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MAKING THE MISSING LINK:
MDGs, Gender and Macroeconomic Policy

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This paper analyzes the impact of the macroeconomic framework underlying globalization on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in Sub-Saharan Africa and its implications for the MDG process. As such, it focuses on the areas of concern related to women's economic rights and poverty in the Beijing Platform For Action. It highlights the critical issues at the interface of gender inequality, poverty and neoliberal economic policy, and points to this prevailing macroeconomic framework as a critical gap in linking the Beijing PFA and MDGs.

The paper is in two main parts: the first part reviews the progress and setbacks in the implementation of the Beijing PFA in SSA with a focus on the relationships between gender inequality, neoliberal economic policies and poverty. The second part deals with the conceptualization of the links between the Beijing PFA and MDGs, and discusses key issues related to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) from a gender perspective, along the conceptual and methodological issues that should be addressed in order to develop a conceptual framework for linking MDGs and the gender equality agenda.

1. Ten Years After Beijing: Trends and Issues in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)

The first part of this section focuses on the implementation of the Beijing PFA in SSA countries, with a view to highlight the major trends and issues related to women's economic rights and poverty. The second part examines the main policy responses to poverty issues from a gender perspective in order to assess their impact on the gender equality agenda and the implications for the core MDG related to poverty (MDG1).

1.1. Progress and Setbacks

Gender mainstreaming: A Double-Edged Strategy

The national and sub-regional reports on the implementation of the Beijing PFA indicate that considerable progress has been made in terms of legal texts and political participation. Achievements since 1995 include:

- The ratification of the CEDAW by 51 of the 53 African States;
- The elaboration and adoption of the Protocol on the Rights of African Women to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights;
- The increased number of women in national parliaments, with 48% of women in Rwanda's parliament;
- The revision of Family Codes in Algeria and Morocco;
- The adoption of laws against harmful traditional practices;
- The adoption of declarations on gender equality at the sub-regional level in SADC, COMESA and ECCAS;
- Gender parity in leadership positions at the African Union;
- Women's contribution to peace processes in Burundi, the DRC and the Mano River.

Progress in the areas of concerns of the Beijing PFA related to poverty and women's economic rights has been uneven across countries and sub-regions. It is even more difficult to assess as

unlike the MDGs, there are no time-bound targets and indicators. The sub-regional reports point to a common set of issues faced by most African countries in implementing the Beijing PFA. Among these, the weakening of the women's movement, economic barriers to women's empowerment and a disabling international environment feature prominently (Ouedraogo 2004; Renard Painter 2004).

The weakening of the women's movement is partly due to the development of a 'gender movement', which is a direct product of gender mainstreaming efforts at different levels. The emergence of this 'gender movement' that denies the existence of women's specific issues resulting from their subordination raises the issue of the prevailing tendency to use gender mainstreaming merely as a technical device, rather than as a political tool for women's empowerment. In this regard, gender mainstreaming strategies have underestimated to a large extent the dynamics of social and cultural factors in the context of globalization. In the face of increasing poverty, inequalities and social exclusion, identity politics and cultural values have been hijacked by the forces who stand to gain from the perpetuation of patriarchal structures, including the control on women's labor which is the major issue at stake for the sub-region in the coming years. This point will be further elaborated in the second part of this paper.

The weakening of the women's movement has been compounded by the absence of a coherent framework for coordination at the regional level, and the lack of capacity and leadership on gender equality issues in regional institutions such as the African Union and the NEPAD Secretariat. Combined with the low level of capacity among women's organizations in economic policy analysis and advocacy, all these have contributed to the slow progress in eliminating economic barriers to women's empowerment.

The Unfinished Agenda: Women's Economic Empowerment

Economic barriers to women's empowerment have been identified since a long time before the adoption of the Beijing PFA. While the reports show that most of them have not been eliminated, notably gender inequalities in access to and control over productive resources, it is important to go beyond the specific constraints related to national contexts described in the reports and to look at the effects of common factors that have influenced the implementation processes in all the African countries under review. These common factors include (i) the HIV/AIDS pandemic; and (ii) economic globalization, including the macroeconomic framework of adjustment and post-adjustment policies.

It is well-known that SSA is at the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and that women and girls are the most affected. The impact of HIV/AIDS in its different aspects has been the subject of a wealth of analyses and advocacy. The slogan of the Millennium Campaign is especially true for the fight against HIV/AIDS: there are no excuses for not taking urgent action to reverse the current trends reported by the regional MDG Report: ten years after the adoption of the Beijing PFA, *"in many parts of Africa, teenage girls are five to six times more likely to be infected by the HIV virus than boys their age. New HIV infections are disproportionately concentrated among poor and adolescent women... (...)...Even if new infection rates drop in the next few years, half of all 15-year olds alive today in the most affected countries are at risk of dying of the disease."* (UNDP-UNICEF 2002). There are also no excuses for the fact that ODA for the fight against

HIV/AIDS in SSA is only US \$2 per capita (UNECA 2004), when we know that the international community is able to effectively mobilize more than US \$4 billion within one week for the Tsunami disaster that has killed as many people as AIDS currently does each and every month.

Although both the Beijing PFA and the Outcome document of the Beijing+5 Review include specific recommendations on the need to take into account the impacts of globalization, only a few reports mention such contextual factors. However, the literature on gender and globalisation in Africa provides ample evidence that the current wave of globalisation has been accompanied by increasing poverty and inequality between and within nations, as well as along class and gender lines. Most studies point out that African women have not benefited from the current wave of globalization and that in many instances, they have provided their free labour in the productive and reproductive spheres for men to access opportunities, as evidenced in the much-lamented feminisation of poverty (Tsikata and al 2000, DAWN 2000, Randriamaro 2002).

While most countries have sought to address issues related to women's economic rights and poverty in their national action plans for implementing the Beijing PFA, the effectiveness of strategies has been hindered by critical flaws in the conceptualisation of women's economic empowerment. Thus, strategies have been devised without taking into account the changes in women's economic activity as a result of globalisation and liberalisation policies.

The sub-regional reports point to important questions that remain about changes in priorities and strategies, as well as on the nature of new priorities and strategies (Ouedraogo 2004). These outstanding questions suggest that there is need to further analyze the determining factors of changes in order to have a comprehensive and meaningful assessment. As this paper argues, these factors will also determine to a large extent the achievement of MDGs.

1.2. The Vicious Circle: Gender Inequality, Neoliberal Economic Policies and Poverty

Poverty Reduction Strategies: Still Gender Blind

An accurate analysis should start from the position that the context of recent economic policy reforms – from SAPs, PRSPs and trade liberalization to privatization – defines the dynamic framework of the links between the Beijing PFA and MDGs.

As an example, many reports for Beijing+10 underline the lack of resources for implementing the PFA, but the links with the impact of economic reforms have not been examined, and it is commonly understood that this is mainly due to the lack of political will. While this assumption appears to be valid in most cases, there have been very few concrete actions for addressing the links with economic reforms and their gender dimensions, apart from a small number of research and advocacy activities and the gender-responsive budgeting initiatives in some countries.

With respect to the central MDG to eradicate poverty and hunger, among the 31 countries identified as MDG top priority countries because of high levels of poverty and either stagnating or reversing trends towards the MDGs, 27 are in Sub-Saharan Africa. A number of reports,

including the regional MDG report (UNDP-UNICEF 2002), underline that Africa is likely to be the only region where the number of poor people in 2015 will be higher than in the 1990s.

This is despite the fact that poverty reduction has become the top priority in official discourses and programmes/projects at both national and regional level. A wealth of studies has been carried out by an increasing number of stakeholders from the civil society, academia, governments and donors, along with the implementation of poverty reduction strategies at different levels. In fact, it appears that the changes entailed by the international consensus around the poverty reduction agenda thus far have affected only some aspects of poverty reduction policy processes. Current poverty trends indicate that in most cases, these changes have not altered the main policy thrust of poverty reduction strategies in the sub-region.

The most visible change at the policy level is the increased institutionalization of participatory approaches, in line with the evolution of the poverty reduction agenda at the global level. While such institutionalization provides a window of opportunity to integrate gender perspectives and to promote the democratization of policy making, *“participation by itself does not guarantee pro-poor outcomes. An evaluation commissioned by UNDP [2003c] regarding its role in the PRSP process found little or no correlation between the breadth of participation and the policy content of the PRSP.”* (Vandermoortele 2004).

Moreover, concerns expressed since the launch of the PRSP process by women and civil society activists about the peculiar conception of participation among the IFIs and governments have been amply justified. The reality behind the much-lauded participatory development of poverty reduction strategies is that in 2003, 16 out of the 20 countries that completed a PRSP had actually an agreed PRGF with the IMF prior to the completion of the PRSP (OXFAM 2004, cited in Vandermoortele 2004). This means that national stakeholders had very little say in macroeconomic target-setting. As a result, *“representatives from line ministries, trade unions, employers’ federations, civil society and academia are beginning to feel that they are involved in a process of ‘choiceless’ participation; sensing limitations for generating homegrown strategies.”* (Vandermoortele 2004)

Meanwhile, SSA countries have continued to comply with the macroeconomic conditionalities imposed on them. Thus, as a result of efforts to reduce fiscal deficits, public investment fell from 6.4% in 2000 to 5% in 2001 in a continuation of trends observed through the 80s and 90s. This is *“a cause for concern”* according to UNECA who has always been a strong supporter of macroeconomic stability, but has come to recognize the need for complementary public and private sector roles in the development process (UNECA 2004:40). The most common policy response to these fiscal problems has been to increase domestic indirect taxation on goods and services, with a focus on the VAT, that is on particularly regressive forms of taxation from a gender perspective.

This is a typical illustration of the persistent gender-blindness of the prevailing neoliberal economic model. The biases inherent to these policies have continued to undermine women’s livelihoods and rights, and their systematic de-valuation of women’s reproductive work has kept invisible their vital contributions to productivity and growth in the context of globalization.

While there is no doubt that the analysis of the causes of the failure to meet MDG targets must take account of the complexity and diversity of national contexts, it is also evident that the enduring predominance of the neoliberal macroeconomic framework is a key factor in the failure to reverse poverty trends in SSA where poor people's livelihoods critically depend on women's economic contributions.

Women's Work and Poverty

The orthodoxy in economic policy making has led to ignore critical changes that have affected the poverty profile in SSA countries in the context of globalization. According to a recent study based on material from SSA, the prevailing poverty reduction strategies are plagued by conceptual flaws in their assumptions about women's work and poverty. In particular, strategies have tended to focus on subsistence farming and to pay little attention to the non-farm sector, while off-farm activity accounts on average for 45 per cent of rural households' income because *"the very poor have long diversified their activities because no single source of income can sustain household members...(...)... The poorest groups are thus those without access to off-farm income"* (Kabeer 2003).

This trend has been accelerated by economic liberalisation that led to the removal of government's subsidies for farm inputs and control on prices. In the face of ever-increasing costs of production and consumer prices, rural households had no other choice but to search for new, more remunerative activities outside agriculture which has become increasingly feminised as men have moved faster than women into the off-farm sector.

In addition, for women farmers, problems due to gender-based inequalities have been worsened by the increasing commercialisation of agriculture. In general, it is the better-off farmers with large-scale plantations, equipment and capital who have benefited from new non-traditional agricultural exports (NTAEs). The majority of women are involved in NTAEs as waged labour in large-scale enterprises organised along quasi-industrial lines: over 65 per cent of workers in Kenya and Zambia; 91 per cent of horticultural employees in Zimbabwe. In smallholder farms, *"contracts are provided on the understanding that male household heads can mobilise the labour of women and children in the family."* (Kabeer 2003).

The prevailing strategies have also tended to neglect markets, particularly the rural labour market, based on the widespread view that *"labour markets in rural Africa are very thin and are only now emerging in some areas in response to population growth and external trade opportunities."* (Kabeer 2003) Yet, female casual wage labour is the main source of labour supply for smallholder farms.

As underlined by the study, *"it is clear that women's work is critical to the survival and security of poor people, and an important route from which they are able to escape out of poverty."* (Kabeer 2003). For the MDG process to promote a virtuous circle of pro-poor economic growth, the key challenge is therefore to address the policy roots of women's disempowerment which are embedded in the mainstream economic paradigm as well as in unequal structures of power at the national and global levels.

2. Linking the Beijing PFA and MDGs

This section deals with some critical issues related to the conceptualization of the links between the Beijing PFA and MDGs and to current approaches for integrating a gender perspective into MDG monitoring processes. It focuses on PSRP processes that are expected to play a key role in the achievement of MDGs. It also offers some policy recommendations for the development of a conceptual framework that can be used to link the MDGs with other processes for achieving women's economic empowerment and gender equality.

2.1. The Critical Gap: Gender and the Macroeconomic Framework

Conceptual Issues

The conceptual framework for linking the Beijing PFA and MDGs should build on the identification of the specific ways in which the frameworks provided by the Beijing PFA, CEDAW and MDGs can support each other, as recommended by UNIFEM (UNIFEM 2004). It should also build on the identification of emerging issues that are critical to the achievement of MDGs, but are not directly addressed by the CEDAW and the Beijing PFA.

As mentioned above, the enduring predominance of the neoliberal macroeconomic framework is a key challenge arising from the current context of the implementation of the Beijing PFA and the MDG process. This framework which has proved to be detrimental to poor people's rights and livelihoods, especially women, has been consolidated by the geopolitical developments at the global level. While women's movements are confronted with the backlash by conservative and fundamentalist forces, the neoliberal economic agenda benefits from the unconditional support of the most powerful stakeholders in global economic governance, most of who are also considered as supporters of the gender equality agenda in international arenas.

In addition, in the name of policy coherence and poverty reduction, the MDG process is being used by the IFIs to further consolidate this neoliberal orthodoxy. As a feminist activist pointed out: "*while UNDP is calling for national reports on nationally set goals, the IMF and World Bank are incorporating the first seven goals into their negotiations for loan and aid agreements with developing countries, including through PRSPs.*" (Barton 2003)

Such situation is a basis for major concern, as this neoliberal macroeconomic framework is also one of the major pitfalls that women's organizations have underlined in the MDGs process. Indeed, while UNDP has championed nationally set goals for the MDG process, these goals are still expected to be achieved under the neoliberal macroeconomic policy framework. This is evidenced in current efforts by the UN system to link the MDG process with the PRSPs which include the same macroeconomic conditionalities as structural adjustment programmes. (Randriamaro 2004)

Feminist analyses have greatly contributed to a better understanding of the gender dimensions of macroeconomic and trade policies, and the links between gender inequality and economic growth. However, these analyses have had little impact at the policy level, as evidenced in the PRSPs which tend to overlook equity concerns, especially gender equality. A recent review by

the World Bank [2003a] of 27 PRSPs reported that as many as 10 failed to include even the slightest recognition of the gender goal. Yet, gender equality is at the very heart of achieving the MDGs.” (Vandermoortele 2004).

With regards to trade liberalization which is considered as the panacea for overcoming poverty, ‘the current round of PRSPs say very little about trade policy... (...)...PRSPs fail to consider the impact of trade on different groups of poor and vulnerable people. Effects are not disaggregated between consumers, producers and employees, between urban and rural population, or by gender. Dimensions of poverty beyond income – risk and insecurity, access to services, and empowerment – are almost completely ignored.” (Ladd 2003).

Moreover, efforts to take into account women’s unpaid and uncounted work suffer from an overemphasis on “time famine’ and on an “exclusive concentration on time as a proxy for burden, effort and equity...” (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1998:19). In the context of increasing levels of poverty in SSA, this has led to focus on increasing income-generating activities and employment opportunities for women, based on the assumption that the time liberated from reproductive tasks will be used for ‘productive’ activities. While this assumption remains to be validated, it also overlooks the implications for work intensity and the associated bodily costs.

Given the centrality of women’s work for poverty reduction, such an approach to poverty as well as the labor-intensive strategies promoted by many development partners, are likely to have a negative impact on women’s well being as an integral part of their entitlements and rights (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1998, Razavi 1998).

This also points to the need to re-consider the conventional indicators used to measure gender bias. In this regard, recent research work on gender indicators in the context of economic reforms provides interesting contributions to the definition of gender-related measures based on both quantitative and qualitative data (Mukhopadhyay and Sudarshan eds. 2003). Another important contribution is the African Gender and Development Index (AGDI) developed by UNECA in collaboration with African gender researchers and activists.

Debt, free trade, and ODA

The MDG reporting processes at the national level pertain to the first seven goals, as the monitoring of MDG 8 to develop a global partnership for development is deemed to be relevant only at the international level. This automatically excludes any analysis and discussion of critical gender issues at the macro level, in particular issues related to debt, trade and ODA.

These issues have been the subject of a number of analyses and intense advocacy and lobbying by gender equality and women activists during the last few years, especially within the UN processes such as the Beijing+5 Review and Financing for Development. Given the current trends in SSA, it is clear that MDGs will not be achieved unless these issues are addressed.

With respect to debt, on average SSA countries spent twice as much on debt servicing to external creditors as their spending on basic social services during the 1990s. The well-known impacts of this problem on poor women and people are worsened by the moves towards free trade.

Trade taxes are an important source of revenue for African countries: they provided on average 28.25% of the region's total current revenue over the last decade, and 30.5% for SSA, compared with 0.8% for OECD countries. The negative fiscal impact of trade liberalization policies initiated since the mid-80 have begun to emerge, especially since the promise of higher trade volumes that were expected to compensate for tariff cuts has not materialized, mainly because of protectionism in the North: in fact, *"Africa's share of global exports saw a sharp fall from 4.1% to 1.6% between 1980 and 2000, and its share of imports fell from 3.2% to 1.3% over the same period. Even in raw materials, its share in world trade fell from 8% in 1980 to 4.4% in 2000"* (Submaramanian and Tamirisa 2003, cited in UNECA 2004).

Thus, most African governments who have fairly liberalized their trade regimes have experienced a decrease in trade tax revenues after further trade liberalization, together with fluctuating or declining terms of trade due to volatile or decreasing international prices for most exportable goods over the 1995-2002 period. As trade restrictions in these countries are already below the revenue-maximizing level of around 10% to 15%, this declining trend is expected to continue under further tariff reductions (UNECA 2004: 197). Since SSA countries rely heavily on international trade taxes for their total revenues, this means not only that they will face critical reductions in their revenues, but also continuing fiscal instability with negative gender implications.

Prospects for achieving MDG 3 under the current context of development cooperation do not seem to improve in light of the trends in ODA. In 2001, \$75 million of ODA was targeted to gender projects in SSA and \$6 million in North Africa. *"This was equivalent to only 11 US cents per capita in SSA, 4 US cents in North Africa as compared to 27 US cents per capita in the developing and transition countries of Europe"* (UNECA 2004: 38). This exemplifies the significance of the intersecting effects of gender and global inequities for both MDGs and the Beijing PFA. Clearly, it calls for the development of a coherent conceptual framework for engendering all the eight MDGs.

2.2. Towards a Conceptual Framework

Achievements and Challenges

The development of a sound conceptual framework for linking MDGs with processes related to gender equality and women's empowerment (Beijing PFA and CEDAW, as well as Human Rights instruments and other processes at the regional and sub-regional levels) should start by addressing the methodological issues arising from the Beijing+10 and MDG reports. While this requires a detailed analysis, the issues discussed in this paper suggest that in SSA, MDG targets were set without consideration for two key factors that have considerably influenced the trends of growth in national economies: the effects of the HIV pandemic and the overall impact of economic globalization on the different countries, including the impacts of trade agreements, liberalization and privatization policies, in addition to debt.

Understanding the several pathways connecting gender to globalization and the underlying neoliberal paradigm and subsequently to the MDGs is critically important. For instance, with

regard to the MDGs related to gender and health, recent research on the intersections between globalization, gender and health suggests that “*globalization has exacerbated women’s experience of poverty and in so doing compromised their health by: (i) limiting their access to essential health services and products; (ii) increasing out-of-pocket expenditures on basic goods like health services and in some instances water; (iii) challenging family cohesion and social support networks as men leave home in search of work; (iv) removing or creating barriers to important sources of decent work in the shrinking public sectors while simultaneously doubling their reproductive work in the home; (v) forcing them to work within the poorly regulated and low waged informal sector; and, (vi) in some instances leaving them with little choice but to engage in transactional sex to augment their low incomes.*” (Maclean and al. 2004)

It should also be noted that the reporting mechanisms for both the Beijing PFA and MDGs say very little of the causal dynamics behind the Africa region’s performances. Combined with the data gaps at the national level, this does not allow for a contextualized and thorough analysis of these processes and the issues at stake.

Significant progress has been made during the last decade in understanding the relationships between economic growth, poverty and gender equality. Notwithstanding the predominance of neoliberalism in the mainstream development model, there are encouraging - albeit slow - moves towards a broader approach to poverty, from the conventional income/consumption dimensions to a multi-dimensional conception of poverty including the intangible dimensions of human rights. There is also an increasing body of knowledge from research on gender, macroeconomic and trade policies, including the participatory research carried out by CSOs and women’s organizations.

These progresses on the theoretical front should be translated into progressive change in development practice. The Gender-Responsive Budgets exercises initiated in different countries are among the important actions that have been taken to translate the progress in development theory into practice. However, there has been an overwhelming focus on the expenditure side of government budgets at the expense of the revenue side which involves many critical issues from a gender perspective. Such initiatives also suffer from the lack of reliable and gender-disaggregated data, and when these are available, from the lack of capacity in gender and economic analysis.

There is also need to analyze the intersecting effects of gender inequality with other factors that determine the achievement of MDGS, including the interconnections between these MDGs. While the interdependence between MDGs has been underlined by most stakeholders, there is very little work done on the dynamics of these interlinkages and their gender dimensions. For instance, the MDG 7 to ensure environmental sustainability has definite gender dimensions as well as implications for the MDG 3 to promote gender equality and empower women. Questions that can be examined from a gender perspective include how the burden of the costs of environmental degradation affect women and gender relations. MDG 7 can also be explored in relation to MDG 8 on global partnership for development, and current patterns of production/reproduction and consumption.

Policy Recommendations

Policy positions that build on the links between the Beijing PFA and MDGs should reflect the explicit recognition in the Millennium Declaration that gender equality is central to the achievement of MDGs. As such, they must seek to address the root causes of poverty and gender inequality that are embedded in the prevailing global macroeconomic framework as well as in patriarchal structures at the micro and meso levels, and to challenge the power relations that are at the heart of global inequities and imbalances against poor countries.

MDGs should not be used as an additional conditionality by the IFIs. As a matter of democracy, transparency and accountability, all of them should be subject to participatory monitoring at the national level. In particular, MG 8 involves critical issues at the macro level for gender equality and should be monitored at the national level with the full participation of women.

The crucial need to link human rights and MDGs cannot be overemphasized, as it is key to challenging the neoliberal paradigm that disempowers women and other marginalized groups. The increasing interest in the rights-based approach among the civil society and development practitioners is a welcome development, however there is still need for the definition of an operational rights-based approach to economic policy making, on the model of the framework for applying the right to health to TRIPS negotiations on essential medicines at the WTO, proposed by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health (UNCHR 2004).

Engendering the macroeconomic framework is one of the major task at hand for ensuring that gender equality issues are taken into account in the formulation of policies and monitoring of progress towards achieving the MDGs. This effort should build on the work that has been done on gender, macroeconomic and trade policy issues by women researchers and activists, along with some UN agencies and other development institutions¹.

These efforts at the conceptual level should be complemented by the necessary reforms at the institutional level. In particular, gender equality advocates and women's organizations have called for the democratization of global economic governance and for human rights to be the overarching framework for macroeconomic and trade policies.

While addressing the data gaps and strengthening national capacities for collection, production, dissemination and analysis of gender sensitive and sex-disaggregated statistics should remain a priority, it is important to up-scale the existing processes so as to move towards the construction of gender-aware economic models and policy tools.

In terms of monitoring and accountability mechanisms, the links with the PRSP monitoring processes should be critically examined, bearing in mind the existing gender biases within these processes.

Finally, all stakeholders should give the same weight to the time factor in the implementation of the Beijing PFA and the MDG process. They should be aware that for the promise of the

¹ Such as Diane Elson, Nilufer Cagatay, Mariama Williams, Naila Kabeer, UNIFEM, UNDP, WEDO, The Commonwealth Secretariat, DFID among others.

Millennium Declaration to become a reality by 2015, the achievement of the gender equality agenda requires at least the same sense of urgency as the achievement of MDGs. Ten years after Beijing, there are no excuses for failing women.

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