



SHORT STORIES: Women in the Tropics



The State of the Tropics 2014 Report provides the first in-depth, objective assessment of the Tropics an environmental and geopolitical entity in its own right. Drawing on the knowledge, experience and diverse backgrounds of leading institutions across the Tropics, the report assess the state of the region and examines the implications of the immense changes the region is experiencing.

During the development of the report, across 50 social, economic and environmental indicators, a number of cross cutting issues have emerged. Healthy, educated and empowered women benefit their families, communities and nations and lead to better health and education outcomes for their children. Across many indicators in the State of the Tropics reports, the importance and vulnerability of women throughout the tropics has emerged as an important theme.

Educating and empowering women and achieving gender equality are fundamental to social justice and a critical pathway to economic and social development.

Educating women

Educating women and girls is one of most powerful instruments available for reducing poverty and developing a foundation for sustained economic growth. Increased participation by girls and women in education generates significant individual, family and societal benefits. Women with higher levels of education can make more informed choices about work, marriage and children. Lower levels of maternal education are associated with higher maternal mortality, even among women with access to postnatal care. Compared with women with more than 12 years of education, women with no or little education are almost three times more at risk of maternal death.

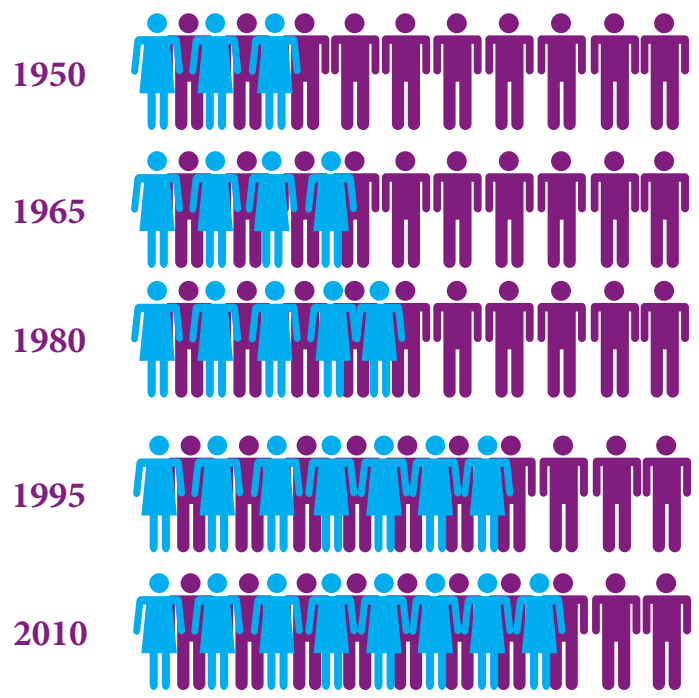
Currently the proportion of adult women that have undertaken secondary education in the Tropics is considerably lower than for males, but the gap in closing. In the Tropics the ratio of women to men with at least secondary education grew from 0.34 in 1950 to 0.75 in 2010. While this is an improvement it still means that there are only 75 women for every 100 men with a secondary education. This ratio varies considerably between regions. Central America, South America, the Caribbean and Oceania are close to parity however in Central and Southern Africa, Northern Africa and the East and South Asia, just over the half the number of women than men have secondary education.

Despite worldwide attention and increased funding for women and girls' education, barriers exist which prevent girls from starting and if they start, completing

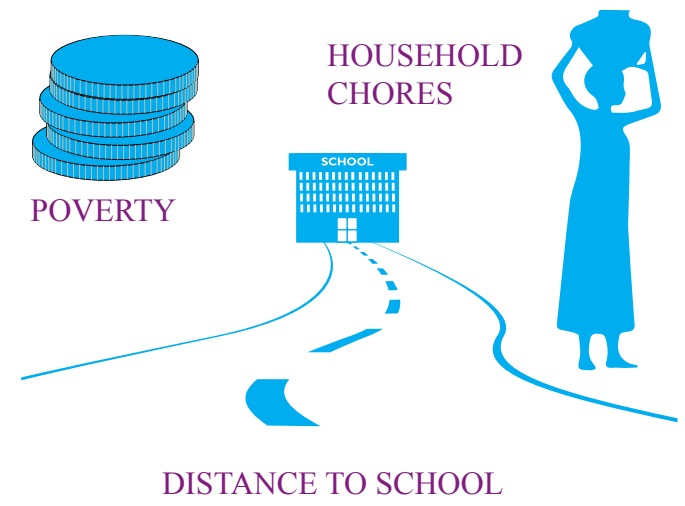
secondary school. Poverty is the main barrier followed by the general undervaluing of girls. Distance to the nearest school, and girls' burden of chores are also factors.

Women and girls are often responsible for a larger burden of household chores than boys and men. In almost three quarters of households without on premise water access, women and girls have the primary responsibility for collecting water. In sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that women and girls spend 40 billion hours every year hauling water.

Only 75 women for every 100 men have a secondary education in the Tropics



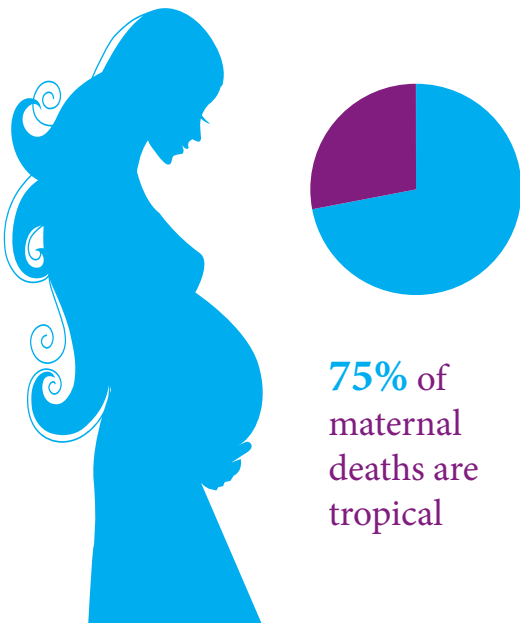
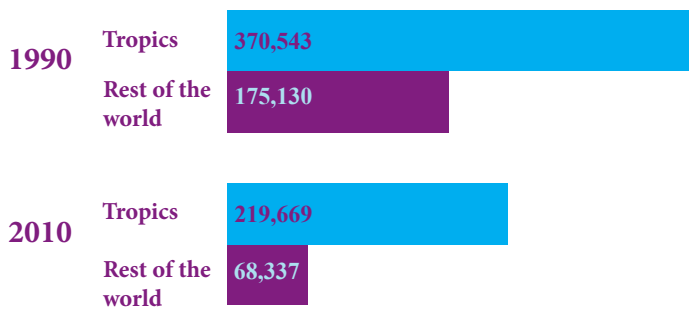
Why don't girls in the Tropics go to school?



Women's health

Closely associated with development challenges such as poverty, inequality and human rights violations, women's health is an important indicator of society health. Women are particularly vulnerable to illness and death during pregnancy and childbirth. Maternal mortality (when a woman dies from any cause related to or aggravated by pregnancy or childbirth) is the leading cause of death among women aged 15-49 years old globally. Reducing the maternal mortality rate by 75% by 2015 is one of the key indicators of the Millennium Development Goals but is not likely to be achieved. Although all regions in the Tropics have experienced significant decreases in maternal mortality rates (46% less than in 1990) the Tropics accounted for 76% of all maternal deaths in 2010. The greatest improvements were in South Asia and South East Asia where maternal mortality declined by 66% and 64% respectively between 1990 and 2010.

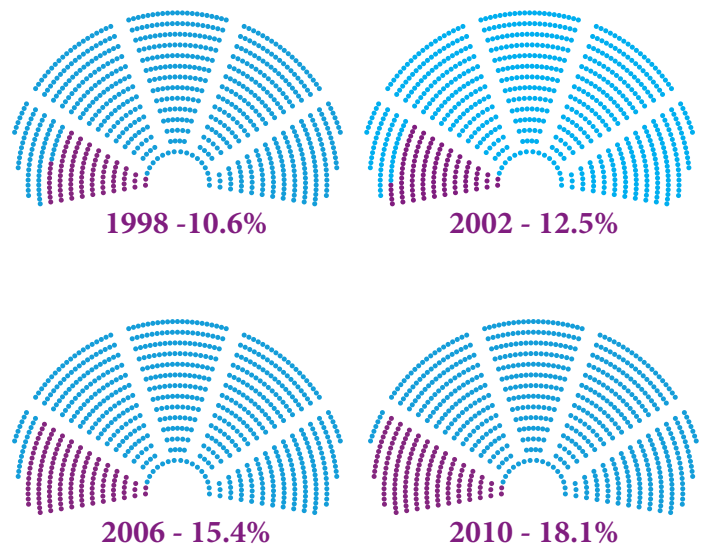
> 1000 maternal deaths occur everyday in the Tropics



Empowering women

Female empowerment is recognised as an important factor influencing the degree of gender inequality in a society. Empowerment leads to increased economic opportunities for women as well as access to transformative and decision making roles in households and society. A principle of democratic government is that parliament should represent and express the will of the people. Females typically represent more than half of a nation's population but tend to be significantly underrepresented in national parliaments. This is a global issue. In only two of the 194 nations for which data are available do women hold more than 50% of parliamentary seats. In the Tropics, women hold just over 18% of lower house seats and although this seems low, it has increased from just over 10% in 1997. There is also a lot of variation across the Tropics. South Asia has the lowest representation at less than 10% and the Caribbean the highest (30%). Central and Southern Africa has shown a great deal of progress. The number of female representatives in the region has almost doubled since 1997. Driven by women's groups and grassroots campaigns, a number of nations in the region have achieved substantial improvements through a phase of post conflict political and civil developments, including constitutional reform to encourage greater participation by women.

18% of lower house seats in the Tropics were filled by women in 2010



Conclusions

Improvements to women and girls lives have been immense in the past 60 years. However, higher rates of maternal mortality and lower levels of education indicate that although inequality exists everywhere, it is more prevalent in many tropical nations. Achieving equality for women and girls will be made possible by challenging the cultural traditions and perceptions of gender that influence discriminatory decision-making practices in legislation and social policy.