Gender equality produces a double dividend, enhancing the lives of both women and children.

In addition, the heavy workloads of women – who in general work longer hours than men – can deny them the time for leisure and rest.

Creating a supportive environment for maternal and newborn health requires challenging the social, economic and cultural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination. This will involve several key actions: educating girls and women, and reducing the poverty they experience; protecting girls and women from abuse, exploitation, discrimination and violence; fostering their participation and their involvement in household decision-making and economic and political life; and empowering them to claim their rights and essential services for themselves and their children. Greater involvement of men in maternal and newborn health care and in addressing gender discrimination and inequalities is also critical to establishing a supportive environment. The remainder of this chapter will briefly examine each of these challenges in turn.

**Quality education and a decent standard of living**

**Securing a quality education**

Education is a right for children and adolescents under the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments. It is also pivotal to improving maternal and neonatal health, reducing the incidence of child marriage – with its largely inevitable consequences of premature pregnancy and motherhood, eliminating extreme poverty and hunger, and enhancing knowledge of health risks and life skills. Since discrimination against girls and women is known to begin early, promoting gender equality and respect for the rights of women and encouraging fathers to play active roles in child care, should begin with early childhood education programmes.

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Figure 2.2

**Although improving, the educational status of young women is still low in several developing regions**

*Sub-Saharan Africa comprises the regions of Eastern/Southern Africa and West/Central Africa.*

Sources: Female youth literacy rate—UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Female net secondary school attendance—Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys.