

A black and white photograph showing a woman and two children, likely in a classroom or library setting. They are all looking down at a book or document on a table. The woman is on the right, and the children are on the left. The image has a grainy, high-contrast appearance.

**Gender and the Millennium
Development Goals**

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Editorial

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In 2000, the leaders and heads of state of 189 countries signed the Millennium Declaration, which set a series of targets for global action against poverty by 2015. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the result of this process. Meeting the MDGs would not end economic poverty; but meeting them could make a positive difference to millions of women, men, and children. In the past decade, 59 countries – predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union – have slid further down the poverty ladder, as they contend with HIV/AIDS, conflict, and enormous foreign debts (UNDP 2004).

In 2005, existing coalitions of activist organisations and individuals will come together in an unprecedented global movement called the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, wearing a white band at key moments during the year to symbolise their demand for immediate action to end poverty. One of the key moments is in September, when the UN Heads of Government will review progress towards the MDGs in New York. The outcome of that meeting will be critical: at current rates of progress, the MDGs are unlikely to be attained by 2015. Only Goal 1, that of halving income poverty, has any chance of being met – but even this achievement is due to progress in a mere handful of countries.

Table 1 sets out the targets as they were agreed.

Gender issues and the MDGs

This collection of articles focuses on the MDGs from a gender perspective. It examines the strengths and weaknesses of this way of understanding and addressing poverty, and suggests ways of strengthening the approach by using key insights and approaches associated with the 30-year struggle to establish and uphold the rights of women. In 2005, there could potentially be real changes for women living in poverty, and their families. But if this is going to happen, the women's movements in different parts of the world need to believe that the MDGs are part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

Contributors to this collection come from both sides of this debate. However, ultimately, they all urge gender and development workers and feminist activists to engage with efforts to attain the MDGs by 2015. Contributors here point to the hazards of restricting action to the current priorities set out in the MDG framework, if women's full human rights are to be served and supported by the approach. The alternative path suggested here is to analyse and address the shortcomings of the MDG framework, using insights and analytical tools familiar to feminist activists who have experienced the amazing progress made in the 1990s to establish an international framework of laws,

Table 1: The Millennium Development Goals

Goal	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	Achieve universal primary education	Promote gender equality and empower women	Reduce child mortality	Improve maternal health	Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases	Ensure environmental sustainability	Develop a global partnership for development
Key targets	Halve the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day by 2015. Halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by 2015	Ensure by 2015 that all children complete a full course of primary schooling	Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005, and in all levels of education by 2015	Reduce the mortality rate of children under five by two-thirds by 2015	Reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth by 2015	Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of HIV/AIDS and other major diseases by 2015	Halve by 2015 the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation	Develop a non-discriminatory and rules-based trading system, provide more generous aid and deal comprehensively with the debt problem

agreements, and pledges to uphold women's full human rights.

Step one – of analysing the MDG framework as it currently stands – is already well advanced. The first issue is the limited 'fit' between the understandings of poverty underpinning the MDGs, and the reality of economic want linked to social and political inequality, as experienced by women. At present, the MDG approach to poverty is charged by feminists with failure to understand and address the gender-specific aspects of women's experience of poverty. Decades of research and activism focusing on the experience of women in poverty have demonstrated that this is as much about agency compromised by abuse, stress, fatigue, and voicelessness as it is about lack of resources. Solving material poverty is not possible for women who lack the power to challenge the discriminatory policies of social institutions, ranging from the family to the state.

Strengths

Supporters of the MDGs argue, first, that one extremely important advance in the approach is that the issue of gender inequality is addressed in Goal 3, aiming to attain gender

equality and the empowerment of women. The fact that there is a goal on gender equality and the empowerment of women at all is seen by some as a powerful symbol of the success of the international feminist movement on international politics and development (for example, Subrahmanian 2004). Second, they argue that it is not true to say that the MDGs are informed by an understanding of poverty as purely economic in nature, since the goals place so much stress on social goods such as education and health care.

Another strength of the MDGs is the focus on maternal mortality. Ninety-nine per cent of all maternal deaths occur in the developing world (Freedman 2003, 99). In sub-Saharan Africa, the lifetime risk of a woman dying from pregnancy-related causes is 1 in 16; maternal mortality is higher there than in any other region of the world and reaches 1 in 12 in East and West Africa (Panos 2005). Lynn Freedman points out that the health-care systems in high-mortality countries are 'grossly deficient' (2003, 100).

The MDGs also provide a common conceptual framework and language for the work of governments, UN agencies, international financial institutions, and

development organisations from civil society. Although the indicators and targets are inadequate in capturing the full reality of the experience of poverty for women, progress towards them can at least be measured. The framework also potentially provides an opportunity to assess what is preventing particular Goals from being attained. The high profile that the MDGs enjoy means that they provide an opportunity for civil society organisations to hold donors and governments accountable for their failures to provide resources to achieve them.

Weaknesses

Nevertheless, the MDGs do undeniably fail to address social and political marginalisation where these are not linked to economic want. Hence, they are not useful in supporting women whose security and human dignity are compromised in contexts that are not needy in an economic sense. In his article, presenting a case study of the position of women in Belize, Robert Johnson reminds us of the need for context-specific analysis of the empowerment of women. Targets and indicators may indicate that empowerment of women has occurred, yet the real picture may be very different. Another warning that the MDGs are necessary but not sufficient to address gender-equality concerns comes from Sheila Aikman and Elaine Unterhalter. Their discussion focuses on the gender issues in education that remain after access to education is achieved for girls. Access is the first part of a more complex web of gender issues which affect the teaching and content of education, and are critical determinants of the worth of the education that girls receive.

It is also a fact that the MDGs are silent on violations of women's human rights, including gender-based violence, and are silent on the need to uphold women's reproductive and sexual rights. (The latter are, obviously, not only important in their own right, but critically important if Goal 6 on HIV/AIDS is to be met.) Aet and Barton

explains in her article, the UN Millennium Summit occurred at the end of 25 years of international progress on women's rights, based on the documents that emerged from UN conferences: notably the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Cairo Programme of Action (the output of the UN International Conference on Population and Development in 1994). At the time of the UN Millennium Summit, many feminist activists were fighting to defend the Beijing and Cairo documents from being damaged by right-wing opposition to the hard-won victories on women's rights: in particular, to their reproductive and sexual rights.

It was only when the MDGs were announced at the UN that women's groups discovered that gender equality was relegated to one quite limited Goal, and that the issue of reproductive rights had vanished. The fact that these essential issues were left out, and gender concerns have not been included in other Goals, despite their key relevance, reflects a tendency in international development circles to depoliticise gender issues. There is a widely noted tendency to adopt an integrationist approach to 'mainstreaming' gender concerns, in which they are added to a pre-existing analysis and agenda (Jahan 1995). This failure to allow gender issues to inform and shape the analysis and agenda results in gender issues being collapsed 'within the wider category of poverty' (Subrahmanian 2004, 11), resulting in 'a fairly depoliticised and needs-based discourse [which] ... require[s] focus on women within poor households, rather than gender disadvantage per se' (ibid.).

Improving on the MDGs

In development circles, it cannot be taken for granted that all agree on the rationale for challenging gender inequality. Instead, it has often needed to be argued carefully. In order to convince policy-makers to take feminist goals seriously, a synergy must be demonstrated between these and the 'official

development priorities' (Kabeer 1999, 435) of national economic development and grassroots poverty alleviation. For example, in her article, Peggy Antrobus points out the need to uphold women's sexual rights if Goal 6, on combating HIV/AIDS, is to be attained.

How can the MDGs be made as useful as possible to women? In their articles, Ceri Hayes and Genevieve Painter consider how the MDG processes and outcome can be strengthened immensely by learning from women's activism, and in particular from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (UN 1979) and the Beijing Platform for Action. If a rights-based approach is taken to the MDGs, they become a potentially useful route to attaining the vision of gender equality and the empowerment of women that lay at the heart of the Beijing document.

In her article, Ceri Hayes cites some of the advances that have been made at national and international levels to address the inadequacies of the MDG framework. She cites the UN Millennium Project's Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, which has recommended six improvements for Goal 3, including a guarantee of sexual and reproductive health rights for girls and women, and a guarantee of an end to violence against women. Ceri Hayes also outlines some of the practical ways in which human rights principles, and the provisions set out in CEDAW in particular, can be used to ensure that the MDGs are met in a way that respects and promotes gender equality and women's human rights.

Genevieve Painter's article, written on behalf of the UK-based Gender and Development Network, also urges development workers to give support in 2005 to efforts on the part of the women's movement to reform the MDGs by integrating perspectives, and methods of implementation, suggested by the rights-based approach of the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW. In her view, the MDG framework is, therefore, a potentially useful

tool for lobbyists to employ in attacks on economic-austerity policies. It is undeniable that the rights-based language of the visionary Millennium Declaration was lost from the MDG framework; yet implementing the MDGs would reflect a commitment to the rights of citizens to demand basic public goods from the state. In this light, the MDG process and framework contain much that is useful for women.

Gaining clarity on women's empowerment: what is it, and how is it attained?

A key criticism of the MDGs from a gender perspective is that the view of the empowerment of women that it includes is a limited one. Naila Kabeer suggests that 'the vision and values of women's groups and organisations across the world have been translated into a series of technical goals to be largely implemented by the very actors and institutions that have blocked their realisation in the past' (this issue).

In recent years, the empowerment of women has become a phrase which means many things to many people. One critic of microfinance interventions that promise empowerment as their result has observed: 'The attractiveness of the concept of empowerment lies mainly in the fact that it legitimises various policies and practices. Empowerment is economically, politically and socially useful' (Lairap-Fonderson 2002, 184).

In her article, Naila Kabeer sets out a feminist model of the empowerment of women, which clearly demonstrates the paralysing effect of economic want on women's agency to challenge inequality. However, this is not to say that addressing economic poverty will result in women 'solving' the issue of structural inequality for themselves. Resources needed to promote the empowerment of women as a sex include, but are not limited to, financial resources.

Money is described as 'frozen desire' (Buchanan 1997, quoted in Oseen 1999, 103), enabling women to enact their own

decisions, free from interference by outside actors. To an extent, even if wider society dislikes the idea of independent women, possessing enough money allows one to live free from interference. Yet, obviously, money alone does not make for empowerment. Other resources needed include less tangible goods. These include self-confidence and pride in one's own worth, and knowledge and skills acquired through formal and informal means. Very importantly, resources also include the time and freedom to form strong relationships with other women, which can form a counterpart to the traditional power of the family and marriage in women's lives. Only through spending time together in reflection and discussion do women come to a point where they choose to advance their shared interests. Further, if grassroots action is to shift up a gear to effect structural change for women in society, women need to have the chance to participate in political life at higher levels of society also.

In relation to the MDG process, Kabeer states that it is critical for women to feel a sense of entitlement as citizens if the MDGs are to deliver: 'It is only through the mobilisation of women, particularly poor women, who are primary stakeholders in all of the MDGs, but particularly the MDG on women's empowerment, that policy makers can be held accountable to ensure that the MDGs are followed through in the spirit of the various international movements and meetings that gave rise to them' (this issue).

The MDGs, the state, and citizenship: a help or a hindrance?

A number of articles in this issue consider the question of whether the intellectual vision informing the MDGs is in line with, or inherently opposed to, neo-liberal development models.

To support the first view, Peggy Antrobus considers the MDGs as conforming to the development agendas of the past 20

years, which have damaged individual women, their families, and wider society. A similar view is expressed by Carol Barton, who in her article suggests that the emphasis on the role of the state in the MDGs is confined to ensuring that the state can pave the way for international capital to operate securely. Genevieve Painter argues in her article that the MDGs 'reflect problems in the dominant development approach. They seek to use women in their existing social roles to "deliver" other aims, and do not address the need to eradicate gender inequality, resulting in lack of commitment to address key issues for women, including gender-based violence' (this issue).

This view of the MDGs is coloured by memories of the appalling social impact on women, men, and their families of the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s, which exploited women's labour to shore up the negative social impact of adjustment (Elson 1991). Memories of these are still vivid, since, in many contexts, similar policies continue to run. Even Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), with their promise of participation of women and people in poverty, have failed to live up to the rhetoric with which they were introduced: women's participation has been very patchy, and gender concerns have tended to slip off the agenda (Whitehead and Lockwood 1999, Zuckerman 2002).

However, Genevieve Painter takes a very different line, suggesting in her article that the MDGs are 'shaking the pillars of the growth-driven model of development' (this issue). The focus in the MDGs on social services, including health and education, suggests clearly that the MDGs provide a potential tool with which to challenge austerity spending.

In her article, Arabella Fraser points out that international financing of aid, under Goal 8 of the MDGs, is essential to attaining Goal 5, of improving maternal health. She argues: 'Finance is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for change to the lives of

millions of women who suffer as a result of pregnancy and childbirth – and it is sorely lacking. This is no argument for technical quick-fixes, however. International efforts to reduce maternal mortality must concentrate on improving health systems – a project that entails rebuilding states to deliver services – but must also look to an advocacy grounded in women's rights, as articulated in the Beijing Platform for Action and the Cairo process' (this issue).

Conclusion: the way forward

This collection of articles aims not only to provide readers with information on the debates on gender in relation to the MDGs, but aims to inspire them to action. At the time of going to press, the 49th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York is about to commence. As Genevieve Painter discusses in her article, there will be a formal link between the review of the Beijing Platform for Action, which will take place at the CSW, and the review of the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, which will take place in September 2005. There is a risk that fundamentalists may challenge some of the hard-won rights of women at Beijing+10, in particular their sexual and reproductive rights, and women's human rights activists are prepared to defend these key areas of concern and to ensure that the outcome of the CSW is as robust as possible. Advocacy by activists at the CSW will directly affect the MDG discussions and content. The outcome of the CSW will be transmitted, via the Economic and Social Council of the General Assembly (ECOSOC), to the high-level General Assembly meeting that will review the Millennium Declaration in September 2005.

Both Ceri Hayes' and Genevieve Painter's articles provide guidance and ideas on ways in which activists can work to ensure that women's human rights perspectives are addressed in the MDGs.

The UK Gender and Development Network, for example, will focus all its lobbying and advocacy work in 2005 on both the MDG and the Beijing+10 reviews.

Finally, all can participate in the advocacy around the MDG Review. As noted earlier, the Global Call to Action against Poverty is a worldwide alliance committed to ensuring that world leaders live up to their promises to support countries worldwide to meet the MDGs (see www.whiteband.org). For readers in the UK, 'Make Poverty History' is the UK element of the global campaign, consisting of a unique alliance of charities, trade unions, campaigning groups, faith communities, and high-profile individuals who are uniting to tackle global poverty in 2005 (www.oxfam.org.uk/what_you_can_do/campaign/mdg/mph.htm).

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