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U.N. report shows women inching slowly, unevenly toward equality

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION

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UNITED NATIONS – Women are more educated, marrying later and living longer worldwide but millions remain illiterate and trapped by work that pays little or nothing, according to a United Nations report on Tuesday assessing progress over the past two decades.

Despite many advances, too many obstacles remain in women's path to global equality, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in releasing "The World's Women 2015," which looks at developments since a landmark U.N. conference on women held in Beijing in 1995.

"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," he said.

Among the findings, women's life expectancy has risen globally to 72 from 64, and women's average age at marriage has risen by about a year to 25 since 1995.

Maternal deaths dropped overall by 45 percent between 1990 and 2013, it said, but remain high in southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Child marriage — before age 18 — declined to 26 percent of young women in 2010 from 31 percent in 1995 but remains a significant problem in southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa as well, it said.

Female participation in education beyond high school has increased, surpassing male participation in nearly all developed countries and half of developing countries, it said.

However, almost two-thirds of the world's 781 million illiterate adults are women, a ratio that has not changed in the past 20 years, the report said.

More than one-third of women have been victims of violence, and roughly two-thirds of the victims of partner- or family-related homicides are women, it said.

Only half of women of working age are in the global labor force, compared with three-quarters of men, and women remain concentrated in low-paying jobs, it said.

Women are more likely than men to be employed part-time, unemployed or contributing family workers who typically are unpaid, it said.

Women typically spend three hours more per day than men on unpaid work such as household chores in developing countries and two hours more than men in developed countries, it said.

Single mothers with children comprise about three-quarters of all one-parent households and suffer higher poverty rates than single-father or two-parent households, it said. The rate of one-parent households has grown due to increases in divorce and childbearing outside marriage, it noted.

“There is progress, but we didn’t progress enough,” said Francesca Grum, chief of the Social and Housing Statistics Section at the Statistics Division of the U.N. Department for Economic and Social Affairs, which prepares the reports every five years.

“We have moved very, very slowly,” Grum said.

The report underscores the importance of a goal recently adopted by U.N. member states to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030, the secretary-general said.

“The worth of this kind of report is to open the eyes of people and to produce data,” said Musimbi Kanyoro, chief executive of the San Francisco-based Global Fund for Women.

Such data is critical to tackling issues in an integrated and locally driven way, she said.

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