

Finding gender in the MDGs

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As the world's attention shifts to the Millennium Review Summit taking place in New York from 12-14 September, Southern African gender activists are asking a critical question: Where is gender in the MDGs?

The inter-connected world we live in demands a standard set of measures to keep us focused on the common goal of humanity.

In his report, *In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all*, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan argues that the "world must advance the causes of security, development and human rights together, otherwise none will succeed. Humanity will not enjoy security without development; it will not enjoy development without security; and it will not enjoy either without respect for human rights."

Gender equality is intrinsic to all these lofty ideals. Unless women are able to exercise their human rights freely in societies in which they are equal, true development will not take place.

As a response to the immediate crises facing the globe, the MDGs focus on the immediate; the practical and the tangible. Many of these targets (health, education) etc ring of the earlier days of the Women in Development (WID) as opposed to Gender and Development (GAD) discourse.

Thus the only target under promoting gender equality and empowering women is eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

This is a laudable goal, but hardly one that on its own will ensure "gender equality and the empowerment of women"! For a start, reducing gender disparities in primary and secondary education is no longer such a major issue; in many countries this has been achieved or is close to being achieved. In Southern Africa anyway, the issues are far more around girls poorer performance at secondary level as a result of teenage pregnancies; dual roles at home and at school; as well as glaring disparities at vocational and tertiary level.

Second, while education is a key factor in the empowerment of women, it is not the only factor. For example, there is no correlation between levels of education of women and their representation in decision-making. In Southern Africa, Mozambique – with the lowest levels of education- has among the highest percentage of women in decision-making while Mauritius, with the highest levels of education, has among the lowest levels of women in decision-making.

The difference between the two countries is that while one has a progressive constitution and history of struggle, the other is steeped in conservative religious and traditional practices. It is not possible to talk of gender equality anywhere without examining these deeply embedded, structural causes of inequality.

The other pitfall of the MDGs is the classic catch 22 of whether to make gender equality a stand alone goal, or to mainstream it in all the goals, or to do both. World leaders opted for a bit of both, but with many gaps in the mainstreaming effort.

Other than goal eight (women's empowerment and gender equality) the only gender-specific indicators relate to maternal mortality. Gender dimensions of the other goals are not mentioned, and therefore not

likely to be measured. For example, there is no requirement that there be gender balance in the halving of the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 per day; or in ensuring equal access to secure tenure for the 100 million slum dwellers to be assisted.

The narrow, time-bound goals are matched with 18 targets and 48 indicators and are located within a framework that does not recognise women's rights as a development goal. The MDGs are not informed by a rights-based approach to development and as such, there are concerns that women's strategic gender concerns are being sacrificed.

A glaring shortcoming for example is the absence of specific targets and indicators on gender violence – which has reached epidemic proportions in Southern Africa and which is fueling the spread of HIV/AIDS. Another example, is the lack of discussion on the need to guarantee women's sexual and reproductive health and rights in the context of reducing maternal mortality.

In an interview, weeks before the Millennium Summit with Inter Press Service, Salma Khan, a member of the UN CEDAW Committee stressed the need for incorporating a broader range of gender-sensitive targets and strategies, and for making gender-equality a cross cutting issue across the goals. Her view is echoed by many women's activists who argue that the women's agenda is being buried in the MDGs.

Gender concerns in Southern Africa and throughout the developing world go far beyond health and education. Many educated women lack access to employment, political participation and experience gender violence. How is it possible to adequately address maternal mortality without looking at the impediments to the realisation of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights? What are the structural and cultural barriers to women's equal and effective participation in public life? How are women being pushed deeper into poverty by trade liberalisation and global economic policies?

Unless gender is centrally located across all of the MDGs they will have no meaning for women. Similarly, unless the MDGs and all regional and international commitments are given meaning and made binding in regional, sub-regional and national contexts, they will just add to the growing pile of words that have little meaning where it matters most: on the ground.

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