



UN Photo/Martine Perret

## Sex, equality and the MDGs

**H**appiness may not be the usual subject of heated debates in UN circles and summits. But maybe it should be. The World Happiness Report 2013 shows that some of the top-ranked 'happiest countries' are also those where people – especially women – enjoy more freedoms and individual choices in matters of sexuality, relationships and reproduction.

What does this have to do with the MDGs and the Post-2015 Development Agenda? Everything. Whether or not adolescent girls and women can determine if, when and who they marry, how many children they have, and can exercise control over their own sexuality and bodies (too often used and abused), has everything to do with achieving sustainable development. Yet, the MDG targets related to sexual and reproductive health and rights are among those that have seen the least progress.

Globally, about 35 per cent of women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Many of the 16 million adolescent pregnancies around the world result from a lack of options for girls, early and forced marriage, sexual abuse and rape. Only about one-third of youth in the most highly impacted regions know how to prevent HIV. And 800 women and adolescent girls still die every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.

### A universal agenda

The costs in human suffering, health, lives, public budgets, productivity and forgone development prospects of failing to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health services are staggering. They undermine all dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic and

environmental. The disparities within and across countries undercut any notion of equity: sexual and reproductive health problems disproportionately afflict the poor and excluded. It is poor women and girls who die giving birth, who die from unsafe abortions, and who have more children than they would have wished or can afford. It is those who are most discriminated against who register the worst sexual and reproductive health indicators – indigenous peoples, migrants, ethnic and racial minorities, sex workers and sexual minorities, among others.

The empowerment of women and young people, gender equality, and the fulfillment of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all are prerequisites for eradicating poverty and achieving the MDGs and sustainable development.

These are fundamental human rights and freedoms for people everywhere, a universal agenda applicable to all countries, rich or poor. They must be foundations of a new post-2015 framework in which the well-being of all people is truly at the heart of sustainable development. ■

*The High-Level Task Force for the ICPD is a group of distinguished individuals with a record of service as heads of state, ministers, parliamentarians, civil society, private sector and philanthropic leaders, co-chaired by former Presidents Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique and Tarja Halonen of Finland ([www.icpdtaskforce.org](http://www.icpdtaskforce.org)).*

**High-Level Task Force for ICPD**

RIGHTS, DIGNITY & HEALTH FOR ALL