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Lives of women improved but gender discrimination remains

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Filipino mother (C) with her children walk at a slum area in Cebu City, Philippines, 30 August 2015. I

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Women now live longer lives, benefit from better access to education and are more independent compared with twenty years ago.

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Even though lives of women have been improved in several areas over the last 20 years, gender based discrimination and violence remains.

UN launched on 20 October, the World's Women 2015 report, which indicated that women live longer lives, benefiting from a better access to education and are more independent. However, more measures are needed for reaching the goal of gender equality as it is outlined in the Sustainable Development Goal 5, which aims to empower all women and girls by 2030.

"We cannot achieve our 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, without full and equal rights for half of the world's population, in law and in practice," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at a recent event on gender equality organized on the margins of the Sustainable Development Summit.

Life expectancy has continued to rise, reportedly reaching 72 years for women and 68 for men, globally. Worldwide, the number of maternal deaths declined by 45 per cent between 1990 and 2013. Although they continue to marry a few years earlier than men, women's age at marriage has also increased, reflecting higher education levels, later entry into the labour force, as well as increased economic independence.

Meanwhile, enrolment of children in primary education is nearly universal today. The gender gap has narrowed and once they have enrolled in school, the report finds that girls perform better than boys through primary education in two thirds of countries.

However in some developing nations the disparities against girls are stark. The UN estimates that today, 58 million children of primary school age are out of school worldwide. More than half of them are girls and nearly three quarters live in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. Although the vast majority of the world's youth is currently literate, nearly two thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women, a proportion unchanged for the last 20 years.

“Far too many women and girls continue to be discriminated against, subjected to violence, denied equal opportunities in education and employment, and excluded from positions of leadership and decision-making,” underscored Ban.

Indeed, the study finds that over one third of women worldwide have been a victim of physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives. Attitudes towards violence are reportedly beginning to change as both men and women see violence against women less acceptable – but 60 per cent of all women victims of violence still do not report it or seek any help.

Turning to the issue of child marriage, despite remaining a critical issue in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, the occurrence has declined from 31 per cent in 1995 to 26 per cent in 2010.

Regarding employment, estimates reveal that only 50 per cent of women of working age are in the labour force, compared to 77 per cent of men. Women are found to remain concentrated in low paid jobs and earn on average between 70 and 90 per cent of what men earn.

Furthermore, women spend on average three hours more per day than men on household chores and caring for family members in developing countries and two hours more per day than men in developed countries. As a result of the gender division of paid and unpaid work, in many countries, women continue to be economically dependent on their spouses.

Meanwhile, women's economic vulnerability becomes even more visible among lone mothers with children. One-parent households are increasingly common globally, both in developing and developed countries as a result of increased extramarital fertility and divorce. Lone mothers with children constitute about 75 per cent of all one-parent households and suffer higher poverty rates than lone father or two parent households.

Women and politics

The report also studied gender representation in leadership positions and found that in most societies around the world, women continue to have unequal voice in public and private spheres. The number of females among Heads of State or Government is still an exception, although the world currently counts 19 female, a slight improvement compared to the 12 counted in 1995.

Similarly, only 22 per cent of parliamentarians and 18 per cent of appointed ministers are women. Women's representation among corporate managers, legislators and senior officials also remains low, with no country reaching or surpassing parity and only about half of countries having shares of 30 per cent or more.

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