

Women Debate the MDGs

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ABSTRACT *Carol Barton reflects on the concerns of women's movements about the millennium development goals (MDGs). She argues that the MDGs can potentially be used as an instrument to advance a global feminist agenda to the extent that feminist organizations define the terms of the debate. She presents the intense debates among women's organizations about how to engage with the MDGs and how they link to Beijing, Cairo and CEDAW.*

KEYWORDS *gender; accountability; CEDAW; Beijing; women's rights; gender justice*

The Millennium Declaration

In September 2000, 156 Heads of State or Government gathered at the Millennium Summit, part of the 55th UN General Assembly denoted as the Millennium Assembly. It was the largest-ever gathering of world leaders. These leaders issued a Millennium Declaration¹ that was a 'statement of values, principles and objectives for the international agenda for the twenty-first century,'² affirming human rights. The Declaration set time-bound and measurable goals and targets for combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. Civil Society participated through a Millennium Forum.³ The Millennium Declaration built on the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter, and the outcomes of several key conferences on development in the 1990s.

As mandated by member states, the UN Secretariat issued a 'Road Map' for implementing these commitments,⁴ which focused on eight 'millennium development goals (MDGs),' to be achieved by the year 2015.⁵ These are priorities towards achieving the Millennium Declaration, and draw on the outcomes of the conferences of the 1990s. The UN worked in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to establish targets and indicators to measure progress on these goals. A set of Task Forces made up of independent scholars and UN staff are making further contributions to shape targets and indicators through the Millennium Project. The Millennium Development Goals are increasingly shaping development policy nationally and globally, and have become the central focus of the UN system.

Women organizing on UN human rights and development

Women's organizations have actively engaged in UN human rights and development policy for more than four decades, and helped to shape the outcomes of the UN conferences of the 1990s. They have been active in monitoring commitments made by their governments and the international system in areas of environment, population and development, human rights, racial equality, gender equality, housing and social development, as well as debates about how this will be financed. They have also actively engaged in seeking to influence trade policy and World Bank Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. There has been enormous frustration at the lack of government commitment and accountability to both development goals in general and gender equality commitments in particular.

In one way, the emergence of the MDGs marks the success of global women's movements and broader civil society, which had made the creation of time-bound targets and indicators a key demand for measuring progress on development and rights commitments. The frustration for many has been the concern that the MDGs have met the letter of civil society demands for accountability, but not the spirit. That is, they seek to solve critical problems with measurable targets, without adequately addressing the roots of these problems. Thus, as this new initiative takes center stage, there is much discussion among women's organizations about the MDGs – on whether and how to engage. From internet conversations and articles to national and international meetings, women are exploring how to impact the MDG process to make them more useful tools for advancing their agenda of gender equality, economic justice and peace.

Women are expressing concern that in prioritizing some areas, the MDGs may minimize key elements of the UN conferences of the 1990s, from Rio, Copenhagen, Vienna, Cairo, and Beijing to Durban.⁶ Having invested over a decade in advocacy and implementation work on these conference outcomes that strongly affirm women's human rights, there are worries that these com-

mitments may be lost in the push to focus on the eight MDGs. Women are also asking where, in MDG initiatives, is the commitment to racial justice that emerged from the World Conference Against Racism.

Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice

The Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ), made up of 40 organizations from all regions of the globe, has made a contribution to this debate with its 2004 publication, *Seeking Accountability on Women's Human Rights – Women Debate the UN Millennium Development Goals*. In that publication (available on-line at www.wicej.org), WICEJ invited women from different regions, working on diverse issues, to contribute to the debate from their particular vantage points. The contributions range from great skepticism to energetic endorsements of the opportunity at hand. As the MDGs and initiatives for implementation are still relatively new, it is clear that there are many different perspectives on what level of flexibility there may be in adapting them, and how broad the engagement of civil society should be.

As women debate the MDGs, they raise larger debates taking place within global feminism about how best to organize for accountability from states, non-state actors, and multilateral institutions. Women are asking what kind of impact their intense advocacy and monitoring work has had in terms of women's lives. They are critically examining how well official *gender mainstreaming*⁷ has worked in practice. They are exploring how, and how much, to engage in governmental and multilateral development processes such as the MDGs and World Bank Poverty Related Strategy Papers. They are asking in which venues their activism will have the greatest impact. Thus, some are turning their sights from the UN to local and regional organizing, the global justice movement, or to global financial and trade institutions, while others see it as a both/and proposition.

Women's discussions around the MDGs take place in the context of the ten-year review of the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (2004), and the ten-year review

of the Beijing World Conference on Women in March 2005. That event, at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, will involve high-level round tables that explicitly address the intersection of the Beijing Platform for Action, and the MDGs. It is not clear, however, to what extent heads of state gathering in New York in September 2005 to review progress on the MDGs ('MDG + 5') will address the Beijing Platform and the gender implications of each of the goals. Civil society may be excluded from the MDG + 5 meeting itself. And despite intense efforts by women serving on the Millennium Project Task Forces to integrate gender into all of the eight goals (including poverty eradication; universal primary education; gender equality; reduction of child mortality; maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; environmental sustainability; and a global partnership for development financing) the tendency has been to relegate gender concerns to Goal 3, which explicitly addresses gender equality in the areas of education and women in parliaments.

Yet even if gender were more present in the eight goals, the MDGs cannot replace the Beijing Platform for its breadth, its global reach, and its integration of multiple priorities. The Beijing Platform has 12 Critical Areas of Concern that are much broader than the MDGs, and engender all aspects of rights and development. It seeks a holistic approach to sustainable and social development. In addition, while Beijing and Cairo are commitments to gender equality, development and peace within all nations both North and South, the MDGs are seen primarily as commitments for developing countries, with the North's role being that of donors. This lets the North off the hook on accountability to gender equality commitments within their own borders. Monitoring of MDGs, through UNDP, is required by developing countries, yet the one commitment that directly affects the North (MDG 8 on global partnership) has few measurable targets and no mandatory monitoring. The MDGs seek technical and programmatic solutions to deeper systemic problems.

In separating Goal 3 (gender equality) from other goals, particularly Goal 8 (enabling environ-

ment, macroeconomic policies), the MDGs feed an unhelpful divide between gender justice and economic justice, which has caused great schisms among UN member states, and is too prevalent within women's movements themselves. Even the useful responses of women's organizations to the MDGs reflects some of this divide instead of an integrated approach. For example, some women have mobilized to reincorporate aspects of Beijing and Cairo into Goal 3, while others are focusing on the gender and macro-policy implications of Goal 1 (poverty), Goal 7 (environment) or Goal 8. Yet women confronting traditional controls over their personal choices as well as physical violence cannot adequately claim economic and social rights either. Similarly, increased economic autonomy gives women increased power in personal relationships. So one challenge for women's movements as they shape strategies around the MDGs is to push each other and nations in both North and South, to integrate all women's human rights, rather than allowing these divisions to undermine us.

Revisiting equality, development peace at the WSF

In that regard, a coalition of seven networks and organizations will host a Feminist Dialogue prior to the 2005 World Social Forum (see <http://feministdialogue.isiswomen.org>). Reflecting the current global crisis for women's human rights, the meeting will explore the intersections of political-religious fundamentalisms, neo-liberalism and militarism from a feminist perspective. In a sense, this revisits and radicalizes the 30-year women's theme of 'equality, development and peace,' embodied in the Beijing Platform for Action. It is a healthy re-integration of diverse strands of women's movements, at a time when intense backlash takes many forms. Unfortunately, the MDGs seek to address the 'development' piece of this triangle, while leaving out most elements of the equality agenda, and the critical aspect of peace. At a time when human rights have taken a back seat to national security; when resources for 'anti-terrorism' and war rob nations of resources for social development; when anti-terrorist laws

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limit the political space of civil society to demand accountability on human rights; and when civil wars and military intervention and occupation destroy societies and particularly jeopardize women's survival, 'development' (always a contentious term) can only be advanced when issues of real democracy, peace, human rights and equality are fully addressed.

Women are also exploring gaps in the way different players are interpreting the MDGs. First and foremost is a concern about the need to draw on the Human Rights commitments affirmed in the Millennium Declaration, and to understand development goals through that lens. The Millennium Declaration affirms the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, CEDAW, CESC, and other international human rights treaties, which are all but forgotten amidst MDG indicators. The commitment to CEDAW necessarily entails *engendering*⁸ all aspects of every Goal, to seek gender equality and women's human rights in MDG outcomes. It entails 'raising the bar' to go well beyond minimum goals to encompass fulfilment of all rights, as established in international law. It pushes us to bridge the false dichotomy of 'private' and 'public' spheres – linking the rights to reproductive health and choice, freedom from violence, and control over one's body, with women's economic and social rights. It also entails using a participatory framework that empowers people to claim rights.

In assessing the MDGs, contributors to the WICEJ publication also considered broader challenges that must be confronted, including the undermining of multilateralism; increased armed conflict; emphasis on National Security at the expense of rights; and the intensification of globalization within the framework of the *Washington Consensus*.⁹ This includes the sharp imbalance in global trade relations. We need to critique the misuse of 'gender mainstreaming' in the decade since Beijing, as women are being called on to 'engender' trade and macroeconomic policies that undermine human rights and real development. Women have raised concerns that the MDGs cannot be uncoupled from the central need to challenge the Washington Consensus, and to get real commitment to Goal 8 on the part of Northern governments – both new rules of global governance and

more equitable distribution of the world's resources. Programmes to address poverty will have little impact if they do not occur within broader structural changes in the global economy and global power relationships. To the extent that 'gender' is utilized to incorporate women into micro-efforts without addressing the macro-framework, it does a disservice to our goals for human rights and equality.

Through these debates, many women are seeking to reframe the development dialogue, once again, to put gender, racial equality and human rights, including social and economic rights, center stage. Thus, many are exploring how to use the MDGs as tools to challenge the *status quo*, to demand action on women's key concerns, to mobilize civil society in both North and South, to highlight labour rights and employment needs, and to push for a global reordering of the world's resources.

Setting the 2005 agenda for women

As a coalition, WICEJ has not taken a position on how to deal with the MDGs, and there are a variety of approaches. Nonetheless, WICEJ was founded in 2000 with an explicit rejection of the neo-liberal model, so coalition members are exploring how to approach the MDGs in a way that will lay bare the contradictions of the current paradigm of liberalization, privatization and deregulation, while embracing commitments to gender justice, including women's reproductive rights and the array of rights affirmed in the Beijing Platform for Action. At the same time, they see the critical need to strengthen social movements that can address issues of power, and insist on government accountability to the majority.

In 2004, there were numerous women's conversations at the national and international levels, about where to go from here. Some emerging themes (without a consensus) include:

- The need to insist in integrating the Beijing + 10 and MDG + 5 reviews, and to integrate Beijing commitments into the MDGs.
- Efforts to reintroduce elements of the Beijing Platform into Goal 3, including women's access

to land, women's unpaid labour, violence, reproductive rights including abortion rights, adolescent sexual education, and labour rights.

- The need to insist that Cairo commitments on reproductive health be incorporated into the MDGs, including through specific indicators.
- Efforts to integrate national plans of action for Beijing and Cairo with national MDG plans.
- A focus on expanding MDG indicators, both through the Millennium Project, and through advocacy at the national level to affect National Plans.
- An effort to hold national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and the exigencies of the International Financial Institutions more accountable to the MDGs, including prioritizing the human rights framework of the Millennium Declaration.
- Efforts to bring the creation of quality jobs into the picture as a necessary part of poverty eradication, the first MDG goal. This reflects recommendations of the ILO World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization.
- Efforts to use CEDAW as a tool for national accountability on engendering the MDGs from a human rights perspective (UNIFEM has a new

resource to assist women's organizations in this area: *CEDAW, Beijing and the MDGs Resource Guide*, UNIFEM, 2004, www.mdgender.net/resources/).

- Campaigns in the North by civil society organizations to hold their governments accountable for commitments to a 'global partnership' that includes increased donor support, debt cancellation, trade access, end to privatization of public services, and other steps to support southern nations in meeting the MDGs. (The Millennium Campaign is working with CSOs in this area) (see Salil Shetty's article in this issue).

Like any policy instrument, the MDGs can potentially be used as an instrument to advance a global feminist agenda to the extent that feminist organizations define the terms of the debate, rather than being defined by a process imposed elsewhere. The intense debates among women's organizations about how to engage with the MDGs and how they link to Beijing, Cairo and CEDAW are part of an evolving dialogue about how best to frame and advance our agenda at this particular moment, and how to hold governments accountable. Clearly, multiple strategies will emerge.

Acknowledgements

This article is adapted from 'Seeking Accountability for Women's Human Rights, Women Debate the MDGs,' WICEJ, Mumbai, India, 2004, and a presentation at the WIDE Annual Meeting *Globalising women's rights: Confronting unequal development between the UN rights framework and WTO-trade agreements*, Bonn, Germany, May 2004.

Notes

- 1 UN General Assembly Resolution A/Res/55/2, 18 September 2000.
- 2 UN Press Release, GA/9752, 8 September 2000.
- 3 The Millennium Forum took place from 22 to 26 May 2000 at UN Headquarters in New York, and adopted a Millennium Forum Declaration and Agenda for Action. The Forum's final outcome has been issued as an official document of the General Assembly (A/54/959). A Civil Society representative addressed the official Millennium Summit plenary to share this outcome (<http://www.un.org/millennium/forum.htm>).
- 4 Roadmap towards the implementation of the UN Millennium Declaration, Report of the Secretary General, 6 September 2001; UN Document A/56/326.
- 5 The eight Millennium Development Goals, which emerged from the UN Millennium Declaration (2000) are listed at www.un.org/millenniumgoals.
- 6 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, 1992, Rio; UN World Summit for Social Development, 1995, Copenhagen; UN Conference on Human Rights, 1993, Vienna; UN International Conference on Population and Development; 1994, Cairo; UN Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, Beijing; UN World Conference Against Racism, 2001, Durban.

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- 7 The goal of using a gender analysis in all policies, programmes, and institutions, to assess differential impacts on men and women, and to end gender inequality.
- 8 The practice of using an analysis that explores the differential realities of men and women due to gender inequality and socially prescribed roles.
- 9 This refers to a set of policy prescriptions emanating from the IMF and the World Bank, that have encouraged the opening of markets, a decreased role of the state in the economy, and export oriented growth.