

For most women and girls, it's still a man's world

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People walk in the International Women's Day march for gender equality and women's rights from the United Nations to Times Square in New York City, March 8, 2015. About 1,000 people gathered to speak up for the gender that traditionally is paid less for work and often has a smaller voice in policy decisions. AP Photo/Mark Lennihan

Women are still fighting for their rights in most countries around the world almost 20 years after a huge plan for gender equality was adopted at a world conference in China.

In September 1995, world leaders met in Beijing for the Fourth Annual Conference on Women. The United Nations (U.N.), which promotes international cooperation, security and human rights, held the meeting.

U.N. members came up with a "Platform for Action" and 189 countries agreed to it. It set a series of lofty goals to improve the treatment of women and girls, including equal access to education, an end to child marriages and the elimination of poverty.

Nearly two decades have passed since then. This year, thousands of U.N. members will gather in New York to begin reviewing how much progress has been made. Many of the goals set in Beijing have not been met.

Fewer Rights Than Men And Boys

Two new studies show that women are still fighting for their rights.

One study, which was released on Monday, was done by the World Policy Analysis Center of the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA). It found that about 90 percent of countries still have laws and policies that give women and girls fewer rights and protections than men and boys.

50 Years To Equality In Government

The second study was carried out by the U.N. It reviewed how much has changed over the past 20 years. The study indicated that countries have made limited progress. For example, men still dominate in government. Only 20 countries have female heads of state or government, and although women make up about half the global population, they account for only about 1 in 5 national lawmakers. Half of all women have paying jobs, but they are paid less than their male co-workers throughout the world.

Although there has been progress, the U.N. study found that it has been slow. At the current rate, it will take about 50 years for there to be as many women in government as men. It will take 81 years for women to participate equally in business.

The findings point to a failure of leadership, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said in a statement last week. She is the head of the U.N. agency on women.

"The leaders entrusted with the power to realize the promises made in Beijing have failed women and girls," she said.

More Girls In School, More Women Work

Both studies noted that some progress has been made. For example, many countries have removed laws that discriminated against women, and many have adopted measures to halt violence against women and girls. Nearly half of all primary school students are now girls, the U.N. report says. Participation by women in the labor force has increased since the 1990s, and the percentage of mothers who die during childbirth has dropped.

The UCLA study identified a few other positive changes. Most of the constitutions adopted since 1995 guarantee equality for women. These include new constitutions drafted in Egypt and Iraq. Saudi Arabia does not have such provisions, however.

Child Marriage Is A Big Obstacle

Saudi Arabia is also one of two countries, along with Yemen, that hasn't established a minimum age for marriage. The Beijing Platform for Action identified early marriage as a major problem for women's equality.

The Maldives passed a law in 2001 setting a minimum marriage age of 18. Since then, the share of girls who married between the ages of 15 and 18 fell from almost half to below 6 percent.

But, more than 60 countries still allow girls to be married at a younger age than boys. Researchers said that this fact helps explain why nearly five times more girls than boys get married before they turn 18.

“Girls who marry young have babies young,” said Jody Heymann. She is the founding director of UCLA's World Policy Analysis Center and is dean of the university's Fielding School of Public Health. Having children at a young age jeopardizes women's health and that of their babies, reduces their chances of completing their education and affects their ability to earn a living.

In at least 23 countries, most of which are in Africa and the Middle East, inheritance laws allow men to inherit more of their families' wealth than women. UCLA's study also found that 10 countries do not give women the same rights to own property as men.

U.S. Lags Peers On Paid Maternity Leave

Western countries also fall short when it comes to women's equality.

The United States scores well on access to education, providing free schooling for boys and girls through high school, but it does not guarantee paid leave for new mothers. Every other high-income country allows mothers to take paid time off to spend time with their newborns.

In Mississippi, girls can be married at 15 with parental consent, but the minimum age for boys is 17.

The U.S. is also one of just seven U.N. member countries that have not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Other countries that have not done so are Iran, Somalia and Sudan.

Heymann said educating women to the same standard as men and giving them an equal chance in the workplace could contribute billions to the global economy. As a result, both men and women are paying a price for women's inequality, she said.

The U.N. study also found that violent conflicts, changes in food and energy prices, economic crises and climate change have all contributed to the lack of progress for women's right.

Despite the barriers, however, the UCLA study found that progress has been recorded in every region of the world and in countries at every income level.

“Clearly we have the capability to do this as a global community,” Heymann said. “It’s a question of whether we all focus on getting the job done.”

Quiz

- 1 Which detail BEST summarizes the central idea of the section “50 Years to Equality in Government”?
 - (A) Only 20 countries have female heads of state or government, and although women make up about half the global population, they account for only about 1 in 5 national lawmakers.
 - (B) “The leaders entrusted with the power to realize the promises made in Beijing have failed women and girls,” she said.
 - (C) Half of all women have paying jobs, but they are paid less than their male co-workers throughout the world.
 - (D) At the current rate, it will take about 50 years for there to be as many women in government as men.

- 2 In the sections “Fewer Rights Than Men And Boys” and “50 Years To Equality In Government,” which fact is NOT directly supported by the studies conducted?
 - (A) Although women are globally equal in population, only 20% are lawmakers.
 - (B) Most countries give women and girls fewer rights than boys and men.
 - (C) Women are not making as much money in the workforce as their male counterparts.
 - (D) Later this year, many U.N. members will attend a conference discussing women's rights progress.

- 3 Which paragraph in the section "Child Marriage Is A Big Obstacle" demonstrates a victory for supporters of women's equality?

- 4 Which paragraph BEST states the central idea of the section "U.S. Lags Peers On Paid Maternity Leave"?