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**Beyond Parity: Development, Freedom and Women**

**Notes on Women's Rights in the Millennium Development Goals**

**by**

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\* The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

The 90's was a decade of commitments among nations to achieve more significant progress in making human rights a worldwide and daily life reality. Beyond reaffirming shared principles and values, the nations agreed plans of action with concrete and detailed measures to reassure not only in theory but in practice every citizen's human rights.

At the end of the decade the gap between the commitments made by the nations and its true implementation was overwhelming. Closing the gap became the most defying challenge of the new millennium.

In the year 2000, the 189 United Nations Member States signed the Millennium Declaration which conveys a new strategy for making progress: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are a unified framework for the 90's Conferences and Plans of Action, but most importantly, it's a communication and political strategy to mobilize political will and resources more effectively. The strategy identifies 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators that are measurable and verifiable, most of which were already in the Plans of Action. The goals must be reached by the year 2015. This strategy by no means implies substituting the Plans of Action of the 90's with the MDGs. On the contrary. The purpose is creating momentum for the full implementation of the already agreed Plans of Action. The MDGs do not provide a comprehensive programmatic view and proposal for human development but leverage to enhance commitment, political will and resource mobilization.

At the threshold of the MDG+5 monitoring process, the purpose of this paper is to examine the links that in practice are being made or not between the MDGs and the Beijing Platform for Action through the revision of the Millennium Development Goals Country Reports (MDGR) officially rendered in 8 countries of Latin America: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Paraguay.

The main conclusions of the review through a gender lens of other 13 country reports are also included: Albania, Armenia, Bolivia, Cameroon, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nepal, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, and Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Women and Gender in Country Reports: Latin America**

### **Poverty and hunger**

Country reports evidence the absence of a reflection and debate on the gender dimensions of poverty and hunger. Women are mentioned as household heads; in a way that suggests that they are seen as a group that needs special attention because of their vulnerability, the same as pregnant women. The condition of women as mothers, that is to say, as a channel to the well-being of families, prevails in the analysis of poverty and the identification of challenges and priorities. Educated women appear to be key agents of well-being but only in reference to their traditional family and domestic roles and

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP. Millennium Development Goals. National Reports. A Look Through a Gender Lens. May, 2003.

responsibilities. In the MDGR from Guatemala higher malnutrition rates than the national average are associated with mothers that live in rural areas, uneducated and indigenous.

Country reports do not express the vision that women are over-represented among the poor, or that women suffer disproportionately or carry most of the burden. Furthermore, it is worth underlining that one of the countries' reports state that "no gender differences regarding poverty rates were found" and a similar percentage is presented for women and men. It must be stressed that in the Latin American countries

Guatemala and Bolivia have each one of the largest indigenous population, most of who live in the rural areas.

Most of the reports disaggregate data not only by sex, but also by rural-urban residence and in some cases by ethnic origin. As has been repeatedly affirmed in different documents and fora, globally Latin America has already met Goal 2. MDGRs show, nonetheless, profound disparities affecting indigenous and black women, and women in rural areas.

### **A Look Through a Gender Lens. National Reports**

Armenia, Albania, Bolivia, Cameroon, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, etc.

#### Education

... gender issues have been mainstreamed to a certain extent under Goal 2 in most reports.

The greater visibility of gender issues under Goal 2 as compared to Goal 1 appears to be an outcome of the fact that gender equality is an explicit component of the target. On the other hand, the fact that an education target is also incorporated into Goal 3 may be a factor behind the absence of any attempt to go behind the data to even list, if not analyze, the reasons for gender gaps in education.

### **Gender equality and women's autonomy**

Explicitly posed in the MDGRs, a second key conclusion that arises from the fact that women have reached parity with men in education enrolment and literacy is that the true challenge and priority for advancing in gender equality and women's autonomy is not attaining parity in education, but economic and politic equality with men.

On reporting on Goal 3, countries went beyond the set targets and indicators and in some cases restated them with a more ambitious mindset. With the purpose of providing a sense of the approach used to the Goal, the following illustrative affirmations have been extracted from the reports:

Argentina. The targets of Goal 3 were redefined and two new targets were adopted: 1) By 2015, the target is to reach further gender equity through a better economic participation of women, the reduction of the salary gap between men and women, while keeping the levels of gender equality in education obtained by 2000. 2) Increase women's participation in decision-making in public and private institutions.

Bolivia. The priorities identified include driving women's participation in economic circuits of resource assignment through the access to income, productive resources, and to capital, goods and the labor market. In addition, improve women's opportunities in the market place, the same as women's access to land property, credit and to a broad deliberation on the current unequal distribution of domestic and family chores.



beyond the indicator set of percent of women employed in the non-agricultural sector to show the disconnection.

Evidence in Latin America shows that only effectively implemented mechanisms of affirmative action like female quota systems increases significantly women's access to Parliament seats. MDGRs report on those advances, the same as setbacks in countries that do not have the quota or it is not adequately implemented.

However, it is not clear from the reports how Governments plan to address the challenges and priorities set in the agenda.

### **A Look Through a Gender Lens. National Reports**

Armenia, Albania, Bolivia, Cameroon, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, etc.

Gender equality and women's autonomy

... discussions under Goal 3 in all reports have attempted to foreground some critical aspects of gender inequality.

Since the target for Goal 3 is phrased in terms of education, it is not surprising that all the reports provide information against the education indicator. Similar attention has not been given to the other two indicators (the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments), that are equally if not more critical to the achievement of gender equality.

It is significant that most reports have skirted discussion of 'difficult' issues such as violence against women – practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage, where they are mentioned, are referred to as 'harmful traditions' rather than as violations of women's human rights.

## **Health**

Women are frequently mentioned when reporting on child mortality, in terms of the importance of educated women to provide better and adequate health care to children for preventing disease and deaths. Women's education is also associated with pregnant women using health services and seeking care on time to prevent child and maternal mortality. Once again, women seem to matter merely in their role of mothers and agents of children well-being.

Child and maternal mortality are analyzed mainly from the point of view of medical causes and public health interventions: coverage of health services, availability of trained medical personnel, quality of care, and information and education strategies.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are scarcely mentioned and when the issue is pointed out, it is not clear what exactly the reports are referring to. When mentioned, the

concern for sexual and reproductive health is not clearly knitted in the diagnosis, challenges and priorities, but casually raised and understood mainly as education, information, counseling and the availability of services. The links between child and maternal mortality and women's reproductive and sexual health and rights are not clearly established, except in regards to maternal/reproductive care.

It is not necessarily that the data is not there. Guatemala reports that child mortality increases when the mother is less than 20 years old at the time of giving birth, when it is her seventh childbirth, when less than 2 years have gone by since the last birth, and when the mother is indigenous and uneducated. This situation is not conceptualized or analyzed from the perspective of women's sexual and reproductive rights, but in terms of the relation between certain socio-demographic characteristics and child mortality.

Honduras' MDGR points out that maternal mortality is closely related to women's reproductive health, family planning, the use of contraceptives and the couples' active participation. This is an isolated remark and the view it expresses does not reflect on the rest of the analysis of the Goal.

In Argentina's MDGR a significant statement is made: maternal mortality is an indicator of structural, economic, social and cultural aspects that determine the level of well-being a society provides women in regards to her health and nutrition, as well as of her access to education and other resources. Again, this assertion does not structure or guide the rest of the analysis.

Health care is, at least, a two way flow. Public health interventions must take into account, they must even grow out of, precisely understanding bone and flesh people and real life. Fully comprehending and implementing sexual and reproductive rights and health care starts by understanding the importance of identifying social, economic and other environmental (non-physiological) determinants of health and disease. This means placing people, their views, expectations, restraints, fears, opinions and preferences as a key determinant of their health and disease. However, when reviewing the MDGRs, women (and people) are clearly absent.

It is worth mentioning the case of the MDGR from Bolivia because it emphasizes the need to adapt health care services and facilities to cultural diversity, especially because indigenous women (and people) restrain from using services that do not respect their view of health care and disease.

There are some few and some timid mentions to the need of a perspective that envisions women's health more broadly.

## **A Look Through a Gender Lens. National Reports**

Armenia, Albania, Bolivia, Camerún, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, etc

Health

### **Environment and world partnerships**

Because of the sexual division of labor and women's socially assigned main responsibility of washing, cleaning, cooking and caring for children and the elderly, access to drinkable water and adequate sanitation is critical to them.

Access to water for drinking and sanitation facilities is determined mainly through household surveys or census. Attempting to explore gender differences, the MDGR from Guatemala reports the proportion of households headed by women and those headed by men that do not have access to potable water. This is the closest any MDGR gets to differentiate between men and women's access to water and sanitation.

Because the absence of drinking water and poor sanitary conditions affect the household as a whole and each of its members individually, men and women in these living conditions seem to be "gender neutral".



It is interesting to note that in contrast to the importance given under Goal 3 to women's economic equality and empowerment, when it comes to reporting on access to information and communication technologies, women are not mentioned at all. An explanation for this is either that it is seen as a "gender neutral" issue or/and no data is available disaggregated by sex. No MDGR mentioned the need for this information. On the other hand, women's need for secure land tenure is mentioned in only two of the reports.

### **Policies and mechanisms**

Most MDGRs have a section where policies and programs related to the issues addressed by the MDGs are described, including those related to advancing women's rights. However, only two MDGRs mention explicitly CEDAW or Beijing's Platform for Action. The report from the government of Argentina points out that the Women's National Council was created in 1992 as the institutional mechanism responsible of the implementation of the CEDAW. The MDGR from Bolivia notes that the Plan for the follow-up of the recommendations conveyed in the Beijing's Platform for Action has had operating problems due to scarce financial and human resources.

## **II.**







Being an essential instrument of change and well being for others, does not necessarily mean women's well-being, and in many cases it implies a double and triple burden due to a heavier load of domestic chores and family responsibilities. In order to avoid using women as instruments for others welfare without major advances in their well-being and even at their expense, a rights-based approach must be promoted and adopted. CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action provide such an approach.

To insist in women's education because of her key role as agents of well-being may altogether simply mean to insist in strengthening and reproducing women's traditional gender roles. But being agents of change and well-being may also turn to mean power. Without doubt one of the most important challenges but also the most promising opportunity women are currently facing is converting the power that means being agents of change and well-being for others, into personal power, freedom, and the autonomy to be and do what they value most for themselves and their life projects. How is the power of change for others well being turned into power to broaden the options available to women to pursue their best interest? This involves much more than just parity with men in education.

### **The Goal 3 paradox: a “half empty or half full glass”**

One cannot say there is not a gender perspective in the implementation, monitoring and reporting on progress made in achieving the MDGs. Rather, reports are characterized by a paradox and suffer from schizophrenia.

In reviewing progress made in reducing poverty and malnutrition, child and maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS and serious diseases, prevails a vision of women mainly as mothers and as a vulnerable group that requires special attention. On deep contrast with this view, the reporting on the advances on women's equality and autonomy under Objective 3, emphasizes a rights-based approach dealing with such core issues as economic and political equality and the need to transform the gender distribution of domestic chores and responsibilities.

This sometimes difficult to define sense of the “glass half full or half empty”, has driven some to think the MDGs narrowed women's rights agenda doing away with decades of struggle, but have also led others to think that MDGs should be taken as one more useful strategy and opportunity to advance women's agenda as evidenced by the perspective adopted by governments to report on Goal 3.

This schizophrenia is the result of the “ghettoisation” of gender concerns that produced Goal 3. But in the other hand, having bet just on mainstreaming gender in all the objectives instead of identifying a gender equality goal on itself could have led to the already well-known practice: “because gender must be everywhere it ends up being nowhere”.

**How to link the MDGs when there are no existing institutional and policy mechanisms for the implementation of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action?**

In practical terms, linking the MDGs with the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW, requires the existence of concrete and functioning institutional mechanisms that make it possible to establish the bridge.

To start with, it requires explicit, well-known and concrete institutional mechanisms and policy instruments for the implementation and follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW. This is not the case in most of the countries. At most, National Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women were consulted or asked to prepare the report for Goal 3.

On the other hand, many of the reports were prepared by the United Nations country teams or with its technical support, because the MDGs are not still clearly embedded in development plans. The main reason is that the MDGs are not clearly embedded in development plans.

nor time will change them naturally. Public policies are needed to compensate and reverse these distortions. The Beijing Platform for Action provides a comprehensive public policy proposal with this purpose. However, it is a proposal that does not fit with current development strategies and the role defined for the State, making it really difficult to follow Beijing. It is not only difficult to pursue gender equality, but social equality too. Beijing embodies a development strategy with a strong sense for “income, land, and productive resources distribution” as a means to assure the benefits of development reach women, but that is not the development strategy being followed by countries in Latin America.

