



For Women, Dry Statistics Can Be Power

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UNITED NATIONS, Oct 21 (IPS) - While women have made strides forward in areas like job market participation over the last two decades, in 2009 only 14 women in the world held the position of head of state or government, and of the 500 largest corporations, just 13 had a female CEO.

Those are just a few of the revelations in "The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics", a compilation of the latest data on the status of women in countries around the globe, released Wednesday in conjunction with the first ever World Statistics Day.

The report illustrates the direct contribution of hard data to social progress, painting a complex picture of the successes and shortcomings on the path to gender equality through statistics and analysis.

"This report is released today, on the occasion of the first ever World Statistics Day, as it demonstrates how official statistics provide policy-makers with useful and impartial data," said Paul Cheung, director of the U.N. Statistics Division (UNSD), which has produced the report every five years since 1995.

The report focuses on eight key areas: population and families, health, education, work, power and decision- making, violence against women, environment, and poverty.

There are approximately 57 million more men than women in the world, with some countries, especially in Europe, experiencing an obvious "lack" of men while others have fewer women, for example, China, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In the majority of countries, there is little difference in the proportion of underweight girls and boys, suggesting that there is no difference in nutritional status between the sexes.

However, the gender digital divide is widespread. In general, it is more pronounced among less developed countries with low Internet penetration, although it is also evident in several developed countries with high Internet penetration, education statistics show.

Concerning work issues, women aged 25 to 54 now have higher labour force participation rates in most regions as compared to 1990, but on average women are still rarely employed in jobs with status, power and authority or in traditionally male blue-collar occupations.

The report's chapter on poverty reveals that married women are often left out of decision-making on how their own earnings are spent. Limited access to financial resources increases women's economic dependency on men, making them more vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks.

Contributing to women's poverty is the denial of inheritance and land ownership rights based on traditional cultural norms and practices.

The report's chapter on violence against women shows that female genital mutilation is decreasing slightly, although it continues to be widely performed. The decline seems to be faster among women with higher education.

Education also plays a fundamental role concerning attitudes towards domestic violence in Africa. Many less or uneducated African women find it appropriate for a wife to be beaten by her husband for specific reasons like arguing with him, refusing to have sex, burning food and venturing outside without telling him, it says.

In the introduction, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon notes that the report "finds that progress in ensuring the equal status of women and men has been made in many areas, including school enrolment, health and economic participation. At the same time, it makes clear that much more needs to be done."

In fact, while the report shows progress in the availability of gender statistics, it also underlines the lack of regular, consistent and reliable statistical measures on the status of women.

Data from nearly all countries are available on the UNSD website, although those countries where more targeted intervention is needed might not be on the list, Francois Coutu, a public information officer with UNSD, told IPS.

Another problem is that even when statistics are available, it is not possible to compare them and data are also lacking in details, leaving out essential information, said the chief editor of the report, Srdjan Mrkic.

Statistics are available for nearly all countries in the world, but often only general information is provided, stressed Mrkic. Statistics, including characteristics such as age, marital status, education, ethnicity and religion, which are fundamental details to properly understand and develop policies to rectify violence against women, are available in "The World's Women 2010" for approximately 50 countries.

The U.N Statistical Commission, established in 1947, has elaborated international methodological standards and guidelines in many statistics areas while making data more available across countries and regions than ever before.

Still, "increasing the capacity to produce reliable statistics, especially about gender equality, remains a challenge in many countries," stressed Mrkic, with lack of funds disadvantaging developing countries.

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