

Iran's Path to a Better World:

Success and Obstacles to Achieving the Millennium Development Goals

Iran is right on track with many of the goals laid out by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but it still has a long way to go in some areas. To focus on both gender and rural versus urban disparities, poses a somewhat bleak view of Iran at first sight. However, when comparing Iran to its neighbors as well as its past, a new picture emerges. Iran has had significant improvements in many areas laid out by the MDGs. While they still face large challenges in achieving their goals, these same goals are certainly within reach.

The first MDG is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Iran seems to be on track with these goals as the indicators call for halving those suffering from both hunger and those living off of \$1 a day or less. In 2002 the percentage of the population living off of \$1 a day was .62%. This is down from 2.24% in 1995. (First, 9) While Iran seems to be doing well in the arena of increasing income, this can be misleading. There is still a significant portion of the population living in poverty. In 2005 6% of Iran's people were living on \$2 a day. (First, 9) The national poverty line is the measure of minimum dietary intake. Less people are also living at or below this "line". In 2002 8.99% of Iranians did not get enough nutrition. This is down from 12.79% in 1995. (First, 9) The question is how do these numbers look when viewing rural areas alone? Underweight children are much more common in rural areas than in urban areas. Underweight children under the age of 5 in urban areas is about 9.6% of that sub population, whereas in rural areas it is 13.7%. (First, 9) It is important to note that while both statistics are relatively high, it is rural areas that are far more deprived of resources than urban areas, overall.

The female-to-male ratio for income is .28. (Global, 1) The implications of this for women are tremendous. People need money in order to forge their path to empowerment. If women are paid so little compared to men, then they are surely dependent on men for their survival and basic needs. This is an alarming statistic when thinking of a wealthy woman versus a wealthy man. When one takes into consideration that there are still people living on less than a dollar a day in Iran, the number becomes far more ominous. The lives of very poor women, therefore, seem to be much more burdensome than that of their male counterparts. It seems as if Iran does not submit gender disaggregated data regarding the first MDG. There is also conflicting data on the gap between the very wealthy and the very poor. According to the Iranian government, the gap is steadily decreasing. (First, 9) However, according to other sources, such as the Tudeh Party, the gap is on the increase and needs immediate and serious attention. (Where) It is difficult to know which information to rely on. Many Iranians believe that the gap between rich and poor is widening, but many government officials and supporters of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad think otherwise.

The second MDG is to achieve universal education in the primary sphere by 2015. The third MDG of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, also deals with education. For the purposes of this report, the second and third MDGs will be analyzed together as they are intertwined when it comes to differences in gender. First, a look at Iranian schools is in order. Primary education in Iran is free and compulsory. However, not every area has a primary school, which is particularly true for rural areas. There is also no distinct national program so the various schools throughout the country have differing curricula. Teachers sent to rural areas complete over four years of training before teaching rural children. (Education

System) Children must pass a test at the end of each year in order to move on to the next grade. It is difficult to find statistics regarding rural versus urban education beyond the above.

The disparities between urban and rural regions in Iran can be explained best by one of two things. The first cause is simply the geography of Iran. It is very arid in parts and this makes traveling, and therefore disbursement of resources, difficult. The second reason pertains to the revolution in 1979. During this time, and in the following decades, rural people flocked to the urban areas of the country. As a result, about 60% of Iranians live in these areas. (EFA)

Iran seems to be on track with primary enrollment goals. 95.3% of all primary aged children were enrolled in school in 2005. This is up from 92% just 3 years prior. (Iran Primary) UNESCO indicates that a reason for this is increasing educational space. With more and more schools at the lower levels, there is more capacity for Iran's large younger generation. About 40% of the population is under the age of 15. Over 50% of the population is between the ages of 15 and 64. In respect to the number of children to tax-paying adults, Iran has a much heavier burden to provide educational spaces than other countries. UNESCO also offers explanations as to why certain provinces such as Sistan & Baluchistan, Chahmahal & Bakhtiari, Hormozgan and West Azarbaijan have lower rates of increase than others. These provinces are very poor and need children to work, either inside or outside of the home. Also, in rural schools, probably due to lack of funding and less students, the classes are co-ed. This presents a problem for these very traditional and Muslim communities. Once girls reach the age of 9, they are at the age of consent according to Sharia law. At this time it is unfavorable for traditional families to mix the genders. Male teachers are looked down upon due to prevailing gender roles and there is a short supply of women instructors in the rural areas. Compound this with the lack of value placed on educating girls, as well as the lack of the amount of schools and it is easy to see why rural children

encounter obstacles to their education. (EFA) UNICEF estimates that about 53% of children aged 14-16 do not complete primary education.

In 2000, when the MDGs were first set in place, the primary education enrollment rate for girls to boys was 95.43%. In 2005 this rose to 122.22%. This means they ranked number one in this ratio among other nations. (Education Statistics) This is a remarkable increase. It appears that Iran has met and surpassed its goal of eliminating gender disparity by 2005, however, now a new problem arises. Boys are now the under-represented group so gender disparity still, in fact, exists. This is more pronounced when one takes into consideration that Iran has more males than females comprising their population. There was a 105% ratio of primary aged boys to girls in 2006. (Education Statistics: Iran) Although it may appear that females are more educated based on their sheer numbers, they are segregated from boys in the classroom, do not get as much or the same kind of attention, and are funneled into certain areas of study once they reach higher education.

Gender disparities have gotten worse in the sphere of secondary education. According to NationMaster.com, the female to male enrollment went from 94.04% in 2000 to 93.96% in 2005. UNICEF reports the reason for the decrease being that as children grow older they are more and more capable of providing income and/or help in the domestic sphere. It is also acceptable for young girls to be married; a fate that costs them the high price of their education. Secondary schools are also fewer and farther in between than primary schools so many parents are concerned with distance. This is especially true for females because of a safety concern of taking a bus alone. In the poorest province of Sístán va Balúchestán, the shortage of teachers is so great that often military men provide education. (Opening) An alarming 90% of girls in rural areas will drop out of school before completion. Parliament has also mandated that all female

schools be staffed and taught by women only. The shortage of female teachers puts further damper on girls education. (Hughes)

Some solutions to these obstacles have already been brought to the government's attention. One of these is to get parents more involved in the education process. This is difficult to imagine for the rural areas because this simply cannot happen until more schools and teachers are available. This will mean an increase in government investment in education. Citizens can also raise awareness concerning the capabilities of girls once educated and the implications for future family income. It is also desirable to provide incentives to parents as this has proved beneficial in many areas of the world. Iran has an obvious commitment to providing education to its children. They have the statistics and policies to prove it. However, high statistics- even increasing statistics- do not imply a rapid incline to 100% enrollment in and of themselves. There is a real possibility that the obstacles in the way of providing adequate rural education can significantly decrease the rise of enrollment and even to stagnate it all together. The Iranian government does seem to be aware of this though and that is a good sign. It is very possible that Iran will achieve full enrollment in both primary and secondary education as long as they apply aggressive measures to bridge both physical and sub-cultural barriers between East and West. This is not to say that other measures need not be in place. The children of Iran, while having access to education, do not necessarily have access to adequate education. It has been suggested by UNICEF that Iran should introduce a more participatory approach to teaching and learning as well as offering different curriculum.

As with other nations, higher education is remarkably different in Iran than the lower levels. When speaking of higher education, it is important to keep in mind that Iranian universities are competitive and not everyone can get in. (Education System) This means that

more higher education centers need to be in place in order to meet the demand of potential students. Higher education also comes with a higher price tag and is therefore reserved to the wealthy urban youth. The MDGs do not indicate that all people should be enrolled in this type of institute, however, but rather that males and females represent equal amounts of college enrollment. Iran is particularly outstanding by this measure of success. Female to male ratios were 86.6% in 2000 and 115.3% in 2007. (GenderStats) More and more women are demanding an education. As stated before, men still typically have a greater range within the college setting as far as their areas of study are concerned, but they still need to be encouraged to attend higher education as their numbers are declining at an alarming rate. Perhaps, because the third MDG addresses the empowerment of women, emphasis should be placed on equal education within college campuses before all else.

The progress of the third MDG is also clouded by conflicting accounts of gender relations in Iran. It has been argued that the MDGs do not address the empowerment of women as much as, or as strongly as, they should. A good example of this lies in Iranian daily life. Although Iran is doing well to educate women, they are not empowered the way they deserve. A problem that highly educated Iranian women face is that they have difficulty in obtaining jobs once they graduate. This is because of deeply embedded sexism displayed in the workforce. There are not enough jobs for women and not enough women in decision-making positions. According to the World Bank, women make up just one third of the paid workforce. There is a 9.3% male unemployment rate compared to a 15.7% unemployment rate among women. Iran has also never exceeded 5% representation of women in Parliament. In fact, in 2007 4.1% of Parliament seats were held by women which is down from 5% in 2000. (GenderStats) Under current law, women are considered to be second class citizens. They do not have as much power as men do in

household matters or in the realm of family law. For example, it is much harder for them to obtain a divorce or custody of children. However, the regime claims that women are treated well under Sharia law. Some women agree, but most do not.

According to the indicators of MDG 3, Iran is doing well with educating women, but not with allowing them adequate representation in the government. Donna M. Hughes goes as far as to say the government practices “gender apartheid”. Within the scheme of things, women are only empowered in the sense that they continue to push ahead with various grassroots movements, including the One Million Signatures campaign. They are strong and intelligent and continue to push the boundaries before them. In the sense of gaining real power within society women have a long way to go towards empowerment. Therefore, one indicator of one MDG is hardly an accurate omen of women’s increased status within society and the home.

Yet another factor intertwined in female empowerment is the maternal mortality rate. MDG number 5 addresses this issue by calling to reduce by three-fourths the ratio of maternal deaths by 2015. The average number of maternal deaths from every 100,000 live births was 140 in 2006. This is a high number, but when taken into context it is much better than surrounding nations. There are many factors contributing to this relatively low rate. More and more births are being accomplished in the presence of skilled health professionals. The World Bank reports that the percentage of births being attended to by health staff went from 89.6% in 2000 to 97.3% in 2007. Women are also having fewer children and have one of the lowest fertility rates in the Middle East. The average woman has 2 children.

During the Iran-Iraq war the government urged women to have more children than before in order to build their population back up after so many people died in the war. When women answered this call, the government then realized that a large and ever-growing population could

hinder development as there would be more people to attend to and they already have one of the highest populations in the region. (UNESCO) Considering the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, it is probably safe to assume that there would be more poor people to “carry”. The government then made contraceptives more widely available and implemented free family planning education programs. 78.9% of women aged 15 to 49 were using some form of contraceptive in 2007. Fertility rates are now close to the replacement level. (Krastev) Also in 1985, a medical care network was established, making health care more organized and capable of serving the people.

These figures reflect the national figures, of course, and do not reflect the differences between urban and rural realities. Women tend to have more children in rural areas due to increased infant mortality rates as well as the need to have sons keeping some women in a trap of having more and more babies to conform to patriarchal wishes. There are fewer women in rural areas that get medical attention they need because they tend to be poor and far from health services. This also means that fewer births across arid regions are attended to by a health professional. However, rural areas are producing healthier and healthier women, even though they may not be improving maternal health as quickly as more urban areas. In 2008 there were 34 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births in rural regions compared to 25 deaths in the total population. (Movahedi) (These are unadjusted figures and so do not match the statistic cited earlier regarding 140 deaths per 100,000 live births, as this was adjusted.)

Iran has taken measures to put a priority on rural health, prevention of illness, outpatient solutions, and general treatment. (A., Farsar) More and more health facilities are being built in poorer regions. Most health indicators, overall, point to a marked improvement of health for all people, including women. It is becoming an increasing priority for all women to receive prenatal

care as well as a trained health professional attending their labor. This increasing concern over the health of women, and mothers in particular, can help to empower women by emphasizing their importance to life. It also increases the attention given to women and issues that affect them. Although increased health institutes in rural regions can help to explain Iran's decreasing rural infant mortality rate, it is safe to say that increasing maternal health contributes to this significantly.

Improvements must still be made in order for Iran to reach their target of reducing maternal mortality by three-fourths. Continuing to emphasize female education is imperative for this change to take place. When women are more educated, they can know what to ask for and when. They also gain the confidence to speak up if they are having difficulty and need medical assistance. Education also helps the population to view women as having more agency than previously believed as well as viewing them more and more as human investments to the sustaining of life. These attitudes will elevate the belief that women are entitled to pre- and post-natal care. It is also important to increase health facilities, particularly in rural areas. Affordable health care should always be kept in mind as essential to real access to these needed services by poor people. UNICEF also reports that malnutrition is high in rural Iran. This is partly due to causes which are difficult to detect. Iran would surely meet MDG 5 by improving nutrition among girls and women who are at or below child-bearing age. Improved eating habits and vitamin intake is necessary for both a healthy pregnancy and baby.

In conclusion, Iran has proven to be fruitful in virtually all of their serious efforts at eliminating various social problems. When Iran puts mind power and money into their programs, they get very appealing results. They have increased the amount of schools and health facilities, as well as provided teachers by the drastic means of using military men. They have

increased the female student population at remarkable speeds. They have reduced maternal mortality rates as well as the amount of people living in poverty. Despite all of its gains, Iran has major obstacles in its way. Educated women face discrimination in the classroom as well as in government positions. The very poor may have an increase in income but the increase is meager and the very poor are still very poor. The gap between the rich and poor appears to be deepening as time goes on as well. Even though rural areas are improving standards for the people there, including women, there is still a notable difference between rural and urban areas. Iran must make some fundamental changes in order to reach the MDGs demanded of them, however, their goals are within reach.

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