

**Commission on the Status of Women**  
**Fifty-seventh session**  
4 March – 15 March 2013

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

**Moderator's summary**

1. On 6 March 2013, the Commission on the Status of Women held a panel discussion on the “Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls” to enable a preliminary discussion on the priority theme of the fifty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2014. Ms. Ana Marie Hernando, Vice-Chair of the Commission, moderated the discussion. Ms. Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), made opening remarks. The panelists were: Ms. Naila Kabeer, Professor of Development Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University; Ms. Carole Presern, Director, Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Secretariat (PMNCH); and Ms. Lyla Mehta, Research Fellow, Knowledge Technology and Society Team, Institute of Development Studies, and Visitor Professor at Noragric, Norwegian University of Life Sciences. Representatives from Member States, regional groups and civil society contributed to the discussion.

2. 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.

3. The most recent 2012 Millennium Development Goals Report<sup>1</sup> 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. Achieving the MDGs will depend on women's equal access to education, healthcare, work, and participation in decision-making processes. As the end date of 2015 approaches, a growing number of States are intensifying their efforts to reach the targets established in the MDGs.

4. Participants of the interactive expert panel identified a number of issues and obstacles to meeting the MDG targets related to gender equality by 2015 but also presented concrete cases of effective interventions and good practices, as well as lessons learned.

***The right of women and girls to live free from poverty and hunger***

5. The dearth of productive and decent employment – for men as well as women - is the biggest challenge for poverty eradication. But, rising female economic activity in the non-agricultural sector cannot be taken as an unambiguous indicator of poverty reduction and of women's empowerment: what matters are the returns to women's labour and their ability to use these returns to pursue valued goals. In a number of contexts, rising female labour force participation has had a

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/mdg-report-2012.html>

positive impact on various measures of gender equality, including literacy and mortality rates, but it is formal employment specifically, as opposed to informal employment, that has the most consistent positive impact on a wide variety of indicators of women's empowerment.

6. Women's education and formal employment not only emerge as important determinants of economic growth but can also play a pivotal role in helping to translate economic growth into progress on other aspects of gender equality, and on human development more generally, thereby improving the distributional impact of growth and its impact on multidimensional poverty. Central to this catalytic role is the greater voice and agency associated with women's access to valued resources.

7. Moreover, given the volatility of global market forces, the need for a basic level of social security to cope with the resulting uncertainty as well as the importance of on-going investment in the knowledge and skills of the labour force is ever more pressing. Implementing comprehensive gender-responsive social protection systems as the backbone of wider social policy measures is fundamental to achieving the MDGs.

### ***Reaching the health MDGs for women and girls***

8. Achievement of the health MDGs has been uneven; there has been accelerated progress in some areas, for example on reducing child mortality (MDG 4), but less so on maternal mortality (MDG 5). A 5.5 percent annual rate of decline is required to achieve the target on maternal mortality, but the current rate is only 1.9 percent (since 1990) which means in many parts of the world, women are still dying at high rates from preventable causes.

9. Gender discrimination is increasingly recognized as one of the most powerful determinants of health, affecting the demand for and access to health care directly and indirectly. Gender norms often limit women's access to money, along with their mobility, which can delay or prevent them from reaching health services and purchasing essential medicines. Many women and girls lack knowledge about pregnancy-related and HIV risks and threats to child survival, a result of low education levels, illiteracy, and lack of access to information. Moreover, gender-based violence is now recognized as a major public health problem that cuts across the "continuum of care" for reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health, and exacerbates other health risks.

### ***Access to water and sanitation is vital to social justice and human development***

10. In July 2010, the General Assembly declared the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a universal human right, which was further affirmed by the United Nations Human Rights Council. In March 2012, the world met the water target of halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water, well in advance of the 2015 deadline. Between 1990 and 2010, over two billion people gained access to improved drinking water sources, such as piped supplies and protected wells. However, 780 million people still use unimproved sources of drinking water. Although 1.3 billion people now have access to improved sanitation (since 1990), more than a billion people still do not, meaning that the sanitation target will not be achieved. Women's disproportionate responsibility for household water, sanitation and fuel supply means that they are more vulnerable to environmental changes. The lack of sanitation facilities also exposes women and girls to the risks of violence.

11. Access to water and sanitation helps to reduce poverty in multiple ways: it frees up time to focus on livelihood and agricultural activities (as well as leisure), and prevents people from losing critical

days from work and livelihood activities due to ill-health. People suffering from water-borne diseases often cannot absorb nutrients in food, resulting in chronic hunger conditions. Every day, it is estimated that 4,000 babies die due to lack of access to proper water and sanitation. Conversely, access to water in the household can be used by women for their home plots and can provide additional nutrition to diets, especially for children. Where proper sanitation and menstrual hygiene facilities exist, including in schools, women and girls are able to have privacy and dignity.

***Lessons learned on what is working and priority areas for achieving all MDGs for women and girls***

12. Examples of best practice were shared, amongst them: the promotion of economic empowerment through the creation of cooperatives for urban and rural girls, the establishment of funds to support women entrepreneurs, the formation of water and sanitation commissions to monitor access to services by the population, the development of school curricula to challenge stereotypes and to support girls' school attendance and completion and efforts to reduce the maternal mortality rate by improving health facilities, strengthening capacity of medical staff and supporting collection and use of data to improve the monitoring of progress.

13. The MDGs have been instrumental in placing focused attention on human development issues, but they have also tended to compartmentalize interventions towards poverty eradication. The linkages between the goals have not always been recognized or readily understood; interventions have thus tended to be fragmented. Participants agreed that a multi-sectoral approach to poverty eradication through the provision of universal and holistic packages of services is needed. The interlinkages between maternal mortality and violence against women and sexual and reproductive health and rights were especially highlighted, as were the links between advances in water and sanitation provision and girls' education.

14. Issues of social equity and discrimination have often been overlooked in an effort of focusing on the so-called 'low-hanging fruit'. For example in the case of sanitation there are high urban-rural disparities in terms of access. In 2010, globally 79 percent of urban populations used an improved sanitation facility as compared to 47 percent of populations in rural areas. However, peri-urban and slum areas, which are some of the fastest growing areas in the world, are not included in these statistics. In order to drive progress and accountability for the 'hardest to reach' people, including marginalized women and girls, participants agreed on the need to strengthen data collection, on supporting the availability of data disaggregated by sex, income and location, and other determinants of disadvantage, and on reinforcing monitoring and evaluation systems. While the lack of quality and timely data was widely cited as hampering progress, such gaps did not reduce the need for urgent action.

15. Speakers agreed that success in achieving the MDGs for women and girls will remain elusive unless gender perspectives are mainstreamed into social and economic policies.

***Global and national leadership is needed to accelerate progress in achieving the MDGs***

16. The MDGs have shown that a global consensus is possible, but more political will and leadership is needed, especially in the areas where there has been less progress. Parliamentarians have been active partners in promoting government leadership, working at national, regional and global level. Through the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) parliamentarians from around the world signed a resolution in 2012 calling for the implementation of all necessary measures to achieve MDGs 4 and 5.

17. Recognizing the slow and unequal progress on the health MDGs, the Secretary-General launched a global strategy on maternal, newborn and child health in 2010, *Every Woman, Every Child*. The strategy is credited with generating new commitments (220 commitments to date), attracting new funding, stimulating partnerships and high level political support for under-addressed health issues. The Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health, established after the launch of the global strategy has been powerful in highlighting the key remaining issues, including shortfalls in skilled attendance at birth.

***Civil society is key to holding duty bearers accountable***

18. Governments have a responsibility to make sure that women's rights are advanced and not bypassed. One important way is by building the capacity of women's organizations thereby giving them greater voice and influence in advancing their own rights, interests and priorities. Trade unions have historically played this role and with the growing informality of work, they have had to adopt different strategies to expand their membership. At the same time, new types of organizations that are more responsive to the constraints faced by women workers in the informal economy are emerging. These offer a more joined-up approach to tackling gender-related challenges in both domestic and public spheres.

***Post-2015 development framework must be stronger on achieving gender equality***

19. In shaping the post-2015 development framework, a number of recommendations were made including the need for a stand-alone goal on gender equality and a strong commitment to gender mainstreaming across all other goals. Specific areas that should be included in the future development framework include:

*Strong commitment to human rights*

20. The strong commitment to human rights and social justice of the Millennium Declaration needs to be reinforced by a strong framework for implementation, based on human rights. The poorest women, those in rural areas, women who belong to ethnic or religious minorities, and young women, are too often denied their human rights. For example, women's access to reproductive health services varies greatly depending on age, location, ethnicity or income. The new set of goals need to be monitored in a way that those hardest to reach due to factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity are fully considered and targeted.

*Addressing all forms of violence against women*

21. The Millennium Declaration includes a commitment to preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women and the full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The omission of violence against women from the MDG framework has been recognized as a major shortcoming. In the next development framework, violence against women and girls, a scourge that affects issues related to health, education, safety, access to markets and economic productivity, and fundamental human rights, must be fully recognized and included. A strong global commitment on a policy of zero tolerance should be made and concrete action plans formulated to ensure implementation.

*Addressing women's work loads*

22. Responsibilities for both paid and unpaid work mean that most women and many girls from low-income households are both overworked and underpaid. A fairer distribution of unpaid work between men and women as part of a broader movement to transform gender relations and promote

men's fatherhood roles and responsibilities is needed. The provision of reliable and affordable support for women's care responsibilities is crucial. This would not only promote women's ability to participate in paid work but also in other spheres of activity: community activities, collective action, political participation and leisure.

*Harnessing women's knowledge for environmental sustainability*

23. Gender inequality is linked to both the environment and natural disasters. While recognizing that women are often disproportionately impacted by natural disasters, positioning them only as victims overlooks their agency and environmental knowledge. Women's environmental knowledge and agency is a new area that the post-2015 development framework should promote. The intersection of gender, class, location, and caste must be analyzed and addressed in the climate change agenda.

*Monitoring quality as well as quantity*

24. The monitoring of the MDGs focuses little on the qualitative aspect of the goals. In the case of education, the focus on enrollment rates meant there was little attention placed on the interlinked factors causing high drop-out rates among adolescent girls, or the risk of sexual violence and other human rights violations that keep girls from attending and finishing school. The post-2015 development framework is the opportunity to shift the focus from quantity to quality across sectors and areas.

***Other issues:***

25. Participants raised a number of additional issues, including regional cooperation on trafficking of drugs and persons; the impact of sanctions on progress towards development and poverty eradication; the need to address the specific barriers to human development faced by women and girls in landlocked and war affected countries; and issues around access to affordable financial services; the need for greater international assistance and cooperation; the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to promote gender equality and women's rights; and the impact of the economic crisis on achieving the MDGs.