

Women: The Critical Link

Student Reading

“Women hold up half the sky,”

reads an old Chinese saying. Indeed, women have traditionally been the world’s farmers, childbearers and caretakers of young and old — the backbone of families and societies. Despite their vast contributions to humanity, women continue to suffer from gender discrimination in much of the world. Being born female in most of the developing world means a lifetime as a second-class citizen, denied most of the opportunities available to males in the areas of health, education, employment and legal rights. This second-class citizenship is detrimental first and foremost to the well-being of women themselves; however, it is also a major contributor to sustained rapid rates of population growth in the world.

The delegates at the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) concluded that “Eliminating social, cultural, political and economic discrimination against women is a prerequisite of... achieving balance between population and available resources and sustainable patterns of consumption and production.”¹ Why does improving the status of women have an impact on population growth and environmental degradation? As we shall see, many of the social, cultural and economic conditions which keep women dependent on men are the same conditions which encourage high fertility.

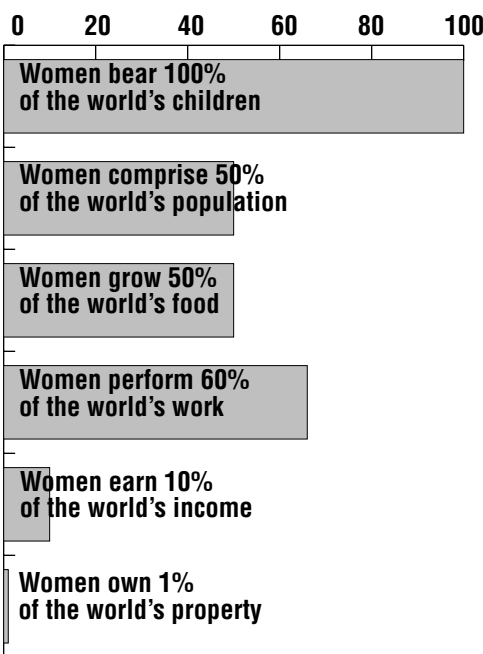
If parents have limited resources to invest on their children, and they know that there is little opportunity for their daughter in the paid work force, they will not make her health or education a priority. As this girl grows up, the only source of security for her will be to marry and have children at an early age. When women lack the skills or opportunity to earn wages to support themselves, they will be economically dependent on their husbands. As they grow older, if they have no savings and the government does not provide any form of social security, they must depend on their male children to take care of them.

On the other hand, breaking down the barriers which deny women access to health and family planning services, education, employ-

ment, land and credit both increase women’s autonomy and encourage lower fertility rates.^{2,3} Across continents, when women have more control over their lives, when they are less dependent on children and their role as a mother for support and security, they choose to have smaller families and to start them later. Throughout this reading we shall see how discrimination against women in health services and nutrition, education and work all lead to higher fertility and population growth, and how equal access to these resources encourages lower fertility and better conservation of resources.



Vital Statistics for the Planet



Source: U.S. Department of State, Bringing Cairo Home: Discussion Guide, 1994.

Healthy Bodies, Healthy Lives

Nutrition

The need for women to have male sons to provide for them in their old age, combined with high infant mortality rates, creates a strong driving force for women to have many children, in hopes that they will have at least one or two boys who will live to maturity. This preference for sons disadvantages girl children from a very

Women: The Critical Link

Student Reading

early age. Frequently they are not fed as well as their brothers, and they receive less medical attention. A study in Bangladesh showed that even under five years old, boys received 16 percent more food than girls.⁴ In India, girls are more likely to suffer acute **malnutrition**, but forty times less likely to be taken to a doctor.⁵

Young Motherhood

Marriage and first childbirth at a young age is both detrimental to women and a cause of population growth. Demographically, young marriage and early childbirth lead to higher fertility, but they also can have serious consequences for both a young woman's health and her options in life. Nonetheless, in Africa, 50 percent of women are married by age 18. Forty percent of women in southern Asia and 30 percent of women in Latin America are also married by their eighteenth birthday.⁸ Compared to 10 percent in developed regions, 40 percent of women in developing regions have given birth before the age of 20.⁹ Pregnancy and childbirth are much more dangerous for girls who have not yet fully developed, especially if their growth is stunted from malnutrition.

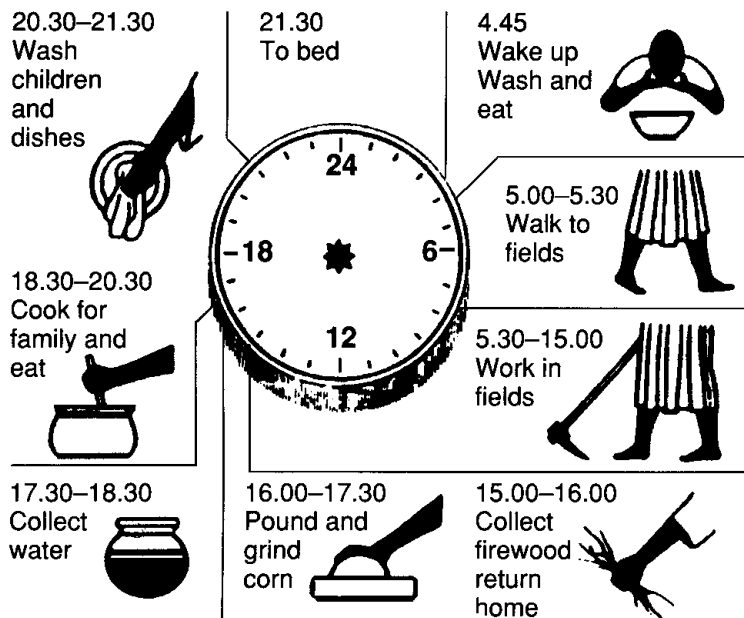
Teen mothers are more likely to be anemic, less likely to seek **pre-natal care**, more likely to have complicated labor, and more likely to have a premature and **low birth weight** infant. Mothers aged 15 to 19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as mothers who are between the ages of 20 and 25, and the children of these younger women are also twice as likely to die.¹⁰ Early pregnancy affects other aspects of young women's lives as well. It is the leading cause of women dropping out of school in Africa and Latin America. It hurts the chances women have to improve their lives, health, educational attainment, employment and decision making power in their families and communities.¹¹

Maternal mortality, or death due to childbirth or pregnancy-related causes, is the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age in developing countries. Worldwide, it claims the lives of half a million women each year, but the vast majority of these births occur in the developing world. The average number of maternal deaths per 100,000 births in the fifty countries that make up Sub-Saharan Africa is 980, compared to only eight in the United States and four in Canada!¹² Many maternal mortalities could be prevented easily and cheaply. It is estimated that about half could be avoided by preventing unwanted pregnancies.¹³

The seventeen hour day

A WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

A day in the life of a typical rural African woman



Reprinted with permission from *Bread for the World*, as printed in *Women, Health and Development*.

Women are frequently malnourished even during pregnancy. Anywhere from 20 to 45 percent of women of childbearing age in the developing world do not eat the recommended 2250 calories each day under normal circumstances, let alone the extra 285 calories needed during each day of pregnancy.⁶ Sixty percent of pregnant women in developing countries suffer from nutritional anemia, characterized by a low red blood cell count.⁷ Malnutrition during pregnancy causes infants to be born prematurely and with low birth weight, thus leading to high **infant mortality rates**.

Women: The Critical Link

Student Reading

An **unwanted pregnancy** can be a pregnancy that a woman does not want at all because she desires no more children, or a pregnancy that comes at the wrong time — closely following another pregnancy or when the mother is very young or very old. Limiting a woman's total number of pregnancies, and increasing the space between pregnancies through use of family planning reduces a woman's risk of **hemorrhaging** (excessive bleeding) when she gives birth.¹⁴ Responsible for one quarter of all maternal deaths, hemorrhage is the most common cause of maternal mortality. Another 13 percent of maternal deaths results from unsafe abortions of unwanted pregnancies.¹⁵ Prevent unwanted and mistimed pregnancies, and you prevent most of the 228,000 maternal deaths due to hemorrhage and unsafe abortion each year.

According to Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), family planning represents “the freedom from which flow all other freedoms.”¹⁶ Access to family planning information and services not only allows couples to plan the number and timing of their children, but it reduces infant mortality and improves the health of both women and children by allowing a woman to conceive at only the times when she is healthiest and ready to have a child.

About 55 percent of couples worldwide use some method of **family planning**, a five-fold increase since the 1960's.¹⁷ Total **fertility rates** have dropped from between five and seven children per woman to around three or four children. However, 350 million couples still lack access to a full range of contraceptive options and services. An estimated 120 million more women would use **contraception** if information and services were available to them.¹⁸

Access to barrier methods of contraception such as condoms is important not only for preventing unwanted pregnancies, but also in preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS. In 1994, women represented about 40 percent of all AIDS cases worldwide. However, women are contracting the virus at a faster rate than men, and by the year 2000, women are expected to comprise half of all the AIDS cases.¹⁹

Education Opens Doors

Discrimination against girls in education is another condition that hurts women and leads to population growth. Although advances have been made over the past decades, enrollment of girls in primary and secondary schools is still far below that of boys in many countries. Presently, 65 percent of girls and 78 percent of boys are enrolled in primary school in developing countries. Thirty-seven percent of girls and 48 percent of boys are enrolled in secondary school.²⁰ Educating girls is one of the most effective ways of giving them a degree of self-sufficiency, providing them with the skills to obtain a good job and enhancing their decision-making power in their families and communities.

Because it increases women's self-sufficiency, education decreases their dependency on having many children for security and status. The years of education a woman has is one of the best predictors of how many children she will have and how healthy they will be. Repeatedly, studies have shown that educated women marry later, want fewer children, are more likely to use effective methods of contraception, and have greater means to improve their economic livelihood.²¹

In Africa, where **illiteracy** among adult women is still around 50 percent, the average number of births per woman is over five. In Latin America and the Caribbean and eastern and south-eastern Asia, where illiteracy rates for women have fallen to around twenty percent, the number of births per woman is under four.²²

Women's Work

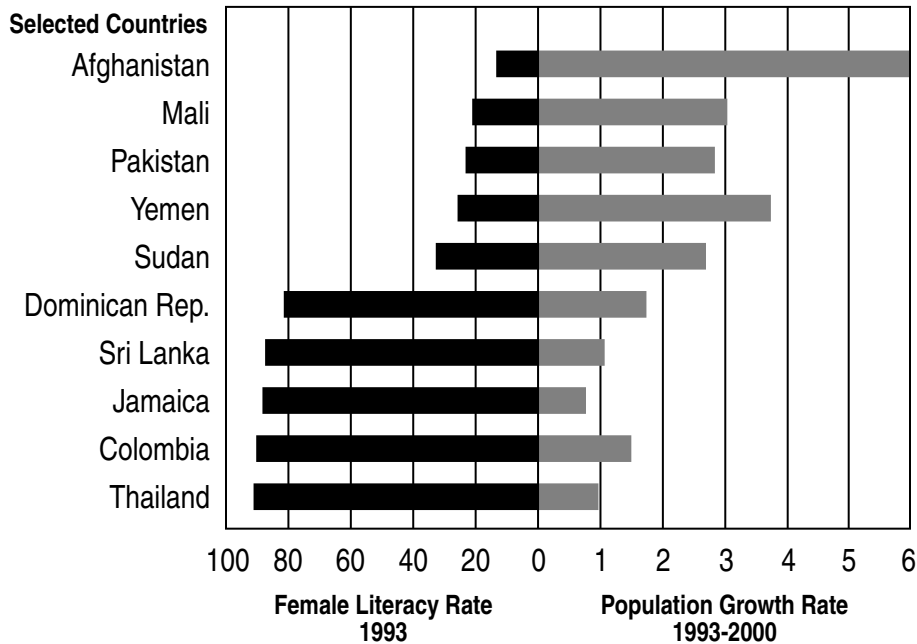
Women are disadvantaged in all forms of work. They are responsible for a larger share of unpaid work, and they are discriminated against in both informal and formal sector employment. Women frequently work more hours per week than men. In Indonesia, women work 78 hours per week while men work 61, and in Uganda women work 50 hours a week to men's 23 hours, more than twice as much.²³ However, globally women only make up 35 percent of the paid labor force.²⁴

Women who are denied employment opportunities that give them status and eco-

Women: The Critical Link

Student Reading

Women's Literacy and Population Growth



There is a close connection between education and fertility: the more education women have, the more likely they are to have small families.

Source: UNDP Human Development Report, 1996. New York: The United Nations, 1996.

economic security have no choice other than to marry and begin having children at an early age. On the other hand, when women have equal access to paid employment, they tend to have smaller families and start them later. This trend both opens up new opportunities for women and slows population growth and environmental degradation.

Invisible Work

Women are responsible for performing the vast majority of unpaid household work. In the developing world, this work includes childcare, collecting water and gathering fuelwood for cooking and heating, and for growing, processing and cooking the food for the family. Women grow 60 to 80 percent of the food grown in Africa.²⁵ This work ties women to the land, and they are frequently the ones most affected by environmental degradation. Desertification and resource depletion increase the amount of time women

must spend collecting firewood and water.

When wood is scarce, women must burn cow manure as fuel instead of saving it for use as fertilizer for their crops. According to a U.N. Population Fund report, every ton of fertilizer burned can cost as much as 110 pounds of grain lost from the next harvest. Ironically, environmental degradation and pollution give women incentives to have more children to help them farm and collect wood and water. Higher fertility increases the rate of population growth, which is often one of the leading causes of the resource scarcity to begin with.

Another form of women's work includes work in the **informal economy**. This sector of the economy is comprised of people providing goods and services, usually out of their homes. In several countries, women represent over 40 percent of people active in the

informal sector, and in Honduras, Jamaica and Zambia, they make up a large majority.²⁶ Where women comprise a larger percentage of the informal labor force than men, it is because of lack of opportunities or other obstacles to wage employment.²⁷

Women frequently face obstacles to success in the informal sector as well. They usually lack access to credit — small loans which they can use to start up small businesses to generate more income for their families. Studies have shown that when given access to low-interest credit, women repay their loans and increase their income and assets, which they use to improve the education, health and nutrition of their families.²⁸

Visible Work

Women who work in the formal sector marry an average 2.4 years later than women

Women: The Critical Link

Student Reading

who do not.²⁹ And when a woman must leave her job and sacrifice possible earnings in order to deliver or care for a young child, women's paid employment discourages couples from having large families. However, several barriers still block women's equal opportunity in the paid work force such as the inability to get maternity leave or affordable child care. Furthermore, even where women comprise a sizable percent of the paid labor force, they usually hold jobs of lower status and make lower wages than men.

The average women's wage is less than 60 percent of the average man's wage.³⁰ Throughout much of the world, women's paid labor is concentrated in "pink collar" professions, including teaching, cleaning, nursing, waiting tables and working in textile mills.³¹ Despite gains in both women's participation in the paid labor force and advancements within it, women still hold only 14 percent of all managerial and administrative jobs, and they make up less than 5 percent of the world's heads of state, major corporations and international organizations.³²

Giving women equal access to nutrition, health services, education, land, employment and credit is a critical step in promoting their human rights. Women who have been well nourished, well educated and who have access to a wage-earning job have a choice about what to do with their lives. They do not have to be dependent on a husband or having male children for their security. As women become more equal partners in their marriages, family size declines. When skills and opportunities are combined with access to reproductive health and family planning services, women and their partners are able to have only the number of children they wish to have when they wish to have them, fertility rates fall and population growth and resource depletion slows.

Endnotes

- ¹ Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994. p. 14.
- ² Nafis Sadik. "Investing in Women: The Focus of the '90's." *Beyond the Numbers: A Reader on Population, Consumption, and the Environment*. Ed. Laurie Ann Mazur. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994. p. 210.
- ³ Ruth Dixon-Mueller. "Women's Rights and Reproductive Choice: Rethinking the Connections." *Beyond the Numbers: A Reader on Population, Consumption, and the Environment*. Ed. Laurie Ann Mazur. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994. p. 240.
- ⁴ Op. cit. note 2, p. 212.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Op. cit. note 2, p. 213.
- ⁷ Adrienne Germain and Jane Ordway. "Population Policy and Women's Health: Balancing the Scales." *Beyond the Numbers: A Reader on Population, Consumption, and the Environment*. Ed. Laurie Ann Mazur. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994. p. 137.
- ⁸ Op. cit. note 2, p. 211.
- ⁹ *The World's Women: Trends and Statistics*. New York: The United Nations, 1995. p. 69.
- ¹⁰ Op. cit. note 2, p. 215.
- ¹¹ Op. cit. note 9, p. 15.
- ¹² 1997 World Population Datasheet (wall chart). Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 1997.
- ¹³ Op. cit. note 2, p. 216.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ A. Tinker and M. Koblinsky. "Making Motherhood Safe," World Bank Discussion Paper no. 202. Washington, DC: World Bank, 1993. p. 3.
- ¹⁶ Op. cit. note 2, p. 209.
- ¹⁷ Op. cit. note 1, p. 32.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Op. cit. note 9, p. 72.
- ²⁰ Op. cit. note 2, p. 220.
- ²¹ Op. cit. note 9, p. xx; Op. cit. note 2, p. 221.
- ²² Op. cit. note 9, p. 92.
- ²³ Op. cit. note 2, p. 225.
- ²⁴ Op. cit. note 2, p. 222.
- ²⁵ Op. cit. note 2, p. 224.
- ²⁶ Op. cit. note 9, p. xxii.
- ²⁷ Op. cit. note 9, p. 116.
- ²⁸ Op. cit. note 9, p. 118.
- ²⁹ Op. cit. note 2, p. 222.
- ³⁰ Op. cit. note 9, p. 127.
- ³¹ Op. cit. note 2, p. 223; Op. cit. note 9, p. xx.
- ³² *Gender Equity*. Washington, DC: Centre for Development and Population Activities, 1996, p. 8.