

A Girl's Life

Introduction:

In every country and culture, women play vital roles in society, but often the only role they are recognized for is their reproductive one. Women around the world have made great progress in improving their lives and the lives of their families, but they still face many inequities in political representation, economic well-being, health, and human rights. These inequities do not only affect individuals but also entire societies, as there is an increasing amount of evidence that improving the status of women is key to improving the health and well-being of families and stabilizing fertility rates around the world. In this activity, students explore the complex relationship between women's status, development, and fertility. Sharing images of women in different regions exemplifies this information to engage various types of learners.

In the following activity, students will first read an overview about the challenges facing girls and women in some of the world's less developed countries. They will then watch a series of photo essays and short videos online that illustrate different aspects of the real lives of girls and women including school, work, early marriage, pregnancy and motherhood. You may want to spread this activity out over the course of a week, having them look at one issue each day (education, etc.) and answer the discussion questions.

Materials:

Student Reading, "Women: The Critical Link"

Student Worksheet

Internet access for viewing online photo essays and videos

Procedure:

1. Women: The Critical Link

Distribute copies of the student reading, "Women: The Critical Link," or have students read it online. This reading provides students with an overview of the status of women, especially in less developed countries. It highlights disparities in the treatment of males and females in many cultures in the following areas: health/nutrition, education, housework, gainful employment and political status.



Concept:

The inequities facing women around the globe affect population growth and quality of life for all.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Discuss how girls' and women's roles vary according to culture, especially with respect to education, work, marriage, and motherhood.
- Compare their own school and work experiences with teens in other countries.
- Research and write about different aspects of gender roles in this country and different countries around the world.

Subjects:

Language Arts, Social Studies, Women's Studies

Skills:

Reading comprehension, active listening, discussion, making cause-and-effect connections, research, writing (essays, summaries, book reports)

Method:

Students read an article about women's status in less developed countries and watch/listen to several online photo essays and videos of women around the world. They discuss what they have learned and extend their learning with research, persuasive essays and/or book reports.

2. Female Voices

Now students can “put a face” on the issues by looking and listening to moving photo essays and videos that explore different aspects of women’s lives. Distribute copies of the four Student Worksheets. Each one directs students to one or more photo essays or videos online that explore an aspect of women’s lives in less developed countries (education, work, marriage, and motherhood). You may wish to have students work on these independently or go over the discussion questions in small groups. Note: The video referenced in Student Worksheet 3 is 55 minutes long, while the photo essays for the other worksheets are much shorter.

3. What Do You Think?

Have students process what they’ve read and seen by writing one or more essays. Possible topics:

- Why do you think the “traditional” role for women in many parts of the world has been sub-servient to men? If women do “hold up half the sky” why are they often not afforded equal respect in many cultures?
- Are women’s roles in your own country different today than when your mother was your age? How about when your grandmother was your age? Talk with women of different generations in your family or community to find examples to support your assertion. Are there changes you would like to see in gender roles as you enter adulthood?
- How does greater equality between the sexes contribute to a society’s progress?

4. Delve Deeper with Contemporary Literature

Encourage students to learn more about women’s issues in the developing world by reading some acclaimed books (both fiction and nonfiction) and preparing book reports or oral reports.

Some suggestions:

I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban

by Malala Yousafzai

The story of Malala Yousafzai, who refused to be silenced and fought for her right to an education.

Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time

by Greg Mortenson

The true-life story of Mortenson’s work to build schools across Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

A gripping novel about the difficult lives and hopes of two generations of Afghan women set amongst the backdrop of the country’s tumultuous modern history.

Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide

by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

The authors profile the lives of women they’ve met on their travels who struggle to create better lives for themselves and their children.

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood by Marjane Satrapi

An autobiography of a young girl’s life during Iran’s Islamic Revolution.

5. Delve Deeper with a Research Topic

There are many aspects of women's lives that were not addressed in the photo essays but would be worthy topics for students to research.

Suggested Topics:

- The preference for boys and how that has skewed the ratio of girls to boys in some countries including China, India, and South Korea.
- Political inequalities between the sexes including voting rights and percentage of women holding political office in different countries. (Examples: Saudi Arabia just recently issued a decree that will allow women to vote for the first time in 2015. In the U.S. only 18 percent of Congressional seats are held by women, about half the average of national legislative bodies across the world.)
- Workforce inequalities (job availability and earning potential for men vs. women) in different countries.
- Cultural norms and/or government policies that may deter women from having children in some developed countries. (Examples: Lack of family-friendly policies from employers in Japan or working women in Spain not getting help from men with domestic responsibilities.)
- The "Women's Lib" movement in the U.S. in the 1970's.

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Student Worksheet 1: A Day in the Life of Two School Girls

In the U.S. and other developed countries, school attendance (or home schooling) is compulsory for boys and girls, at least through age 16. While children may be encouraged to help with household chores, they are only allowed to be gainfully employed outside of the home for a limited number of hours each week to protect them from being exploited and to encourage their school participation. We take this for granted today, but until 1938 when the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed, many children left school in their elementary years and spent their days toiling in factories or “sweat shops,” often in dangerous conditions.

In less developed countries, school attendance is not taken for granted, especially for girls who often have to cut their schooling short to take care of younger siblings and help with chores at home and in the fields.

Watch and Listen

Watch and listen to the stories about the daily routines of two teen girls, one in Papua New Guinea and one in Senegal, and the role that school plays in their lives. These photo essays can be found on the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative website: www.ungei.org. Type “photo essays” into the search field and select “UN Girls' Education Initiative - News and Events - Photo Essays.”

Discuss:

1. What are the similarities and differences in Emily's and Aminata's schedules?
2. Do they have similar standards of living? Why or why not?
3. What are the similarities and differences in their school experiences?
4. What do you think will determine these girls' futures?
5. What other aspects of Emily and Aminata's lives make it challenging for them to stay in school?

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Student Worksheet 2: Woman's Work

In many less developed countries, girls and women do much of the hard labor of running a household and a subsistence farm. In rural areas where homes lack indoor plumbing and electricity, it is not uncommon for them to spend hours each day gathering water and firewood and carrying these items long distances. Most of this work is unpaid, domestic labor that takes a toll on women's bodies. With little formal education and large families to tend, women are often not able to be gainfully employed outside of the home. Cultural traditions often dictate what jobs are appropriate for men and women. Where women are able to attain an education and learn job skills, they help their families and communities prosper.

Watch and Listen

Nicholas Kristof is a Pulitzer Prize winning columnist who writes for the New York Times. He and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, have traveled the globe and written about women's hardships and triumphs in less developed countries. Their critically acclaimed book, *Half the Sky*, tells some of these women's stories.

1. First, watch Kristof's short video, "What Are You Carrying?" in which he learns first hand how difficult a woman's burden can be in the eastern Congo.
<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2010/03/08/opinion/1247467297119/what-are-you-carrying.html>.
2. Watch "A Powerful Truth," a short video which gives some highlights from the book, *Half the Sky*, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/08/20/magazine/kristof-audioss/index.html#>

Discuss

1. What is the "Congo Exercise Plan" and why is it exclusive to women?
2. Why do you think the Congolese women featured in "What Are You Carrying?" endure the burden of carrying such heavy loads while the men drink beer?
3. What's different about the work the women do for City of Joy, as opposed to the other Congolese women profiled?
4. The first three women profiled in "A Powerful Truth" (Saima Muhammed, Goretti Nyabenda and Claudine Mukakarisa) were all able to turn a small amount of money in the form of a loan or donation into the promise of a better life for their families. How did they do it and what do their stories suggest about the promise of aid projects aimed at women?
5. Kristof states that "women's empowerment is the best weapon against poverty and extremism." What evidence does he give? Can you think of other examples from history or current news to support this?

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Student Worksheet 3: Child Brides

For many girls around the globe, the future is determined at a young age when they are married off by their parents while still children themselves. In Southern Asia, almost half of all girls are married before the age of 18, most in arranged marriages. The rate of child marriage is also high in Africa (42 percent) and Latin America (29 percent). While the practice has declined globally over the past few decades, it remains common in rural areas and among the very poor.

Child brides are more likely than unmarried girls to die young, suffer from health problems, live in poverty and remain illiterate. The younger girls marry, the younger they are when they become pregnant, often before they are ready physically and emotionally to become mothers. Pregnancy-related complications are the leading cause of deaths for girls 15-19 worldwide. The babies they produce also suffer, often born premature and underweight. Child brides are often pulled out of school when they marry. Denied an education and employment opportunities, they remain poor and ill-equipped to take care of their own children. In an effort to break this cycle of poverty, many government leaders have raised the age of legal marriage in their countries and are encouraging parents to keep their daughters in school.

Watch and Listen

Watch "Child Brides: Stolen Lives," produced for NOW on PBS, at www.pbs.org/now/shows/341/. This hour-long documentary examines the lives of girls in India, Niger and Guatemala, taking a close look at cultural issues that define marriage, pregnancy and girls' education in their local areas. The program also highlights how committed individuals and organizations in these countries have been working to empower girls and give them greater freedom to make their own choices about their futures.

Discuss

1. In the first part of the program we learn that it is illegal in India for girls younger than 18 to marry, yet the practice is still widespread in rural areas, where girls are married off as small children. Why do you think communities ignore or feel threatened by this law and the people trying to enforce it?
2. Chukha, one of the Indian girls we meet, tells of being beaten regularly by her in-laws in her arranged marriage. What do you make of the treatment of girls and young women by older women in the community?
3. The Emir, interviewed in Niger says that ending child marriage is "one of the most important steps in a country's development." What are all the ways that a country's development is impeded by continuing this cultural tradition? Why do you think the villagers who continue the practice don't see the drawbacks to their daughter's futures and the future of their country?
4. The Veerni School in India, the Good Conduct Brigade in Niger and the mentorship program in Guatemala are all trying to work to convince girls and their parents that girls' education should be a priority and that marriage can wait. Do you think these programs will be effective at challenging long-held traditions? Why or why not?
5. How do you view child marriage from the perspective of human rights? (You may want to refer to Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 at www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/)

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Student Worksheet 4: Pregnancy, Childbirth and Motherhood

In the world's poorest countries, maternal and child mortality are serious problems. More than a quarter of a million women die each year in childbirth and almost 7 million children do not survive beyond their fifth birthdays. A woman's experience of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood vary greatly depending on where she lives, her socioeconomic status and her level of education. Fertility rates vary widely from an average of one child per woman in Taiwan to over seven in Niger, where the lifetime risk of a maternal death is one in seven.

Watch and Listen

The World Health Organization (WHO) produced "Great Expectations," an interactive flash movie and photo stories that follow six women from different countries (UK, India, Ethiopia, Bolivia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Egypt) from pregnancy through the first weeks of their children's lives. The photo stories on the website also follow the progress of these babies through their first year. http://www.who.int/features/great_expectations/en/

Start by watching the *Interactive flash movie* - listen to the audio introduction and read the stories from the map. For more information, scroll down the page to Photo Stories, starting at the bottom with the link, *5 months pregnant*, and working your way to *The world of a nine-month old*.

Discuss

1. What differences did you notice in the prenatal care each woman received?
2. How did the women's childbirth experiences compare? What factors determined how the women experienced childbirth?
3. What role did the fathers play during the first weeks and months of their babies' lives?
4. How did the women's ages and number of children affect how they approached this pregnancy and birth?

Women: The Critical Link

“Women hold up half the sky,” reads an old Chinese saying. Indeed, women have traditionally been the world’s farmers, child bearers, and caretakers of young and old – the backbone of families and societies. Women play a central role in the effective development of families, communities, nations, and regions. Yet, despite their vast contributions to humanity, women continue to suffer from gender discrimination in much of the world. Being born female in most of the developing world means a lifetime as a second-class citizen, denied most of the opportunities available to males in the areas of health, education, employment, and legal rights. This second-class citizenship is detrimental first and foremost to the well-being of women themselves; however, it is also a major contributor to

sustained rapid rates of population growth in the world.

The delegates at the **1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)** concluded that “Eliminating social, cultural, political, and economic discrimination against women is a prerequisite of...achieving balance between population and available resources and sustainable patterns of consumption and production.”¹ Why does improving the status of women have an impact on population growth and environmental degradation? As we shall see, many of the social, cultural, and economic conditions that keep women dependent on men are the same conditions that encourage high fertility.

If parents have limited resources to invest in their children and they know that there is little opportunity for their daughter in the paid work force, they will not make her health or education a priority. As this girl grows up, the only source of security for her will be to marry and have children at an early age. When women lack the skills or opportunities to earn wages to support themselves, they will be economically dependent on their husbands. As they grow older, if they have no savings and the government does not provide any form of social security, they must depend on their male children to take care of them.

On the other hand, breaking down the barriers that deny women access to health and family planning services, education, employment, land, and credit both increases women’s autonomy and encourages lower fertility rates.² Across continents, when women have more control over their lives, when they are less dependent on children and their role as a mother for support and security, they choose to have smaller families and to start them later. Throughout this



African Woman and Child. © Urosr; Dreamtimes.com

reading we shall see how discrimination against women in health services and nutrition, education, and work all lead to higher fertility and population growth, and how equal access to these resources encourages lower fertility and better conservation of resources.

Healthy Bodies, Healthy Lives

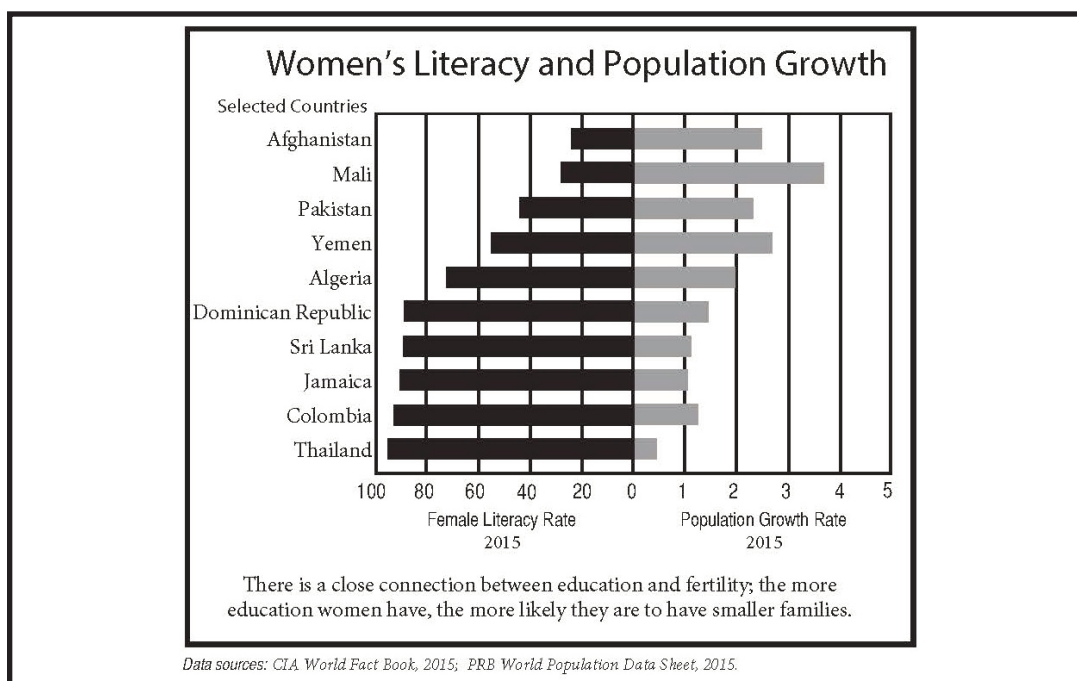
Nutrition

The need for women to have male sons to provide for them in their old age, combined with high infant mortality rates, creates a strong driving force for women to have many children, in hopes that they will have at least one or two boys who will live to maturity. This preference for sons disadvantages girl children from a very early age. Frequently they are not fed as well as their brothers, and they receive less medical attention. A study in Bangladesh showed that even under five years old, boys received 16 percent more food than girls.³ In India, girls are more likely to suffer acute malnutrition.⁴ Women are frequently malnourished even during pregnancy. Only 20 to 40 percent of women of childbearing age in the developing world eat the

recommended 2,200 calories each day under normal circumstances. Pregnant women need at least 2,500 calories. Fifty percent of pregnant women in developing countries suffer from iron deficiencies in their diet, which can lead to their children developing anemia and protein energy deficiencies.⁵ This leads to high infant mortality rates.

Young Motherhood

Marriage and first childbirth at a young age is both detrimental to women and a cause of population growth. Demographically, young marriage and early childbirth lead to higher fertility, but they also can have serious consequences for both a young woman's health and her options in life. Nonetheless, in Africa, 42 percent of women are married by age 18. Forty-nine percent of women in southern Asia and 29 percent of women in Latin America are also married by their eighteenth birthday.⁶ Compared to 10 percent in developed regions, 40 percent of women in developing regions have given birth before the age of 20.⁷ Pregnancy and childbirth are much more dangerous for girls who have not yet fully developed, especially if their growth is stunted



from malnutrition.

Teen mothers are more likely to be anemic, less likely to seek **prenatal care**, more likely to have complicated labor, and more likely to have a premature and **low birth weight** infant. Mothers aged 15 to 19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as mothers who are between the ages of 20 and 25, and the children of these younger women are also twice as likely to die.⁸ Early pregnancy affects other aspects of young women's lives as well. It is the leading cause of women dropping out of school in Africa and Latin America. It hurts the chances women have to improve their lives, health, educational attainment, employment, and decision making power in their families and communities.⁹

Maternal mortality, or death due to childbirth or pregnancy-related causes, is the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age in developing countries. Worldwide, it claims the lives of roughly a quarter of a million women each year, but the vast majority occur in the developing world. A woman living in Sub-Saharan Africa has a 1 in 16 chance of dying during pregnancy or childbirth, while the risk is only 1 in 4,000 for women living in a developed country.¹⁰ Many maternal mortalities could be prevented easily and cheaply. It is estimated that about 1 in 3 deaths could be avoided by preventing unwanted pregnancies.¹¹

An **unwanted pregnancy** can be a pregnancy that a woman does not want at all because she desires no more children or a pregnancy that comes at the wrong time - closely following another pregnancy or when the mother is very young or very old. Limiting a woman's total number of pregnancies and increasing the space between pregnancies through use of family planning reduces a woman's risk of **hemorrhaging** (excessive bleeding) when she gives birth.¹²

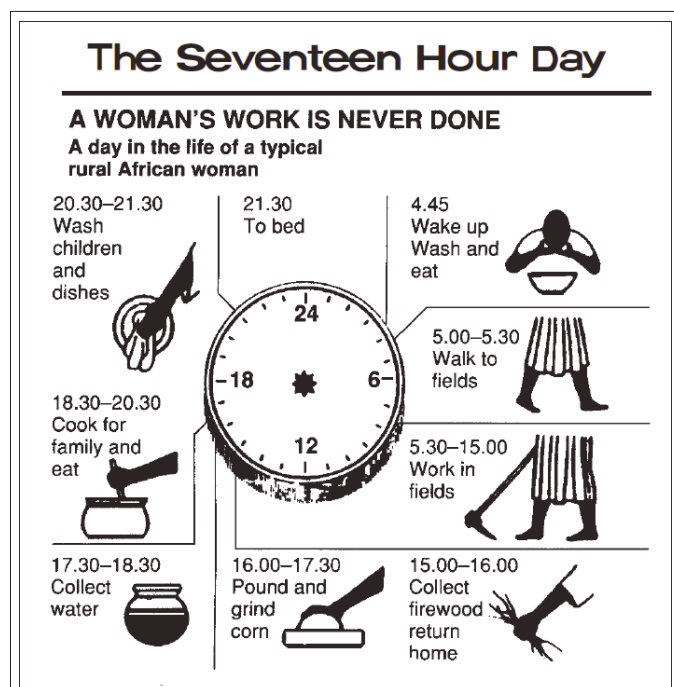
Eighty percent of maternal deaths are caused by hemorrhage, infection, or complications of unsafe abortions.¹³ Prevent unwanted and mistimed pregnancies, and you prevent

many of the 287,000 maternal deaths occurring each year.¹⁴

According to Nafis Sadik, former Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), family planning represents "the freedom from which flow all other freedoms."¹⁵ Access to family planning information and services not only allows couples to plan the number and timing of their children, but it also reduces infant mortality and improves the health of both women and children by allowing a woman to conceive at only the times when she is healthiest and ready to have a child.

Although an increased number of families have access to family planning, at least 200 million women around the world want to delay or end their childbearing, but lack the services to do so.¹⁶ These women also lack access to a full range of contraceptive options and services.

Total fertility rates have dropped from 3.2 children per woman in 1990 to around 2.5 children.¹⁷ However, in 28 countries where women are still having an average of 5 or more children, modern contraception use is as low as 2 percent.¹⁸ Access to barrier methods of contraception such,



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A health worker in the Philippines calls names of girls for weighing. Photo; Marian Starkey

as condoms, is important not only for preventing unwanted pregnancies, but also in preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS. In 1994 women represented about 40 percent of all AIDS cases worldwide. However, women are contracting the virus at a faster rate than men, and in 2006, women represented over 50 percent of adults living with HIV globally and nearly 60 percent of those in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹

Education Opens Doors

Discrimination against girls in education is another condition that hurts women and leads to population growth. Although advances have been made over the past decades, enrollment of girls in primary and secondary schools is still below that of boys in many countries. Presently, 85 percent of girls and 89 percent of boys are enrolled in primary school in developing countries. Fifty-one percent of girls and 52 percent of boys are enrolled in secondary school. Worldwide, the adult female literacy rate, at 80 percent, lags behind the male rate of 84 percent.²⁰

Educating girls is one of the most effective ways of giving them a degree of self-sufficiency, providing them with the skills to obtain a good job, and enhancing their decision-making power in their families and communities.

Because it increases women's self-sufficiency, education decreases their dependency on having many children for security and status. The years of education a woman has is one of the best predictors of how many children she will have and how healthy they will be. Repeatedly, studies have shown that educated women marry later, want fewer children, are more likely to use effective methods of contraception, and have greater means to improve their economic livelihood.²¹

In Africa, where **illiteracy** among adult women is still around 50 percent, the average number of births per women is almost 5. In Latin America and the Caribbean and eastern and southeastern Asia, where illiteracy rates for women have fallen to less than 10 percent, the number of births per woman is under three.²²

Women's Work

Women are disadvantaged in all forms of work. They are responsible for a larger share of unpaid work, and they are discriminated against in both informal and formal sector employment. Women frequently work more hours per week than men. A survey of eight developing countries reports that women work an average of one hour and 9 minutes more than men each day.²³ However, globally women only make up 40 percent of the paid labor force.²⁴ Women who are denied employment opportunities that give them status and economic security have no choice other than to marry and begin having children at an early age. On the other hand, when women have equal access to paid employment, they tend to have smaller families and start them later. This trend both opens up new opportunities for women and slows population growth and environmental degradation.

Invisible Work

Women are responsible for performing the vast majority of unpaid household work. In the developing world, this work includes childcare; collecting water and gathering fuel wood for cooking and heating; and growing, processing, and cooking the food for the family. Women grow 60 to 80 percent of the food grown in Africa.²⁵ This work ties women to the land, and they are frequently the ones most affected by environmental degradation. Desertification and resource depletion increase the amount of time women must spend collecting firewood and water.

When wood is scarce, women must burn cow manure as fuel instead of saving it for use as fertilizer for their crops. According to a U.N. Population Fund report, every ton of fertilizer burned can cost as much as 110 pounds of grain lost from the next harvest. Ironically, environmental degradation and pollution give women incentives to have more children to help them farm and collect wood and

water. Higher fertility increases the rate of population growth, which is often one of the leading causes of the resource scarcity to begin with.

Another form of women's work includes work in the **informal economy**. This sector of the economy is comprised of people providing goods and services, usually out of their homes. In most developing countries, women represent over 60 percent of people active in the informal sector; in India, 91 percent work in the informal sector and in Kenya 83 percent.²⁶ Where women comprise a larger percentage of the informal labor force than men, it is because of lack of opportunities or other obstacles to wage employment.²⁷

Women frequently face obstacles to success in the informal sector as well. They usually lack access to credit – small loans that they can use to start up small businesses to generate more income for their families. Studies have shown that when given access to low-interest credit, women repay their loans and increase their income and assets, which they use to improve the education, health, and nutrition of their families.²⁸

Visible Work

Women who work in the formal sector marry an average 2.4 years later than women who do not.²⁹ And when a woman must leave her job and sacrifice possible earnings in order to deliver or care for a young child, women's paid employment discourages couples from having large families. However, several barriers still block women's equal opportunity in the paid work force, such as the inability to get maternity leave or affordable child care. Furthermore, even where women comprise a sizable percentage of the paid labor force, they usually hold jobs of lower status and make lower wages than men.

According to the Census Bureau, in 2013 the average woman's wage in the United States was less than 77 percent of the average man's wage. Throughout much of the world, women's paid

labor is concentrated in “pink collar” professions including teaching, cleaning, nursing, waiting tables, and working in textile mills.³⁰ Despite gains in both women’s participation in the paid labor force and advancements within it, women still hold only a small percentage of all managerial and administrative jobs. And, in 2012, they accounted for fewer than 21 percent of parliamentarians worldwide.³¹

Giving women equal access to nutrition, health services, education, land, employment, and credit is a critical step in promoting their human rights. Women who have been well nourished, well educated, and who have access to a wage-earning job have a choice about what to do with their lives. They do not have to be dependent on a husband or having male children for their security. As women become more equal partners in their marriages, family size declines. When skills and opportunities are combined with access, population growth and resource depletion slows.

Endnotes

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- ¹¹ UNFPA. www.unfpa.org/public/home/mothers/pid/4382.
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- ²² UNICEF.
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