

## **Positive impacts from incorporating gender perspectives into the substantive work of the United Nations**

While gender equality is an important goal in itself – an issue of human rights and social justice – efforts to promote greater equality between women and men can also contribute to the achievement of other social and economic objectives. It has been clear for decades that women in many parts of the world make key contributions in areas of development such as agriculture and water resources management. Neglecting women in these areas has often led to less than optimal effects of development inputs, and at worst negative impacts. In other sector areas it is becoming increasingly clear that development goals will not be met unless the needs and priorities of all stakeholders are identified and addressed, for example in the transport or health sectors. Even in areas, where gender perspectives were normally considered irrelevant, such as trade and macroeconomics, it is increasingly recognized that sound developments must be based on a clear assessment of the contributions of women as well as men and the potential impact of planned interventions on both women and men and on their productivity. There has been a steady accumulation of evidence that gender differences and inequalities directly and indirectly affect the impact of development strategies and hence the achievement of overall development goals.

Persistent differences and disparities between women and men can mean that women have to bear more of the costs of lack of development and gain fewer benefits than men from development interventions. This does not only have negative implications for women themselves, but for the society as a whole. Women represent half the resources and half the potential in any society. This potential remains unrealized when women are constrained by inequality and discrimination. *“The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women’s social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life.... Achieving the goal of equal partnership of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning.”* (Platform for Action, para 109)

The links between gender equality and effective and sustainable development are clear in some areas, especially areas where both women's and men's roles are very visible, for example in health, education and agriculture. The most well-known example of links between promotion of gender equality and achievement of development goals is in the area of **education**. Research carried out, particularly by the World Bank, has shown that, in many contexts, more equitable access to education by women and girls can give very positive returns in improved family health, greater productivity and reduced family size. Studies in 46 developing countries showed that a one per cent rise in women’s literacy had three times the positive effect of a one per cent rise in the number of doctors available. Research on economic growth and education shows that failing to invest in education can lower the gross national product (GNP). All other things being equal, countries in which the ratio of female-to-male enrolment in primary or secondary education is less than .75 can expect levels of GNP that are roughly 25 per cent lower than countries in which there is less gender disparity in education.

The World Bank has also argued that there are overall **health** gains to be achieved through a strong focus on the specific health needs of women, particularly in the area of reproductive health. Improving women’s health is seen to be cost-effective. Greater health for women impacts positively on the health of other family members, especially children. Particular gains are to be had from investing in the health of adolescent girls, since reproductive and other lifestyle behaviours established at this age set the stage for health prospects in later life.

Experience in the area of **agriculture** has indicated that the failure of many agricultural programmes in developing countries could be directly related to the neglect of women’s productive roles, particularly in relation to food crop production. Experience has also shown that women farmers are particularly receptive to innovations and incentives in

progressive farmer schemes. Studies have shown that giving women farmers in Kenya the same level of agricultural inputs and education as men farmers could increase yields of farmers by more than 20 per cent. There is also evidence from **water supply programmes** in developing countries which indicates that the sustainability and impact of these programmes can be positively affected by proper attention to gender perspectives in user participation. This is due to the fact that women play key roles in relation to the management of water resources at both household and community levels. Work in the area of **forestry** has also shown that it is important to identify the roles of women as well as men, and to understand the uses and knowledge of forest resources of both women and men. Identifying and utilizing the knowledge of women has proven critical to successful promotion of bio-diversity in some areas.

Considerable research has also pointed to gains that can be made by focusing **poverty reduction** efforts on women. Investing in women is seen to speed up economic development as well as produce significant social gains, and to have considerable intergenerational payoffs. It is well established that improving women's equitable access to **credit** is cost-effective since women are often more reliable credit-takers than men. There is also evidence from a number of countries that the benefits for family welfare of increased incomes for women are greater than the benefits from increases to men's income. Women's income tends to be more consistently utilized for expenditures on health, food and schooling, which benefit the whole family. In spite of these findings, women face persistent constraints in gaining equitable access to credit schemes, being forced to rely on special schemes for women which provide very small amounts of credit.

In other areas of development the interlinkages between gender equality and achievement of overall development goals are not as clear. Even when the broader development impacts of gender equality are increasingly understood, the direct and indirect interconnections with economic development are not always explicitly drawn out. There are many examples of why and how gender equality is critical for sustainable people-centred development, with links to economic development and economic efficiency. Women's time burdens are an important constraint on growth and development. The benefits of reducing this gender-based constraint can be considerable. A study in Tanzania shows, for example, that reducing women's labour constraints in a community of smallholder coffee and banana growers increases household cash incomes by 10 per cent, labour productivity by 15 per cent, and capital productivity by 44 per cent. Research on gender inequality in the **labour market** shows that eliminating gender discrimination in relation to occupation and pay could both increase the income of women, and contribute to national income. Estimates reveal, for instance, that if gender inequality in the labour market in Latin America were to be eliminated, not only would women's wages rise by about 50 per cent, but national output would rise by 5 per cent. Data also shows that gender inequality hampers a positive supply response to **structural adjustment** measures by reducing women's incentives to produce tradeable goods as a result of increases in women's time burdens.

To promote greater gender mainstreaming throughout the United Nations system, it is important to be able to illustrate for economists that gender equality is relevant to issues of economic growth and efficiency. Similarly, it is important to convince demographers that gender perspectives can strengthen their analyses and provide new insights about demographic processes, and to demonstrate to statisticians the inadequacy of data that do not incorporate gender perspectives.