

Worsening inequality holds everyone back

Gaps in wealth have grown wide within most countries. Billions of people linger at the bottom, denied their human rights and prospects for a better life. At the top, resources and privileges accrue at explosive rates, pushing the world ever further from the vision of equality embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Inequality is often talked about as a lopsided distribution of wealth or income. However, it is a more complex phenomenon, reinforced by diverse forms of disparity—between the sexes, between races and ethnicities, and between urban and rural residents. Inequality has many facets, each a symptom—and cause—of some other inequality.

Multiple inequalities tend to feed on each other, locking people in a downward spiral of deprivation and lost human potential. Although some people have opportunities and abilities to interrupt this damaging trajectory, many do not have enough of one or the other, or both.

The long-term growth potential of developing countries is at stake when economic inequality is wide, even in countries where remarkable progress has been made in reducing the incidence of extreme poverty. Conversely, narrowing inequality could boost economic growth and accelerate the reduction of poverty.

Economic inequality has a negative impact on growth largely because it reduces people's capacities and curbs opportunities of the poorest to build their human capital.

10 ACTIONS FOR A MORE EQUAL WORLD

- 1 **Meet all commitments and obligations** to human rights agreed in international treaties and conventions.
- 2 **Tear down barriers**—whether discriminatory laws, norms or service gaps—that prevent adolescent girls and young women from accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services.
- 3 **Reach the poorest women** with essential, life-saving antenatal and maternal health care.
- 4 **Meet all unmet need for family planning**, prioritizing women in the poorest 40 per cent of households.
- 5 **Provide a universal social protection floor**, offering basic income security and covering essential services, including maternity-related benefits and support.
- 6 **Bolster services** such as childcare to enable women to enter or remain in the paid labour force.
- 7 **Adopt progressive policies** aimed at accelerated income growth among the poorest 40 per cent, including through stepped-up human capital investments in girls and women.
- 8 **Eliminate economic, social and geographic obstacles** to girls' access to secondary and higher education, and to their enrolment in courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.
- 9 **Accelerate the transition** from informal jobs to formal, decent work, focusing first on sectors with large concentrations of poor, female workers, and unblock women's access to credit and property ownership.
- 10 **Work towards measuring all dimensions of inequality** and how they influence each other, and strengthen links between data and public policy.

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WORLDS APART

Reproductive health and rights
in an age of inequality



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Inequalities in reproductive health are linked to economic inequality

Economic inequality correlates with inequalities in sexual and reproductive health.

Within most developing countries, women in the poorest 20 per cent of the population have, for example, the least access to sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception, while women at the top of the wealth scale generally have access to a fuller range of high-quality services.

The unmet demand for family planning in developing countries is generally greatest among women at the bottom of the wealth scale. Without access to contraception, poor women, particularly those who are less educated and live in rural areas, are at heightened risk of unintended pregnancy. This results in greater health risks and lifelong economic repercussions for herself and her children.

Reducing inequalities in reproductive health contributes to prosperity for all

An alternative course—one that tackles multiple inequalities, including those in sexual and reproductive health—can unleash significant benefits, including health, human capital development and the eradication of poverty.

Stopping the downward spiral of inequality will require a vision for inclusive societies and shared prosperity, grounded in principles of human rights, and backed by new and better-targeted resources.

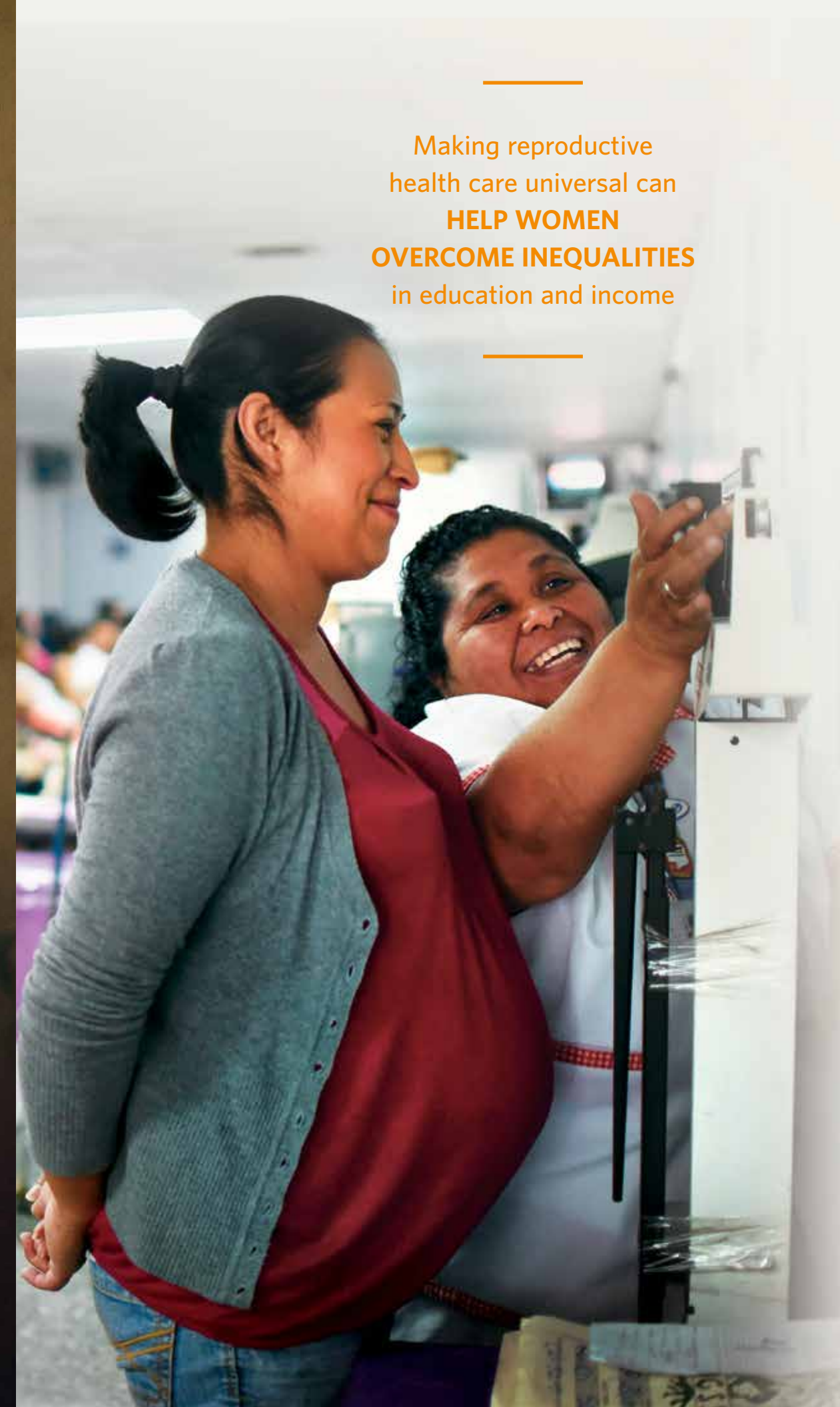
Actions on multiple fronts are needed to tackle all forms of inequality—social and economic—and to address the consequences and the root causes.

Reproductive health inequalities are deeply affected by the quality and reach of health systems and by gender inequality, which can have a profound impact on how much control a woman has over her own sexual and reproductive health. Overcoming these obstacles and tackling underlying gender inequality are critical to progress in reducing inequalities in sexual and reproductive health, and could also lead to progress in reducing economic inequalities.

The unmet demand for family planning in developing countries is generally highest among women in **THE POOREST 20 PER CENT OF HOUSEHOLDS**



Making reproductive health care universal can **HELP WOMEN OVERCOME INEQUALITIES** in education and income



Towards the world we want

Inequality blocks the path to the world we want. It allows development to benefit some but not others, marginalizes some groups and individuals, and distorts political, social and economic relations. Inequalities lead to social and geographic clustering of privilege and deprivation.

When nations of the world came together in 2015 to chart the course towards sustainable development for the next 15 years, they committed to ending poverty and hunger everywhere, to combating inequalities within and among countries, and to building inclusive societies that leave no one behind. They pledged to “reach the furthest behind first.”

Prosperity for all

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its accompanying 17 Sustainable Development Goals are grounded in principles of rights, fairness, inclusiveness and equality. Included in the global vision for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the notion of “shared prosperity” and “a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination ... and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential ...”.

The 2030 Agenda has envisaged a better future. One where we collectively tear down the barriers and correct disparities, focusing on those left furthest behind. Reducing all inequalities needs to be the aim. Starting points may vary, but should be grounded in the notion that meaningful progress in one dimension can unleash multiple gains. In that respect, some of the most powerful contributions can come from realizing gender equality and women’s reproductive rights.

Realizing rights and ambitions

Expanding access to quality sexual and reproductive health services is only half of the solution. The other half depends on how well we deal with the other dimensions of inequality that hold women, particularly the poor, back from realizing their rights and ambitions, and living their lives on an equal footing to men.

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