



## Commentary

## We all progress through progress towards gender equality

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*Ubuntu* – often translated as “I am because we are” – is an African humanist philosophy asserting that we are all interconnected and derive our humanity from each other [1]. It follows that we progress through the progress of others. Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it this way [2]:

“We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.”

Likewise, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is predicated on the interconnectedness of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to achieve comprehensive global development [3]. Among others, eradicating poverty and achieving good health and well-being go hand-in-hand with gender equality, quality education, decent work and economic growth. The United Nations (UN) calls on all countries – developed and developing – to make progress towards these interconnected goals through global partnerships [3].

In this context, the study by Gadoth and Heymann provides robust evidence about the relationship between country-level female participation in education and work with measures of both men's and women's survival [4]. Using the 2015 (the latest available year) UN agencies' data for 97 countries from every income level and geographical region in the world, the authors constructed new indices of gender parity in education and work and plotted them against health outcomes pertaining to both female and male life expectancy at birth as well as maternal mortality. Then, the authors ran multivariable regression models to examine the relationship between these health outcomes and gender parity in education and work.

This novel study affords major advantages over the previous research on gender parity and health outcomes. Whereas previous

research has predominantly focused on low and middle income countries [5], the study by Gadoth and Heymann is conducted at global scale. It includes a broad range of countries, while carefully controlling for country per capita gross domestic product (GDP), unemployment rate, urbanisation, and domestic government health expenditure as percentage of national GDP. The study also provides novel insights into gender parity in work, which has been under-researched compared to education [6]. Finally, in addition to maternal mortality, which has previously been widely investigated [7], the study also examines both female and male life expectancy at birth.

As a result, the study provides robust evidence at global scale for the positive relationship between gender parity in education and work with improved health outcomes for females and males. Namely, gender parity in education is significantly associated with female and male life expectancy at birth and with maternal mortality; gender parity in work is significantly correlated with reduced maternal mortality and increased female life expectancy [4].

This study allows us to better understand potential benefits of equality in improving adolescent and reproductive health outcomes. Educational skills and employment income achieved by women are likely to be invested in wellbeing of their children, family members and offer financial independence to improve resources at home as well as access to healthcare services whenever required. Additional benefits include improvements in men's health and well-being. Therefore, gender equality is likely to improve overall family health and well-being with transfer of such benefits to future generations.

Findings also suggest an urgent need to collect gender parity related data, especially, in the developing nations from South East Asia, Africa, and Western Pacific Region. Such data will be valuable to assess progress towards SDGs, conduct national and regional evaluations and plan necessary interventions to accelerate such progress.

While the inability of the study to establish causality due to its cross-sectional design is one of the stated limitations, it also provides a valuable opportunity to interpret the results of the study in the light of the predicament of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and, more broadly, the humanist philosophy of *Ubuntu*. In a way,

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the study demonstrates the interconnectedness of gender equality and health outcomes globally and that gender equality is not a zero-sum game. We all progress through progress towards gender equality.

#### **Declaration of competing interest**

PVO and AA have nothing to disclose.

#### **Author contributions**

PVO and AA co-wrote this commentary.

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