But rallying around the cause of children without championing gender equality is like stocking a sports team with players but failing to teach them how to play the game.

The intergenerational dividends of gender equality

Women are the primary caregivers for children and thus ultimately shape children’s lives. This is especially true in the most traditional, patriarchal societies where roles and responsibilities are strictly delineated by gender. The well-being of women and children is inseparable. What is good for women is good for children with few, if any, exceptions.

Nations bear the consequences when women are disempowered and deprived of human rights. The cycle of poverty and despair is passed from generation to generation. Conversely, countries reap double dividends when gender equality is promoted and ultimately attained. Women become healthy, educated, productive and able to help their children survive and thrive. These benefits are bequeathed to current and future generations.

To maximize gender equality’s impact on poverty reduction, education and sustainable development, women must have influence in decision-making in three distinct areas: the household, the workplace and the political sphere. A change for the better in any one of these realms influences women’s equality in the others. But halfway measures towards human rights are unacceptable. Anything less than unqualified support for gender equality in all three areas will sabotage meaningful progress towards fulfilling the MDGs.

Equality in the household (Chapter 2)

Women’s access to power at the household level has the most direct impact on families and children. Here is where decisions are made about the allocation of resources for food, health care, schooling and other family necessities.

When women are locked out of decisions regarding household income and other resources, they and their children are more likely to receive less food, and to be denied essential health services and education. Household chores, such as fetching water, gathering firewood or caring for the young or infirm, are delegated to mothers and daughters, which keeps them out of the paid labour force or school. When women share equality in household decisions, they tend to provide more adequately and fairly for their children.

Equality in the workplace (Chapter 3)

At work, women are often victimized by discrimination. They may be excluded from more highly remunerated occupations and are frequently paid less than men for the same work. Women and girls are often recruited into domestic work outside their own homes and may be forced to live away from their families, at times in oppressive, dangerous conditions. Destitute women and girls may find the sex trade their only option for employment when all other economic doors have been shut.

Ending the wage gap, opening higher-paying fields to women and allowing female workers more decision-making power will greatly benefit children. As women become economically productive, their spheres of influence increase. They become able to make choices not only for themselves, but also for their children. When a woman brings income or assets into the household, she is more likely to be included in decisions on how the resources will be distributed. Historically, when women hold decision-making power, they see to it that their children eat well, receive adequate medical care, finish school and have time for recreation and play. Women who have access to meaningful, income-producing work are more likely to increase their families’ standards of living, leading children out of poverty.

Equality in government and politics (Chapter 4)

Increasing women’s political participation is an MDG objective in its own right (MDG 3, Target 4, Indicator 12). Empowering women in the political arena can help change societies.