Battle against poverty hampered by sex discrimination

Owen Dyer *London*

The world's failure to confront discrimination against women is undermining efforts to fight poverty and storing up problems for the future, a report by the United Nations' Population Fund says.

Improving the status of women, reducing maternal deaths, and enhancing girls' access to education are among the targets already set out in the UN's millennium development goals. But the report argues that other development goals also depend on women controlling their reproduction and living free of violence and preventable disease.

More than 1.7 billion women are in their reproductive years, between the ages of 15 and 49, and benefits seen in this group will be carried into future generations, said Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, executive director of the UN Population Fund, when launching the report.

"World leaders will not make poverty history until they make gender discrimination history," she said. "Many leaders call for free trade to spur economic growth. It is time to call for

action to free women of the discrimination, violence, and poor health they face in their daily lives. This will unleash the power of half of humanity to contribute to economic growth."

Violence kills as many women and girls between the ages of 15 and 44 as cancer, the report says. Worldwide, one in three women has been beaten, coerced into unwanted sexual relations, or abused, often by a family member or acquaintance. Roughly 80% of the 800 000 people trafficked across borders each year are women and girls.

Besides violence and discrimination, poor reproductive health and education are the main barriers facing women. The two issues are intimately linked, the report stresses. For every extra year that women are educated, a country sees a 5-10% drop in infant mortality rates, and every three years of additional education correlates with a fall in the birth rate of up to one less child per woman.

The report urges governments to adopt the model of the "Asian tiger" economies, where

family planning and women's education set up a virtuous circle of smaller families, bigger savings, and more educated children.

Some 201 million women worldwide lack access to effective contraceptives, the report says. The problem is most severe

in sub-Saharan Africa, where only 20% of women use modern contraceptives, compared with 54% globally.

The report, *The Promise of Equality: Gender Equity, Reproductive Health and the Millennium Development Goals* is available at www.unfpa.org.

Another FDA expert resigns over emergency contraception delay

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Frank Davidoff, an internal medicine expert and former editor of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, resigned last month as consultant to the US Food and Drug Administration. He said that the reason for his decision, which has only just become public, was the FDA's postponement of a decision on over the counter sale of emergency contraception, despite overwhelming support for such a move by

the FDA's expert advisory committees and its professional staff.

Susan Wood, the FDA's assistant commissioner for women's health, resigned at the end of August for the same reason (*BMJ* 2005;331:596).

In his resignation letter, Dr Davidoff wrote, "I can no longer associate myself with an organisation that is capable of making such an important decision flagrantly on the basis of political

influence, rather than the scientific and clinical evidence... I am truly sorry it has come to this, since the agency serves an extraordinarily important function, and I generally respect the staff and the work they do."

The FDA commissioner, Lester Crawford, resigned without giving a reason in September, only two months after being confirmed in the job. Two senators called for an inquiry into his departure amid rumours, denied by his wife, that he had not fully disclosed financial information (*BMJ* 2005;331:713 and *BMJ* 2005;331:796).

Dr Davidoff served on the FDA's non-prescription drug

advisory committee that, together with the committee on reproductive drugs, voted 23:4 that the emergency contraceptive pill, known as Plan B, be approved for over the counter sale to women of all ages in December 2003.

In 2004, these recommendations were over-ruled and in August this year, Dr Crawford delayed the decision indefinitely.

Dr Davidoff told the *BMJ* that he resigned because of Dr Crawford's August delaying decision. He said he was concerned about the effect on public trust in the FDA's integrity. "It's potentially very damaging to the agency's credibility," he added.