

Women's Rights: The Facts

“In particular I wish to consider the essential issue of the *dignity* and *rights* of women, as seen in the light of the word of God. . . Unfortunately, we are heirs to a history which has *conditioned* us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. . . When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the *attitude of Jesus Christ himself* . . . This is a matter of justice but also of necessity. Women will increasingly play a part in the solution of the serious problems of the future: leisure time, the quality of life, migration, social services, euthanasia, drugs, health care, the ecology, etc. In all these areas a greater presence of women in society will prove most valuable. . .”

Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women, 1995, #1, 3

While women's lives have improved enormously in many ways, especially in the West, women still make up 70 per cent of the world's poorest people and two-thirds of those who cannot read and write. Some rights they have won may also be slipping away.

Violence Against Women

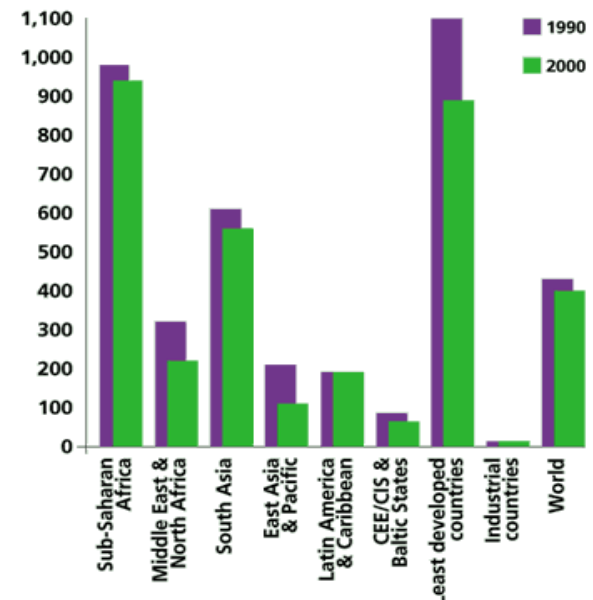
Violence against women and girls takes many forms and shows no sign of abating.

- 79 million girls who would otherwise be expected to be alive are “missing” from various populations, mostly in Asia, as a result of sex-selective abortions, infanticide or neglect.
- Domestic violence is widespread in most societies and is a frequent cause of suicides among women.
- Rape and other forms of sexual violence are increasing. Estimates of the proportion of rapes reported to authorities vary — from less than 3 per cent in South Africa to about 16 per cent in the U.S.
- Two million girls between the ages of 5 and 15 are introduced into the commercial sex market each year.
- An estimated 4 million women and girls are bought and sold worldwide each year, either into marriage, prostitution or slavery.
- At least 130 million women have undergone female genital mutilation or cutting; another 2 million are at risk each year.
- So-called “honor” killings take the lives of thousands of young women every year, mainly in Western Asia, North Africa and parts of South Asia.

Source: *State of the World's Population 2000*, UNFPA

Maternal Mortality

MATERNAL MORTALITY RATIO, DEATHS PER 100,000 WOMEN⁶



Some progress has been made, but worldwide, more than 50 million women still suffer from poor health and serious pregnancy-related illness and disability. Every year more than 500,000 women die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Most of the deaths occur in Asia, but the risk of dying is highest in Africa.

Adapted From: “Women's Rights: The Fact,” *New Internationalist*, November 2004, and the Millennium Development Goals website, http://www.developmentgoals.org/Maternal_Health.htm



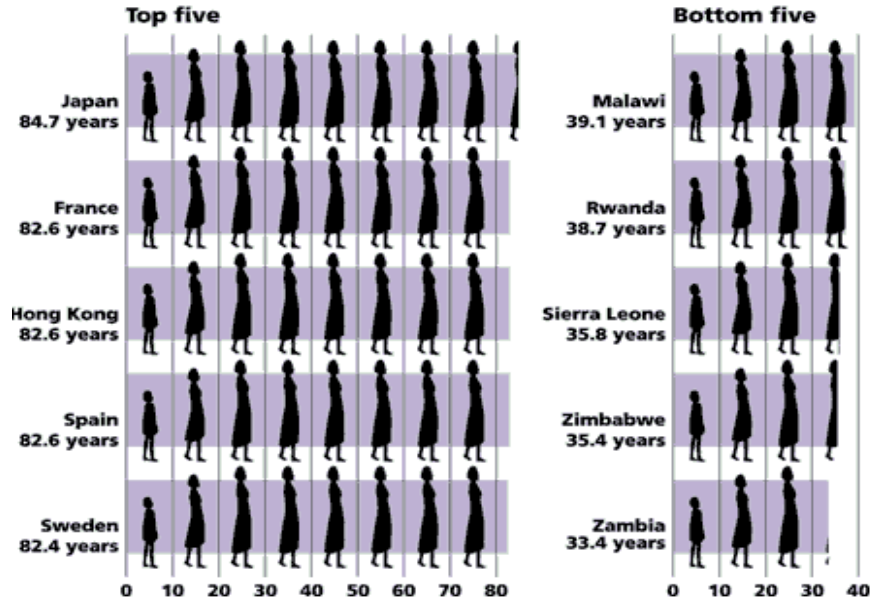
“The Synod Fathers stated: ‘As an expression of her mission the Church must stand firmly against all forms of discrimination and abuse of women’. And again: ‘The dignity of women, gravely wounded in public esteem, must be restored through effective respect for the rights of the human person and by putting the teaching of the Church into practice.’”

John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 1988, #49

Life Expectancy for Women

On the whole, women still live longer than men. In many countries, life expectancy has increased for both women and men. But in some regions it is going down, as the divide between rich and poor increases. Between 1995 and 2001 in poorer countries, life expectancy for women decreased from 65 to 50.5.

FEMALE LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH 2001²



Source: Human Development Report 2003, UNDP

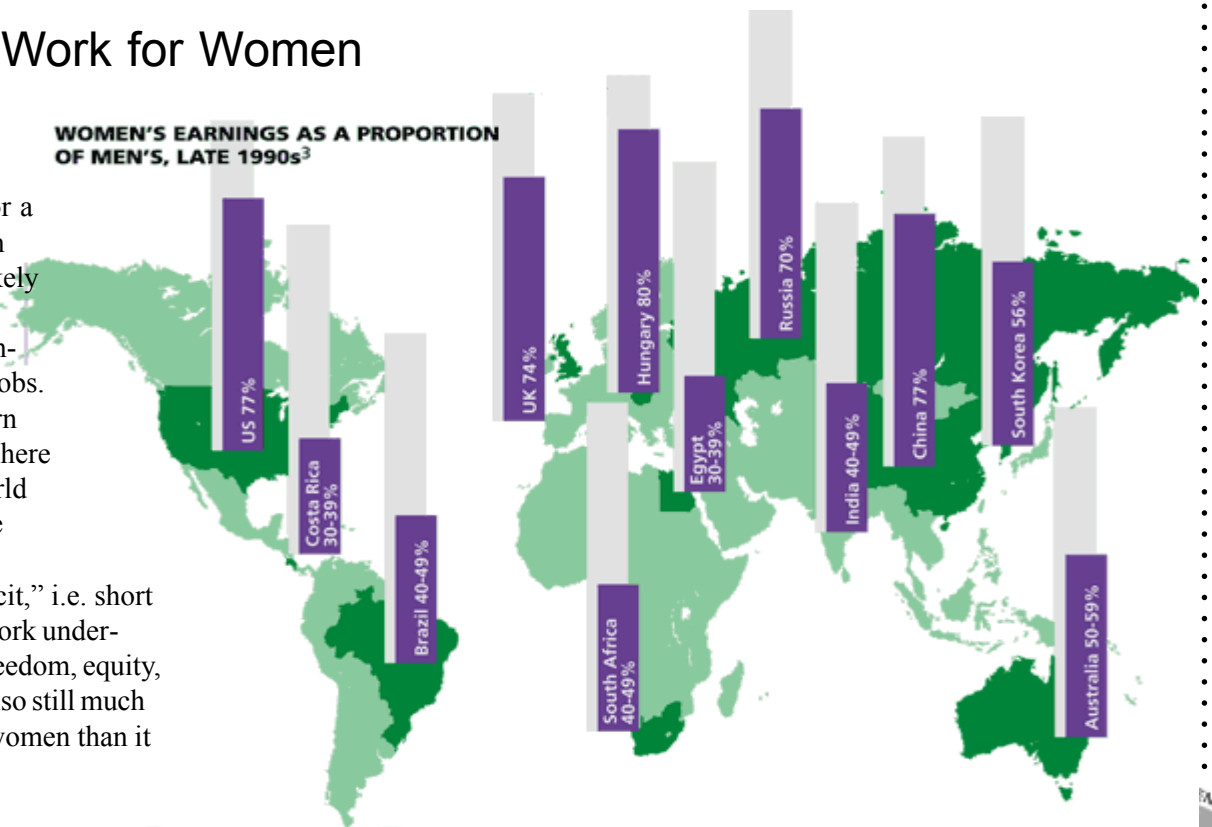
Wages and Work for Women

WOMEN'S EARNINGS AS A PROPORTION OF MEN'S, LATE 1990s³

Fewer women work for a regular paid salary than men. They are more likely to work in the informal sector, on part-time contracts and in low-paid jobs.

Worldwide, women earn 69% of male wages. There is no country in the world where women earn the same as men.

The “decent work deficit,” i.e. short supply of productive work undertaken in condition of freedom, equity, and human dignity, is also still much more pronounced for women than it is for men.

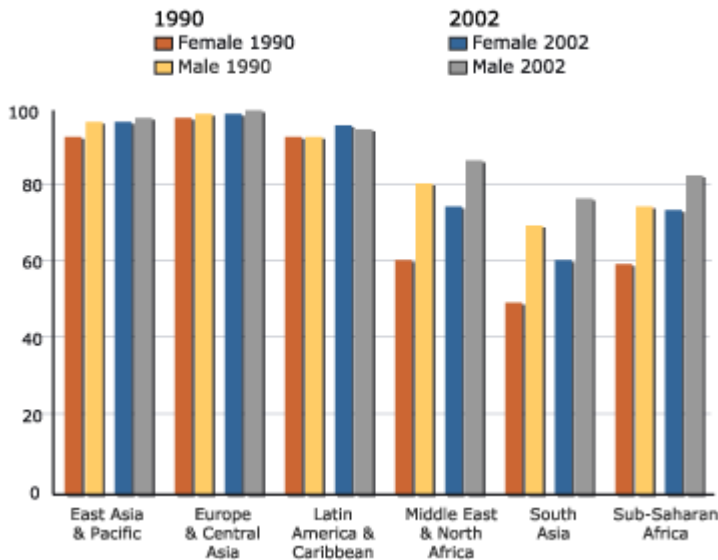


Respect [for women] must first and foremost be won through an effective and intelligent *campaign for the promotion of women*, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a *universal recognition of the dignity of women*.

Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women, 1995

Women and Education: A Sign of Hope?

Youth literacy rate, ages 15–24 (%)



One of the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) is to “Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015.”

The number of literate women aged 15-24 years in the did go up between 1990 and 2002, as can be seen from the chart. By 2015, the situation is projected to have improved further, but is still expected to fall short of the MDG with the literacy rate for women 15-24 projected to be 88 per cent, versus a projected rate of 90 for young men.

Literacy is a fundamental skill to empower women to take control of their own lives, to engage directly with the world and give them access to the wider world of learning. Educating women and giving them equal rights is important for many reasons:

- **It increases their productivity**, raising output and reducing poverty.
- **It promotes gender equality**, within households and removes constraints on women's decision making this reducing fertility rates and improving maternal health.
- **Educated women do a better job caring for children**, increasing children's chances of surviving to become healthier and better educated.

Source: Millenium Development Goals, http://www.developmentgoals.org/Gender_Equality.htm

God who is both our Father and our Mother, we look towards a world in which the dignity of all women and girls can be seen in the elimination of gender-based violence and the promotion of equality of the genders in education and the workplace. We pray for a world of respect and opportunity that is based in love and equality. Help us, Lord, to work together as women and men to eliminate the disparities that still exist in the world. Let us work to restore that dignity of woman which has been “gravely wounded.” Help us to challenge all forms of discrimination and injustice. Amen.