**11. Status of Women**  
**How can the changing status of women help improve the human condition?**

Gender equity is essential for the development of a healthy society and is one of the most effective ways to address all the other global challenges in this chapter. It is well documented that countries with smaller gender gaps tend to have better economies, healthier children, and superior welfare in general. For example, the Nordic countries top both gender parity ratings and general quality of life indexes. Increased participation of women in political economic decision making around the world has been slow but steady.

The ratio of women in national parliaments has increased from 13.8% in 2000 to 18.4% in 2009. Since some 110 countries have introduced regulations to help women get elected, there are notable advancements in Europe and the Americas, but less progress in Africa and the Middle East. Nevertheless, UNICEF reports that school attendance improved worldwide and the education gender gap is closing; of the estimated 100 million primary-age children who are not in school, girls only slightly outnumber boys.

Women represent over 60% of all unpaid family workers and account for over 40% of the world’s workforce but earn less than 25% of the wages and own only 1% of the assets. Since there are more women than men in universities in many countries that limit women’s professional work, the feminine brain drain could become an issue in countries as diverse as Saudi Arabia and Japan.

About 70% of the 600,000–820,000 individuals trafficked each year are female and up to 50% are minors, in the “largest slave trade in history.” Although many of the norms on gender relations have found official endorsement in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and in the Beijing Plan of Action, many countries still have laws and cultures that deny women basic human rights.

Religious and patriarchal structures continue to hinder progress in addressing women’s deprivations of liberty, maternal mortality, unsafe abortions and lack of access to family planning, genital mutilation, child marriage, child labor, and the feminization of poverty. While maternal death risk is 1 in 8,000 for women in industrial countries, it is 1 in 76 in the developing world, with most prevalence in Africa and Asia due to high fertility rates and weak health systems. Environmental disasters, food and financial crises, armed conflicts, and forced displacement might further increase vulnerabilities and generate new forms of disadvantages for women and children.

The largest war today, as measured by death and casualties per year, is men attacking women. WHO reports that after diseases and hunger, violence against women is the greatest cause of death among women. About one-third of women suffer gender-based violence during their lives, and one in five have been be a victim of rape or attempted rape, especially during armed conflicts. War crimes committed against them are often not prosecuted. Truth and reconciliation commissions on violence against women and protecting their rights in armed conflict should be established. Educating men and ending harmful gender stereotyping in the media will help, but it is a slow process. In the meantime, elementary and secondary school systems should consider teaching martial arts and other forms of self-defense in physical education classes for girls. Mothers should use their educational role in the family to more assertively nurture mutual respect between men and women.

Campaigns such as “UNite to End Violence against Women” raise awareness and encourage strategies to address physical, mental, or sexual harm against women and girls worldwide. Fewer than half of the UN member states have passed laws targeting domestic violence. Meanwhile, women are increasingly cutting through cultural hierarchies via the Internet to get information, form groups, coordinate actions, and participate in networks. Web sites like iknowpolitics.org help improve women’s political skills. (See Appendix in the attached CD for an annotated listing of women and gender organizations and resources to improve gender equity.) Indexes are being created to assess gender gaps and increase accountability. Legal systems should draw on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Plan of Action to improve gender parity and access to credit, land, technology, training, health care, and child care. Infringements on women’s rights should be subject to prosecution and international sanctions.

Challenge 11 will be addressed seriously when there is gender parity in school enrollment, literacy, and access to capital, when discriminatory laws are gone, when discrimination and violence against women is prosecuted, and when there are essentially equal numbers of men and women in parliaments, cabinets, and other policy-making positions. (See results of a study conducted by Millennia 2015 on potential policies to improve the status of women in the attached CD.)

**Regional Considerations**  
  
**Africa:** Half the world’s maternal deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa. Pregnancy-related death is 4.5%, genital mutilation is still widespread, women have little say in their own health care, and only 61% of the girls go to primary school. Although women represent 18.5% in sub-Saharan African parliaments, thanks to a 30% seats guarantee rule, Rwanda became the first country in the world to elect a women-majority parliament. Major cultural changes will have to be made to systematically improve the prospects for the average woman in Africa. Uganda eliminated school fees to help close the educational gender gap. Fifteen First Ladies of Africa held a summit in California.  
  
**Asia and Oceania:** Some 18% of Asian national legislators are women; the equivalent figure in Oceania is 15.2% and in Arab States, 9%. At least 60 million girls are “missing” in Asia due to the abortion of female fetuses, female infanticide, and deliberate neglect and starvation of baby girls. China funds pension plans for parents with daughters to counter male-only child preferences. Many women are achieving socioeconomic independence through micro loans. China has banned gender discrimination in the job market. The Philippines is close to having a Magna Carta of Women become legally binding. Australian universities now graduate more women than men, and their women hold 36% of senior executive positions in government and 12% of private-sector management jobs.  
  
**Europe:** Women hold 41.4% of parliamentary seats in Nordic countries, 19.3% in OECD countries (excluding Nordic ones), and 30% of EU Parliament seats. Although women represent 59% of university graduates, their employment rate is only 58% and they earn on average 15% less than men (11% less in France); women represent 32% of managers, 10% of board members, and only 2.9% of CEOs of large companies. Work/life balance is still deficient. About 500,000 women from Central and Eastern Europe are working in the sex trade in Western Europe. A new public school program in Italy has more than 60,000 girls learning martial arts as deterrence to male violence.  
  
**Latin America:** Women’s participation in Latin American parliaments improved after the introduction of quotas in many countries. Women represent more than 60% of college graduates in Brazil. Peru is introducing programs for teaching computer skills to women in indigenous languages. Institutional weaknesses, “machismo” attitudes, and a patriarchal culture hinder progress in addressing rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and equal pay and opportunities for women.  
  
**North America:** Women hold 25% of parliamentary seats in Canada and 16.5% in the U.S. The U.S. “Equal Pay for Equal Work” law gained international recognition. Women held 15% of executive positions in the top 500 companies in the U.S. in 2007 and 13% in Canada in 2006. Nevertheless, at least 86.4% of U.S. companies had boards with at least one woman member, versus 48.2% in Canada. In Quebec, Canada, state corporate boards by law will have to be 50% female by 2012.

**Graph:** Women in National Parliaments (percentage)

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, with Millennium Project estimates

