

## The Millennium Development Goals

Beijing Platform for Action respectively) or the elimination of cultural practices and gender stereotyping that contribute to gender inequality (a requirement under CEDAW).<sup>4</sup>

Peggy Antrobus\* of DAWN has coined the term 'most distracting gimmick' to describe the MDGs. She has expressed deep concerns that the MDGs are involving feminist and development activists yet again in complex monitoring and reporting processes, draining time, energy and resources, without achieving substantive change in the condition of women or the position of women in the South and worldwide.

Other critics focus on what they see as the essentially neoliberal policy approach of the MDGs. Sunila Abeysekera\* of INFORM in Sri Lanka comments on the irony of identifying MDGs relating to maternal and child mortality and universal primary education in a context where governments' capacity to provide the necessary services is being eroded by privatisation and other policies imposed by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. The MDGs do not require the IFIs or the industrialised countries to change their policies. Therefore, as Marjorie Mbilinyi\* of the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme has put it, that 'efforts to halve extreme poverty, provide universal primary education, achieve gender equality and combat infectious diseases, among other important goals are occurring within the same Washington Consensus that has exacerbated poverty and gaps between rich and poor nationally and internationally.'

In a similar vein Carol Barton,\* of the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice, uses the term 'positive conditionality' to describe the application by Northern NGOs and governments of conditionalities regarding the implementation of gender equality, human rights agreements etc. to aid. She argues that this process replicates colonial power relations, and intensifies North-South inequalities. And there is a double standard, in that, because the MDGs are seen as a responsibility of the South, governments in the North are not held accountable for their lack of progress in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment.

It is clear that the MDGs are not a sufficient framework for gender equality and women's empowerment. And there is a danger that their oversimplification of development and human rights will become a substitute for the more complex policy frameworks they aim to encapsulate. However, not all are pessimistic: feminist economists, Diane Elson, for example, and Yassine Fall, of the African Women's Millennium Initiative believe that the MDGs constitute 'an arena for feminist engagement'.<sup>5</sup> However, as Elson says, in order not to lose the Broader vision of development, it is important to engage with the MDGs with scepticism, but also with hope.

### Sources

\*Articles by Sunila Abeysekera, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Peggy Antrobus and Mary Robinson in *Seeking Accountability on Women's Human Rights. Women Debate the UN Millennium Development Goals*, edited by Carol Barton. The full publication can be downloaded from [www.wicej.org](http://www.wicej.org)

<sup>1</sup> Genevieve Painter: *Gender, the Development Goals, and Human Rights in the Context of the 2005 Review Process*. October 2004, Gender and Development Network

<sup>2</sup> L Waldorf and S Inglis. *Pathway to Gender Equality. CEDAW, Beijing and the MDGs*. A UNIFEM report.

<sup>3</sup> Caren Grown and Geeta Rao Gupta. *Millennium Project Task Force 3 Interim Report on Gender Equality*. ([www.unmillenniumproject.org](http://www.unmillenniumproject.org))

<sup>4</sup> Brita Neuhold, (2005), *Focus on Human Rights and Gender Justice: Linking the Millennium Development Goals with the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action*. WIDE Austria.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Elson. *The Millennium Development Goals A Feminist Development Economics Perspective*. October 2004

All the above are available to download from [www.siyanda.org](http://www.siyanda.org)

<sup>6</sup> Charlie Sever. *Gender Mainstreaming in Country Strategy Papers*. Development Cooperation Ireland, 2005.

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### Introduction

2005 is a year of great significance for women's human rights.

The 10-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) took place at the annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York in March. At the review, and in spite of US opposition, the BPFA was reaffirmed in its entirety by the UN, and remains a core human rights document, committing governments to policies and programmes of radical, transformative actions aimed at bringing about substantive equality between women and men.

By comparison with two major gatherings of world leaders, the G8 meeting in Edinburgh and the Millennium Summit in September, Beijing+10 received little media and public attention. Much of the reporting as well as the campaigning and lobbying by NGOs and other civil society organisations focused on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the need for Northern governments to increase aid in order to achieve the Goals. So the question arises whether Beijing still has relevance to the work of women's organisations worldwide, or whether we should focus instead on the MDGs. This Banúlacht Briefing Paper aims to provide both a gender perspective on and a feminist critique of the MDGs, and to highlight the connections between the Goals and the BPFA.

We explore the MDGs from two angles: the first is a feminist critique of the limitations of the MDGs as a framework to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. The second is an overview of basic information on the MDGs from a gender perspective (inside pages).

This paper on the MDGs is based on Banúlacht's advocacy work in relation to the Beijing+10 Review. Many of these points were reiterated as part of our submission on the DFA White Paper on Development Cooperation. In May, Banúlacht made a submission specifically on the MDGs and also worked with other development NGOs to draft a collaborative submission critiquing the draft outcome document for the Millennium Summit.

### Feminist critiques of the MDGs

The Millennium Development Goals are increasingly shaping development policy and practice, and can undoubtedly make a significant contribution to development.

But they are neither unproblematic nor uncontested, and both the framing of the Goals and the assumptions underlying them have been widely critiqued. Critics of the Goals are concerned at their portrayal of a list of development 'problems' that can be 'solved' with the right formula of delivery and distribution of resources. According to Mary Robinson\* and others, such an approach does not address underlying structural causes of poverty and inequality or the ways in which poverty and the non-fulfilment of basic human rights intersect.

The Millennium Declaration is a powerful synthesis of the goals of the UN conferences of the 1990s. It reiterates and reinforces the recognition within the UN human rights system of the equal importance of economic, social and cultural rights with political and civil rights, the indivisibility and interdependence between all human rights and the centrality of gender equality to human rights. The language of the Millennium Development Goals, however, frames poverty eradication, housing, health, etc., not in terms of human rights, but as basic needs. The MDGs adopt a 'universal framework' ignoring differences within and between countries and omitting consideration of "race", class and ethnicity. Women, therefore, are treated as a homogenous group. 1

Many international networks and NGOs working for women's human rights and gender empowerment have serious concerns that the MDG process inadequately addresses governments' commitments under CEDAW and the BPFA. 2 The only target for Goal 3 (the elimination of gender specific disparities in the field of education. The indicators relate to gender gaps in education, literacy, earning capacity and political representation. These may be significant pre-conditions for the strengthening of women's "strategic capacities" and for overcoming traditional images and roles, but they relate to the first part of the Goal only. Gender equality is a critical step to the achievement of women's empowerment, but empowerment requires more than equality of opportunity and equal access to resources, it is related to the capacity of women to control their destiny.3 There are no targets or indicators on such human rights issues as fulfilment of sexual and reproductive rights and health, eradication of violence against women (highlighted in the Cairo Programme of Action and the