

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

Civil Society Perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals



carol barton

martin khor

sunita narain

victoria tauli-corpuz

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civil society
perspectives

Women's Movements and Gender Perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals

Carol Barton □ Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ)

Women's rights, women's movements and the Millennium Development Goals

Women's movements that have been engaged with the United Nations at all levels around the UN Conferences of the 1990s working on both gender equality and social and economic justice, approach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with mixed feelings. On the one hand, these goals recognize the centrality of gender equality in the development agenda, and set measurable, time-bound goals on "commitments" with the support of the international community. On the other hand, there is great concern that they sideline key gains made in Beijing, Cairo and other UN conferences¹; set a minimalist agenda; and fail to integrate gender perspectives into all eight goals.

¹ These include the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna), the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo), the 1995 World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen), the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing), the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban), as well as the broader commitments from the 1992 Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro), the 1995 Conference on Small Island Developing States (Barbados), and the 1997 Habitat-II conference (Istanbul).

Much more, there is growing dismay at efforts to eradicate poverty or attain gender equality without addressing the fundamental causes of these problems, including issues of power, distribution of resources, militarism, fundamentalisms and current economic orthodoxy.

Thus, in the year of the review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing+10) and the Millennium Declaration (Millennium Summit), feminists are seeking to reshape the MDGs to advance their agendas for transformative gender justice and economic justice. This paper presents: 1) an exploration of gender economic analysis; 2) feminist concerns regarding the MDGs; 3) a feminist gender analysis of the MDGs; 4) a brief assessment of proposals made by Task Force 3 of the Millennium Project in terms of expanding the scope of MDG 3 on gender equality, as well as the Sachs report; 5) women's civil society organizations' engagement with the MDGs; and 6) Recommendations for the UN system regarding women's organizations' needs for advancing the MDGs.

I. Gender economic analysis

Ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which

affirmed the commitment to “mainstream gender” in all programmes and policies, the concept of *gender mainstreaming* is in crisis. This is because the concept has been instrumentalized by many UN agencies, donors and NGOs to merely integrate women into current social and economic policies, instead of transforming relations between men and women, between dominant and subordinate racial and ethnic groups, and among rich and poor within and between nations.

Gender refers to the socially constructed relations between men and women, as opposed to their biological differences. These gender roles are not static, but change over time.

While a mainstream *gender analysis* seeks to explore differential impacts of policies on men and women and to quantify the gendered outcomes of projects or policies within current systems, an integrated *feminist gender analysis* addresses power relations first and foremost, seeking to transform social inequities for all, not just for some groups of women. Frequently in development discourse, gender equality or women’s rights are seen as a means to an end (more growth, more successful development projects) instead of fundamental rights, as affirmed by the Beijing Platform and the Convention Against all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). (Elson 2004, Williams 2004b, Francisco 2004)

Feminist economic analysis seeks to understand how all of the institutions of society, from family and community to workplace, government and private sector embody patriarchal assumptions

that obscure women’s contributions and marginalize women from power and decision-making. It seeks to unmask the apparently “gender neutral” workings of the economy. (Riley) Central to this analysis is an understanding that race, class, ethnicity, caste, sexual orientation, national origin and other factors intersect in determining women’s experiences and in limiting the achievement of their rights. Policies that advance equality or meet the needs of women in the dominant group in a society may continue to marginalize other groups of women. Thus, policy responses must address this full range of societal exclusion in an integrated way for effective outcomes.

Neo-classical economic theory, and its application in economic policy, measures the paid work in the productive sphere of the economy. However this is only a portion of the overall labour needed to enable capitalist production. What is invisible in national accounts, and thus official policy, is the sphere of *social reproduction* or the care economy. The ability for workers to provide their labour each day presupposes a huge amount of labour in terms of cleaning, cooking, childrearing, healthcare and numerous other services provided in the home. In a patriarchal society, this role tends to be relegated to women and girls, and tends to be uncounted and undervalued. According to the 1995 *Human Development Report* (UNDP 1995), the non-monetized, invisible contribution of women is an estimated \$11 trillion a year, compared to the monetized output of \$23 trillion. (UNDP 1995)

When women enter the paid workforce they are often concentrated in jobs that are an extension of their social roles in

the household—services and garment industry for example. In many cases, this work is in the informal sector where entry may be easier and where women can balance demands at home with paid work, but this “off the books” work does not get formally counted in national accounts either.

Without consistent efforts to recognize the contributions of the reproductive economy (including home based, street based, part time and casual work), women will be marginalized. When women’s time appears as a free good, certain policies appear to be “efficient” when in fact, they merely shift costs from the public sphere to women’s unpaid labour. (Elson 1999, 2004) This has been well documented in the case of structural adjustment, now extended to IMF and World Bank economic reform programmes including PRSPs (Sparr 1994, Kalima 2002).

There is a consistent tendency to dichotomize the public and private sphere and to give less priority to the private sphere. This involves not only the failure to count women’s unpaid work in the home, but also the right to bodily integrity including issues of violence and sexual and reproductive rights as well as ownership of or access to resources, decision-making power and mobility, which tend to be relegated to the private sphere.

II. Feminist concerns on the MDGs

The following are some highlights of the many critiques by women’s organizations about the MDGs:

- The MDGs drastically limit the scope of their attention, and set a **minimalist agenda**;
- The MDGs were developed within the UN system without the broad participatory processes of UN conferences. As a result, **civil society does not have a sense of ownership** in this agenda (Kindervatter 2004);
- They are a **technocratic effort to solve systemic political issues**, which have to do with global distribution of power and wealth between and within nations;
- In their initial formulation, they **have left out too much of the Beijing and Cairo agendas** (as well as the outcomes of other key UN conferences), and restrict their understanding of gender equality, including it in only one of the eight goals. Absent is the overall Cairo goal of universal access to sexual and reproductive health for all by 2015. This vastly reduces government accountability on the broad range of women’s human rights and obscures key issues such as violence, labour, reproductive rights, and women’s unpaid labour. A gender-based review of national MDG reports produced by the United Nations in 2003 found that discussions on gender were limited to Goal 3 (gender equality), Goal 5 (maternal mortality) and Goal 6 (HIV/AIDS), illustrating a ‘ghettoization’ of gender issues within women-specific sectors (Kalyani Menon-Sen, UNDP 2003). “The faces of women in the MDGs are predominantly those of a ‘girl child’, a ‘pregnant woman’, and a ‘mother’ (Painter 2004).

- The MDGs **do not use the human rights framework** of the Millennium Declaration, which gives primacy to international law, including affirmation of CEDAW. The human rights framework sees people as ‘rights-holders’ who can mobilise to demand the realization of their rights, rather than “stakeholders.” While economic development goals are often seen as targets to be achieved when possible, a rights framework sees health or education as inherent rights to be claimed by all. If the MDGs are not considered as integral to existing human rights commitments, they could actually undermine international human rights law by setting lower standards than human rights treaty obligations. (Painter 2004, Symington 2004)
- They seek to eradicate poverty with a **top-down approach** that virtually excludes poor people, particularly women, from decision-making.
- The MDGs ignore an **intersectional analysis of multiple oppressions** due to gender, race/ethnicity/caste, class, sexual orientation, age and national origin. The outcome document of the Durban World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) linked racism to gender, poverty and denial of women’s human rights. If women’s poverty is exacerbated by biases due to race, ethnicity or caste, then efforts to end poverty that ignore this reality will fail, and efforts to increase access to education must specifically target the needs of diverse groups of girl. In women’s lived experience, oppressions due to gender, race and class are inseparable and policies to address them must address all of these

factors simultaneously. (Nazombe/Barton 2004)

- The MDGs assume that growth, via **macro-economic policies that conform to the Washington Consensus**, is the means to eradicate poverty, even when per capita income fell in 54 countries in the 1990s during the years of this same ‘economic reform’ (Bendana 2004).
- The MDGs **emphasize implementation in the global South**, without mechanisms of accountability for nations of the North. For peoples in the South, this is significant in relation to Goal 8 on ‘global partnership’, which calls on the North to increase aid, support debt reduction and open markets to Southern goods. For peoples in the North, this is problematic because it apparently absolves their governments of responsibility to address issues of poverty, gender equality and environmental sustainability within their own borders.²
- There is concern that, similar to the Monterrey Consensus (International Conference on Financing for Development, 2002), **a broad**

² “While there is an important push for global sharing of resources to support the development of poor nations, this emphasis should not ignore the mal-distribution of resources within developed countries and the reality of poverty in the global North...In New York City, home to the UN, 21per cent of children live in poverty and 9.6per cent of children die at birth. As Northern nations also signed the Millennium Declaration and World Conference Commitments, they should be held accountable for race, class and gender disparities within their borders.” (Ortega, 2004) Regarding Goal 8, see Vandemoortele, Malhotra and Lim (2003).

agenda on aid, debt, trade and global financial architecture is being boiled down to a request for increased donor assistance. Yet eradication of poverty and efforts to address education, healthcare and sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing unsustainable debt, trade subsidies, terms of trade, net reverse flows of resources from South to North, and unequal power in global economic governance, which aid flows alone do not alter (Adaba 2004). It is worth recalling that NGOs in Monterrey soundly rejected the Monterrey Consensus, because it failed to challenge the fundamental tenets of neo-liberal globalization.³

- It is unclear how MDGs will mesh with **Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers** (PRSPs), developed through the HIPC initiative in conjunction with the IMF and World Bank. Economic reforms inherent to the PRSP process are in direct contradiction to development goals of poverty eradication, healthcare, education and environmental sustainability. Poor countries are being called on to increase expenditures on poverty reduction, health and education while

also servicing debt and cutting public expenditures.⁴

- **Achievement of numerical goals may mask continued inequalities**, particularly in terms of labour rights and gender justice. The target of reducing by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day is likely to be reached in the two most populous countries, China and India, due to sustained economic growth (UNDP 2003). This masks the extreme gaps between rich and poor, urban and rural, men and women, and among different ethnic groups or castes within those countries. Economic growth does not necessarily lead to gender equality, but can in fact exacerbate inequalities (Kabeer 2003).⁵
- Many women's NGOs feel that it is impossible to view a "development agenda" outside of **current geo-**

³ The list of issues NGOs in Monterrey considered essential for financing development to achieve the MDGs included debt cancellation, a currency transaction tax, the subordination of global economic governance to human rights instruments, no conditionality on ODA, debt and national development plans, the protection of internal markets and the conservation of biological and genetic resources, the right to establish regulatory regimes for foreign direct investment, and the equal voice and vote for developing countries in global economic decision-making processes (NGO Statement, 2002).

⁴ In the Tanzanian PRSP "there are no specific targeted actions on behalf of the poor. In fact, seven of the 11 action strategies listed to reduce poverty directly support the large-scale private sector, including a private sector development programme. There are no gender-specific dimensions with respect to actions which focus on poverty reduction" (Mbilinyi 2004).

⁵ "If MDGs appear feasible at the global level it does not necessarily imply that they will be feasible in all nations or at all locations. {While averages} give a good sense of the overall progress, (they) can be misleading... (An example is) the failure to disaggregate for gender... Average household income is very much an abstraction for women who have little or no control over how it is spent; it may exist in the mind of economists, but it does not necessarily correspond with the reality faced by millions of poor women." (Vandemoortele 2002b). Therefore, "the simple extrapolation of global trends to 2015 is invalid; global poverty projections will only be meaningful if they are based on country-specific solutions" (Vandemoortele 2002a).

politics. This means addressing the inter-linked dynamics of militarism and military intervention; the rise of religious fundamentalisms and communalism as political projects; and neo-liberal economic globalization. To address only one aspect is to ignore the multifaceted ways that women's rights agenda is undermined. Thus, while the MDGs seek to address social and economic development issues, much of civil society is focused on the interlinkage of multiple forces, within a broader social change agenda.⁶

III. Gender perspectives on the MDGs

The fact that Goal 3 focuses on gender equality affirms that gender equality is a value in its own right, and not only a means to other ends. At the same time, achievement of the MDGs is dependent on the integration of gender equality targets within each of the MDGs, not merely Goal 3 and other women-specific goals including 5 (maternal health) and 6 (HIV/AIDS and other diseases). There is disappointment that gender was not established as an explicit cross-cutting theme in all of the goals. This has left it up to gender advocates at the national and international level to create gendered targets and indicators and make the case for gender once more.

to sexual and reproductive rights are inextricably linked to Goals related to macro-economic policy, poverty and resource distribution. For example, the lack of access to jobs and extreme poverty has led thousands of women to turn to prostitution for income, exacerbating the AIDS pandemic. The collapse of public health systems under structural adjustment policies and the inability of poor nations to access low cost essential medicines due to intellectual property rights (both linked to Goal 8) have meant the inability of AIDS patients to get adequate care, as well as loss of public reproductive health services for women.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

According to the UN Department of Public Information, the number of people living in extreme poverty worldwide, on less than one dollar a day exceeds 1.3 billion, and women are the majority (UNDPI 2003). Moreover, the focus on the quantitative measurement of a dollar a day ignores the fact that for poor women, access to affordable housing and transportation, water and sanitation, primary health care for their families and education are essential to well-being for their families and communities (Antrobus 2005). There are multiple factors that lead to this reality, which may differ by

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