

**Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-seventh session**

**Preparatory Panel for 2014**

**Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the  
Millennium Development Goals for women and girls**

Wednesday, 6 March 2013, 1:15-2:45 pm

**ISSUES PAPER**

**I. Introduction**

In accordance with the methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women (ECOSOC resolution 2006/9), UN Women organizes a panel event in the margins of each annual session to enable a preliminary discussion on the priority theme of the subsequent session. During the fifty-seventh session of the Commission, a panel discussion on “Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls” will be organized in preparation for the Commission’s fifty-eighth session in 2014.

**II. Background**

In September 2000, 189 Member States adopted the Millennium Declaration, which outlined a global vision to eradicate poverty, foster peace and security, protect the environment, achieve human rights and democracy, and protect the most vulnerable populations.<sup>1</sup> The Declaration also recognized the fundamental value of the equal rights and opportunities of women, and reaffirmed Member State commitments to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Furthermore, the Declaration acknowledged the importance of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective means to combating poverty, hunger and disease, and to stimulating truly sustainable development.

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were derived from the Millennium Declaration, have proven to be a powerful tool for sustaining global attention and galvanizing international support to promote development and meet the needs of the world’s poor by 2015. The specific, time-bound targets and measureable indicators have served as valuable benchmarks for monitoring and reporting on progress and achieving concrete results.

MDG 3 is dedicated to promoting gender equality and empowering women, and MDG 5 aims to reduce maternal mortality. There are also a number of other targets and indicators within the framework that relate directly to gender equality and women’s lives, and many of the indicators have been disaggregated by sex, with the notable exception of the MDG 1 indicators on poverty and the MDG 7 indicators on water and sanitation.

Since the introduction of the MDGs, there has been broad consensus that the achievement of gender equality is not only a goal in itself, but is critical to the achievement of the other goals as

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<sup>1</sup>A/RES/55/2

well. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently reiterated this position in stating that a failure to fulfill the goal of gender equality will have “broad negative consequences, given that achieving the MDGs depends so much on women’s empowerment and equal access by women to education, work, health care and decision-making.”<sup>2</sup>

Important progress has been made in many countries towards achieving the MDGs, particularly in the areas of reducing poverty, increasing people’s access to improved sources of water, and increased access to primary education.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, progress continues to be uneven between and within countries, as well as across regions. Multiple and intersectional inequalities and the marginalization of certain populations persist and continue to undermine progress. Women and girls often experience multiple forms of discrimination, including on the grounds of race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, and citizenship status, in addition to gender. The resulting social, political, and economic exclusion of women and girls can be further compounded by spatial inequalities for those who live in isolated rural areas or overcrowded slum neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup> Inequalities among different groups of women are also often overlooked in assessments of progress. Furthermore, structural barriers in the economic, social, political and environmental spheres produce and reinforce gender inequalities and serve as obstacles to the realization of the MDGs for women and girls.

As the benchmark of 2015 approaches, a growing number of States are intensifying their efforts to reach the targets established in the MDGs. In order to facilitate a focused and targeted approach to the priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2014, this panel will analyze the remaining obstacles and gaps that must be addressed in order to accelerate progress for women and girls, not just in reference to MDG 3, but in the development and achievement of all goals, while highlighting good practices and lessons learned.

### **III. Critical Issues**

The most recent 2012 Millennium Development Goals Report reveals that while there has been notable progress in a number of the gender dimensions of the MDGs, there is still much to be done in every country and at every level to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment.

In fact, the goals that are most off-track and least likely to be achieved are the ones that most depend on achieving gender equality, such as MDG 5 to improve maternal health, which requires women to be able to realize their rights and make decisions on whether or when to have children. While there have been some improvements in maternal health, and maternal deaths have declined by almost half worldwide since 1990, there were still 287,000 reported maternal deaths in 2010, 85 percent of which occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia.<sup>5</sup> These are also the same regions that have the lowest coverage of births attended by skilled health personnel—less than 50 percent, with even further intra-regional disparities.<sup>6</sup> Even in countries which are on-track to meet target 5a to reduce maternal mortality, there are great disparities between the general population and marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and internal migrants.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations. *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2012*. New York, 2012

<sup>3</sup> MDG Report 2012

<sup>4</sup> Kabeer, Naila. *Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice? The challenge of intersecting inequalities*. Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, 2010

<sup>5</sup> MDG Report 2012

<sup>6</sup> MDG Report 2012

There are also increasing gaps among the world's poor, rural and vulnerable populations in terms of knowledge about and access to reproductive health care.<sup>8</sup>

Research reveals that early marriage is a major contributor to the risk of early pregnancy and childbirth, which is the leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19 in developing countries.<sup>9</sup> Early childbearing is also linked to lower educational attainment (MDG 2, 3) and poverty (MDG 1), and vice versa. Contraceptive use has been proven to improve maternal and infant health; however, rates of contraceptive use have declined in the last decade as compared to 1990-2000. The rate of decline of adolescent pregnancies has also slowed over the last decade concurrently with a reduction in aid for family planning.<sup>10</sup>

Progress on MDG 5 is also intricately linked to the fulfillment of Goal 6 to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. The proportion of maternal deaths attributed to HIV was 10 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 6 percent in the Caribbean.<sup>11</sup> While new HIV infections have declined in most regions, globally, young women aged 15-24 are twice as likely to contract HIV as young men.<sup>12</sup> In fact, every minute, one young woman acquires HIV.<sup>13</sup> Women, in general, also continue to be disproportionately represented among those living with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa (59 percent) and in the Caribbean (53 percent).<sup>14</sup> Condom use among young people remains low, and there is still a great need for comprehensive sexuality education, including on HIV transmission. Harmful gender norms and violence both serve as barriers for women to negotiate condom use and to access services and support.

In terms of progress towards MDG 1 on eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, although household survey data are still not routinely sex disaggregated, the scarce evidence available suggests that women continue to be disproportionately represented among those living in poverty. In the context of the most recent economic and financial crisis, women have often been more adversely affected, including by the resulting austerity measures.<sup>15</sup> Research has shown that as a result of global gender inequalities, during economic hardships, women and girls are often the first to be taken out of school, are more likely to reduce the quantity or quality of their food and forgo medical treatment, and to sell sex for survival.<sup>16</sup> In general, women remain in a disadvantaged position in terms of access to productive employment in the formal sector, with more than half of the world's women in vulnerable employment.<sup>17</sup> In addition, due to the gender division of labour, the burden of care work almost always falls on women and girls to fulfill the family's needs for food, water, clothing, shelter and care for children, the elderly and sick, which, in turn, limits women's opportunities for paid work and other activities.<sup>18</sup> Additional

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<sup>8</sup> A/67/257, Report of the Secretary-General. *Accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals: Options for sustained and inclusive growth and issues for advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015*

<sup>9</sup> United Nations. *The Millennium Development Goals Report: Gender Chart 2012*. New York, 2012

<sup>10</sup> MDG Report 2012

<sup>11</sup> MDG Report 2012

<sup>12</sup> UNAIDS. *Women Out Loud: How women living with HIV will help the world end AIDS*. Geneva, 2012

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> MDG Report 2012

<sup>15</sup> Elson, Diane. "The Reduction of the UK Budget Deficit: A Human Rights Perspective," *International Review of Applied Economics*, 2012, vol. 26(2): 177-190

<sup>16</sup> UNAIDS. *Impact of the global economic crisis on women, girls and gender equality*. Geneva, 2012

<sup>17</sup> A/67/257

<sup>18</sup> Espey, Jessica, Caroline Harper, and Nicola Jones, "Crisis, care and childhood: the impact of economic crisis on care work in poor households in the developing world," *Gender & Development*, 2010, vol. 18(2): 291-307

factors such as women's lack of access to social protection, limited education and training, and lack of control of and equal access to economic and financial resources, combine to reinforce inequalities and further impoverish women and girls.

While increasing the quality of people's drinking water remains a challenge, the target of MDG 7 to halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water has actually been met, despite major persisting gaps between rural and urban populations. However, significant challenges remain for many women and girls. Due to weak infrastructure, women continue to bear the main burden of water collection, which significantly contributes to their unpaid work burdens. Furthermore, the target set for improving basic sanitation is still far from being reached. Close to half of those living in developing countries (2.5 billion) continue to lack access to improved sanitation facilities.<sup>19</sup> In addition, social norms related to privacy often restrict women's use of shared sanitation facilities to hours of darkness, increasing their vulnerability to violence.<sup>20</sup> Menstrual hygiene management is also a major challenge for many women and girls, who may limit their school or work attendance due to a lack of sanitation facilities that allow them to manage their menstruation hygienically and with dignity.<sup>21</sup> While MDG 7 was conceptualized before the impacts of climate change were well known and accepted, since 2000 the gendered impacts of changing weather patterns have been increasingly recognized. Despite their very important role in agriculture and their reliance on natural resources, women are often excluded from participating in the conservation and management of these resources.<sup>22</sup>

Violence remains one of the biggest obstacles to development and the realization of the MDGs both in times of peace and conflict. Close to one-fifth of the world's population lives in countries experiencing some type of significant violence, political conflict, insecurity or societal fragility.<sup>23</sup> An escalation of conflict often coincides with an increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence in both the public and private spheres.<sup>24</sup> In addition to violence experienced by women in conflict-affected areas, women and girls are subjected to numerous forms of violence in every country of the world that undermine efforts to overcome poverty and achieve development.

A great body of evidence now exists on good practices and lessons learned on successfully implementing the MDGs to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Initiatives such as those implemented in Bangladesh and Ethiopia that provide stipends to girls who stay in school and delay marriage until their education is completed, and the use of quotas to increase women's representation in political decision-making bodies such those used in Andorra, Belarus, and Cuba, can be used as models for change.<sup>25</sup> Other good practices include programmes such as the Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity (IMAGE) in South Africa, which provides small loans to women to start businesses and also combines gender and HIV education to facilitate women's negotiations of sexual relationships. This programme was found to contribute to a 55 percent reduction in the incidence of intimate partner violence experienced

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<sup>19</sup> A/67/257

<sup>20</sup> A/67/270, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. *Integrating non-discrimination and equality into the post-2015 development agenda for water, sanitation and hygiene*

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> UN Women. *2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women: In Pursuit of Justice*. New York, 2011

<sup>23</sup> A/67/257

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/women\\_war\\_peace/gender\\_based\\_violence.html](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_war_peace/gender_based_violence.html)

<sup>25</sup> *Progress of the World's Women*

by the women who participated.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, while there are numerous examples of programmes and policies that have succeeded in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, the recent economic, food and climate crises, and rising inequalities, clearly illustrate a need for more systemic approaches, such as universal social protection and healthcare and macroeconomic policies that promote economic stability and inclusive and sustainable growth.

#### **IV. Format and outcome of the interactive expert panel**

The panel will take the form of an interactive dialogue. Three expert panelists will make presentations of no more than eight minutes. Member States, United Nations system entities and non-governmental organizations will be encouraged to share experiences, raise issues that should be considered within the theme, and/or respond to the panelists' presentations. Interventions from the floor will be limited to three minutes. The dialogue is part of the preparations for 2014, and will be available via webcast. A moderator's summary of the dialogue will be prepared and posted on the website of UN Women.

#### **V. Issues for consideration in the interactive dialogue**

The following issues could be considered:

- What are the main challenges to meeting the MDG target date of 2015 for women and girls?
- What are the priority areas where new and concerted policy measures and interventions are necessary to achieve all MDGs for women and girls?
- What initiatives have been effective in meeting the MDGs for women and girls and how can those be scaled up?
- What are the key lessons learned from the MDGs that can inform a future development framework that actively promotes women's rights gender equality?

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<sup>26</sup> *Progress of the World's Women*