

# Gender Equality & the Millennium Development Goals

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## Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals

The eight Millennium Development Goals form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries for providing a measurable, minimum package of development for the world's poorest<sup>1</sup>. Goal 2 (universal primary education) is essential for Goal 3 gender equality and empowerment of women; while gender equality and women's empowerment is a prerequisite for the remaining six Development Goals.

### United Nations and UN Agency Commitments to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration called for women's empowerment and full participation in all spheres of society<sup>2</sup>. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) seeks specifically to foster women's empowerment and gender equality, putting women's human rights at the centre of its efforts<sup>3</sup>. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) works to improve reproductive health with gender equality a human right, and empowering women an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty<sup>4</sup>. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supports governments, civil society and community organizations to address gender inequality and power relations<sup>5</sup>. UNAIDS initiative The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS is concerned with empowering women to fight AIDS with a focus on eight key issues for improving AIDS programming for women and girls<sup>6</sup>. The 2001 UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV and AIDS declaration stresses that the empowerment of women is fundamental for reducing their vulnerability to infection<sup>7</sup>. The 2006 United Nations General Assembly political Declaration on HIV/AIDS pledges to eliminate gender inequalities and increase the capacities of women and adolescent girls to protect themselves from risk of HIV infection ... and take all necessary measures to create an enabling environment for empowerment of women and strengthen their economic independence. This means that women's economic empowerment—which requires equality in access to education and resources, as well as the right to own property and land, and to participate in legislative processes—are prerequisites for attaining the Millennium Development Goals for HIV and AIDS and attaining reproductive health.

The global commitments with agreed indicators and targets for gender equality provide a hugely important platform for donor discussions with partner governments on progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment as ***the targets are not imposed but are the recipient government's own targets.***

### Definition of women's empowerment

Women's empowerment generally refers to the recognition that women legitimately have the ability and should, individually and collectively, participate effectively in decision-making processes that shape their societies and their own lives<sup>8</sup>. In relation to empowerment and the Millennium Development Goals, women must legitimately have the ability and should make informed decisions about their own lives, bodies and behaviors. Important aspects of empowerment are both *agency* (defined as ability to set their own goals and act upon them) and women's *resources* and *capacities*<sup>9</sup>. Women's agency is greatly impacted by prevailing concepts of gender and gender roles, and their own gender socialization.

At macro level, development organizations can create an enabling environment by addressing the structural and institutional factors that oppress women. They can create structures that institutionalize opportunity for women. At individual level, development agencies and NGOs can facilitate empowerment through skills building, access to information and resources, and creating processes where women have gender equitable roles and opportunities for leadership and decision-making. However, empowerment of women cannot be bestowed by others; those who would become empowered must claim it<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, **methodologies for working with women must be facilitative and not directive, to achieve empowerment.**

Agency — women making decisions on issues that are important in their lives and carrying out those decisions — requires reflection, analysis and action<sup>11</sup>. This may happen on an individual or collective level. Care must be taken when addressing gender relations at the individual level as challenges to existing power relations between men and women are often strongly contested. However, gender relations need not be viewed as a closed system with women’s empowerment resulting in loss of power by men. Instead, both men and women need empowering to have gender equitable relationships that, in the context of socioeconomic development, support change in roles for women and girls with equality in access to household resources and education.

### **Effectiveness of Empowerment as a Strategy**

Empowerment is considered by some a development outcome in itself, and by others a means to an end, for example attaining socioeconomic development. Nevertheless, there is no widely accepted method for measuring and tracking changes in levels of women’s empowerment although progress is being made in development of a framework and indicators for measuring women’s empowerment<sup>12</sup>. The World Health Organization’s Health Evidence Network (HEN) has researched the effectiveness of empowerment to improve health and reduce health disparities. The HEN synthesis report shows that empowering initiatives can lead to improved health outcomes and that empowerment is a viable public health strategy<sup>13</sup>. While the sexual and reproductive health aspects of HIV are only part of a multisectoral development challenge, it is useful to know that “[m]ultilevel empowerment strategies for HIV/AIDS prevention which address gender inequities have improved the health status and reduced HIV infection rates”<sup>14</sup>.

There is a growing body of empirical evidence that women’s empowerment benefits women’s own health promoting behaviors and that they try to promote better social and health outcomes, and equitable gender norms among their married daughters and their daughters-in-law<sup>15</sup>.

Interventions to empower women, integrated with the economic, educational and political sectors, have shown the greatest impact on women’s quality of life and agency, and on policy changes, and on improved child and family health.

### **Change in Developing Economy Countries**

#### *Legislative reform and enforcement of the law*

Change is needed to support gender equality in many countries. This includes changes in the legal framework to reduce discrimination against women that may be enshrined in the law: statutory, common, and/or customary (traditional practice) or religious. Follow up is

vital to changes in the legal code to ensure women know their rights<sup>16</sup> — for example to be able to divorce a violent, abusive husband; rights to own land and property; to be able to inherit property and land from their husbands, and not themselves be inherited by a dead husband's brother or other male relative — and that women's legal rights are respected. Laws that exist to protect women's rights must be enforced. Women (and often their children) need access to provisions that ensure they receive adequate crisis care and support when they are victims of gender-based violence. A number of donors are funding work in this area including the International Development Research Centre's work on gender relations and land tenure<sup>17</sup>, the Canadian International Development Agency's Women's Legal Empowerment commitment, and USAID's Women's Legal Rights Initiative.

### *Empowering girls through education*

Most countries have signed on to the Millennium Development Goals, and Goal 2 attaining universal primary education is critical to addressing poverty. Goal 3, Target 4: eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015 is also important for women's empowerment. Education helps girls and women achieve greater agency over their lives. Girls educated to secondary and tertiary levels are less likely to be coerced into sex. Higher levels of education translate into higher earning power in the job market.

#### ➤ Barriers to girls accessing schooling

School enrolment and poverty are directly and inversely related. School fees and other formal and informal costs reduce the number of children who can stay in school. Girls are less likely to receive family financing for education costs than boys. They may drop out from school or they may engage in transactional sex to help pay for their education<sup>18</sup>. Girls carry a greater burden of caring for sick parents and siblings than boys, and family members' AIDS-related illness has increased this burden. Girls are more likely than boys to be kept home from school to help with household chores.

#### ➤ Increasing girls access to schooling

Potential areas for development assistance include subsidies for reducing school fees and other financial barriers to girls enrolling and remaining in secondary school. A randomized evaluation of education in Western Kenya found that reducing the cost of education by paying for school uniforms reduced dropout rates, teen marriage and childbearing<sup>19</sup>. Such support is particularly needed by orphans<sup>20</sup> if they are to break out of the downward spiral of HIV, AIDS and increasing poverty. Cash transfers targeted to poor people, but conditional on school attendance are being adopted in a growing number of developing countries<sup>21</sup> and donors<sup>22</sup>. A well designed impact evaluation of the Progresca conditional cash transfer program in Mexico, using a quasi experimental methodology demonstrated that the program effectively reduced drop out rates and facilitated transition through the grades, particularly the transmission between primary school and secondary school<sup>23</sup>. Targeted scholarships and stipends to overcome financial and, through the direct empowerment of girls, also cultural barriers to girls' school attendance have also been successful in Bangladesh and India. Social transfers in the form of foster care grants are often an integral element of an overall care package for children affected by AIDS. Early findings from the pilot *Kenya Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children* show how the unconditional transfer of Ksh.500

(\$6.97) per month has increased school attendance. Similarly, overall absenteeism from school has declined by 16 percent over the first nine months of the *Kalomo cash transfer pilot scheme* in Zambia — where transfers are made to the most vulnerable households, often grandparents caring for children affected by AIDS<sup>24</sup>.

➤ The quality of education and safety of schools

In addition to addressing the demand side for girl's education, it is important to improve the quality, availability and safety of schooling. It is critical that schools provide a safe environment for girls, and that schools in Africa take effective measures to reduce the widespread sexual and other abuse by male teachers and older students<sup>25</sup>. Ministries of education may need to revise curricula to educate boys and girls in social competencies including respect for others, and particularly respect for women and girls. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has published guidance on developing a gender sensitive environment for teaching and learning with gender equity training for teachers and a gender equitable curriculum and teaching materials<sup>26</sup>.

**Implications for programs addressing reproductive health, and HIV and AIDS**

To attain the Millennium Development Goals, reproductive health and HIV and AIDS programming must be part of a wider development approach that strives for gender equality and economic empowerment. They must not be viewed only as health sector issues if the wider determinants of poor reproductive health, the increasing spread of HIV infection and the impact that AIDS is having on families, communities and countries' economies are to be successfully addressed. Governments have the moral imperative to lead a multisector development response; they are also best placed to provide the enabling environment of legislation and policies that are needed to ensure gender equality and empowerment of women, and reduce discrimination against women, the poor and marginalized and those infected with HIV. Civil society must advocate for the necessary changes including the needed investment in education and services. Non-governmental organizations are often best placed for extending the demand for change and for services into the community, reaching families and individuals. It is in the commercial sector's interest to join the movement for attaining the Millennium Development Goals to ensure a healthy workforce and develop markets for products and services.

Broad coalitions and partnerships are needed to coordinate approaches, programs and services; to ensure there is no wastage through overlap or inefficiencies through gaps in programs and services. Collaborations and alliances permit sharing resources, development of efficient and effective systems, and mutual capacity building. Organizational effort is focused on attaining common goals rather than on rivalry with competition. National processes for monitoring programs and services are needed to ensure that effective programming is identified and brought to scale to equitably meet health and development needs, nationally.

The limitations on such scaling up include too little investment by national governments and donors in attaining the Millennium Development Goals, as well as national human resource limitations. Far too often there are too few health, education, justice and development workers trained and deployed, too few trained staff at health facilities, schools, and legal aid and justice offices, inadequate staffing and systems in the national

health, education and justice systems, and too little funding to expand recruitment, training and further systems strengthening.

### **About MIDEGO**

MIDEGO works with partners to build capacity for developing gender sensitive policies and designing programs and services that address socioeconomic development from a gender sensitive perspective. MIDEGO facilitates collaborative strategic planning and design processes, working with stakeholders and ensuring a gender analysis of proposals and plans for services and programs. MIDEGO trains program managers and implementers in gender equality and coaches them in applying gender equitable practices in their work.

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