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UN statistics show women's equality still a dream

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By Edith M. Lederer, The Associated Press

Women's equality is still a dream in a world where there are currently 57 million more men, according to a U.N. report released Wednesday.

"The World's Women 2010" says women are living longer than men, enrolment of girls in primary school has increased to 86 per cent in 2007 up from 79 per cent in 1999 and around 52 per cent of women work compared with 77 per cent of men.

But it also found that despite legislation, many pregnant women still lose their jobs and that women remain severely underrepresented in decision-making positions in parliaments, government, and the private sector, where only 13 of the world's 500 largest corporations were led by female CEOs in 2009.

The report was released on the first U.N. World Statistics Day, established to pay tribute to statisticians around the world.

In an introduction, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the report "is intended to contribute to the stocktaking being done to mark the 15 anniversary of the Beijing conference" on women where 189 nations adopted a platform to achieve equality for women.

Despite progress on several fronts, Ban said the report "makes clear that much more needs to be done, in particular to close the gender gap in public life and to prevent the many forms of violence to which women are subjected."

According to the report, the 57 million more men in the world are concentrated in the youngest age groups, especially in the most populous countries, China and India.

"This surplus of men ... steadily diminishes until it disappears at about age 50, thereafter becoming a surplus of women owing to their longer life expectancy," the report said.

The report also said people are marrying at older ages than in the past — especially women.

In many European countries, the average age at which women first marry is 30 or older, it said, but in some of the least developed African countries like Mali and Niger the average age is still below 20, with 20 per cent of brides in Niger 15 years old or younger.

In every region, more than 50 per cent of the people over 60 are women, the report said. In southern Africa the population share of women over 60 is 59 per cent and in Eastern Europe it's 63 per cent.

While primary school is making progress toward gender parity, the report said 72 million children — 54 per cent of them girls — aren't going to school. A significantly lower proportion of boys and girls attend secondary school, but over the past two decades men's dominance in higher education has been reversed globally and there are now more women than men attending university, the report said.

Despite women aged 25 to 54 now participating in the work force at higher rates than in 1990, women are paid between 70 and 90 per cent of wages of their male counterparts, the report said.

When it comes to power, women lag far behind.

According to the report, women hold an average of 17 per cent of the seats in parliament, and only seven of 150 elected heads of state and 11 of 192 heads of government are women.

While women serve on most boards of directors of large companies, their numbers also remain low compared to men and the "glass ceiling" has blocked many from leadership positions in private companies, it said.

Srdjan Mrkic, chief of the social statistics section in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, said only 50 countries had good statistics on violence against women.

According to the report, the proportion of women exposed to physical violence in their lifetime ranges from 12 per cent in Hong Kong and 13 per cent in Azerbaijan to about 50 per cent or more in Australia, Mozambique, the Czech Republic and Zambia.