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## Meet the New Director



Inés Alberdi,  
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Executive  
Director, on  
gender and  
the Millennium  
Development  
Goals

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### 1. When did you first become interested in gender equality and women's empowerment, and why?

I was at university in the 1970s when women's rights issues were being raised in Spain along with the movement for democratization. Spain was under a dictatorship until 1975, so women's rights were all part of the same struggle for political and social rights. Spain was not the only place -- these issues emerged together with democratization, civil rights and social justice movements all over the world during the last quarter of the century.

### 2. Can you share one example of something with which you were involved that you believe really made a difference for women?

The women's movement in Spain had a huge impact. You have to realize that up to the late 1970s in Spain divorce was not permitted; married women had no rights and had to obey their husbands in all things -- they had to ask his permission to get a passport, to open a bank account, even to work. All household income was controlled by the man. The husband also had sole authority over the children -- unless he was dead or in prison. And all of the legal frameworks -- the civil code, penal code, labour code -- reflected the same lack of autonomy for women.

Women played a major role in getting the new constitution in 1978, which gave women equal rights with men in public and private life, including marriage, divorce and custody. Individual laws to implement gender equality in employment and other arenas took time, but in the end we got them. To me this shows that women, in connection with broader democratic and social struggles, can really make a difference -- not only for women but for society itself. We united under the banner of modernization, which was the dream of everyone in Spain, to be a 'modern' country.

### 3. Who is a leader you think of as someone who has really made a difference?

I would first say Simone de Beauvoir, who had an enormous influence in redefining the way in which women thought of themselves in their personal and public lives. Her struggle to live in a way that maintained her independence and autonomy as a woman went on all of her life and is recorded in her multi-volume memoirs as well as her essays.

Among political leaders I think have made a difference I would certainly want to put Eleanor Roosevelt close to the top. Her achievement in getting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would by itself entitle her to this place, but her belief that government had a responsibility to respect and protect the rights of all citizens and to improve the lives of poor and disadvantaged people also made a huge difference in the U.S. and set an example for women's political leadership everywhere in the world.

### 4. A year past the halfway mark to the MDGs, what gives you the greatest cause for hope and optimism?

The vision articulated in the Millennium Declaration -- of a world free of fear and free of want -- is tremendously important in helping to unite people around these fundamental goals. Also what has been truly inspirational is the successful struggle to put sexual and gender-based violence on the peace and security agenda. The unanimous adoption of resolution 1820 by the UN Security Council, which mandates military protection for women in conflict, is a cause for optimism.

### 5. What causes you the greatest concern?

I share the concern that halfway along the timeline for achieving the MDGs, we are still not halfway to our goals -- especially regarding poverty, which is now far more difficult to eliminate in the face of the dramatic increases in energy and food prices.

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**6. If you could change one thing about the Millennium Development Goals or targets, what would it be?**

Goal 3 is extremely important in its own right and is central to the achievement of the other MDGs. Yet measurability of progress against this goal, and accountability for it, is constrained by the fact that it has a single target. While of fundamental importance, the education target captures only part of the spectrum of gender equality and women's empowerment. Existing indicators under this goal, including paid employment and political representation, are not reflected in any targets. Some key areas, such as violence against women, are not identified at all.

The UN has helped make tremendous progress in opening up the indicators on gender equality—inserting women's access to decent work into Goal 1 on poverty, adding women's access to reproductive healthcare and HIV treatment to health-related goals, and so on. Now we need to agree on an indicator for ending violence against women, add it to Goal 3, and hold every government responsible for making meaningful progress against this crime.

**7. What one single action could the international community take in the next few years that would make the greatest impact on the likelihood of achieving the MDGs?**

It is hard to identify a single action. Ending violence against women, for example, would go a long way to improving women's access to education, paid employment and political participation as well reducing poverty and increasing growth -- but such a goal requires a great many actions, engaging families, communities, schools and religious organizations as well as government ministries and the media. That said, however, I think that increasing resources to all of the UN and civil society organizations working to end gender-based violence and inequality would help expand and implement the innovative strategies we know can work.

**8. Why are societies so slow to change attitudes about gender roles and gender equality?**

These attitudes come about as a result of centuries of thinking that women were inferior to men. It is only in the 20th century that ideas about women's roles and identities have been changing, which is very recent, really. I have seen in my lifetime how much things can change when people come together to make it happen.

**9. You have been inside the UN for three months now. What are some of your early impressions?**

I want to say that my impressions of UNIFEM, which is what I know best so far, is that it is really exceptional in that most people are committed to the issues and values they are working on, and that this is a source of strength. I really think that when people are doing work that they care about, it makes a big difference.

