

# **Making the links:** women's rights and empowerment are key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals<sup>1</sup>

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*Men and women have the right to live their lives and raise their children in dignity, free from hunger and from fear of violence, oppression or injustice.*

Millennium Declaration (UN 2000a, 2)

The Millennium Declaration, adopted by all UN Member States in 2000, outlines a vision of freedom from want and freedom from fear. Together with the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which make that vision concrete, the Millennium Declaration commits states to 'promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger, disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable' (UN 2000a, 5).

The recognition that women's equality and rights are central to achieving economic and social priorities is important. But it is not by chance that this has come about. It is the result of work by women's human rights advocates over decades, creating a groundswell of activism for gender equality at global, regional, and national levels. The commitments to women made in the UN World Conferences of the past two decades – in Beijing, Cairo, Vienna, and Copenhagen, as well as the Special Session on HIV / AIDS in New York in June 2001 – are fundamental to the vision embedded in the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs.

So, too, is the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international women's bill of rights – now ratified by 179 countries – which obligates governments to take actions to promote and protect the rights of women (UN 1979). It is crucially important that the specific and detailed commitments and obligations contained in these documents are not lost as governments and the international community begin to organise around goals and targets selected to track progress on the MDGs.

The power of the MDGs lies in the unprecedented global consensus and commitment that they represent. They establish a common index of progress, and a common focus for global partnership for development, which emphasise the needs of poor people. The MDGs also provide an opportunity to raise awareness about the connections among the eight Goals and the rights and capacities of women. The year 2005, which will mark the ten-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action and the five-year review of the Millennium Declaration, will present an opportunity to assess progress in implementing both the

Platform for Action and the MDGs, especially Goal 3.

As governments and civil society come together to track progress towards achieving the MDGs, we have an opportunity to re-energise gender-equality initiatives, by insisting on the central importance of Goal 3 and the Millennium Declaration itself. As a recent World Bank report notes: 'Because the MDGs are mutually reinforcing, progress towards one goal affects progress towards others. Success in many of the goals will have positive impacts on gender equality, just as progress toward gender equality will help other goals' (World Bank Gender and Development Group 2003, 3). It is thus absolutely essential to ensure that tracking progress towards all of the eight Goals relies on sex-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive indicators. Many agencies and advocates for gender equality are producing reports that will contribute to understanding the gender dimensions of many of the goals and targets.

Progress, however, will again depend on the energy and commitment of women. How then, do women's equality advocates view the MDGs? In order to find out, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), in co-operation with the UN Interagency Network on Women and Gender Equality, the OECD/DAC Network on Gender Equality, and the Multilateral Development Bank Working Group on Gender, hosted a five-week online discussion on gender and the MDGs with more than 400 women's equality advocates, representing UN agencies, bilateral donors, multilateral development banks, and civil society organisations, as well as independent scholars and activists. What did this tell us?

First, women's advocates are dismayed that, despite their success in pushing for recognition of women's rights as human rights by governments through UN conferences, many of these hard-won victories are not reaffirmed in the

Millennium Declaration, and are entirely absent in the MDGs themselves. They point to the lack of a goal on reproductive rights, or a decent work standard for women or men, the absence of issues such as violence against women, and the narrow targets and indicators for the gender equality goal.

As a result, many women's advocates have questioned the relevance of the MDGs to their work. Why should women's organisations pay attention to the MDGs when the need to tackle the roll-back in women's reproductive rights, the persistence of violence against women, and the rise in militarisms, extremism, poverty, and inequality is so urgent? Especially when, at face value, the MDGs are operational and are devoid of any analysis of power relations. Nor do they take into account the inequities within the global economic system that exacerbate existing inequalities.

Several participants in the online discussion observed that, in much of the work on MDGs, the gender dimensions were often missing or treated as an afterthought. As one said: 'We have been witness to serious exclusions of a gender perspective in MDG Task Forces, MDG Reports and PRSPs [Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers]. This is just one symptom of a larger epidemic, that puts gender and human rights on a back burner.'

This has begun to change over the last year, as gender advocates made themselves heard in the Task Forces working on strategies for achieving the Goals, and in the statistical agencies working on better data and indicators for monitoring progress. States are already under formal, legal obligations to realise gender equality, particularly those states that have ratified CEDAW. For every area covered by the MDGs, there is direction on gender equality that exists in the core human rights treaties, and through the concluding observations and recommendations of the treaty bodies and special rapporteurs this direction has in

many cases already been fine-tuned to the circumstances of individual countries. And, while CEDAW is not fully reflected in the formulation of the MDGs, the Millennium Declaration itself reaffirms a global commitment to implement the Convention.

Progress in implementing these agreements, however, has highlighted some of the obstacles to be overcome in achieving Goal 3. The five-year review of progress in implementing the Beijing Platform, held in June 2000, showed that the path had been bumpy at best. As the Secretary-General's report states: 'an improved understanding of gender equality does not necessarily automatically translate into gender equality in practice. Despite progress, the persistence of traditional and stereotypic gender roles, often reinforced by legal and/or institutional structures, impedes women's empowerment. Promotion of gender equality continues to be relegated to a lower level of national priority' (UN 2000b, 10). The result of this is that resources are often in short supply.

This uneven progress results from a complex set of conditions that lie at the heart of women's inequality. The structures that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination pervade economic, social, political, cultural, legal, and civic institutions, norms, and practices around the world. The know-how and investments required to eliminate them are rarely committed, especially in poor countries. The political will required to achieve gender equality is variable, or altogether lacking. Although positive actions have been taken in almost every country, the Secretary-General's report concludes that 'more work needs to be done, at every level, to create the enabling environment envisioned in the Platform for Action, in which women's rights are recognized as an indispensable part of human rights and women as well as men have the opportunity to realize their full potential' (ibid. 10–11).

## What will it take?

Making gender equality and women's human rights central to the MDGs means making connections between the MDGs and global agreements such as CEDAW and those that emerged from Vienna, Beijing, and Cairo. This requires a commitment from donors to finance women's empowerment. It requires support for women's organising, to push for policies to ensure that rhetoric is translated into concrete actions. And finally, it requires recognition by the international development community that the motor of gender mainstreaming is commitment to women's rights and gender empowerment.

For this reason, we must guard against falling into a kind of technocratic approach to gender mainstreaming that governments and agencies can adopt, without actually talking to women – particularly women who are poor and disadvantaged. We must guard against regarding gender equality and women's empowerment as a set of technical tools and concepts de-linked from practice, power, and politics. This is because, in the last analysis, all of these are necessary to build the vital partnerships needed to fulfil our commitments to the world's women. What women are telling us is that they need to believe in the rhetoric. In the words of one participant in our study: 'Women, and the poor in general, have suffered too much from economic recycling and broken promises. Women have reason to be very skeptical about cooptation, and attempts to use them as an excuse to push an agenda that is not theirs. We must make sure that agenda setting is not done without concern for our voices and warnings.'

The MDGs may represent another chance – perhaps the only one – to heed these voices and to link the goals and aspirations of women to the priorities of governments and development specialists. Achieving the Goals demands that we find a way to mobilise the political will and the financial resources to turn rhetoric into action.

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**Note**

1 This article is taken from an address originally given at the Workshop on Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals, World Bank, Washington DC, on 19 November 2003. Since the article was written, many of the links that the author laid out have been codified in detail in a UNIFEM booklet (2004).

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