

GENDER EQUALITY: NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR MOVING AHEAD

by Yvette Collymore

Ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, women's advocates are targeting new international mechanisms in their bid to erase inequalities between men and women and promote the advancement of women and girls. They have found that the Millennium Declaration and its time-bound and measurable goals, which have become a prime focus of development work throughout the world, provide an opportunity to mobilize governments and the international community to support the Beijing agenda.

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Increasing women's access to economic and political opportunities is key to the development process.

As a strategy for women's empowerment, the agenda adopted in Beijing spells out critical areas for action to remove obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life. While the latest review of this Platform for Action shows some areas of progress, women are still commonly excluded from full participation in economic, social, cultural, and political decisionmaking.

Women's disadvantages are evident in a range of areas. In sub-Saharan Africa, 75 percent of people ages 15 to 24 with HIV/AIDS are female.¹ Despite rising school enrollments and literacy among girls in many developing countries, disparities remain between women and men in the work force. For instance, women hold less than 20 percent of seats in national parliaments in much of the world, and their share of the nonfarm work force is only an estimated 38 percent worldwide.² Also, deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth show no signs of decreasing in poor countries, where women's reproductive health needs often receive insufficient attention and funding.

New global realities have presented additional hurdles to efforts to end gender inequalities. Women's advocates and government delegates who met at the United Nations in March 2005 to weigh the gains over the last decade described increasingly challenging times. They cited the rise of various forms of religious fundamentalism; a concentration of resources on the war on terror at the expense of poverty reduction; widening gaps between the rich and the poor; increased trafficking of women and children; new wars and conflicts, and violence against refugee and other marginalized women.

The March meeting in New York, which included delegates from 165 countries and thousands of nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives, discussed the best practices and experiences in moving ahead but noted that the new global climate and scarce resources made it difficult to secure the Beijing objectives. Against this background, delegates considered the need to link the Beijing agenda to new local and international development processes, such as efforts to realize the goals of the Millennium Declaration.

The Millennium Development Goals

The Millennium Declaration, which world leaders unanimously adopted at their September 2000 UN Millennium Summit, represents a vision for

improving the lives of the world's people. To add teeth to the declaration and ensure that countries' progress could be measured, UN agencies and other international organizations defined eight distinct Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and attached to them a series of quantifiable and time-bound targets and a set of indicators for tracking progress.³ The goals include reducing poverty and hunger, and addressing illiteracy, gender inequality, child mortality, maternal health, diseases, and environmental sustainability (see box). Almost all of the goals are to be achieved by 2015.

The MDGs have drawn unprecedented support from national governments, UN agencies, and key development aid organizations such as the World Bank as a concrete way to establish priorities for poor countries, guide development assistance, and measure countries' progress.

The MDGs, like the Beijing Platform, face a major review process in 2005. Heads of government will meet in New York in September for a high-level UN General Assembly session to measure progress, to determine the best national strategies for achieving the goals, and to establish the global partnerships that will be required. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has commissioned an independent advisory body—the Millennium Project—to identify strategies to achieve the goals. Also, countries have been reporting to the UN system on their progress toward meeting their commitments.

For women's advocates eager to carry forward the objectives of the Beijing Platform, the MDG review process comes at a critical time. The process presents a strategic opportunity to integrate the 10-year-old platform into a broad development agenda and to bring women's groups into closer dialogue with a range of government departments, ministries, and stakeholders that extend beyond women's constituencies.

Critical Links: The Beijing Platform and the MDGs

The Millennium Declaration has the potential to carry forward the Beijing agenda. The declaration draws broadly on the conclusions of the landmark global development conferences of the 1990s, including the Beijing conference and the 1994 International Conference on Population and

Development (ICPD). The declaration acknowledges that perspectives linked to gender—the economic, social, political, cultural attributes, limitations, and opportunities associated with being female and male—are central to reducing poverty, diseases, and other development ills.

The declaration includes a human rights perspective. It includes pledges to combat violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The convention, a legally binding international agreement, establishes an international bill of rights for women and outlines actions for countries to guarantee these rights and to end discrimination against women. Through its Optional Protocol, CEDAW allows individual women or groups to submit complaints about treaty violations directly to the United Nations once they have exhausted all national remedies.⁴ It also entitles the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women—the body that monitors countries' compliance with CEDAW—to conduct inquiries into grave or systematic treaty violations. CEDAW, along with its complaints procedure, represents the cornerstone of efforts to advance the status of women.

With the inclusion of these and other global commitments, the Millennium Declaration confirms the central role of gender equality and women's rights to the development process. However, the actual MDGs and their indicators only narrowly represent the far-reaching commitments called for by CEDAW and the Beijing Platform.

In particular, attention has focused on the one MDG—Goal 3—that promotes gender equality and women's empowerment. The goal has only one target, however: to end disparities between boys and girls in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education by 2015. While education is a vital building block for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, many argue that confining the target to the educational sphere is not enough.

Taking Ownership of the MDG Process

Gender equality and women's empowerment are critical to all areas of development, and gender

experts are urging that they be fully integrated into the implementation and monitoring of all eight MDGs. This would entail having a broader set of priorities and actions at the national level.

At the same time, a goal specifically geared toward gender equality and women's empowerment is seen as crucial. Work is therefore underway to ensure that MDG 3 is grounded in a broad framework that seeks to take action in spheres beyond education—spheres including health and political and economic decisionmaking.

To this end, the UN Millennium Project, which is making recommendations to help countries achieve the MDGs, has adopted a framework for MDG 3 that has three dimensions: improving women's capabilities (as measured by education, health, and nutrition); increasing women's access to economic and political opportunities; and ensuring women's security (by reducing women's vulnerability to violence and conflict). Within this framework, the Project's Task Force on Education and Gender Equality has outlined a series of priority actions for countries:⁵

- **Strengthening post-primary schooling for girls.** Global commitments to girls' schooling have mainly focused on primary education, with the result that nearly two-thirds of developing countries improved girls' enrollment in the past decade.⁶ The task force notes that while continued focus on universal primary education is crucial, secondary schooling and higher levels of education can increase women's income-earning potential, heighten their ability to bargain for resources within the household, and build their capabilities in other ways. Key actions include reducing the costs of post-primary schooling and making schools girl-friendly by improving their safety, design, and policies.
- **Improving reproductive health.** Poor reproductive health causes widespread hardship to families and communities, particularly in the developing world, where maternal mortality is high. Actions to address these problems include the provision of quality family planning services, emergency obstetric care, post-abortion care, and prevention and treatment services for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Millennium Development Goals

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day, and halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Ensure that by 2015 all boys and girls can complete a full course of primary schooling.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education no later than 2015.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases

Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the losses of environmental resources. Halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, and have achieved by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Goal 8, which has seven targets, calls for an open, rule-based trading and financial system, more generous aid to countries committed to reducing poverty, and relief for the debt problems of developing countries. The goal draws attention to the problems of the least developed countries and of landlocked countries and small island developing states, which have greater difficulty competing in the global economy. It also calls for cooperation with the private sector to address youth unemployment, ensure access to affordable, essential drugs, and make available the benefits of new technologies.

SOURCE: United Nations, "UN Millennium Development Goals" (www.un.org/millenniumgoals).

- **Investing in infrastructure to reduce women's and girls' time burdens.** Routine household responsibilities often limit the ability of women and girls to take part in educational, productive, and civic activities. To reduce this time burden, the task force urges greater investments in public infrastructure—including accessible and affordable transportation, improved water and sanitation systems, and efficient energy sources.
- **Guaranteeing property and inheritance rights for women and girls.** Women are often far less likely than men to own or control assets such as land and housing. To address this imbalance, several types of changes within countries are recommended,

For More Information

For more information on the Millennium Development Goals and Goal 3 (Promoting Gender Equality), go to www.millenniumproject.org.

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including amendments to statutory and customary laws, the promotion of legal literacy, and support for groups that can help women to make land claims.

- **Eliminating gender inequality in employment.** Despite increases in women's employment globally, women's status within the labor market remains inferior to that of men. Recommendations include closing the gender gap in earnings. Since women's responsibilities as the primary caretakers within the family constrain their job opportunities, countries are also encouraged to expand national policies and programs to support the care of children, the elderly, and other family members.
- **Increasing women's seats in government.** The Beijing Platform for Action recommends that governments set a target of 30 percent of seats for women in national parliaments. While some countries have made progress in meeting this goal, women remain largely absent from decisionmaking bodies around the world. Recommendations include setting gender quotas for these bodies.
- **Combating violence against girls and women.** Violence against women, which includes intimate-partner violence and sexual abuse by nonrelatives, is prevalent around the world. A combination of actions, such as the provision of education, health, and legal services, can reduce such violence. The task force also recommends a global campaign to mobilize resources and support for national plans to end the violence.

What Needs to Be Done

For women's advocates, the MDG goals, with their time-bound targets and indicators, offer an important opportunity to hold governments and international agencies accountable for their commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment. To influence policy discussions at the local and international levels, women's groups and other

NGOs need to become familiar with the MDG process and with key international legal instruments and other agreements that commit governments to action.

The challenge is to bring about changes in policies, programs, and spending priorities on a scale that benefits the most disadvantaged populations. Women's organizations can show that increasing women's access to education, health services, and economic and political opportunities is a good investment, and that increasing women's ability to make strategic decisions about their lives without the threat of violence is good for development.

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