

On the Agenda: Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals

The issue: Starting in the 1990s, a decade of major global development conferences, including the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, established internationally agreed goals that have galvanized unprecedented efforts on issues such as population, the environment, gender equality, HIV/AIDS and development financing. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), drawn from the Millennium Declaration adopted at the 2000 Millennium Summit, encapsulate some of the most critical development objectives. They mark the first time that the international community has agreed on a shortlist of common aspirations, bound by a deadline of 2015 and defined by specific targets and indicators.

The MDGs call upon nations to work together to 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; and develop a global partnership for development. While only one of the MDGs focuses specifically on gender equality, the Millennium Project has emphasized that equality is critical to achieving all of the goals. Governments are using the goals to frame national development strategies and the flow of development resources. Women are mobilizing to make sure that the MDGs help advance gender equality and women's rights across the board.

UNIFEM takes action: UNIFEM is involved with essential MDG entry points—namely, the monitoring, analysis and advocacy needed to prompt and track progress towards achieving the goals. In addition to its own operational programmes, which help transform specific aspects of the goals into real advancements for women, UNIFEM is currently executing a pioneering five-country project on gender and the MDGs for the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Countries around the world will be able to pick up and adapt for themselves some of the lessons being learned.

In Cambodia: After trade quotas favourable to the garment industry were dropped in 2005, threatening the livelihoods of 200,000 female garment workers in Cambodia, the UNIFEM-UNDP pilot began advocating MDG analysis to measure women's economic security and pinpoint ways to bolster it. While Cambodia has a strong labour movement and adheres to International Labour Organization standards, this kind of analysis had not been carried out. UNIFEM drew together high-level government officials, women garment workers, and representatives from industry, other UN agencies and the Economic Institute of Cambodia. Based on the recommendations that emerged, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training is drafting a new employment and vocational training policy that responds to women's concerns. To help policy makers craft the most effective strategies on economic and other issues, the project produced a set of policy briefs on gender and the MDGs. A parallel initiative is supporting the Women's Ministry, women's non-governmental groups and women politicians to use the MDGs to mobilize political commitment to women's rights.

In Kenya: Consultations with 800 women in two rural communities burdened by pervasive poverty and high HIV prevalence have made clear that women view the relevance of the MDGs in terms of whether or not they produce results in daily life: cleaner water, quality schools, guaranteed property rights and reduced violence against women. UNIFEM convened these meetings and helped make sure that the proposals the women put forward—along with those from a newly formed advocacy platform for rural women known as the African Women's Millennium Initiative—reached the ears of policy makers in the Government. An early response came in the 2005/2006 budget, which dropped a value-added tax on staples such as mealie meal and cooking oil. On another front, ongoing collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture and Social Services has helped frame a gender and MDG needs assessment that will make gender an important part of future development strategies.

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In Kyrgyzstan: Supported by UNIFEM, an expert working group has screened indicators related to gender in the MDGs, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the country's own poverty reduction strategy paper. The group harmonized them into one system for monitoring women's progress—an invaluable mechanism for integrating gender across development strategies. By involving officials from a broad cross-section of government ministries in the expert group, the project has helped to ensure that gender has risen on multiple agendas, even in those ministries not traditionally associated with women's concerns. Another initiative has been the production of a series of fact sheets, targeted to policy makers, non-governmental groups, journalists and the general public, that sketch statistical profiles of how women and men are faring in Kyrgyzstan compared to global and national MDG indicators.

In Morocco: A first step forward on the MDGs for many countries is to prepare a baseline MDG report summarizing current national standing on the goals, and identifying areas that require concerted action. The UNIFEM-UNDP project in Morocco has helped insert gender into the report preparation process. Key Government ministries are participating, and have already agreed to adopt gender-sensitive targets and indicators tailored to the Moroccan context. These will help guide development planning, and tackle issues including employment, access to resources, legal discrimination and violence against women. The pilot has also embarked on advocacy for a costing exercise that will determine the resources Morocco needs to achieve the goals, including the gender targets. The Ministry of Finance plans to pursue this through its existing work on fully reflecting gender priorities in official budgets.

In Peru: A UNDP-sponsored advocacy campaign is helping to raise awareness of the MDGs among diverse constituencies. Making sure that a gender-perspective is taken into account, UNIFEM has participated in organizing a slew of media activities that have made the MDGs a popular theme, with radio spots broadcast across Peru that have also reached stations in other parts of Latin America. The fund has also supported several research initiatives. One study, geared to inform both local and national policy makers, analyses links between the MDGs and women's rights commitments, and examines the goals in light of existing national legislation. A small grants project funds young researchers to investigate issues related to gender and the MDGs. UNDP is now building on the findings of all of these activities to develop sex-disaggregated indicators that will make the monitoring of the goals more precise and responsive to Peruvian women at large.