

Gender and the MDGs

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What are the MDGs?

The Millennium Declaration in 2000 agreed on 8 Goals to be achieved by 2015 across the world.

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Countries are responsible for putting policy and funding in place to achieve the MDGs at the country level. The one goal which puts responsibility on donor countries is in Goal 8, through for example, development aid to low-income countries, dealing with low-income countries' debt and developing an open and non-discriminatory trading and financial system.

Why are the MDGs important?

Whilst there are many views on the usefulness of the MDGs, they have ensured a longer-term policy focus on the 8 goals, and within this, have put in place monitoring mechanisms through various indicators, to measure the progress of attaining the goals at country, regional and global level.

Achievements of the MDGs

The progress to date shows that, of course, some Goals are more likely to be achieved than others, and that some countries are more likely to achieve more of the goals, than other countries.

The maternal mortality rate is one of the goals which is least likely to be achieved in most countries across the developing world. In Sierra Leone, for instance, a

woman has a 1 in 8 chance of dying during pregnancy or childbirth, compared to a risk of 1 in 8,000 in the industrialised world. This stark fact highlights three points which I want to discuss here:

The **first** is that although women are often disproportionately affected by extreme poverty, gender issues are only explicit in 2 of the 8 Goals: Goal 3: promoting gender equality and empowering women (which measures gender parity in education; the share of women in wage employment; and the proportion of seats held by women in national legislature); and Goal 5: maternal mortality. Whilst it is imperative to draw attention to these issues in Goal 3 and 5, it is too narrow a focus. It excludes the fact that greater gender equality (more broadly defined than Goal 3) can help to tackle the root causes of poverty and vulnerability and thus contribute to achieving ALL the MDGs, not just 3 and 5.

For example, in many parts of the world, women account for a large and growing proportion of the labour force. In most countries, women are also responsible for household food production and consumption. In a changing development context, including globalisation and climate change, the links between women's empowerment, natural resource management and food security are vital, yet often overlooked.

When women have ownership and control of resources, such as land and other assets, and have higher education levels, it leads to greater productivity. Yet many face barriers to ownership and education as a result of prevailing attitudes and discriminatory laws and institutions. While globalisation has meant new labour opportunities for women – which MDG 3 recognises only in the *number of women* in the labour force - they continue to earn less than men, even in similar jobs. Moreover, their employment is often informal, with no access to social security or predictable income.

Missing these points, means missing important ways to achieve MDG 1 – eradicating poverty and hunger.

Furthermore, socially constructed gender roles mean that in most societies women have responsibility for the dual roles of care and production. In this respect “time poverty” is a critical variable, affecting women disproportionately. In Brazil, 90% of women spend an average of 20 hours a week on unpaid domestic chores, in contrast to only 45% of men for an average of 7 hours a week. Time poverty can prevent women accessing health care, if clinics are far away, and affordable childcare is unavailable. Similarly, environmental degradation can exacerbate time poverty, if women and girls travel long distances to find supplies of firewood and water.

Not acknowledging these dual roles and responsibilities, and burdens on women's time, has critical effects on the achievement of Goals 2, 4, 5 and 6 for example – accessing services.

Secondly, whilst gender is supposed to have been ‘mainstreamed’ within development policies over the last decade; most of the MDGs do not have indicators relating to gender. Without sex disaggregated data, gender-related discrimination often goes unnoticed, and is therefore not considered in the design of programmes and policies. This has implications for the types of policies and programmes implemented at the country level, but also for those supported through partnerships in Goal 8.

The importance of sex disaggregated data can’t be overstated. For example, it is widely assumed that immunization services against childhood diseases are gender neutral – that they don’t have any differential impact on girls or boys. However, recent studies have shown that there are important gender differences in coverage. While many girls miss out on immunisation in South Asia as a result of son preference, some boys are not being immunised in parts of Africa as a result of sterility fears.

In particular, MDG8, which focuses on improved international aid and cooperation, could be an important opportunity to create an international environment which supports gender equality in a broad sense, and which supports women’s own voice and agency.

While MDG8 has been criticised for setting few indicators to measure the North’s contribution to the MDGs, and for the absence of a gender perspective, it is only by recognising the ways in which global macro-economic and political issues are gendered that it is possible to find effective, sustainable ways to achieve other goals. Recent Free Trade Agreements in Latin America, for example, included commitments to gender issues, but concerted action by governmental and non-governmental actors in North and South is needed to put them into practice.

On aid, the recognition of gender equality as a cross-cutting issue in recent high level declarations (such as the Paris Declaration) and the (Development Assistance Committee’s) creation of a gender marker to assess the contribution of overseas development assistance to gender equality goals, are important first steps. However, there is a growing consensus that more proactive measures are needed to combat the dilution of gender equality commitments during policy implementation.

New methods are also needed to give civil society groups working on gender equality adequate resources and to help them better communicate with high-level UN and state actors so their perspectives are more adequately taken into account in policy formulation. With a growing number of public-private partnerships, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, delivering international development ‘goods’, innovative approaches are also needed to raise the awareness of the private sector on gender issues.

So, **thirdly**, an understanding of how improvements in gender equality link to poverty reduction and natural resource management therefore needs to resonate across the MDGs. Calls for strengthened global partnerships in international development should be complemented by a renewed commitment to existing gender-related frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, and the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. These spotlight gender-specific issues that are largely invisible in the MDGs, but critical to their achievement, such as gender-based violence, harmful traditional practices (e.g. female genital mutilation and child marriage), and the challenges female youth face in finding decent work.

They underscore the need for national governments and the international community, including the UN, in putting resources and institutional mechanisms in place to achieve gender-based rights and therefore to achieve the MDGS.

Additional information

The full ODI briefing paper is available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/odi-publications/briefing-papers/42-gender-mdgs-poverty.pdf>

For more information on ODI's work on gender, visit: <http://www.odi.org.uk/themes/gender/index.asp>

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