

# Gender equality as a development goal

NEW YORK—Despite progress in many societies, women almost everywhere still suffer from significant levels of discrimination. Even in countries where gender equality has advanced furthest, women are overrepresented in lower-paying jobs, underrepresented in senior government and business positions, and on the receiving end of most domestic violence.

In parts of the developing world, things are much worse. In many cases, traditional cultural norms prevent girls from obtaining any real education, lead far too many to marry and bear children while still adolescents, and bar women even from opening a bank account.

At the turn of the century, the international community adopted an ambitious set of targets: the Millennium Development Goals. Much has been achieved since then, including in the area of gender equality, but we still have a long way to go. Though girls in the developing world today are much more likely to go to school, they still grow up shouldering a disproportionate burden of poverty, poor health, inadequate education, discrimination, and violence.

Most people around the world agree that men and women should be treated equally, and we also know that empowering women is a highly effective way to help families and societies lift themselves out of poverty. So how can we achieve the most gender equality at the lowest cost?

Working out the costs and benefits of a program to improve women's rights is not easy, but analyses by my think tank, the Copenhagen Consensus, offer some valuable insights. For example, investing a dollar in family planning programs can yield benefits worth \$120—an amazingly high return.

This information is particularly pertinent now, as the United Nations' 193 governments prepare the next set of international goals to guide the world's approach to development until 2030. Given that there are many important targets but limited resources, hard choices have to be made.

## WORLD VIEW

*Bjorn Lomborg*



So which targets to increase gender equality should be included?

A useful way to make direct comparisons between targets is to analyze how much each will cost to achieve and how much good achieving each will do. The Copenhagen Consensus has asked more than 60 top economists to make this assessment across the full range of relevant issues, including education, food and energy security, and ending violence against women.

It is clear that gender equality has a number of important components, but reproduction is a key issue in determining life opportunities. In particular, allowing women to decide if, when, and how often they become pregnant leads to fewer deaths in childbirth and fewer infant deaths. It also gives mothers more time to devote to raising their children and investing in the next generation. It is not surprising, then, that money spent on family-planning programs turns out to be such a good investment.

But there are other gender targets to consider. The best way to reduce violence against women, lift them out of poverty, and empower them to be full and equal members of society is to break the cycle of early marriage and childbirth.

Such a large change is not easy to achieve, but if girls can stay in school longer and have decent job opportunities available to them after they graduate, they are likely to marry and bear children later. For example, in rural India, recruiters for well-paid back-office jobs visited randomly selected villages over a period of three years. Female employment rose and women aged 15-21 were 5-6 percent less likely to get married or give

birth over this period. Moreover, better job opportunities created an incentive to become better educated. As a result, younger girls in these areas stayed in school longer, and women enrolled in training courses.

More broadly, the evidence from different approaches and countries is that spending one dollar on improving women's access to economic opportunities yields about \$7 in health, education, and poverty-alleviation benefits. Other studies show that spending a dollar on improving girls' education is also a sound investment, producing \$5 of benefits for each dollar spent.

There are plenty of other possible gender-equality targets that seem unquestionably good, but for which we do not have cost/benefit estimates. For example, ensuring that women have equal rights to inherit, sign a contract, register a business, or open a bank account would cost little, but could have far-reaching economic benefits. However, we do not have the data to quantify these benefits well.

Likewise, increasing women's political representation would cost little, whereas the benefits would often be welcome but difficult to quantify. Essentially, women's priorities would begin to take equal precedence with those favored by men.

There is no simple way to achieve something as complex as gender equality. But economic analyses can help show us where we can do the most good. Clearly, the international community needs to consider the case for family planning carefully when formulating its priorities for the next set of development goals. And we now have stronger information for other gender targets when they compete with targets related to nutrition, health, poverty, and the environment. **Project Syndicate**

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