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DEVELOPMENT: Gender Equality Equals Growth

WASHINGTON, Jun 2 (IPS) p Gender equality and development go hand in hand and countries with smaller gaps between men and women achieve higher economic performance, the World Bank says in a new study.

The document released ahead of the UN Special Session on Women in New York next week echoes what gender activists have been championing for years - that societies which discriminate on the basis of gender pay a significant price in more poverty, slower economic growth, weaker governance and lower quality of life.

"The findings won't surprise advocates for gender equality," says Karen Mason, World Bank Director for Gender and Development. "But we hope that it will help to convince others that attention to gender issues really is crucial to development and poverty reduction."

The study, 'Engendering Development' is still only available on the Internet. Its aim is to fuel debate ahead of the Jun. 5-9 General Assembly session titled "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century".

The UN session, also called Beijing Plus Five, is a review of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in the Chinese capital in September 1995, and is expected to draw more than 15,000 people from across the world.

Gender inequalities in basic rights, education, access to resources and participation in public life affect development, and they tend to be largest in low-income countries. Within these countries these inequalities are greatest among the poor, notes the report.

A Bank study that examined the factors contributing to child malnutrition patterns in 63 countries between 1970 and 1995 found that gains in women's education made the single largest contribution to declines in malnutrition.

In Brazil, the positive impact on children's nutrition due to additional income in a mothers' hands is four-to-eight times larger than the impact of additional income to a father, the study notes.

Countries where girls are only half as likely to go to school as boys have 21 more infant deaths per 1,000 live births than countries with no gender gap, the findings show. In Sub-Saharan Africa, if the ratio of female-to-male years of schooling had been near parity in 1990, its under-five child mortality would have been 25 percent lower.

It is widely acknowledged that gender inequalities in education and access to other productive resources create inefficiencies that reduce countries' prospects for economic growth.

Evidence cited in the new study taken from farm studies in Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that improving gender equality in access to productive resources could increase agricultural productivity by as much as one-fifth.

"Much of the recent debate about gender and development has pitted growth-oriented approaches against rights-oriented approaches," says report co-author Elizabeth King. "But the evidence we examined suggests that economic development and institutional change are complementary - and that both are necessary."

Cross-country evidence on the impact of gender inequalities in education in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa supports these findings.

If these regions had started with the gender gap in average years of schooling that East Asia had in 1960 and had closed their gender gaps at the rate achieved by East Asia from 1960 to 1992, their GNP per capita could have grown by between 0.5 and 0.9 percentage points higher per year the report concludes. These would be substantial increases over actual growth rates.

In no region do women experience full equality with men in social, economic, and legal rights. In a number of countries women still lack independent rights to own land, manage property, undertake outside employment, or even travel, without their husbands' consent.

In parts of Africa, women obtain land rights chiefly through their husbands, as long as the marriage endures, and they lose these rights when they are divorced or widowed.

Nonetheless the last quarter century has seen much improvement in the absolute status of women and in gender equality in most developing countries. With few exceptions, females' education levels improved considerably.

The primary enrolment rates of girls about doubled in the Middle East, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, rising much faster than boys', and substantially reducing large gender gaps in schooling, says the study.

The last 50 years have seen women's life expectancy increase by 15 to 20 years in developing countries, the World Bank adds.

"With greater investments in girls and women and better access to health care, the expected relationship between female and male longevity has emerged in all developing regions; for the first time, in the 1990s, women in South Asia are living longer than men, on average."

But the UN Special Session will also hear that the lot of women has been minimal in the area of political representation according to the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

In politics women continue to be vastly under-represented in national and sub-national assemblies, accounting for less than 10 percent of the seats in parliament, except in East Asia.

Progress has been minimal in most regions since the 1970s, and in Eastern Europe, female representation has fallen from about 25 to seven percent since the beginning of economic and political transition there.

"Greater women's rights and female participation in public life are associated with cleaner business and cleaner government," the World Bank study says.

"Cross-country findings from several studies show that where the influence of women in public life is higher, the level of corruption is lower. This holds even when comparing countries with the same civil liberties, education, legal institutions, and GDP." (END/IPS/HD/DV/gm/da/00)