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Living Up to the Challenge: Kenya's Efforts at Achieving Gender-Related MDGs

Most, if not all, of the countries participating in the UN's Millennium Development Program have seen marked and definite improvements toward achieving the eight benchmarks. Simply by agreeing to work on the areas defined by the MDGs, all of the participating countries have demonstrated a raised awareness of power structures and gender equity, and a greater understanding of the importance of good health care, education, and safe access to government services. The Millennium Development Program also emphasizes the necessary and basic services a government should provide in order to best serve its constituency, and, via Goal Three, suggests that women should have a larger role in government. As part of their participation and in an effort to achieve the MDGs, the government of Kenya has produced a plan called *Kenya Vision 2030*, which is a long-term "blueprint" for the development of Kenya based on three "pillars." The bulk of Kenya's efforts and goals concerning the MDGs can be found in the *Vision 2030* literature, and the most recent report made by H. E. Zachary D. Muburi-Muita, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Kenya to the UN, relates some of the needs and successes of the country in reaching the goals. A comparison of the two documents—the *Vision 2030* literature and Mr. Muburi-Muita's transcribed report—seems to give a fairly complete picture of Kenya's achievements so far and also allows for some projection of what might lay ahead for the sub-Saharan African republic.

Vision 2030 literature introduces the pillars as follows:

The economic pillar aims to improve the prosperity of all Kenyans through an economic development programme, covering all the regions of Kenya, and aiming to achieve an average Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 10% per annum beginning in 2012. The social pillar seeks to build a just and cohesive society with social equity in a clean and secure environment. The political pillar aims to realise a democratic political system founded on issue-based politics that respects the rule of law, and protects the rights and freedoms of every individual in Kenyan society. (Republic of Kenya 1)

Although this brief description mentions social equity, the document describing the blueprint is fairly vague. It should be noted that the Kenyan government is clear that *Vision 2030* is merely a framework, and that five-year plans to be published from now until 2025 will be the driving force for implementing social, economic, and political change. However, while the three pillars appear to be well developed, the stated social, economic and political aims leave a bit to be desired regarding the position of women in the expanding state.

Perhaps the most disturbing omission of *Vision 2030* is the almost complete lack of attention paid to gender equity and the empowerment of women. When women are mentioned, they are compartmentalized and lumped with other groups such as the “disabled” and so-termed “vulnerable groups.” This lack of detail regarding the role of women in the new Kenya may be linked to the MDGs themselves. Goals two, three, and five are the MDGs with specifically gender-related targets and/or indicators. Goal Two, achieving universal primary education states that “by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling” (MDG). In response,

Vision 2030 states, “The overall goal for 2012 is to reduce illiteracy by increasing access to education, improving the transition rate from primary to secondary schools, and raising the quality and relevance of education” (Republic of Kenya 16). Although the large, color picture following this description in *Kenya Vision 2030* is of two young girls working at a computer, there is no mention of gender specifically in the text, nor does the blueprint seem to create a space for safe learning places for women and young girls to be created. To be fair, Kenya already has several schools for women throughout its more developed sectors, but these schools are not equivalent to similar institutions for male students. Although the ideas of equity and equal access do seem implicit in the literature, the omission of the words gender, woman/en, etc. in the education and training section is notable.

Goal Three’s target (Target Four) states that every effort should be made to “Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and to all levels of education no later than 2015” (MDG). Indicators Nine and 10 under this goal deal directly with education and literacy rates. Indicator 11 is the “share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector” and indicator 12 is the “proportion of seats held by women in national parliament” (MDG). Though still a disproportionately small part of the overall footprint of *Vision 2030*, the literature does address these indicators directly. The authors of the program write,

The goals for 2012 are, therefore, to increase opportunities all-around among women, youth and all disadvantaged groups. Specific strategies will involve increasing the participation of women in all economic, social and political decision-making processes (e.g. starting with higher representation of

women in Parliament); improving access to all disadvantaged groups (e.g. business opportunities, health and education services, housing and justice); and minimizing vulnerabilities through prohibition of retrogressive practices (e.g. female genital mutilation and child labour), and by up-scaling the training for people with disabilities and special needs. (Republic of Kenya 21)

Clearly this description is meant to directly address the indicators under Goal Three as well as Goals Five (improving maternal health) and Six (combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases). The *Vision 2030* literature goes on to describe a “flagship project” to be funded and in place by 2012 that would “institutionalize the Women Enterprise Fund and increase its overall amounts of efficiency in projects launched by its beneficiaries” (Republic of Kenya 21). The literature goes on to discuss equity and poverty elimination, describing an initiative that

aims to expand access across different social and political dimensions, including: increasing school enrollment for girls and children from nomadic communities and poor rural and slum communities; widening coverage of ‘essential health care’; equitable distribution of water, sewerage and sanitation services; improvements in public transport; and attaining gender parity and fairness in the delivery of justice. (Republic of Kenya 21)

Reading further, the plan suggests that “reducing social inequalities, in short, cuts across all the economic and social initiatives proposed by *Vision 2030*” (Republic of Kenya 21).

Strange, then, is the near absence of the explicit mention of women and/or gender issues throughout the document.

Finally, in section six of the *Kenya Vision 2030* literature, the authors mention “Equity of Citizens” and define it as follows: “Kenya shall be a nation that treats its women and men equally. It will not discriminate any citizen on the basis of gender, race, tribe, religion or ancestral origin” (Republic of Kenya 22). Again, this statement is no doubt meant to address specifically Goals Two and Three. These scant mentions of gender equity in Kenya’s decades-long development plan are somewhat disturbing, especially when compared with the lengthy and detailed descriptions of economic transformations and flagship projects. Again, to be fair, many of the economic and social reforms would be helpful to women. For instance, the literature goes into great detail in the area of water and sanitation. Notably, flagship projects in this area include the “rehabilitat[ion] and expan[sion] [of] urban water supply and sanitation in the key satellite towns identified under the economic pillar” and the “rehabilitat[ion] and expan[sion] [of] the major irrigation schemes” (Republic of Kenya 18). Clearly, making access to water would improve the condition of rural and urban women, and improved sanitation in general would be helpful to women and all members of the family and/or citizens of Kenya, but the question remains at the end of the document: What will Kenya do specifically to empower and equalize women in the public spheres of society, economy, and politics?

Mr. Muburi-Muita begins his 2008 address to the UN Assembly in New York with a sobering set of facts about African countries and their ability to reach the 2015 deadline for achieving the MDGs. Mr. Muburi-Muita says

In spite of the initial high expectations the latest reports generally indicate that Africa has not made sufficient progress towards meeting the MDGs by

the target date of 2015. That most countries in Africa are far off track to achieve most or all of the goals is now a forgone conclusion. (*Kenya Missions*)

However, Mr. Muburi-Muita does not stop there. He cites several transformations and strategies that have been put in place in order to get Africa, and therefore Kenya, back on track to achieving the goals. Specifically, the representative cites the transformation of the OAU, the Organization of the African Union, to the AU, or African Union, an organization that more closely resembles the EU in both structure and goals. He also cites the adoption of NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, which is a kind of think-tank set up to strategize ways in which Africa as a whole can achieve the goals as laid out by the UN. Additionally he says, "In Africa, the challenges of eradicating poverty, achieving rapid and sustainable socio-economic development and integrating the continent into the mainstream of the world economy have increasingly been taken seriously by the African leadership" (*Kenya Missions*). Like other sub-Saharan African countries, Kenya, though fairly politically stable since its independence in 1963, is starting nearly from the beginning in its efforts to achieve the MDGs, especially those with gender-related targets and indicators.

Muburi-Muita did cite specific examples of work being done in Kenya to reach the goals:

A cabinet directive in March 2005 requiring all Ministries/sectors to mainstream MDGs in their specific policies, plans and budgets. This led to increased budgetary allocations for MDGs-related programmes, and further, MDGs have become key criterion for allocating resources to development programmes. Education, health and agriculture have been the greatest

beneficiaries of this directive. (*Kenya Missions*)

Clearly, as this directive impacts education, health, and agriculture—three areas of specific importance to women in Kenya—this serves as an example of direct benefits *vis à vis* the Kenyan government's choice to attempt to achieve the MDGs. Efforts in Kenya to resuscitate the economy through the implementation of the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation have also had a very positive impact on the economy and on enrollment figures for primary education:

The implementation of the ERS has enabled the economy to grow from a GDP of 0.5 percent in 2002 to 6.1 in 2006 and estimated 7.1 percent in 2007.

These gains have impacted positively on MDGs indicators across the economy. For instance, the percentage of Kenyans living in absolute poverty reduced by 10 percent between 2002 and 2006. As a result of the introduction of Free the Primary Education in 2003, the national gross enrollment rate in primary schools rose from 93 percent to 107.7 percent in 2006 while the net enrolment for 2006 was 86.5 percent. (*Kenya Missions*)

Mr. Muburi-Muita's remarks were no doubt tempered by his desire to reinforce the need for more international support in order for Kenya to achieve the MDGs. He cites the internal problems of "inadequate resources, poor infrastructure, inadequate capacity and policy frameworks" which have held Kenya back as they attempt to address the challenges of the MDGs. In his closing statement, Muburi-Muita points out that the "assumptions behind the MDGs agenda must hold at all times." He continues by explaining that, for Kenya,

achieving MDGs requires implementation of commitments by all stakeholders. All parties must live to up to the challenge bestowed upon them in the Millennium Declaration. If this is done, regardless of how far off track countries are, there is still hope. With adequate donor support and MDGs-friendly policies, we can deliver on these goals. (*Kenya Missions*)

Much like the *Kenya Vision 2030* literature, Muburi-Muita neglects to mention gender specifically throughout his speech. Although many of the points he raises would most certainly directly affect women, he gives no gender-disaggregated data. In truth, according to recent data, women comprised only seven to eight percent of positions of power in national parliament. Between the years of 1997 and 2002, women accounted for only around 12 seats, while men held over 200. Women were fairly equal to men in their enrollment in primary education in Kenya, but women constituted scarcely more than one-third of all university students enrolled in Kenya in 2005, and 30% of women are illiterate as opposed to 22% of men. Seager writes of the general state of women in workforce. She says, “women are both ‘segregated’ and ‘concentrated’ in the workforce. They are employed in different occupations from men, and are over-represented in a limited number of occupations” (64). Seager describes the concept of “‘women’s jobs’ and ‘men’s jobs,’” asserting that “more women than men work in the service sector” (64). This holds true for Kenya where, although 69% of women are part of the wage-earning workforce, a whopping three-quarters of them work in the service sector. (“Pulling Apart” and Seager 118-119)

Unpacking the above figures, it becomes clear that efforts to achieve the primary education goal are bearing some fruit; however, there is little evidence that women are able to continue on to post-primary and higher education. Efforts to create a place in the

workforce for women have also met with success—over two-thirds of Kenyan women are employed for pay—but nearly all of those women work in lower-paid, less valued jobs in the service sector. Many of these jobs, if not all, are merely extensions of colonial conceptions of “women’s work” in the home. As for Goal Three—promoting gender equality and empowering women—very little headway has been made at any level. Kenya’s political parties theoretically use quota systems, but women are rarely chosen to represent the party. In recent years, Kenya’s parliament has refused even to hear two separate bills directly aimed at empowering women at the national levels of government. In a recent IPS article both the new bill and an earlier one were discussed. According to the article, the 2000 bill was simply rejected by then president Daniel Arap Moi, and shelved for later discussion. That bill gathered dust and was never readdressed. The most recent bill, despite over a million signatures in support and a march on the capital of Nairobi led by women activists and politicians,

was thrown out Aug. 15 when the number of MPs in the legislature proved too few for a vote on the law to go ahead. While at least 145 of the 222 parliamentarians were needed for a quorum, only 95 were in the house. Certain MPs had walked out of parliament before the vote; others simply failed to present themselves for the event. (KENYA)

The amendment proposed only that a “minimum of about 17 percent of parliamentary seats in Kenya were occupied by women at all times” (KENYA).

Though the rejection of this second bill was a blow to rights activists in Kenya and certainly a setback in achieving the MDGs, Kenya’s slow march toward meeting the goals has remained steady. As indicated in Mr. Muburi-Muita’s address to the UN Assembly, if

Kenya is to achieve the goals by 2015, the state will need large amounts of international support. Kenya's strength lies in its people working at grassroots levels in NGOs supported by international donors such as USAID. These NGOs provide work for some Kenyans and also a way in which to give back to the community at large and to build strong connections within diverse communities of people. A leading cause of internal strife in Kenya is intertribal conflict and ethnic/tribal segregation. Schools and communities, local and state governments, and Kenyan citizens at large must recognize and eliminate this racial conflict. Better-integrated schools with updated curricula and more legislation addressing racial and gender tensions and needs are necessary before any true change can occur. The initiation of national quota systems to match those of surrounding states might also allow Kenya to match the successes of those neighboring states. According to the IPS article,

Kenya has some way to go before catching up with its neighbours concerning women's presence in parliament. Its current legislature boasts the highest number of female MPs in the country's history: 18. However, this amounts to just 8.1 percent of legislators, compared to a female representation of 30.4 percent in Tanzania, and 29.8 percent in Uganda (this according to figures from the Inter-Parliamentary Union). [. . .] Rwanda, also in the East African region, has women in no less than 48.8 percent of seats in the lower house of parliament, and in 34.6 percent of seats in the upper house. (KENYA)

Other African states with similar backgrounds, compositions, and internal issues have managed to empower women to a level that exceeds that of many core nations around the world. This aspect of the MDGs—indicator 12 under Goal Three dealing with parliamentary seats held by women—would seem to hold more influence over whether or

not women are actually empowered than any other part of the MDG Program. Statistically, more women in power means more money spent on healthcare, education, and efforts for gender equity. If Kenya is to meet the goals laid out both by the UN and by its own *Kenya Vision 2030* blueprint, it must more fully integrate women and prioritize gender equity issues suggested by the MDGs and through its own improved analysis of local community and state-wide needs.

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