

TASK FORCE: Gender Equality

Empowering Women Vital for Successful Economic Development

Task Force develops seven-fold strategy to improve status of women in world's poorest countries

17 January 2005, New York—Around the world, and particularly in poor countries, girls and women carry the brunt of poverty. They support and care for their families. They sustain life by growing food, and collecting fuel and water. Yet, in the same places, they face social and economic discrimination that prevent them from attending school, working for wages, and taking part in civic life. More than 40 percent of women in Africa are without access to basic education.

But the goal of greater equality goes far beyond parity in education according to one of two final reports of the UN Millennium Project's Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, released today as part of a detailed global action plan for fighting poverty, disease and environmental degradation in developing countries.

The task force on gender equality was led by **Nancy Birdsall**, founding president of the Center for Global Development; **Amina J. Ibrahim**, national coordinator for Education for All at the Ministry for Education in Nigeria; and **Geeta Rao Gupta**, president of the International Center for Research on Women.

The task force report—*Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women*—argued for an increased focus on sexual and reproductive health and advocated improved access to economic opportunities through better access to infrastructure, property rights and employment. “It would be hard to imagine in the developed world today a family spending one or more hours every day gathering ... wood, agricultural residues, and dung, when one could instead buy cooking fuel for the same purpose at a price that reflects a mere two or five minutes of income from work,” the report said. “Yet this is the burden of women in the developing world.”

The report also issued a wake up call to the silent epidemic of violence against women. Between 10-69 percent of women report having experienced domestic violence. Violence against women is not only a violation of basic human rights, but also a constraint on economic development, argued the report.

The task force focused specifically on women and girls in poor households and the disparities they encounter in education, transportation, clean water, sanitation and sources of energy; on adolescent girls and women and girls in conflict and post conflict settings. The authors identified seven strategic priorities, that they argued would be a minimum set of actions aimed at creating opportunities for women, particularly in education and employment, while protecting them from violence and sexual abuse:

- **Strengthen opportunities for postprimary education for girls**, while simultaneously ensuring universal primary education. This would require special interventions to make schools more affordable and safer for girls, and to reform the content of education.
- **Guarantee sexual and reproductive health and rights** to women and girls, through at a minimum, public health systems that provide quality family planning services, emergency obstetric care, safe abortion (where legal), post-abortion care and prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (like HIV). Outside of the health sector, sexuality education programs help increase awareness of sexual and reproductive rights and outcomes.
- **Invest in infrastructure designed to reduce the amount of time women and girls spend on burdensome tasks** through use of new forms of fuel for cooking, improved cooking stoves to reduce indoor air pollution, rural electrification and low-cost transitional energy sources and improved access to water and sanitation systems.

Increasing women's participation in the design and implementation of infrastructure projects can also increase access and affordability.

- **Guarantee women's property and inheritance rights with actions that include** legal reform to increase access to land through, for example, joint titling and amending or harmonizing customary and statutory laws. Strategies for better enforcement include recording women's share of land or property, supporting women's groups that help women make land claims and improving legal literacy.
- **Reduce gender inequality in employment**, close gender gaps in earning and reduce discrimination against women in labor markets through programmes that provide support for care, social policies that eliminate discriminatory employment and pay practices, social protection and access to credit and skills training, especially in the informal sector.
- **Increase the political representation of women in political bodies**, at the national and local levels through proven interventions like gender quotas and reservations.
- **Combat violence against women** through a combination of infrastructure, legal, education, health and other actions, including legislation, awareness programmes, health services to support violence victims.

The plan to achieve greater gender equality is crucial to meeting commitments forged in 2000 at the Millennium Summit, where world leaders agreed to make the fight against poverty—and all of its faces—in developing countries their priority. The summit inspired the Millennium Development Goals, which are built on the recognition that, from health to the environment, from education to gender equality, a growing list of development issues can no longer be managed solely within the boundaries of a single nation.

The gender equality task force plan is part of the UN Millennium Project, which was commissioned by the UN Secretary-General in 2002 to develop a practical plan of action for enabling developing countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals and reverse the grinding poverty, hunger and disease affecting billions of people. As an independent advisory body directed by Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs, the UN Millennium Project submitted its final recommendations in January 2005.

The Gender Equality Task Force is one of 10 UN Millennium Project Task Forces that together comprise some 265 experts from around the world, including members of parliament; researchers and scientists; policymakers; representatives of civil society; UN agencies; the World Bank; International Monetary Fund; and the private sector. The UN Millennium Project Task Force teams were challenged to diagnose the key constraints to meeting the Millennium Development Goals and present recommendations for overcoming the obstacles to get nations on track to achieving them by 2015.



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