Gender and the Millennium Development Goals

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Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) have become a prime focus of development work throughout the globe. They are derived from the Millennium Declaration of September 2000. The MDG's are the benchmarks of development progress which includes programmes for eradication of poverty, achieving universal primary education, combating dreaded deceases, gender equality and empowerment etc. MDS's can be achieved when all actors work together. Further there should be commitment on the part of rich as well as poor countries to help each other .The present paper discusses the different aspects relating to MDGs such as Promotion of Gender Equality and Empowerment, Identifying the indicators to measure MDGs, the limitations of these indicators etc., The present article also offers certain suggestions to meet the goals of women empowerment.

Keywords: *Millennium Development Goals(MDGs), Gender Equality and Empowerment, Indicators to measure MDGs*

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals are a derivative of the Millennium Declaration of September 2000, which spells out the following values: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility. They are a clarion call of 189 governments, on behalf of their citizens, to “free our fellow men,

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women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want." (Patel, 2006). These measures, collectively known as the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs), have become a prime focus of development work throughout the globe- a gold standard to which programs aspire, and by which they measure their work. They are as follows:

I Eradication of Poverty and Hunger,
II Achievement of Universal Primary Education,
III Promotion of Gender Equality and Empowerment,
IV Reduction of Child Mortality,
V Improvement of Maternal Health,
VI Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria, T.B.,
VII Ensure Environmental Sustainability
VIII Develop a Global Partnership for Development

As articulated in the Millennium Declaration, the MDGs are benchmarks of development progress based on such fundamental values as freedom, equity and human rights and peace and security. MDGs can be achieved if all actors work together- heads of the nation states, civil society organizations, international financial institutions, global trade bodies and the UN system- and do their part. Poor countries have pledged to govern better, and invest in their people through health care and education. Rich countries must stick to their pledge to support the poor countries through aid, debt relief, and fairer and just trade. Only if there is commitment on the part of the rich as well as poor countries to fulfil these promises all the MDGs could be achieved.

Gender concerns in MDGs

All goals are expected to mainstream gender and MDG 3 has a special focus on gender and challenges discrimination against women by Focusing on school education, ensuring that more women become literate, Guaranteeing more voice and representation in public policy and decision making-political participation, providing improved job prospects- 36 percent WPR , gender equality and the empowerment of women –Win-win approach, Food and nutrition security, Women subsistence farmers, Women as users, managers and storers of natural resources-Climate change.

The MDGs explicitly acknowledge that gender -- what a given society believes about the appropriate roles and activities of men and women, and the behaviours that result from these beliefs -- can have a major impact on development, helping to promote it in some cases while seriously retarding it in others. MDG number 3 (out of 8) is specifically about gender, calling for an end to disparities between boys and girls at all levels of education. There is general agreement that education is vital to development, and ensuring that girls as well as boys have full opportunities for schooling will help improve lives in countless ways. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude -- as a casual reader of the MDGs might --. Not surprisingly, then, the rules that regulate the behaviours and values of men that the relevance of gender to development is confined to the educational sphere. Men and women, both, participate in nearly every aspect of life in communities throughout the world and women in a given society -- that is, its gender system -- have the potential to impact nearly every aspect of life. Therefore, while only one of the MDGs is specifically about gender, addressing gender is of critical importance to every MDG.

Critique of the Indicators

The United Nations has suggested four indicators to measure Goal 3- the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education, the ratio of literate females to males among 15-24 year olds, the share of women in wage employment in the nonagricultural sector, and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments.

The first two are indicators of capabilities, the third is an indicator of opportunity, and the fourth is an indicator of agency. Although they represent all three domains of gender equality, they are not without their drawbacks. In addition, there may be other indicators that are better suited to tracking progress toward the MDG gender targets.

Capability Indicators

There are both substantive and technical concerns with the two capability indicators. The ratio of girls to boys in school reflects the input side of education, that is, how many girls and boys are enrolled in school, which is where most policy efforts have been directed. Getting girls and boys to school is clearly an important first step. Yet, the more important issue is school completion and student learning outcomes. The completion of 5 to 6 years of schools is necessary for mastery of basic competencies, such as literacy and numeracy. School enrolment ratios, whether on a gross or net basis, are poorly correlated with the rate of primary school completion; moreover, enrolment ratios are consistent with many different patterns of drop-out and retention. Finally, gender differences are brought into sharper contrast in the comparison of enrolment rates against completion rates.

Beyond the substantive issue of what should be the focus of the MDG goal, there are other concerns with the proposed capability indicators. The ratio of girls to boys in school simply depicts the

number of girls relative to boys in school. Enrolment rates, by contrast, give a picture of the number of students, boys or girls, enrolled in a given level of education relative to the population of the age group which should be enrolled at that level. Net enrolment rates, which take into consideration the appropriate age for each grade, are a good indicator of access to education, but they are not available for many countries. Gross enrolment rates are more widely available, but they include repeat students in the calculation and so will be higher than net enrolment rates. There are also concerns about the literacy indicator. This indicator was chosen to reflect the performance of the national education system, as well as the quality of the human resources within a country in relation to their potential for growth, contribution to development, and quality of life. Yet, the quality of the literacy data is suspect. Some countries collect literacy information using sophisticated and comprehensive techniques while others are not able to even provide the most basic information. In addition, because literacy is not a simple concept with a single universally accepted meaning, different countries measure literacy differently. The UNESCO definition ("A person is literate if s/he has completed five or more years of schooling") has been widely criticized partly because it assumes that people can be easily categorized as "literate" or "illiterate" or because adults with five or more years of schooling may still be functionally illiterate, while those with less than four years of schooling may have acquired literacy skills by non-formal means. Despite these limitations, this indicator is the best that exists across countries and over time.

Opportunity Indicators

The choice of indicator in the MDGs to measure progress in economic opportunity is the female share of non-agricultural wage

employment. As noted in UNIFEM's Progress of the World's Women 2000, this is an indicator of the extent to which women have equal access to paid jobs in areas of expanding employment. As stated in the report, "Wage employment in industry and services usually puts some money directly into the hands of women themselves, unlike employment as an unpaid family worker on a family farm. Moreover, the pay is likely to be higher than the average pay for self-employment." The drawback of using this indicator is that it could be interpreted to also mean equality in income. A second drawback is that an increase in women's share of paid employment adds to women's total workload such that what women may gain in terms of cash they lose in terms of time (UNIFEM 2000). Third, as Anker (2002) notes, this indicator only measures the presence or absence of work, and not the "decency" of work itself or the disadvantages women face – in access to employment (measured by unemployment rates), in returns to their labor (earnings or wages), in the types of jobs they hold (occupational segregation), and in security of employment (social protection). Finally, in grouping together all non-agricultural employment, the indicator can't distinguish between work which is formal or informal, full time or part time, and permanent or seasonal. There is ample evidence that women's participation in informal employment is as high as 80 percent in some countries such as India, Uganda, Indonesia, among others (Charmes 2000), and that women are more likely to predominate in part-time and seasonal jobs.

The ILO has proposed a series of indicators for equality in access to and fair treatment in employment as part of the ILO's decent work initiative (Anker 2002). These indicators include gender-disaggregated unemployment rates, the female to male wages or earnings ratio (divided by years of school which controls for human capital), and occupational segregation by sex (the percent of non-

agricultural employment in male-dominated and female-dominated occupations and the index of dissimilarity), among others.

These indicators show a sobering picture of women's status in employment. For instance, in 1997 female unemployment rates were higher than male unemployment rates in all regions of the world for which data were available, although the gap narrowed in some regions (United Nations 2000). Similarly, in no country for which data are available do women earn as much as men. For instance, in the manufacturing sector in 13 out of 39 countries, women earned up to 20 percent less than men; in the other countries, the pay differential was even greater (ibid). Approximately half of all workers in the world are in gender-dominated occupations where at least 80 percent of workers are of the same sex, a form of labor market rigidity that reduces employment opportunity and impairs economic efficiency (Anker 2002). Occupational segregation is also associated with lower wage rates for women, as typical women's occupations tend to have lower pay, lower status and fewer possibilities for advancement than do male occupations.

Because of multiple data and other problems, it is difficult to recommend one global indicator to measure progress toward eliminating gender inequalities in access to assets and employment. Unemployment rates, for instance, are an important indicator of labor market performance in industrialized countries, but are of much more limited significance in low-income economies where the majority of the population engages in some form of economic activity – usually informal employment or self-employment. Occupational segregation indicators may not cover informal employment, and in some countries, they may not be correlated with other indicators of labor market disadvantage. And finally, data on

the gender earnings gap – in both paid and self-employment -- are currently not available for many countries. Of these three indicators, the gender earnings gap is probably the best marker of gender equality in the labor market.

Agency Indicators

The United Nations has recommended that progress toward women's empowerment be tracked by the female share of seats in national parliaments. Currently, this is the only indicator that can be tracked on a global scale. It is an imperfect proxy for tracking aggregate levels of female empowerment because it says nothing about whether women have power in parliament to make decisions or whether or not they are sensitive to gender issues and can promote a gender equality legislative agenda. It has also been observed that greater progress has been made in municipal and local level elections than in national elections, so it would therefore be very useful to track progress that women are making at the local level. The International Union of Local Authorities has scattered data on municipal level institutions but aims to construct a global database on women in local government. At the individual level, indicators could include control over fertility and sexuality. Again, however, there is a paucity of such information for most countries. One barrier that stands in the way of women being able to use their capabilities, exploit opportunities, and exercise agency is violence. Worldwide, it has been estimated that violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer, and is a greater cause of ill-health than traffic accidents and malaria combined. Therefore, another indicator of women's agency, albeit in a negative way, is the prevalence of physical violence in the past year experienced by women aged 15-49 at the hands of an intimate partner.

Measuring the true prevalence of gender-based violence presents several challenges. To accurately measure true prevalence of physical violence, the questions used to gather data must disaggregate specific acts of physical violence such as kicking, beating, hitting and slapping, information which can be hard to obtain because of its sensitive nature. Statistics available through the police, hospitals, women's centers, and other formal institutions often underestimate the levels of violence because of under-reporting. The WHO's World Report on Violence and Health, which presents data from 48 population-based surveys conducted in 35 developed and developing countries, and WHO's recent multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence lay a strong foundation for larger-scale data collection initiatives. Thus, although prevalence rates are a good indicator, they can't be used to track progress toward the goal since data are not currently available for a large number of countries.

General limitations of all indicators

Beyond the specific issues associated with each indicator described above, there are a number of more general issues. First, the paucity of data on some indicators automatically restricts their use, despite the fact that there may be more valid indicators than the ones for which there is more data. Second, good ratios are not good enough because they say nothing about the absolute levels achieved. Third, national averages mask regional variation. Finally, few indicators exist that measure *quality* of progress toward the goal instead of just *quantity* of progress. The dearth of data and lack of standardization across countries limit a complete and accurate measurement of gender equality and empowerment. There are data gaps across all domains – capabilities, opportunity, and agency -- but gaps are particularly prevalent in the domain of opportunity. For example, most of Sub-

Saharan Africa and South Asia are missing data on the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector. As noted earlier, even fewer have information on women's relative earnings. Lack of time-series data is an additional hindrance. Finally, data are often missing for countries that experienced violent conflict during the decade.

Meeting the Goal of Empowering Women

Meeting the three targets will lay the foundation for women's empowerment because gaining power in society is dependent upon having capability, opportunity and influence over key decisions that affect life outcomes. However, achieving the goal of women's empowerment is not only about the content of interventions but about the process. The process of empowerment varies from culture to culture, but there are several types of changes that are considered to be central across cultures. Some of these changes include increased participation in decision-making, more equitable status of women in the family and community, increased political power and exercise of rights, and increased self-esteem.

Women can be empowered through development interventions. Some of the clearest evidence comes from evaluations of well-designed micro credit programs (Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley 1996). In addition to gaining greater respect and legitimacy in the broader community – particularly from male members – because of their access to credit, the opportunity to have control over decisions about loan size, use of the loan, and so forth has been found to be empowering for women. Women borrowers have also gained experience and confidence as leaders of their Trust Banks (in the Philippines) and have gone on to be elected within their barangays in the Philippines and Mayor in Honduras (Cheston 2002). A significant

barrier to women's empowerment is gender-based violence. As mentioned earlier, the prevalence of violence against women can serve as an indicator of the level of empowerment of women in any given country. The lack of data currently makes this difficult to operationalise in the MDG context, but it does not reduce the urgency to address this problem.

At the country level, most initiatives to address violence have been legislative. Although the legislation varies, it typically includes a combination of protective or restraining orders and penalties for offenders. As with property rights, a formidable challenge are often the enforcement of existing laws. Procedural barriers and traditional attitudes of law enforcement and judicial officials undermine the effectiveness of existing anti-violence laws. Training programs for judicial and law enforcement personnel often go a long way to change such attitudes. Beyond training programs, the establishment of female-staffed police stations has been effective in making them more accessible to women. For the women who have experienced violence, a range of medical, psychological, legal, educational, and other support services is necessary.

Finally, to prevent violence, improving women's education levels and economic opportunities has been found to be a protective factor (Duvvury 2002; Panda 2002). The interventions noted above to improve women's economic opportunities thus become even more important. Ultimately, however, the threshold of acceptability of violence against women needs to be shifted upwards. To do that requires a massive media and public education campaign.

Conclusion

Overall, the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides a useful international

mechanism to hold countries accountable for meeting Goal #3. All nation states that have ratified the convention are obligated to take all necessary measures at the national level to implement the provisions within it, including providing legal protection against discrimination of women. In order to monitor progress made by nation states in advancing the agenda of CEDAW, each nation state is required to report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on specific measures that they have taken to advance the Convention's agenda. Each country is required to report within one year of acceding to the Convention and at least every four years thereafter, including whenever the Committee so requests. The Committee annually reports to the UN General Assembly and makes recommendations to nation states based on an evaluation of the country reports. A recent study of the impact of CEDAW has shown that it provides a powerful instrument at the national and international level for defining norms for constitutional guarantees of women's rights, for interpreting laws, mandating proactive, pro-women policies, and for dismantling discrimination overall (McPhedran et al. 2000). For CEDAW to be used effectively requires action at many levels and by many actors. Among the many factors identified by the study as being key to the effective utilization of CEDAW were the following: widespread awareness and knowledge of CEDAW; constructive dialogue between government representatives, CEDAW Committee members, and NGOs; governments recognizing how policy goals can be adapted to implement their stated commitment to CEDAW; and the systematic use of gender-specific indicators to assess the impact of governmental policies, laws, and budgets. The CEDAW mechanism be used to monitor progress toward the MDGs and to hold nations accountable.

It is important that the women organizations advocating for sexual and reproductive rights develop ways to achieve progress on a range of issues within the framework established by the MDGs. They should ensure that a rights based approach be applied to development, both within the UN system and at the country level, that prioritizes equity, profound social changes, and sustainability, rather than simply the achievement of narrow quantitative targets.

The MDG campaign offers an opportunity to attend to the unfinished business of development by fulfilling the promises made by world leaders to reduce poverty, end hunger, improve health and eliminate illiteracy. Gender inequality fuels many of these ubiquitous challenges and is exacerbated by them. Conversely, gender equality and the empowerment of women can secure the future of women themselves, their households, and the communities in which they live. Relative to the past, current international development rhetoric places gender inequality high among the list of development priorities. Having an independent MDG goal on gender equality is a reflection of this new emphasis. The Millennium Development Goals are a derivative of the Millennium Declaration of September 2000, which spells out the following values: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility. They are a clarion call of 189 governments, on behalf of their citizens. World leaders who are currently doing performance appraisal must address the gender gap in the MDGS.

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