

Press release

Investing in women yields high returns to social and economic development

Women's rights remain central to development and gender equality contributes to economic efficiency

Remarkable progress in Asia in female education, however, severe disparities exist between countries

Colombo, Sri Lanka 19 February 2008: Making a case for greater investment in gender empowerment, particularly women's education programmes, the United Nations Development Programme's Regional Centre in Colombo (UNDP RCC) reiterated that investing in gender has proven to be central to economic and social development in the Asian region.

A new report, *Investing in Gender Equality: Global Evidence and the Asia-Pacific Setting*, released today, urges countries in the Asia Pacific region to focus on gender empowerment programmes and women's rights. Empirical evidence available from several countries has been reviewed in this report that suggests that decreasing gender inequalities has the potential of accelerating economic growth and development. "Asian history has shown countries that have invested in gender equality have been able to show early declines in fertility levels, which is vital to progress towards the Millennium Development Goals," said Omar Noman, Chief of Policies and Programmes, UNDP RCC.

Globally, as well as in the Asia Pacific region, investments in gender equality, represented by the narrowing of education disparities, have consistently paid off in terms of human development, including better mother and child survival and overall health outcomes.

The report argues that impairment of women's right to equality and empowerment not only denies a human right but also sabotages development. Emphasis on education of girls is related with progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and has a positive impact on fertility decline, child mortality and malnutrition, according to the report. Countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, and Nepal, where the girls' secondary enrolment ratio is below 50 percent also suffer from high child mortality. Globally, a 1 percent rise in the female-male secondary schooling ratio has been found to be related with decreased under-five mortality by 1.42 percent.

However, severe disparities remain between countries in the Asia Pacific region in female education. Although primary school enrolment is improving in most countries of the Asia-Pacific region, change is slow in some countries and rural areas. Nearly half of the out-of-school girls in the world live in Asia and the Pacific.

In secondary schooling, the regional divergence at the secondary level is wider than at the primary level. Some countries with fairly low income levels have managed to decrease the gender gap in secondary enrolment. Bangladesh, Mongolia, and Sri Lanka with per capita GDP below \$1000 per year, have achieved gender parity in secondary enrolment.

Sri Lanka is an outstanding example in the South Asian region, with 82 percent of boys and 83 percent of girls enrolled in secondary school and low child mortality of 14 per 1000 births. “Sri Lanka is an exemplary model for other countries in the region, with early investments in gender empowerment programmes. It is, in fact, one of the first countries to witness demographic transition because of high female education levels,” noted Neil Buhne, United Nations Resident Coordinator, Sri Lanka.

Countries of the region have made progress towards higher education levels for women. From 1980 to 2000, the East Asia and Pacific countries improved their average years of female primary schooling by one year – from 2.4 to 3.5 years. The Asia-Pacific setting shows that women have responded to education opportunities with enthusiasm and have made major contributions to the dynamism of the region. In this context, for policy makers, investing in gender equality becomes enormously significant.

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