



Worlds Apart: Reproductive Health and Rights in an Age of Inequality

Ms Sietske Steneker

Here below follows an abstract of the lunch lecture Ms Sietske Steneker (UNFPA) gave on 18 October 2017. The lecture was organized by the United Nations Association Flanders Belgium (VFN) and the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies. It took place at the United Nations Regional Information Centre (UNRIC) in Brussels. We are grateful to Ms Steneker and UNFPA for taking the time to give this lecture and to UNRIC for its generous hospitality.

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Good afternoon everyone,

I would like to start my presentation with a brief introduction of UNFPA. We have country offices in 155 countries so definitely in all developing countries. An office like the one here in Brussels is a bit of an anomaly, because Belgium, obviously, does not face the same situation as developing countries.

We are a very small team here in Brussels and we focus on advocacy. We try to keep all the issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights high on the agenda. For instance, the whole process leading up to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals was an important moment to try and make sure that sexual and reproductive health and rights were included. Sometimes the more sensitive issues fall through the cracks. Effective advocacy is key to ensuring that such issues are not forgotten.

Every year UNFPA presents a report called the “State of World Population” in which we analyze a specific topic that is relevant. This year we have chosen to report about the link between reproductive rights and inequality.

Our world is increasingly unequal and it is not only about money. It is also about power, about rights and about opportunities. Inequality has many dimensions and those dimensions often feed on each other. One dimension that we at UNFPA think has received too little attention is the enjoyment of, or conversely the denial of, reproductive rights and the effect that that has on half of humanity. It is not a small matter. This is the focus of the UNFPA Report which is called “Worlds Apart: Reproductive Health and Rights in an Age of Inequality”.

Why Now and Why about Inequality?

Economic equality between countries is decreasing and inequality within countries is increasing. This is an important thing to understand. Aggregated numbers about a country actually say very little.

In at least 34 countries the gaps between the richest and the poorest within the country grew between 2008 and 2013. In those countries, a privileged few are rising to the top and are staying there, while the ranks of those at the bottom grow. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is about building a more equitable world. The report aims to show how sexual and reproductive health and rights may contribute to fairer and more inclusive societies where everyone’s rights are respected. It also aims to show how upholding those rights can even help to achieve SDG 1: to eliminate poverty.

This presentation will cover a lot of the material that is in the report, but I would like you to take away three big messages.

The first one is that inequalities in women’s reproductive health and rights must be tackled in order for the world to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The second one is that we must heed the call of the SDG’s to first reach those that are the furthest behind if we are to reach shared prosperity at all. This cannot happen without couples

in the poorest segment of society getting access to reproductive health care and that includes family planning. Leave no one behind.

The third message is that an increasingly unequal world is not inevitable. Actions recommended in this report can lead to a more equitable future where women govern their own lives, have equal access to sexual and reproductive health care and also have the knowledge, skills and power to find employment and to do in life what they want to do.

It is also important to realize that there is a price to inequality. Extreme inequality has been shown to reduce economic growth. It does not allow a country to make use of people's capacities; it leads to a concentration of economic and political power, and can ultimately result in economic and political instability. Taking all of this together, this means that high inequality stands in the way of reaching Sustainable Development Goal number 1, to eliminate poverty. It stands in the way of many things but reducing poverty will be impossible with such high inequality.

Many Dimensions

As I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, inequality is often thought of only as a matter of a lopsided distribution of wealth or income. But it's a more complex phenomenon, which is reinforced by different forms of disparity between the sexes, between races and ethnicities, and between urban and rural residents.

Inequality has many dimensions, each in turn a symptom and cause, of some other inequality so it is all related. Within this larger context, two critical, intertwined dimensions that the report looks at are in the first place inequalities in realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights and in the second place gender inequality more broadly.

Wealth and Health

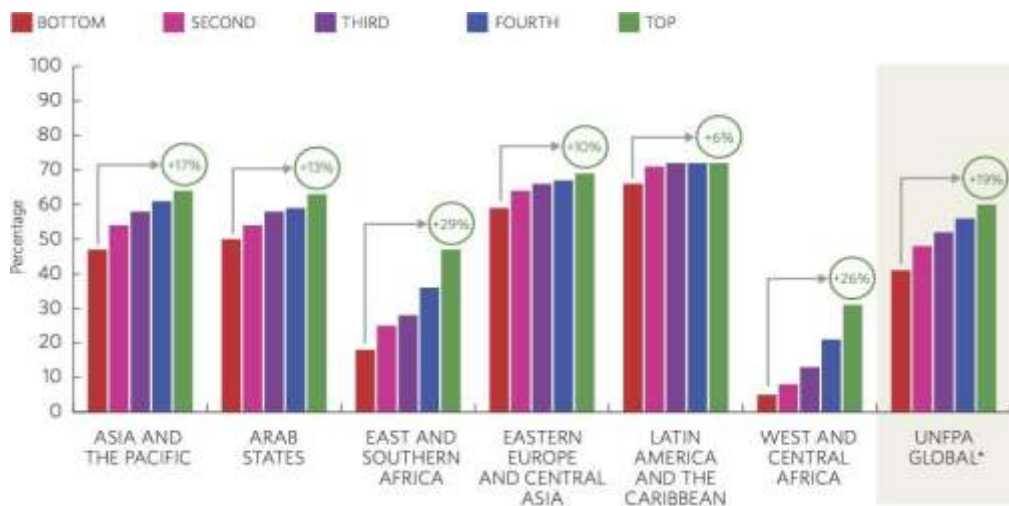
Even in most developing countries, women who are wealthier, who live in cities and who have more education, often have access to acceptable quality sexual and reproductive health services and they are more likely to be able to realize their reproductive rights.

Meanwhile, women at the bottom of the economic ladder generally have little access to services and are least able to exercise their reproductive rights. The poorest women often cannot decide themselves whether, when and how often to become pregnant. The poorest women also have the least access to quality care during pregnancy and childbirth.

This inequity has lasting repercussions for women's health, work life and earnings potential, as well as for the well-being of their families and the development of their communities and ultimately for their countries.

I will now show a few slides on important aspects of reproductive health and the level of access to them of different quintiles of the population in developing countries.

Contraception



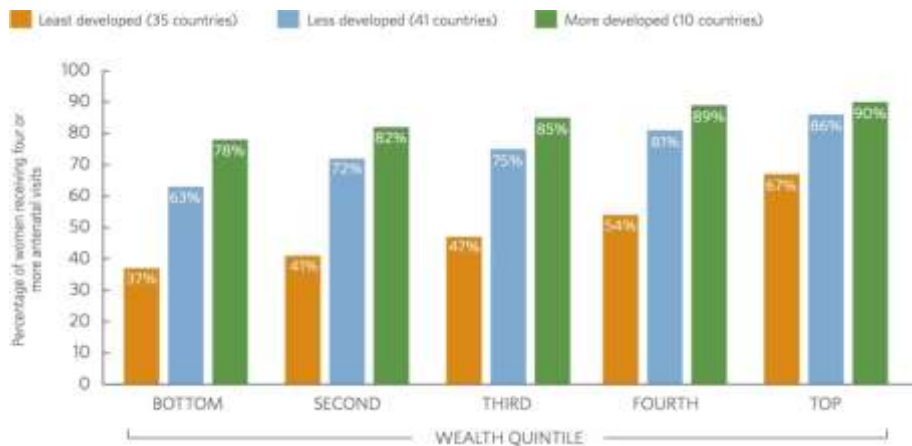
Access to contraception is foundational to reproductive health and rights. Deciding if, when and how often to give birth is the basis for so many other things in the life of a girl or woman.

This slide shows the contraceptive prevalence by wealth quintile and by region. Red is the poorest 20 per cent of the population and green the richest 20 per cent. You can see that the gap between poorest and richest is biggest in Africa and smallest in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the difference is only 6 per cent between the poorest and the richest segments of society.

In all regions the poorest women, especially those with less education who live in rural areas, generally have the least access to contraception. And this puts women and adolescent girls at greater risk of unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion.

Lack of access to contraception is also linked to increasing and intergenerational poverty and reduced prospects for women's economic upward mobility.

Antenatal care

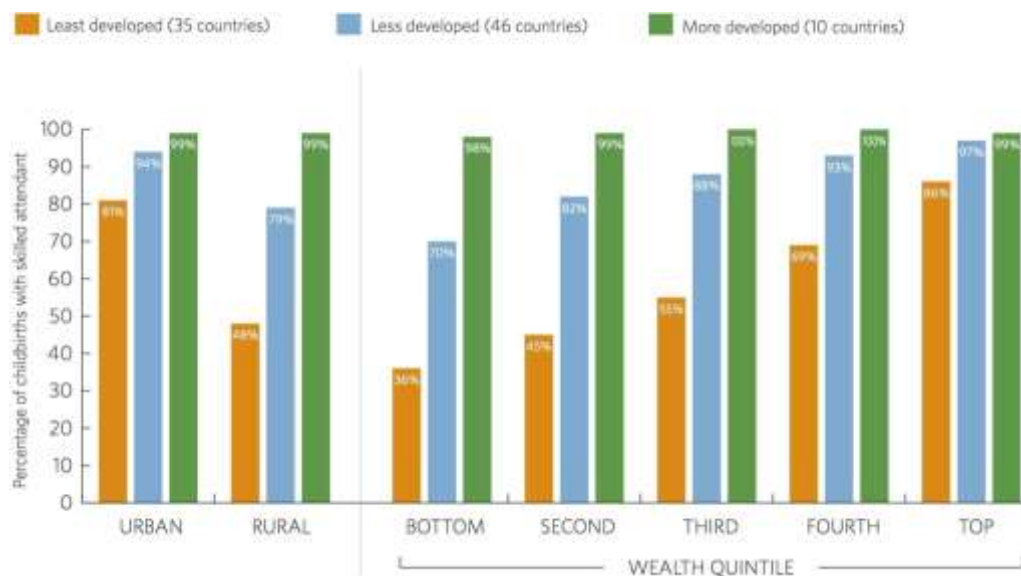


Another important dimension is antenatal care. Antenatal care helps ensure the best health conditions for mother and foetus and provides a platform for health promotion and education and can help prevent or manage pregnancy-related risks.

The slide shows the percentage of women having at least 4 antenatal consultations during their pregnancy by wealth quintile. This is shown in orange for women in the least developed countries, in blue for less developed countries and in green for more developed countries.

Women in the poorest 20 per cent of households have the lowest access to antenatal care in all of these types of countries. But the gap between the poorest and the richest 20% of women is greatest in the least developed countries.

Skilled birth attendance



Skilled attendance at birth leads to fewer maternal deaths and higher survival of newborn babies. This slide shows the proportion of births that are attended by a professional; a doctor, midwife or nurse.

The slide is similar to the previous one, showing wealth quintiles in least developed (orange), less developed (blue) and more developed (green) countries. In the first two segments it also shows the difference between urban and rural residents. And you see that in the least developed countries (orange) only 48 per cent of births in rural areas benefit from skilled attendance.

The wealthiest 20 per cent of women are far more likely to give birth with the help of a doctor or other skilled person. The poorest 20 per cent are more likely to give birth without . And that means giving birth alone, or with the help of an untrained family member.

Inequality and Sexual and Reproductive Health

Limited access to sexual and reproductive health services and negative health outcomes correlate with poverty.

For poor women, poor sexual and reproductive health can block opportunities; it can blunt their potential and solidify their position at the bottom rung of the economic ladder.

In contrast, women in the wealthiest 20 per cent of households have greater access to the care and services that will enable them to exercise their reproductive rights. The services available to these women can help unlock opportunities to pursue education, enter or remain in the paid labor force, earn higher incomes and realize their full potential in life. These opportunities reinforce and boost their economic and social status in society.

Reproductive health inequalities are deeply affected by the quality and reach of health systems and by gender inequality. Both can have a profound impact on how much control a woman has over her own sexual and reproductive health.

Motherhood Penalty

Something interesting that is actually also relevant in European countries is that for women everywhere, pregnancy and child-rearing can mean exclusion from the labour force or lower earnings. In a way there is a “Motherhood penalty”.

Women typically lose ground in earnings for taking time off during pregnancy, or after giving birth. Some employers, just to play it safe, perceive all women as potential mothers and discriminate against them, passing them over for more challenging work assignments because of a perceived risk of pregnancy-related leave coming up later on.

If a woman has a child but has no access to child care, or if childcare is extremely expensive, she may have to stay out of the paid labor force altogether.

Lack of maternity leave can also force women to choose between participating in the labor force and giving birth, or between their productive and reproductive lives. Globally, about 60 per cent of working women do not benefit from any statutory right to maternity leave. I find that personally shocking but it is the truth.

Underlying Gender Inequality

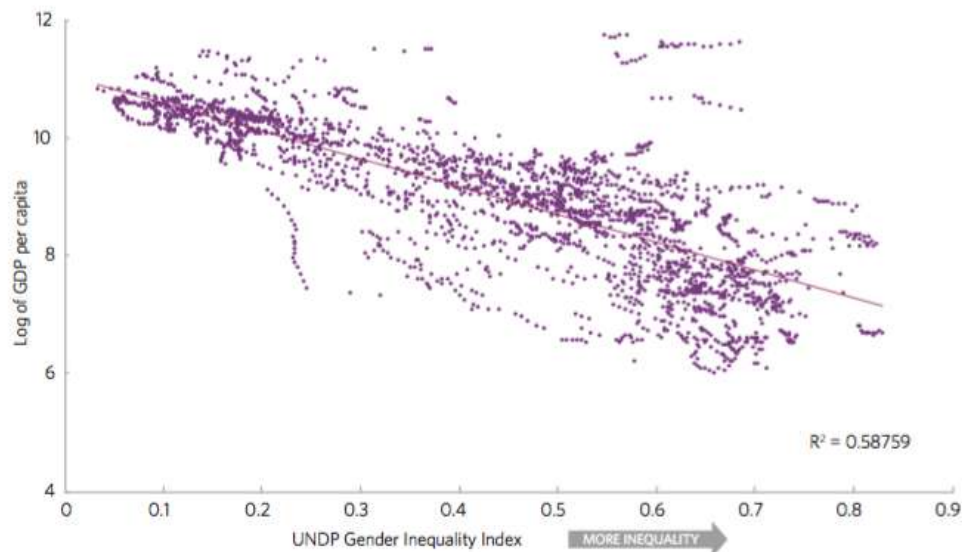
Gender inequality more broadly speaking is a key driver of inequality in sexual and reproductive health. Gender inequality affects how much control a woman has over her own life.

Gender inequality is reinforced by laws, institutions, entrenched negative attitudes and harmful practices, like child marriage and female genital mutilation.

I will give you a couple of figures from the report that I thought were interesting:

- 46 countries still have no laws prohibiting domestic violence which sends the message that domestic violence is basically okay. Having a law is not enough because its implementation is also difficult but 46 countries not even have a law.
- Laws in 18 countries in the world give men the power to prevent wives from working outside the home.
- Gender inequality also affects educational attainment. Of the 758 million illiterate adults, 479 million, 63 per cent, are women.
- Worldwide, the gender wage gap, the percentage shortfall in the average wage of women relative to the average wage of men, is about 23 per cent. That means that women on average earn 77 per cent of what men earn for the same work. The gender wage gap is narrowing, but at current trends, it will take 70 years before the gender wage gap is closed.

GDP and Gender Inequality



This is an interesting graphic as it maps out a relationship between gross domestic product (vertical axis) and gender inequality and is based on an index developed by UNDP that includes reproductive health, political empowerment, and economic status expressed as labor market participation rates (on the horizontal axis).

While lower gender inequality is correlated with a higher per capita GDP, I think the more interesting feature of this graph is that by no means the sole determinant of gender inequality is GDP.

If you go horizontally, what you can see is that any given per capita GDP level is associated with multiple levels of gender inequality. The point here is to see that government policies really matter: they can make a difference!

Caught in a Web of Inequality

Women in the poorer segments of society can be caught in a web of self-perpetuating inequalities. The interplay of inequality in women's health and rights, gender inequality and economic inequality can make poor women even poorer and prevent them from participating in or contributing to their economies.

These inequalities reinforce or are reinforced by economic inequality, and economic inequality in turn leads to weaker, less resilient economies, slower overall growth and, ultimately, slower reduction of poverty.

Towards Inclusive Societies

So what do we do about it and why does it matter?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for more equitable and inclusive societies and shared prosperity. Achieving shared prosperity requires an effort to reach the furthest behind first. This requires boosting the incomes of the poorest 40 per cent of households more quickly than the richest 60 per cent of households.

Accelerating the growth of incomes among the poor requires targeted investments that build their capabilities and that create opportunities for decent work and wages. Left alone, inequality only gets worse so it needs targeted interventions.

The Way Forward

Because inequality, as I already said, has many dimensions, the solution requires actions in many areas, including sexual and reproductive health.

But of course resolving inequalities in sexual and reproductive health will not, by itself, resolve economic inequality. However, progress in addressing one dimension of inequality can enable progress in others as we saw that everything is related. Even small steps can open the path to great strides.

We, therefore, call for action on multiple fronts to tackle all forms of inequality in sexual reproductive health and rights from the root, laying the foundation for an alternative, more equitable future. A future where women govern their own lives. A future where all women, men, girls and boys may understand and enjoy their rights and have the knowledge and the power to set their own course in life.

Where to Begin?

Where do governments or policy-makers begin? I will sum up some of the priority action that should be taken.

They should start, as I already mentioned, with the furthest behind first: focus on the 2 quintiles or 40% that are most disadvantaged. Nations have agreed that the new vision for sustainable

development, reflected in the SDG's, may only be realized if *all* of humanity is united and engaged in the effort and that development in the future must benefit all, not just the few at the top of the economic, political and social ladders.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 may be out of reach without a renewed focus on the poorest in all populations, and those for whom gender discrimination is harshest, educational attainment is weakest and for whom sexual and reproductive health are anything but universal.

We must uphold universal rights. A top action that is required, from UNFPA's perspective, is making reproductive health care universally accessible, in line with the objectives of the Programme of Action that was adopted in 1994 at the International Conference in Population and Development, but also in line with the SDG's. This will not only help fulfill a poor woman's reproductive rights but will also help her overcome inequalities in education and income. That will benefit herself, her family and her country.

Another important action is to make equality a matter of law, i.e. explicitly embed equal rights for all citizens in national laws and legal practice.

Scaling up and strengthening of health systems are also essential to safeguarding reproductive rights and ensuring equitable and universal access to care and services. Also in this area it is very important to spend more on groups who have been left behind, for whatever reason. Sexual and reproductive health is a development priority. Tackling deficiencies in health care systems that disproportionately burden the poorest and the rural is of key importance to achieve progress.

We must also jumpstart upward mobility. Achieving equality in access to education and in educational attainment is critical, for so many reasons. Realizing the right to a quality education contributes to upward mobility in the labor market, contributes better health and lower fertility. Investments in adolescent girls are key in this respect. In many countries in Latin America, once a girl is pregnant, she is no longer welcome at school. There are often very mundane barriers that need to be taken care of to make sure that girls can go to school, like separate toilets for girls.

In sum we can say that what really should be done is aiming policies at leveling the playing field. Given the evidence on how inequalities tend to worsen without deliberate attention to closing the gaps, achieving equity and inclusion in all areas vital to human well-being should become a central goal of development planning and policymaking.

And finally, data should be used in new ways, not just to count people or inform the scaling up of services, but also to identify who the furthest behind are. Data should be analyzed to show where inequalities lie and to guide policymaking aimed at rectifying those inequalities. This chart (shows page from report) is an example of the equiplots for key reproductive health indicators and outcomes that you can find in the back of the report. Each dot represents a wealth quintile in a country. The two lines for each country show what progress a country has made or what ground has been lost over a 10-year period. Have a look, they are revealing. You see the difference that policy can make. For instance in a country like Rwanda, you can see that a lot of progress was made in a short period of time. All quintiles moved together and the poorest

quintiles moved fastest. If you look at Ethiopia, you can see that a little progress was made but about the same for all quintiles, which means that policies do not deliver for poorer people.

An Alternative Future Within Reach

That was an overview of what's in the report. If you go through the whole report, you'll find plenty of examples of the intersection of economic and other forms of inequality. And these examples show in very concrete ways how inequality in women's health and rights has a very real impact on lives everywhere.

But: an alternative future can be within reach and I would like to recap five points in that respect:

- 1) Inequality has many facets. Economic disparities are only part of the inequality story.
- 2) Economic inequality fuels and reinforces and is, in turn, fueled by other forms of inequality, such as those related to ethnicity, gender and in sexual and reproductive health.
- 3) Failure to tackle this multidimensional inequality can mean slower economic growth for all and will undermine progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 1, to end poverty.
- 4) The path to shared prosperity, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, requires actions to prioritize support to the farthest behind. They need to be empowered.
- 5) A good place to start is by supporting the health and rights of the poorest women and taking steps to address underlying gender inequality. Failure to prioritize the health and rights of girls and women can set in motion a lifetime of missed opportunities and unrealized potential, trapping a woman and her children in an endless cycle of poverty. The economic slide can continue for generations.

So, in closing we can conclude that inequality is indeed about power, about the few who have it and the many who do not. "Worlds Apart", the 2017 UNFPA State of World Population report, is a plea for putting power in the hands of women to control their own reproductive choices and their futures. We hope that, with that power in women's hands, Worlds Apart no longer holds. With that power, instead of separation and inequality, fairness prevails and a more equitable world for all is the reward.

Thank you!

