

**Rt Hon Helen Clark. Chair of the Board of the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health (PMNCH).**

**Address to G20 Ministerial Conference on Women's Empowerment.**

**Gandhinagar, India. 2 August 2023**

**Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.**

**I thank the Minister for Women and Child Development and Minority Affairs of India for her very kind invitation to me to attend this meeting and contribute to this session on “*Education: a game-changing pathway to women's empowerment*”. I am honoured to do so as Chair of the Board of the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health, of which India is a major and greatly valued member and supporter.**

**Perhaps some of you, like me, have been the first in your family to go to university, and know from that personal experience how powerful that was in opening up choices for you. For my parents' generation, however, the milestone was to complete secondary school. For my grandparents' generation, it was to complete primary school. Yet achieving even those modest goals eludes**

**many young people, and particularly young women, around our world today.**

**Therefore, it is for good reason that the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, agreed to unanimously by all Member States, emphasise the importance of education for all, and target achieving completion of primary and secondary education for all children by 2030. The education goal – SDG 4 - also promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all.**

**Yet the SDGs are in trouble, including the education SDG. The pandemic has been a major setback – many children have missed considerable periods of schooling. Early on in the pandemic, UNESCO estimated that eleven million girls may never return to school after the lockdowns, not least because of deepening family impoverishment associated with the pandemic. For many of those girls who did not get back to school, there will have been the prospect, if not the reality, of early marriage and the risks to their health of pregnancy at a young age.**

**A research review co-conducted by PMNCH and partners has estimated that the cost to GDP of not reaching the education targets of SDG 4 would be a nine per cent loss for low-income**

**countries and 6.24 per cent for lower middle-income countries. That would prevent education being the “game changing pathway” for those societies which it could be.**

**Therefore, the time is now to step up investments in education, and to ensure that they are fully inclusive of girls and women so that their full potential can be realised. And, in making those investments, there could also be a focus on those who have missed out on education to date. In New Zealand we have a concept of “second chance” education – where there is an opportunity to catch up with what was missed from dropping out of school. There is provision for teen parents to finish secondary schooling, and there are literacy initiatives in, for example, workplaces and prisons. [Research](#) by Dr Lynette Brice of the University of Canterbury suggests that “failing to finish secondary school has been linked to poverty, crime, low-paid employment, benefit dependence and teenage pregnancy”. While every country has its own unique context, those factors to some degree or other are probably at play in most.**

**Put simply, education is transformative. It has the power to change lives for the better – and it does. And, when we invest in girls’ and women’s education, we also contribute to transformative change across whole societies and economies.**

**For example, the World Health Organisation's Global Study on Maternal and Perinatal Health reveals that lower levels of education of mothers are associated with higher maternal mortality. More years of girls' education are also associated with delayed marriage and less early pregnancy. That is positive for health and for economic and other empowerment.**

**As well, UNESCO tells us that a literate mother has a fifty per cent higher chance than an illiterate mother of having her children survive beyond the age of five. An educated woman will on average earn significantly more income in her lifetime. Her children, if she has them, are less likely to be malnourished, and they are more likely to spend more years in education too.**

**Let me also make the strong case here for investment in comprehensive sexuality education. UNESCO and other UN partners have laid out guidelines and pathways for this. Children and young people have a right to know the facts of life, and to have basic education about how to keep themselves safe and avoid unplanned pregnancy. Adolescents and youth must be able to access sexual and reproductive health services. Failure to provide knowledge, services and supplies can be literally life threatening – as we see with the continuation of the AIDS pandemic. In**

**southern Africa, adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 are now considered key populations for HIV epidemic control, and account for thirty per cent of all infections in the region.**

**(Link [here](#))**

**Winnie Byanyima, Head of UNAIDS often reminds us that ending AIDS is a political choice – she is right. AIDS won't end until we ensure access to the knowledge, services and supplies needed to stay safe, and until people are empowered to act on that knowledge. Education about this has to be part of the school curriculum for girls and boys – that is both life-saving and life changing.**

**The relationship between increased educational attainment in society and economic growth is well documented around the world, including here in India. That's why it is vital everywhere for educational opportunities to be fully inclusive of girls and women – so that whole countries can reach their potential. It makes economic sense to invest in the talents of the whole population – and it is also the right thing to do. Simultaneously investing in both education and health for girls and women contributes immensely to building human capital and economic returns.**

**Now is exactly the time for countries with large adolescent and youth populations to be investing in them to realise a demographic dividend. The world has its largest ever adolescent and youth population – 1.8 billion young people with huge potential to contribute. This year PMNCH has a #1.8 Billion campaign supporting young people to voice their priorities for health and wellbeing, culminating in an online Global Forum for Adolescents in October. We aim to have gathered the inputs of a million young people by then, and to encourage decision-makers to listen and to invest. India has already supported us with a major G20 adolescent and youth forum in June. We are encouraging countries to make new investment commitments in this demographic.**

**It goes without saying that the cost of not investing in this demographic is high – in lost opportunity for a country and in not creating positive opportunities for young people to contribute. There are always negative opportunities available to fill a vacuum – these too are costly for societies in the form of a range of illicit activities from terrorism and trafficking to other areas of crime.**

**Let me note now the great importance of empowering women, including through education, to be part of leadership at every level. Equality between women and men at decision-making tables ensures that the perspectives of both get full consideration. As**

women, we are fully justified in asserting that there should be no decisions made about us without us.

When women are at those decision-making tables, they have the power to change priorities to what matters for the health and well-being of families and communities. When India established a minimum 33 per cent quota for women's participation on local councils - panchayats – in the early 1990s, that led to more to water, sanitation, and hygiene projects, for example, getting priority. Thus, empowered women became the architects of better health and well-being, making informed decisions for themselves and their communities.

In conclusion: education opens up opportunity – to have self determination and choices about one's life. It contributes to empowerment, and to women being able to rise up the ranks to decision-making levels across society. Decision-making improves when those taking decisions are representative of society.

The benefits of investing in education are great – and so are the costs of not doing so. I hope that this message will come loud and clear from this year's G20 meetings in India, and that your deliberations here will drive more global commitment to the

**education of girls and women, knowing that it will bring many benefits to us all.**