



Smart Feminists Finding Strategic Windows

Joanna Kerr

I have to lay my cards on the table. I am an MDG cynic. I, like many others in the movement, groan with discomfort at the thought of yet another “commitment that women’s groups need to hold our governments accountable to.”

First of all, let’s be honest. There are so few women’s organizations that do advocacy work or CAN do advocacy work because of the political climate, their lack of funding, capacity, or, yes, even a lack of strategic political insight. My cynicism with the MDGs also relates to the how—that is, *how* will they be achieved? With all due respect to my dearest colleagues in the UN, World Bank, and other multilaterals, a political economy analysis is truly lacking as to why poverty and gender inequality still exist. Change comes about with a transformation in power relations

(especially economic and social) and yet the approaches that so many of the international organizations promote are purely technical and, so, devoid of any analysis of power or politics. But it’s always about power. That’s why gender equality work is so hard, and that is why there is so much resistance to it.

So the case for me still needs to be made: Why get the women’s movements involved? Especially when the need to tackle roll backs in women’s reproductive rights, the persistence of violence against women, the rise in militarism, fundamentalisms, and poverty is so urgent. Despite the resources and importance given to the MDGs by the United Nations, I have yet to be convinced that this will be a winnable solution for gender equality and not just a waste of time. Not meaning to provoke, but many women’s groups will argue that gender budgets, PRSPs, or the Platform for Action have also not gotten us not far beyond beautiful words on paper.

So what to do? Well, indeed we do need more research, sex-disaggregated data, policy shifts, and accountable governments. Using human rights law is a great idea, too. But we also need *street heat*: mobilizing and organizing for alterna-

tives and peace, for wealth redistribution and freedom from violence, for rights and for justice.

We also need to have honest conversations about how change happens if government/UN/civil society partnerships are going to be real and effective. It’s true that the MDGs and the Millennium Declaration represent an “unprecedented commitment.” But they were made by politicians...who know politics.

I would think that the only way they can be used strategically are by gender equality advocates who also understand politics...and how power works. In other words, use them indeed if they are effective tools to hold governments accountable and mobilize or redirect resources to women’s rights. Absolutely. However, my fear is that too many of our hours will be caught up in the

processes-reporting, monitoring, drafting, making the case, new research, etc, etc—with little result.

We need savvy analysis of alternative economic models, and the pressure to bring about national legislative change. And we need much, much more money to go to supporting feminist leadership in the women’s machineries and trade departments, human rights commissions, UNIFEMs, International Financial Institutions, and, of course,

women’s groups working at all levels. As we all know (because research and history have proved it), institutional change depends on a critical number of smart feminists (female or male) finding strategic windows inside organizations making change; more rhetorical policies, indicators, or frameworks are just not going to do it.



It’s always about power. That’s why gender equality work is so hard and why there is so much resistance to it

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A Dialogue Among Donors

In the fall of 2003, UNIFEM hosted an email discussion among multilateral agency staff around the world, bilateral donors and women from civil society. The discussion addressed how to concretely engender all of the MDGs, as well as the larger question of why civil society should get involved. Below are excerpts from the discussion, which originally appeared on MDGender-Net, 29 September-31 October, 2003 (www.mdgender.net).

Irma van Dueren

We should not think that now that we have the MDGs, the future will be bright for women. There is no reason to assume that Governments will feel committed to eliminating gender inequalities through working towards MDGs if they did not show any commitment before to earlier agreements like the Platform for Action.

The big hurdle, to get political commitment to change power relations, remains to be overtaken. And this is not going to be tackled by the MDGs, which indeed represent a rather technical approach and do not touch on underlying questions of how to bring about fundamental change in society.

We must not lose sight of these bigger concerns. The MDGs can be useful and important tools to work with when working at the national level, with government entities and NGOs, trying to translate these larger concerns in to specific work in the areas such as education and health. Data and analysis developed within the framework of the MDGs can serve as entry points for policy dialogue in which commitments need to be made by governments on spending their budgets on improved access for women to the most basic resources and services, increased participation for women in decision making bodies, etc.

We have no choice but to work with what we have. While doing so we must be realistic about what we think we can achieve with instruments like the MDGs. My conclusion is that, as usual, women activists have to be everywhere and do it all—work at all levels, in all parts of society in different ways but never losing sight of the long-term goal.

Irma van Dueren is Gender Specialist at the Netherlands Embassy in Yemen.

Phil Evans

For me, the real question is not whether the MDGs are sellable to the women's movement but how everyone committed to gender equality can respond to the opportunities offered by this framework. The best place to start is not with the simplified listing of the MDGs themselves, but with the Millennium Declaration. A thorough reading of this should reassure people that this is far more of an

opportunity than a threat. The Declaration is packed with positive language about human rights, equality and democracy. This includes a clear statement that the pursuit of gender equality is not limited to education alone. The power of the MDGs lies in the unprecedented global consensus and commitment that they represent. They also provide a common focus for new forms of global partnership that (at last) put the poor at the front of the queue. The case for pursuing the goals from a gender perspective is being made, and is getting stronger. Both the CEDAW and Beijing PfA remain fully relevant and indispensable to the achievement of the goals.

Phil Evans is a member of the DFID-UK Mission to the UN, New York.

Aster Zaoude

The powerful energy for change is in the hands of advocacy groups that are able to mobilize constituencies around their priorities, and to link them with policy groups; change-agents in parliaments, political parties, and rights-based associations; and through the media. The experience of gender budgeting and the movements around the trade negotiations clearly show that civil society organizations can use the space to mobilize and demand pro-poor action and transparency in decision-making. Neither the MDG national reporting nor the Millennium Campaign are exclusively for governments, to comply with international reporting requirements, or to meet loan conditionalities. They are only useful if they help constituencies to focus on a few key indicators, trace them across policies and budgetary allocations and make demands for change, for transformation—all in the interest of the poor and disenfranchised. There is no need for apologies or authorization from anyone if gender advocates want to take the MDGs and make them their own instrument for holding governments accountable. Nothing can stop the movement if it awakes to the challenge and decides not to be co-opted but instead to regain its right to be the voice of the poor.

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Bharati Sadasivam

The Millennium Development Goals address age-old challenges. What is unprecedented is the commitment of heads of state and government to a set of numerical and time-bound targets that address these key elements of human development. The MDGs are ambitious in scope and vision, or nothing more than a minimalist agenda, depending on who is looking at them. Whatever the viewpoint, the goals are feasible, financially and technologically. Resources are only part of the barrier to achieving the MDGs. The real work, as we all know, lies in building political will and setting and reordering priorities.

For both tasks, the full involvement of civil society actors—with all their diversity, demands, critiques and challenges—is key. The greater the debate on the ‘how’ of the goals, the more pressure it builds on governments and international financial institutions for policy changes towards human development. ‘National ownership’ of the goals rests on the extent to which CSOs are able to examine them, have a say in adapting them to their country contexts, and debate pathways to achieve them.

CSOs, whether human rights or gender advocates, can hold governments accountable in each of these areas. Their role is also key in ensuring that the overarching global MDG campaign is geared to more visible national signposts, set every three to five years, and in sustaining political momentum and public interest.

While several countries will need substantial help in aid and trade to go even part of the way towards the goals, a number of others—such as Thailand—have moved on to MDGs-plus, or ‘localized’ them completely, as Vietnam has with its ‘VDGs.’ These experiences suggest that the MDGs need be no more or no less than what each country or community decides. Ultimately, the MDGs are a set of benchmarks for all other development frameworks, including the PRSP. It is up to all development actors, but most importantly CSOs, to use them in each of their spheres as tools for accountability of governments.

Bharati Sadasivam is a Policy Advisor, CSO Division at UNDP, based in New York. This is a new contribution to the dialogue and did not appear on MDGender-Net (www.mdgender.net).

A Question of Ownership

Suzanne Kindervatter

NGOs do recognize the value of the MDGs as a global consensus framework. At the same time, they see the MDGs as a top-down effort. Having been deeply involved with the series of UN conferences in the 1990s, NGOs continue to be committed to those frameworks and concerned about what’s not included in the MDGs. There is also concern that Gender Equality will be limited to one goal and narrow indicators, despite the content of the Declaration.



Overall, I think there are several major considerations for NGOs to “come on board” with the MDGs:

- NGOs feel strong ownership for the frameworks they were involved in developing, but don’t feel that same ownership for the MDGs. MDG campaigns need to link to or build on the existing human rights and global frameworks on which NGOs are still working.
- If NGOs are to be the mechanism for “holding governments accountable,” then funding needs to be made available. In the processes around Beijing and the other world conferences, NGOs were at the table when documents were developed, learned how to influence them, organized to translate international commitments into national plans or legislation, and then, in some cases, took on monitoring for accountability. But most NGOs don’t have the kind of funding that enables them to sustain monitoring over time. Many national “watch groups” emerged after Beijing, but only a few have continued.
- NGOs need to believe that advocacy work related to the MDGs will pay off, in particular that alliances can be forged with the UN, donors, and governments and that strategic points for impact can be identified.

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Skepticism and Hope

Yassine Fall

While I am affiliated with UNIFEM, my comments here are those of a feminist economist and an African woman. The MDGs would have gained more credibility if the social impacts of economic globalization, structural adjustment, and economic stabilization policies had been evaluated together with global civil society, before implementation of the MDGs began. Women, and the poor in general, have suffered too much from economic recycling and broken promises. Multilateral institutions and development practitioners have recognized both the failure of past reforms and their role in increasing global inequity and gender inequality. Women, in particular those in the Global South, know too well that declaring that globalization has benefited many does not mean that their own livelihoods and economic positions have transformed for the better.

If the MDGs succeed in halving extreme poverty, this may only mean that we have returned to 1970 poverty levels. Today, in most African countries, three women share a hospital bed with their three babies after giving birth; they are considered to be lucky. Recently, the President of a well-known

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national Association of Women Infected and Affected by HIV/AIDS in Africa died in horrible conditions after giving birth, because of stigma, neglect, and poor health services. This must make us very disillusioned about new poverty reduction initiatives. The poorly equipped hospitals and

schools, poor water quality, and unavailability and decaying sanitation infrastructure are all the result of ill-inspired economic policy decisions. For many years nothing was done to seriously fix these conditions except unmet promises to increase Overseas Development Assistance while the poor were making huge sacrifices to accommodate globalization. Women therefore, have reason to be doubtful and very skeptical about cooptation, and attempts to use women as an excuse to push an agenda that

is not theirs. We also all agree that something must be done and we must start from somewhere. The questions are how, where, with who and for whose benefit? We must make sure that agenda-setting is not done without our concerns, our voices, our warnings, and our demands for accountability.

Of course, there are many issues and questions left unanswered. The global trade regime remains the main contradiction of the day. The whole discussion about ideologies, and the one-size-fits-all approaches needs to be challenged and the women's movement is one of the most robust assets we have to do so.

But the MDGs also incorporate demands for debt cancellation, for the rich to walk their talk, for Government and their citizens to define their own poverty strategies without conditionality, and for the economic costs paid by women to be recognized.

I work on the MDGs, and this can be a difficult. But when I hear that Ethiopia and all poor and highly indebted countries will be guided and supported to not pay their debt, I am encouraged—because other existing poverty initiatives essentially tell poor Governments exactly the contrary. When I hear that we need to work to produce global data that shows feminized poverty in order to reward women more equitably, I am encouraged. When the *MDG Task Force One* says governments and citizens should develop a strategy to fight poverty first and then worry about resources to make it happen, I am encouraged. I agree to do this work, while staying vigilant because there are millions of women who need to see urgent action while waiting for liberation, a day we all yearn for.



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Local Voices

The Case of Colombia: The MDGs and Women's Human Development

María Adela Rivera-Santander

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aim at reducing poverty and promoting gender equality. However, in Colombia, economic adjustment policies and militarization have made women's lives more precarious and contributed to increased poverty. If Colombia is to make progress towards achieving the MDGs, the nation must challenge current macro-economic policies and begin a real process of negotiation for peace.

Data on Latin America from the 2003 UNDP Human Development Report shows that things are getting worse, not better. Between 1990 and 2000, regional development indicators declined. In Colombia, "... inequality increased, reflected in increased poverty in the past four years."¹ In addition, what little growth that occurred was uneven across provinces. A crisis in the Colombian economy since 1997 has led to the deterioration of social conditions, particularly for the poor:

- Personal income dropped from US \$2,716 dollars per person in 1997 to US \$1,890 in 2003.
- 25.5 million Colombians are "officially" poor; the population living under the poverty line increased from 50.3% in 1997 to 60% in 2000.
- Extreme poverty increased from 18.1% in 1997 to 23.4% in 2000.
- Almost 3 million people are unemployed and 5 million are underemployed or have informal jobs with a monthly income below the minimum wage.
- The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Colombia declined by 20% between 1997 and 2003.

This situation stems from macro-economic factors within the context of globalization, which leads us to wonder how ready Colombia is to meet MDG targets for 2010. Some of these factors include increased external debt and the constantly growing cost of debt servicing; the lack of a national strategy to support an egalitarian process of economic integration through trade agreements; external pressures related to National Security policies; and increased defense spending, which has meant budget cuts in the social and public policies which help women.

We are also witnessing the forced displacement of rural women due to armed conflict that increases poverty and racial/ethnic injustices. Afro-Colombian women, men and children, as well as indigenous peoples and rural peasants, face threats, massacres and the total lack of legal protection to fulfil their rights to life, security and freedom of movement inside the country. This is related to the civil war in the countryside, and is not unrelated to corporate interest in oil reserves, and externally supported "drug-eradication" and "anti-terrorism" policies. Many

of those forced to move do not register as "internally displaced," even when this might bring them temporary emergency assistance, because it greatly increases the risks they have to face and may even result in their deaths. With this label they become easy targets for harassment and assassination in the cities. Women and children constitute 74% of the displaced population in Colombia, according to the report from the "Working Group on Women and Conflict" presented to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.² A disproportionate number of the displaced are Afro-Colombian and indigenous and their populations are concentrated in the areas of conflict. Armed groups threaten land rights, economic survival, and food security, and use rape, physical abuse, abduction or death as strategies of war. The displaced often move several times before ending in urban shantytowns, where they face greater poverty and marginalization. There, the circle of violence and rights abuse continues. The majority of displaced families have women as their heads of households; this double condition of being displaced and being women means that both they and their families face structural discrimination and are condemned to permanent poverty.

From a Gender Perspective

UNDP has created an indicator to measure and compare progress in gender equality in terms of basic capacities, including life expectancy at birth, literacy rates, school enrollment rates, and per capita GDP in a country. A UNDP report on Colombia utilizing this measure noted some progress between 1997 and 1999. But gender inequality remains significant. Colombia's national statistics bureau (DANE) found that in 2000 women earned 20% less income than men on average, with no gains after 1995. In 2001, 28% of women and 23% of men were officially unemployed.³

Gender inequality needs to be explored in all of the MDGs, and we must examine how this inequality manifests itself in:

- The privatization of public services with a high proportion of women workers
- Access to water and its impacts on household labor
- Cuts in social spending in order to increase defense spending and debt payments
- Lack of access to minimum basic education for many girls; less access to quality secondary education, and

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Exporting Poverty: US Social Policy and the MDGs

Ramona Ortega

The MDGs have evolved with a focus on developing countries. While there is an important push for global sharing of resources to support the development of poor nations, this emphasis should not ignore the mal-distribution of resources within developed countries and the reality of poverty in the global North.

The United States has been central to the development of the MDGs and is a primary player in setting IMF and World Bank policies which have been tied to their implementation. Yet at home in the richest country in the world, poverty rates, hunger, and unemployment have risen for women and people of color.

Across the US, 12.4% of Americans live below the official poverty line, and rates are much higher in states with large minority populations. In New York City, home to the United Nations, 21% of children live in poverty, 31% live in households headed by a single parent, and 9.6% children die at birth.¹

The World Conference Against Racism set a mandate to end discrimination and recognized poverty as a substantive variable in racial discrimination. In that light, it is frightful that in the US 15.7% of black children—compared with 7% of white children—live in neighborhoods that are wrought by extreme human poverty—measured as more than 150% of the national average in four indicators: poverty, female-headed households, school drop-out rates and unemployment.

The US government's response to poverty is in line with its overall rejection of economic human rights: the US constitu-

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even less to higher or technical education

- Lack of access to technology and communications, which deepens the gender gap in income distribution.
- An increase in women's unpaid labor for "social reproduction."

To achieve women's human development through the MDGs and human rights commitments, it will be critical to address global distribution of resources; national macro-economic policy; gender inequalities; racial and ethnic inequalities; external political and military pressures; and peace through a negotiated solution to the armed conflict in Colombia.

Notes

- 1 Report on Ten Years of Human Development in Columbia, *UNDP, Columbian National Planning Department, Columbian International Cooperation Agency, and National Human Development Program, December 2003, UNDP.*
- 2 Report on "Internal Displacement in Colombia," from the Mesa "Mujer y Conflicto" to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, in her visit to Colombia in 2002.
- 3 "Encuesta de Hogares" (Household census) carried out monthly by DANE (January, 2000).

tion does not even recognize the right to education, let alone a social safety net. Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" policy that attempted to create a permanent social safety net through social protection known as "welfare" was dismantled in 1996 under the so-called "Welfare Reform." The reform strategy was to move women single heads of households off public assistance and into the workforce. This has been problematic in a period of rising unemployment and without providing childcare, job training, or continuing education. It has boxed many women into part-time and contingent work, minimum wage jobs that pay below the poverty rate, and homelessness. Current Congressional draft legislation to renew "Welfare Reform" policies mimic the language and intent of the US's international agenda: *privatize, decentralize, and maintain a large body of low-wage workers.*

Unfortunately, US social policy has been exported around the globe without sufficient scrutiny and despite notable failures on the domestic front. An overview of indicators shows that "Welfare Reform" has done little to move people out of poverty, particularly women and children.² Educational support for former welfare recipients has been dramatically cut, and is not being promoted as an essential asset to moving out of poverty despite concrete research to the contrary. Educational support for former welfare recipients has been dramatically cut, and is not being promoted as an essential asset to moving out of poverty, despite concrete research to the contrary.³

The US recession has slowed the growth in single-mother wage rates, while unemployment for this group is growing faster than the average. It is evident that women with children in the US experience poverty differently than others, yet the government response has been to produce marriage-promotion policies that negate internationally recognized rights of women.

In sum, US domestic policies on poverty eradication, gender and racial equality are not models from which to measure or shape Millennium Development Indicators, nor should the US be free and clear from scrutiny under these documents.

Notes

- 1 Pocket Guide: State-level Measures of Child Well-Being from the 2000 Census, African-American Children, pp. 4-5 (www.aecf.org/publications/data/african_american_pocket-guide.pdf). See also, State Profiles of Child Well-Being, 2003 (www.aecf.org/kidscount/databook).
- 2 Levitan, Mark, Poverty in New York, *Community Service Society: September 2003.*
- 3 From Poverty to Self-Sufficiency: The Role of Postsecondary Education in Welfare Reform, *Center for Women's Policy Studies, 2002, pg. 6, (www.centerwomenpolicy.org).*

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