



Education means the difference between making her own decisions and having them made for her
— Photo: Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

Keys on a Ring

Let the same women hold the keys to sustainable development for the remainder of the 20th century. In fact, the future of sustainability well into the next century may depend on the choices available to women, according to this year's State of World Population Report from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Increasingly, it is recognised that empowering women through the extension of personal choice is a stimulus to economic and social change, nationally and internationally. It means offering women the right to decide whether and when to get married, whether and when to become pregnant, and to make their own decisions regarding education, employment, and their role in the community.

This is important for its own sake, but extension of

Widespread proof also exists that educated women find it easier to understand contraception and to take advantage of available services. The consequence, again, is fewer children and, subsequently, improvements in maternal and infant survival as well as better health in other family members.

The demand for literacy programmes, special job training and education about contraception and reproductive health comes from older women, too. This is particularly the case in communities where older women exercise influence in family decisions.

Nepal is a case in point. Mothers-in-law by tradition oversee pregnancy and delivery and seek additional help only when they deem it necessary. Accordingly, mothers-in-law have an influence upon young wives' reproductive health and choice of family

Despite advances in health, education and working conditions, life for millions of women across the world remains needlessly hard. Overworked, burdened by too many pregnancies, frequently undernourished, with little respect and care from family and society, women — young, middle aged and old — are often second class citizens within their own communities.

women's choices will also contribute towards the aim of balanced population growth.

The priority for the remaining years of this century must be to ensure that these twin aims remain in harmony and that individual needs form the basis of public policy. By increasing women's decision-making capacity, their status and ability to contribute to social and economic development will also be strengthened. Experience shows that population and development programmes are most effective in conjunction with action to improve the status of women.

Looking towards the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in September 1994, the Report stresses that the link between population and development issues will determine the future of sustainability. "The aim will be to find ways to fulfil human rights, needs and aspirations, while fostering sustainable use of the world's resources," the Report states.

Among the strategies for achieving such objectives, education and its link to improved status for women must secure a high priority. Without greater educational opportunities for women, no general improvement in their status is likely. Conversely, for girls as well as for women, secondary and higher education is one of the most important routes to healthy choices and enhanced life quality.

"Educating women is an investment in sustainable development," the Report says. "Educated women command better jobs and salaries, marry later and have their first child later. Education raises self-esteem and increases confidence in dealing with the wider world."

True, the link between mother's level of education and smaller families cannot be taken for granted. The role of education in enhancing women's social power, however, is beyond dispute.

planning. Recognising local realities, Nepal trains mothers-in-law in a wide range of topics such as antenatal care, rest, immunisation, family planning and risk factors in connection with pregnancy and birth.

The inherent inequality in the status of women and men is reflected in their general health and expectation of life. While women's life expectancy improves in line with men's — the number of countries with a life expectancy over 60 years rose from 74 in 1980 to 91 in 1990 — women still die younger than men in many regions.

The reasons are manifold, although some factors recur throughout the developing world. These include gender discrimination in nutrition and health care from childhood and enhanced pregnancy risks. Women are more at risk because they are disproportionately represented among the urban poor. They tend to be at the end of the queue for both nutrition and health care.

Preference for sons remains widespread. Cultural factors and perceptions of economic advantages favour sons above daughters; girls' share of education, food, health care and work options are therefore frequently smaller — simply because they are perceived to be less valuable than boys. Studies show, for instance, quite strong preferences for boys in countries like Bangladesh, Jordan, Nepal, Pakistan, Republic of Korea and Syria.

As the State of World Population Report 1994 declares:

"The empowerment of women is a key development issue as well as a human rights objective. In the process special attention must be given to gender issues and, most importantly, to widening the range of possibilities and choices for individual women and men."

— State of World Population Report, 1994.

Choice and Empowerment

The themes of this year's State of World Population Report — choice and empowerment, reproductive health and sustainable development — will be discussed at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), to be held in Cairo this September.

Empowerment of individual women, says the Report released by the UNFPA yesterday, may be the key to social development, including the resolution of many population-related problems. The Daily Star, with its commitment to the issues relating to empowerment of women, brings out this special feature.

Women's Empowerment is the Key

Empowering women is the key to solving population problems, says this year's State of World Population Report from the United Nations Population Fund. "The invisibility of women as individuals, as opposed to their roles as wives or mothers, may be coming to an end," says the Report, to be released worldwide on 17 August.

The Report says that free and equal access for both men and women to health care, family planning and education is "not only desirable in itself but is a practical contribution to environmental protection and economic development". In particular, women's growing command of the means to manage their own fertility improves women's health and opens up a range of options regarding education, marriage, employment, housing and migration. It will also help in achieving balanced population growth, says the Report.

Slower global population growth will relieve pressure on the environment and other problem areas, and grant time to find solutions. "For the countries concerned, even the different of a decade in the transition to lower fertility can have a considerable impact on the quality of life, for example in providing education, quality health care and employment opportunities," says the Report.

Population Increases are Highest in History

The Report notes that world population in mid-1994 is 5.66 billion. It will be six billion by 1998. Although over-all fertility rates have fallen, annual increases are at 94 million a year, the highest in history. After 1997, annual additions will start to

decline fertility. Without it, population growth could be much more rapid in the first half of the next century, reaching 12.5 billion in the year 2050. The difference between high and medium pro-

remain in harmony and that individual needs form the basis of public policy.

Extending Choices

Empowering women means extending choices: choices

family and the community.

Population Conference to Meet in Cairo

The Report notes that the International Conference on Population and Development



Making contact with the world outside their homes — Photo: Jorgen Schytte/Still Pictures

jections is 2.5 billion, equal to all of world population in 1950.

But population growth could also be slower, says the Report. There is a low projection, which assumes more rapid fertility decline and would result in a population of 7.8 billion in 2050. The difference between medium and low scenarios at the year 2050 is 2.2 billion.

Many of the actions that must be taken to alleviate poverty, improve food supply and malnutrition, and provide

about if and when to get married, choices about education, employment opportunities, controlling the social and physical environment; choices about if and when to get pregnant, and ultimately about family size. Empowerment requires that husbands, partners, family members, and communities help to promote a healthy environment free from coercion, violence or abuse, in which women are free to use community services on a basis of equality.

"The role of education in

meets in Cairo in September 1994. The aim of the Conference will be to find ways to fulfil human rights, needs and aspirations, while fostering sustainable use of resources and a diverse and vigorous natural environment. Promoting equity between the genders will be an important aim of the Conference.

Needs for the Future

The Reports states that the means are available that would allow most of the women in the world to plan how many children they wish to have and when to have them. However, access to health care, particularly reproductive health care, is still inadequate. There are approximately 120 million women who wish to plan their families but do not have access to modern contraceptives.

All countries can learn from the successful experiences of a number of developing countries, the Report states. It is possible to design successful strategies that meet individual needs, especially those of women, and that also contribute to national development priorities, the Report adds. Countries need to undertake a number of initiatives including increasing national investment in the areas of human development, especially in education, health and improving the status of women, that the Report calls the "building blocks of sustainable economic development".

Extended globally, these national programmes "will contribute to slower overall population growth, and thus to a solution of the central issue for the 21st century — how to balance human needs and human numbers," the Reports says.

The Report also urges continued cooperation among governments, the United Nations, NGOs and the private sector to ensure that the successes of the past 25 years will continue.

— State of World Population Report, 1994



When men take more of the responsibility for the family, women have more choices in life
— Photo: Jorgen Schytte/Still Pictures

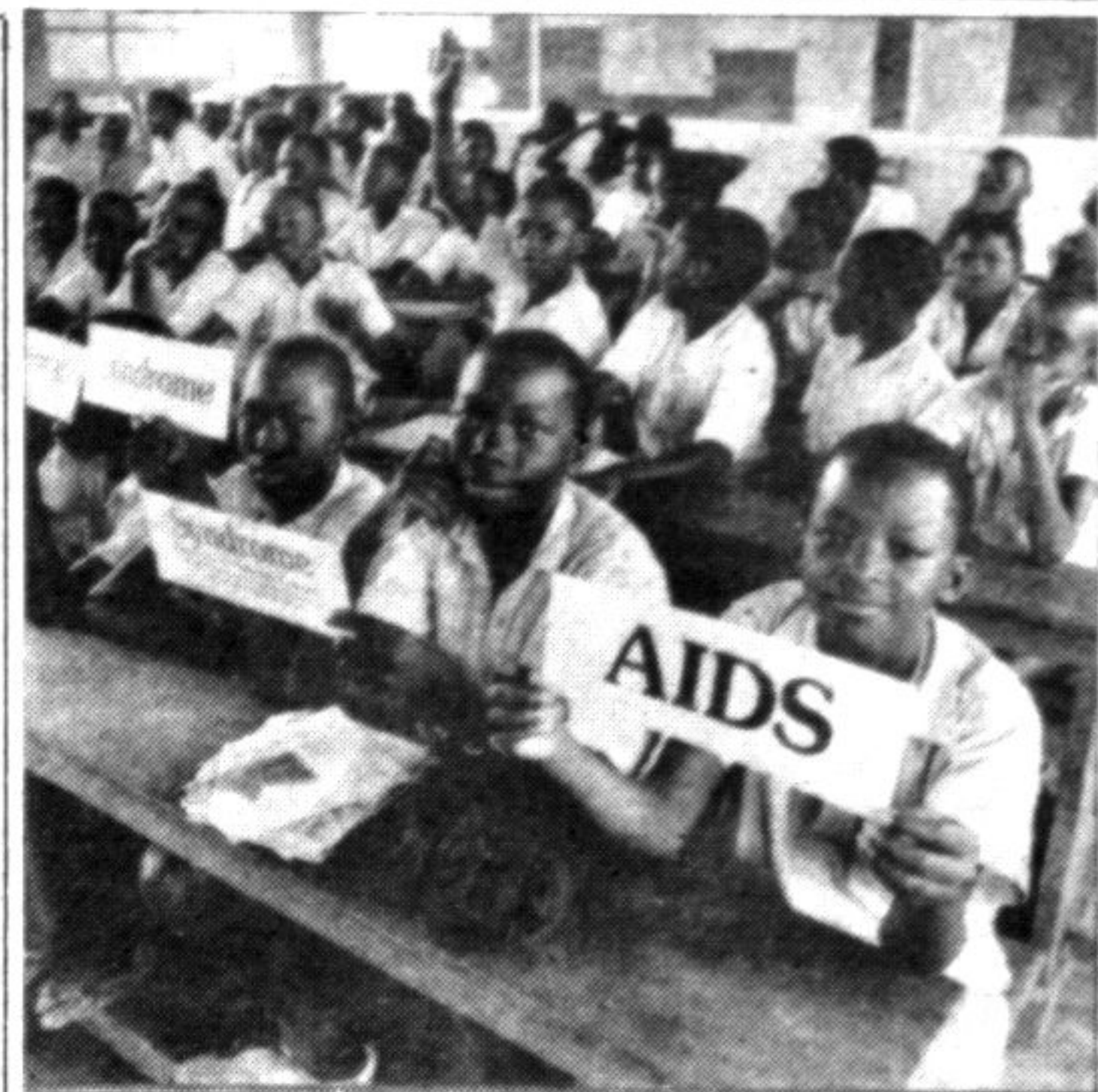
decline, and by 2020 the annual increase will be 85 million. Nearly all of this growth is in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Over half is in south Asia and Africa, with many of the poorest countries in the world.

The latest United Nations projections indicate a world population of 8.5 billion by the year 2025 and 10 billion by 2050. These long-range projections assume continued de-

adequate housing are the same as those required to achieve balanced population growth, says the Report. For example, extending the range of choice available to individuals, especially women, and equalizing opportunities between the sexes from birth onwards.

Individual needs and public policy are converging, says the Report. "The priority for the remaining years of this century must be to ensure that they

enhancing women's social power is undisputed," says the Report. Education influences the number of children a woman wants and the number of children she bears. It is important for girls to have equal access to formal schooling, but women also need special training outside school. Education for older women is also important because they often have influential roles in the



Learning about AIDS — Photo: Jorgen Schytte/Still Pictures

Death by Pregnancy — A Needless Risk

EVERY minute of every day one woman dies from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. Yet most of these deaths could be prevented — through existing knowledge and technology. They occur mainly due to a lack of existing reproductive health care as well as family planning information and services.

A stark contrast is provided by the figures for Europe, North America and Japan. With a combined population of 800 million people, virtually no lives are lost in these three areas as a result of pregnancy.

Such enormous discrepancies call for an even greater effort in a field which has seen significant advances in recent years. As the United Nations Population Fund's 1994 State of World Population Report emphasizes, better reproductive health care, family planning and equal access for all lie at the heart of any concerted attempt to provide lasting solutions.

Successful population programmes, the report notes, integrate family planning with other reproductive health ser-

vice and lack of choice and services prevent millions of other women from sharing the basic health care enjoyed elsewhere.

HIV/AIDS continues to spread into female populations. Before the end of the decade, as many women as men will carry the HIV virus.

Globally, women's share of HIV infections has risen from 20 per cent in 1980 to 40 per cent in 1992. Only in North America and Eastern Europe do HIV-infected men substantially outnumber women.

Moreover, the spread of HIV/AIDS shows no sign of abatement and there are few indications that programmes designed to diminish the spread of AIDS have had significant impact. By the year 2000, the number of AIDS sufferers is expected to rise to 1.8 million per year.

Less publicized but no less frightening in its impact, maternal mortality remains "a neglected and unnecessary tragedy in developing countries," the UNFPA report states.

Indeed, maternal mortality represents the greatest single

Progress in the provision of modern health care across the world has tended to obscure one tragic fact: despite renewed attention to maternal health, pregnancy and its consequences claim the lives of 500,000 women in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

vices, including treatment for infertility, reproductive tract infections, HIV/AIDS and a wide range of STDs (sexually transmitted diseases). Good programmes expand women's health care choices and give them a sense of competence in caring for their own sexual and reproductive health, says the report.

Many of these development goals are exemplified by the Safe Motherhood Initiative. Launched in Nairobi, Kenya in 1987, and co-sponsored by seven international agencies — the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the Population Council, UNDP, UNFPA, the World Bank and WHO — the Safe Motherhood Initiative's chief objective is a 50 per cent reduction in the number of maternal deaths before the end of the century.

The fact that more than 100 governments, NGOs and international donors have already participated in Safe Motherhood conferences highlights the size of the task. Around the world, efforts on behalf of governments, international bodies and public and private organizations continue to extend individual choice to an ever-increasing number of women. Yet poverty-induced

health disparity between the industrialized and developing countries. On average, women in developing countries are 13 times more at risk of dying from pregnancy and childbirth than women in industrial nations. Two regions, South Asia and Africa, account for 90 per cent of all maternal deaths.

For every woman who dies, ten fall ill as a result of pregnancy and childbirth. Many are in the "danger zones" for pregnancy; they were too young or too old to become pregnant safely; they had many children, or their last pregnancy was too recent.

National governments, NGOs and the international community are enhancing family planning programmes in developing countries and have joined in making available appropriate contraception counselling, professional screening and a range of family planning methods to suit individual preferences.

Yet, for all these efforts, measures to broaden reproductive care choices must be accompanied by strategies which enable women to make and sustain healthy decisions. This will be one of the subjects for discussion at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo this September.

"Reproductive care, therefore, not only includes the treatment and prevention of disease, but the information and means to optimize reproductive health," the UNFPA Report declares. "Reproductive health exists in a broader context which implies that women in particular do not suffer from discriminatory social practices and traditions. This context, therefore, must include progress towards gender equity, including equal access for women to health care and education and to work in professional, academic and political spheres." — State of World Population Report, 1994

Average Years of Schooling, Selected Countries



Source: State of World Population Report, 1994

Source: United Nations, 1993 Human Development Report 1993, New York: Oxford University Press for the United Nations Development Programme, Pp. 144-45, Table 5