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1. *UN Adopts "Universal Access" Target For Reproductive Health;*
2. *Nations Are Not Sufficiently Preventing Widespread Violence Against Women;*
3. *Helping Girls Make The Grade*

1. UN adopts "universal access" target for reproductive health

London, 5 October 2006 - The adoption of a new target, "to achieve universal access to reproductive health by 2015", under Millennium Development Goal 5, to reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio, by the United Nations General Assembly is being hailed as the culmination of a tireless campaign by the global reproductive health community.

The new target ensures the centrality of universal access to reproductive health in improving maternal and infant health and reducing poverty in the MDGs. The importance of reproductive health to maternal and infant health, addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic, gender equality, human rights and poverty reduction has been recognised by the global community since the International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo in 1994, where 179 countries agreed to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health by 2015.

Yet when the MDGs were adopted in 2000 these logical and intimate links were ignored; nowhere did the MDGs set targets for universal access to reproductive health. Fortunately, many governments, NGOs and other organizations recognized this omission, and began to call for increased commitment - political and financial - to reproductive health services, culminating in the General Assembly's adoption of the universal access target this week.

Dr. Gill Greer, Director General of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, said, "Sexual and reproductive health is one of the most important aspects of health policy in general and is crucially important in the reduction of global poverty. Despite continued opposition from some governments, including the United States, the UN General Assembly has made a decision that will save the lives and reduce the suffering of millions of women worldwide — especially the poorest women in the poorest countries, who bear a disproportionate level of maternal death and ill health."

Dr. Greer continued, "500,000 women die in pregnancy or childbirth every year, the vast majority of whom live in the poorest countries on the planet; the lifetime risk of dying from complications in pregnancy or childbirth in Africa is a staggering 1 in 20, in Niger this is as high as 1 in every 7 women dying during pregnancy or childbirth.

"In Sweden this figure falls to 1 in 29,800. Millions more women will suffer illness, injury or disability. If this global catastrophe is to be halted, the international community must act now to provide the political will and funding they promised for reproductive health over a decade ago in Cairo. Presently they are missing the mark by 50 per cent."

The eight MDGs form the global framework for poverty reduction, with most of the 18 specific targets which comprise the MDGs to be met by 2015. Progress is measurable by 48 different indicators. The UN General Assembly has agreed to adopt 4 new targets, including universal access to reproductive health.

2. Nations are not sufficiently preventing widespread violence against women

Dateline: United Nations - Nearly 60 percent of women in Ethiopia are subject to sexual violence by a partner. Domestic violence and rape account for 19 percent of disease in women in developed countries. And in Colombia, a woman is killed by an intimate partner every six days, a study from the United Nations said on Tuesday.

Violence against women persists at high rates around the world, and governments are not doing enough to prevent it, according to the report from U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The report, which synthesized information from various studies conducted in several countries, said while violence against women has been recognized as a violation of human rights on an international level, many national policies fall short of appropriate condemnation and protection.

"We cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace," Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in a press release, "until progress is made in the prevention of violence against women".

The report compiled a list of the proportion of women from 62 countries who have been the victims of violence at the hands of their partners.

Many of the highest rates were found in developing countries, such as Zambia, where 49 percent of women said they had experienced violence at some time in their lives, and Papua New Guinea, where 67 percent had. But industrial nations, like Lithuania, with 42 percent, and Australia, with 31 percent, were also near the top of the list.

At a news conference launching the report, Undersecretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Jose Antonio Ocampo called violence against women "a pervasive phenomenon it's really a global problem that has to be addressed."

"According to the quantitative estimates, which certainly underestimate the amount of violence that occurs, at least one out of three women experiences violence at some stage of their lives," he said. "The report states that the major form of violence takes place at the domestic level, in the households ... and it takes place in societies throughout the world."

In addition to spontaneous violence, the report also condemned what it found to be high levels of institutionalized violence, such as female circumcision, estimating that 130 million girls and women living today had undergone this practice.

Women are not receiving adequate protection from their governments, the report said, finding that 102 member states had no specific laws on domestic violence. The report also found that marital rape was not a prosecutable offense in at least 53 states, and only 93 have laws to prevent female trafficking.

Rachel Mayanja, the secretary-general's special adviser on gender issues, said the curtain has been raised on violence against women and it's now time to act in a coordinated way "to try and eliminate this scourge."

"We are going to try to end impunity (ensure) that those who are violating women will be prosecuted, will be punished, and that none of them will be allowed to continue to prey on their women," she told the news conference.

"This is the hope that this study can galvanize this kind of action."

The report urged governments to take action to bridge the gap between international policy and national laws, including securing gender equality, gathering more data on violence against women and allocating more funding for its prevention.

Violence against women affects whole societies, the report said, citing the costs of treating women injured both physically and emotionally, the effect of the violence on children, the loss of employment productivity, and the cost of bringing perpetrators to justice.

The Global AIDS Alliance, which also issued a report on the issue, said the same international leadership that has been brought to bear on the fight against AIDS should be mobilized to fight violence against women.

"If we want to reduce the stigma" of AIDS, "we have to do something about violence," said David Bryden, communications director for the alliance.

The threat of violence, especially from an intimate partner, dissuades women from getting tested for HIV, from sharing their status with sexual partners, and from seeking treatment, he said.

"We cannot make poverty history unless we make violence against women history," U.N. Population Fund Executive Director Thoraya Ahmed Obaid said in a statement.

3. Helping girls make the grade

SENEGAL, Integrated Regional News Network; October 2, 2006

Kewe Thiam is the exception to the rule that most Senegalese girls don't make it to high school.

Sitting with a group of her peers, Thiam's is the only female hand that shoots up, along with those of a dozen boys, when asked who among them goes to school.

"The girls here want to go to school, but their parents don't have the means. They can't afford the inscription fees or the supplies," says Thiam, 20, speaking for the girls around her who haven't had the opportunity to learn French, the language of instruction in Senegal.

Thiam is the only girl in her village to have completed high school. She is about to enter her final year in a two-year accounting programme offered in Kaolack, the largest nearby city and approximately 90 minutes away by road.

As in many villages in West Africa, education is still a distant dream for many girls. The United Nations children's agency (UNICEF) says that in Senegal about 40 percent

of girls 7-12 years old lack access to basic education, and those who do enroll are likely to drop out.

Sixty percent of Senegalese girls are illiterate. Senegal's Ministry of Education reported that 80.6 percent of girls began school during the 2004-2005 school year, yet only eight percent finished high school.

Early withdrawal

In the intervening years, many factors come into play that pluck girls from their desks and books and into the adult world, where they are often not equipped to deal with the lives handed to them.

"Many parents are ignorant of the importance of education and pull their daughters out of school at some point," said Anta Basse Konte, president of the scientific commission of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in Senegal.

FAWE is a pan-African organisation that aims to improve access to school for girls and strengthen retention rates. The organisation conducts sensitisation campaigns, speaking to parents about the importance of keeping their daughters in school. It also provides financial assistance and scholarships.

Konte says that even a large city like Dakar, Senegal's capital, has pockets of resistance to sending girls to school.

"We did a study and found that in certain suburbs underage marriage is a big problem. These are more traditional zones where there is a very strong religious influence that promotes this practice," she said.

She said that in some communities the local marabouts, Muslim Senegalese religious leaders and teachers, have been urging parents find husbands for their daughters - some as young as nine. Generally, a young bride's new domestic duties put an end to her education.

"Parents fear that their daughters will fall pregnant out of wedlock because there is a great deal of shame attached to that," said Konte, explaining why some parents agree to early marriage.

She said that one school in particular has been suffering tremendous losses from its classrooms because the local marabout performs yearly collective marriages, sometimes marrying off between 100 and 200 young girls at a time.

Economics is another reason for early marriage. Parents might view their daughters as financial burdens and consider how a dowry might help family finances.

"Often it just comes down to poverty," said Konte.

For this reason, girls will also be pulled from school to work, often as domestic workers or merchants. Or, they will take the place of their mother in the household to care for younger siblings because both parents need to work. Konte said this is very common in fishing villages and in agricultural

areas.

Poor access

Accessibility is also a factor in education. UNICEF says that 35 percent of schools in Senegal do not offer the full primary cycle, making it difficult for girls to reach schools offering higher grades. Parents either can't afford to send their daughters to distant schools or fear losing control of them if they are far away.

This has been the case in Keur Omar Tounkara, where a local primary school has only existed for four years. Young girls can now attend school, but older ones who missed out stay in the village, spending their days cooking, cleaning, tending to their siblings and retrieving water from the well.

Thiam said she had to push and work hard to get as far as she did.

"I found ways to get by. My family came together and pooled their money so I could afford to go. And I studied day and night to get good grades," she said.

She hopes to work at a bank when she completes her accounting programme, a job that she says will provide her with a decent salary and allow her to help her family.

"Parents often only think in the short-term and don't think about school as a long-term investment that will provide their daughters with better paying jobs, greater autonomy and more control over their lives," said Konte.

She said her organisation is funding the university education of 10 girls studying abroad. It is also trying to encourage girls to pursue studies in mathematics and science by offering bursaries that include supplies such as laptops, she said.

Konte stresses the importance of creating a cycle of change

She said she hopes that if girls have role models they will be motivated to continue their educations, and if parents witness some success stories they will be more inclined to keep their daughters in school.

"Right now girls have very few intellectual models," Konte said. "It is just normal to drop-out."