

Violence against women and the Millennium Development Goals

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Introduction

Violence against women is a violation of women's human rights.

Violence against women is not isolated from the rest of society, but is rather an integral part of the social system. It is part of gender inequality, and linked to other aspects of human and economic development. Yet, despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of violence against women, with the introduction in many countries of innovative policies and laws, the knowledge base needed to assess and evaluate the effective implementation of existing standards and laws is inadequate.

My contribution here is, first, to identify the major links between violence against women and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and, second, to suggest areas where the knowledge gap can be addressed so as to strengthen the effectiveness of policy responses. In this way, I hope to contribute to the discussion of the key issues to be addressed in the Secretary-General's study on ways of eliminating violence against women.

Linkages between violence against women and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals

The eight UN Millennium Development Goals¹ are each linked to gender-based violence.

Goal 1: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Violence against women undermines their capacity to work. Injuries and fear prevent women from engaging in productive employment contributing to poverty. Further, domestic violence is linked to the unequal distribution of resources within the household resulting in poverty and hunger for women and their children.

Goal 2: achieve universal primary education. When mothers are strong their children thrive, a necessary condition for all to engage effectively in education.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Eliminating violence is essential for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women. The existing target, to eliminate the gender disparity in education captures only one, though a key, dimension of gender inequality. While there is violence against women, there is no gender equality.

Goal 4: reduce child mortality. Child abuse and wife abuse are often linked. Mothers who are abused may be unable to look after their children as well as they would like. Abuse during pregnancy can affect the foetus and the newborn child. A reduction of violence against women is likely to reduce child mortality.

Goal 5, improve maternal health. Violence against women is significant cause of maternal ill health, sometimes leading to complications in childbirth.

¹ UN Millennium Development Goals accessed at: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

Goal 6: combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Sexual violence can play a role in the spread of HIV/AIDS since coerced sex is likely to be unprotected sex. The reduction in sexual violence against women is likely to lead to a reduction in the spread of HIV/AIDS to women and to the children they bear.

Goal 7: ensure environmental sustainability. Women can be key to developing practices for environmental sustainability. Women who are subject to violence are less likely to be able to contribute to this.

Goal 8: develop a global partnership for development. Development requires everyone to be effective actors; women who are subordinated through domestic violence are unlikely to contribute their expertise to the development process, with a critical loss of knowledge.

In brief, the reduction and elimination of violence against women would make a major contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Domestic violence costs society as a whole, not only the women who are abused. A UK study found that domestic violence cost that country £23 billion a year. This included over £3bn for state services, such as the criminal justice system, emergency housing and health care; £3bn in lost economic output; and £17bn in human costs².

Closing the knowledge gap: Adding an indicator on violence against women to the Millennium Development Goals

There has been much innovative policy development, passing of new laws, and proclamation of new standards in many countries around the world in order to reduce and eliminate violence against women. The amount of gender-based violence can be reduced by such changes. However, it is hard to know which policies, laws and standards have made a difference, since there is little systematic measurement of the extent of violence against women over time. Regular collection of data over time is needed in order to know if the new policies and laws are having the intended effect. There have been much rhetoric and policy initiation, but how much is concerted and effective action? Only if there is a measurable outcome can there be an effective assessment and evaluation of what works to reduce and eliminate violence against women. Only if these measures are repeated year after year, will we know if the policies are effective and if violence against women is being reduced. There is a need to close the knowledge gap between rhetoric and policy initiation on the one hand and actual reduction in violence against women on the other hand.

One of the reasons that the Millennium Development Goals have much potential to lead to the improvement in people's lives around the world is that they have measurable targets. The precise formulation of goal, targets and indicators are intended to provide reliable knowledge as

² Sylvia Walby (2004) *The Cost of Domestic Violence* (London: Department of Trade and Industry Women and Equality Unit). This is available at:
http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/research/cost_of_dv_Report_sept04.pdf

to whether the aspirations behind the Millennium Development Declaration are being translated into effective action.

The United Nations Millennium Declaration resolves ‘to combat all forms of violence against women’³. But, as yet, the Millennium Development Project does not have a measure to assess whether this resolve is being met with practical effect.

This leaves a knowledge gap that hinders the achievement of the Millennium Declaration. This makes it hard to hold to account the states that signed the Declaration.

I suggest that the Millennium Development project introduces an indicator on violence against women as part of the MDG Goal 3 ‘to promote gender equality and empower women’.

What might such an indicator be and how might the data be collected to support it? The key information is the extent to which women are subjected to violence, prevalence in the population, and how severe it is, for example how frequent and how injurious. To be consistent with standard collection of crime data, the measure might be that of the number of incidents in a year, relative to the size of population⁴.

In many countries of the world representative sample surveys have been carried out on violence against women. The methodology has been developing rapidly, with much learning between countries⁵. The introduction of a UN MDG indicator would further spur the development of robust data collection in this area by the responsible national statistical bodies.

There is currently the opportunity to create the consensus needed to introduce such an indicator, provided by the development of the Millennium Development Goals, the proposed increased priority accorded to human rights by the Secretary General’s in his report ‘*in larger freedom*’ for the UN Summit later in September, the interest by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Secretary-General’s forthcoming report on violence against women.

³ United Nations General Assembly (2000) Resolution 55/2. *United Nations Millennium Declaration*.

⁴ An example of a national survey on the extent and nature of gender-based violence is: Sylvia Walby and Jonathan Allen (2004) *Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey*. Home Office Research Study 276. (London: Home Office). This is available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors276.pdf>

⁵ UN expert group meeting final report ‘Violence against women: A statistical overview, challenges and gaps in data collection and methodology and approaches for overcoming them’ at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw-stat-2005/docs/final-report-vaw-stats.pdf>; Sylvia Walby ‘Improving the statistics on violence against women’, *Statistical Journal of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe*, 23 (in press 2006) accessible at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw-stat-2005/docs/expert-papers/walby.pdf>