



World Population Day 2005: Equality Empowers

Joint Statement by Thoraya Ahmed Obaid and Louis Michel*

“Equal rights for men and women are a basic condition for development, as essential in education and access to work as it is in the provision of health services. We call for concerted action to advance on gender issues, notably in the area of reproductive health and rights.”

Sixty years ago when the United Nations was founded, 2.5 billion people shared our planet. Today, that number is 6.5 billion with more than half women and girls. Gender equality is a key issue in building communities, reducing poverty and helping to save lives. More than 500,000 women currently perish each year in childbirth owing to an absence of emergency obstetric care taken for granted in wealthier countries. Millions of children will die because they were orphaned by HIV/AIDS or because their mothers were too sick, too poor or too ill-educated to feed, nourish and care for them. Through gender action we can save women from HIV/AIDS by empowering them through information, education and negotiation of condom use with their partners.

The costs of inequality are high. They include harmful traditional practices that place the lives of women and girls at risk. They include lost productivity, high health care costs and generations destined to an endless cycle of poverty and want. For tens of millions of girls, early marriage and childbearing mean an incomplete education, limited opportunities and serious health risks.

The solutions are well known and effective. They include universal education for all girls and boys; guaranteed access to reproductive health services; the equal participation of women in the workforce, economic and political life and anti-discriminatory laws and policies that promote and protect the full range of internationally agreed-upon human rights.

For its part, on gender equality, the Commission is supporting a variety of projects worldwide such as actions to increase property rights and security for women in Afghanistan, and promotion of women holding parliamentary seats in South Africa and Mozambique. The Commission is organizing a major conference on gender equality and developing cooperation in November of this year. The Commission will continue to champion solutions for sexual and reproductive health problems and promote better access for girls in its education programmes.

UNFPA also provides support in these key areas. For example, UNFPA supports development of women's leadership qualities in Nepal by strengthening mothers' groups. It organized a regional conference in Gabon in November for African women policymakers on how to combat gender-based violence. It is training Arab women leaders to promote poverty reduction strategies and reproductive health and rights. It supports a project in a Viet Nam farming community that shows how families can rise out of poverty if women have access to resources and reproductive health.

Equality is an end in itself and a cornerstone of development. It saves money and improves and saves lives. Equality is a goal that demands sustained political leadership. Today, on World Population Day, we urge leaders at every level to speak about the great gains that equal rights for women and men offer the entire human family and to take action to make these rights reality. Indeed without the support of men, equality will remain a distant dream. We know what the solutions are, what we need is the political will.

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