



## Women as Change Agents: Improved Outcomes

Gender Equality and Sustainable Development  
June Zeitlin, Executive Director,  
Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO)  
May 22, 2006

Perhaps the most important evidence documenting women as change agents is that where women earn wages and control resources, household incomes and standard of living rise, and families tend to benefit more than when men have exclusive control of the income and resources.

Investing in the education of girls is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. One World Bank study estimates that countries that fail to close the gender gap in primary education are at risk of losing 0.1 to 0.3 percentage points annually in per capita growth. Another study found that if countries of South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa had closed the gender gap in schooling between 1960 and 1992 as quickly as East Asia did, their income per capita could have grown by an additional 0.5 – 0.9 percentage point per year. In Africa, this would have meant a *doubling* of per capita income growth.

Other data demonstrates how strategic investment in women generates positive change for entire communities:

- **Reduce Malnutrition**
  - A study of 63 countries showed that gains in women's education made the single largest contributions (43% of the total) to declines in malnutrition.
- **Increase child survival**
  - As the World Bank reports, increases generally in household income are associated with reduced child mortality, but the marginal effect of income in the hands of the mother rather than

the father is almost 20 times as large for child survival. Moreover, a study of 25 developing countries found that one to three years of maternal schooling would reduce child mortality by about 15 percent, whereas a similar increase in paternal schooling would lead to only a 6 percent reduction.

- **Improve health and well-being of women and children**
  - The number of grades of schooling mothers complete correlate positively with their age at marriage, number of births, health, mortality of children and their children's educational attainment. Daughters of educated mothers are more likely to attend school.
  
- **Improve Women's Reproductive Health**
  - Educated women are more likely to initiate sexual activity and began childbearing later than uneducated women. They also have fewer children. Access to reproductive health care can result in large savings for public health and other social services.
  
- **Addressing Violence Against Women**
  - Addressing violence against women not only redresses women's human rights but also reduces the actual costs to countries in terms of lost productivity, health care expenditures and demands on the criminal justice system.
  
- **Increasing Political Participation**
  - Effective strategies through quota systems to achieve a critical mass (30%) have been identified and replicated particularly in Africa, Europe and Latin America.