

Benefits of empowering women

By Bjørn Lomborg

Even if believe we have come a long way regarding gender equality, the fact is that up to today, women tend to hold lower-paying jobs, be under-represented in politics and the upper levels of business and bear the brunt of domestic violence. In parts of the developing world, women have it even harder; traditional cultural norms may mean that many girls receive little education, are married off and bear children while still adolescents and cannot even open a bank account.

In Zimbabwe, the World Economic Forum finds that women still only make 74% of men's salary for the same work. And for every female in the senior public or private legislative positions, there are nearly four men.

Simple morality dictates that men and women should be treated equally but the more difficult question is what does gender equality do to improve lives? Are women just equally free to live in poverty, or are they freer to help families and societies lift themselves out of poverty? What are the most cost-effective ways to achieve better treatment of women? It is tough questions like this that my think tank, the Copenhagen Consensus, is trying to answer.

Working out the costs and benefits of a program is a complex enough task for something concrete like providing clean water but for a wider issue like women's rights it is fiendishly difficult. Despite this, it is possible for some specific targets, and it turns out that investing a dollar in family planning programs can produce benefits worth \$120, an amazingly high return. But before we can say this is the best we can do for the developing world, we need to compare this with other worthy goals.

With the United Nations planning for the next set of goals to follow the Millennium Development Goals and take us through to 2030, we have to ask: which targets should we include?

Because having hundreds of targets is like having no priorities, and as resources of time, money and trained people are limited, we need to focus on where we can do the most good.

So, should targets to increase gender equality be on our priority list? One way to help decide this is to compare all the options by analyzing how much each will cost and how much good each will do. This is what the Copenhagen Consensus has done with 60+ teams of top economists across education, hunger, energy, violence and now gender equality.

Gender equality is a big issue with various important components, including reproduction: allowing women control over pregnancy means fewer deaths in childbirth, reducing infant deaths and giving mothers more time to devote to raising their families and earning an income.

But that is not the only way to think about gender equality. We should also think of reducing violence against women, ensuring they have equal rights and lifting them out of poverty by getting out of the cycle of early marriage and childbirth, and empowering them to be full members of society.

This is easier said than done, of course, but one good approach is to keep girls in school for longer and to make sure that well-paid jobs are available for them when they finish education.

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