifesaving family planning information, services and supplies by 2020. Summit organizers emphasize that family planning must be offered in the context of comprehensive maternal and reproductive health care, and meet the needs of unmarried women and adolescents, as well as married women and couples. The Family Planning Summit presents a transformational opportunity to engage nations and civil society in the urgent effort to address unmet need for family planning worldwide.

UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and beyond. In the [MDG](#) context, global commitments to empower women through education, economic opportunities, and access to family planning also accelerate achievement of MDG 4 (reducing child mortality), 5 (improving maternal health – including target 5b, reproductive health), and 7 (environmental sustainability). Rio+20 may also provide a framework for UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are expected to succeed the UN MDGs when they expire in 2015. The SDG negotiations offer an opportunity to ensure that women's empowerment and reproductive health are integral to the next generation of development goals—from the start.

NOTES

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