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INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

**Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the
Millennium Development Goals for women and girls**

**THE HEALTH MDGS:
WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS?
WHAT HASN'T WORKED? AND WHAT'S NEXT?**

by

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1. Summary: The fundamentals for reaching the health MDGs

during 2000-2010.³ The proportion of women living with HIV has remained stable at 50 per cent globally, although women are disproportionately affect

violence nearly 30 per cent higher than other women reported.¹⁰ Gender-based violence is individual and societal, and violence against girls and women is rife in conflict situations. Fragile states feature among the countries furthest from achieving the health MDGs.

The synergy between girls' education and their health is widely accepted. While countries have made considerable progress on gender parity in primary schooling – an MDG in itself – girls' post-primary schooling remains a major challenge. This is a health problem because children enter adolescence during these years. Adolescent girls face distinct health risks that they are more likely to avoid when in school. These include child marriage, early pregnancy, and HIV infection. Adolescence also is a formative period for future behaviour, and many secondary school children receive comprehensive sexuality and life skills education. Out of school girls miss the opportunity to gain these assets, which could lay the foundation for health lifestyle choices, empowered futures, and healthier children.

While marriage ages are increasing in all regions, an estimated 142 million girls will be married by 18 (by 2020) if present trends continue. Globally, approximately one in three women aged 20 to 24 were child brides.¹¹ **Child marriage** threatens girls' prospects for education, building skills and a decent livelihood, and accessing social support. It also comes with the risk of early pregnancy, heightened maternal mortality risk, and in heavily HIV-affected regions, increased risk of HIV infection. The babies of young mothers face a higher risk of mortality than babies of women in their 20s.¹²

Other social determinants have distinct effects on girls and women because they are responsible for managing their households and families. They carry the burden of providing adequate nutrition, food security, water, and sanitation – for themselves and for their families. They may face insecurity, violence, and exploitation in order to meet basic personal and household needs. Environmental and climate change threaten access to clean water, adequate nutritious food,

with assets such as micro-credit, financial management skills, and mobile technology are a few examples of social interventions with untapped potential to bring health benefits to the most excluded women and children at highest risk of health problems.

The focus on health MDGs for women, children and girls as a lead up to 2015 and beyond should include a goal focused on the health of populations: where the target should be ending preventable deaths and morbidity, especially amongst women and children who are the most vulnerable. The global community needs to come together to champion the cause of “healthy life expectancy” which addresses intersectorality and universality and moves beyond single theme issues, which have been a major obstacle in achieving the MDGs. Investing in girls’ education, investing in efforts to reduce violence against women and investing in improving gender-sensitive, population centric and equitable reproduction, maternal, newborn and child health policies is an investment in social and economic growth and an obligation to realize the human rights for all.

6. Conclusion

Forward-looking leaders from heads of state to heads of households are starting to recognize how gender inequality and other social determinants threaten women’s and children’s health. It will only be possible to accelerate progress in the lead up to 2015 by tackling the underlying causes of health inequality and through targeted action to those who are most excluded. Beyond 2015, integrating the push for gender equality into deliberations on future goals will be fundamental to sustainable development. This is no small task. But the benefits will be significant for today’s women and children and for generations to come.