

Gender equality and the post - 2015 framework

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"I am committed to ensuring that gender equality is at the heart of the global development goals that will replace the Millennium Development Goals. This could take the form of a separate goal on gender or ensuring that some targets are specifically on girls and women and that all data is gender disaggregated. The Prime Minister and his co-chairs on the High Level Panel will want to listen to the voice and experiences of others to ensure that the new framework secures the best outcome for girls and women." Andrew Mitchell, International Development Secretary¹

As the 2015 deadline for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)² approaches, debate has begun in earnest as to what should follow. The recommendations of the Gender and Development Network (GADN) are intended to complement the various proposals for a post-2015 development framework currently being debated, rather than to add yet another alternative. We argue that it is critical to maintain a strong and explicit focus on gender equality in any new global framework, with priority given to reaching the poorest women and girls. Achieving this will require a two-pronged approach of mainstreaming gender in targets and indicators across the board, *and* a standalone goal or domain for gender equality.

Why gender equality should be central to the post-2015 framework

"Gender inequality persists and women continue to face discrimination in access to education, work and economic assets, and participation in government. Violence against women continues to undermine efforts to meet all goals. Further progress to 2015 and beyond will largely depend on success of these interrelated challenges." UN Millennium Goals Report 2012³

There have been hard won gains made on gender equality over the past 15 years. Gender gaps in girls' enrolment in primary education have closed in almost all countries.⁴ Women are living longer and having fewer children.⁵ There have also been increases in women's participation in the labour market in almost every region of the world.⁶

However, despite these developments, progress has been slow and uneven.⁷ Gender disparities remain pervasive and entrenched, and continue to be a major driver of poverty.⁸

Gender equality must be central to the post-2015 framework both because of the importance of women's empowerment in its own right with women disproportionately represented among the poorest and most marginalised in the world, and because of the impact that gender inequality has on achieving other development goals.

1. Need: the majority of the world's poorest people are women

'Across the developing world, girls and women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of poverty.' UK Department for International Development⁹

Women and girls "account for roughly half of the world's population, but, according to informal estimates, comprise the majority of the poor and excluded." Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development¹⁰

Women are estimated to account for two-thirds of the 1.4 billion people globally who live in extreme poverty.¹¹ UN data shows that across sub-Saharan Africa women are more likely to be living in a poor household than men – up to 20% more likely for women of working age.¹² A similar pattern has been identified in Latin America by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.¹³ Even these statistics are likely to be an under-estimation because they don't account for the women and girls living in households that are officially categorised as 'non-poor' but who are deprived due to the unequal distribution of resources between women and men *within* households.¹⁴

Women's poverty is, in part, caused by gender inequality. Women's and girls' social roles as care-givers and managers of household food security, the unequal gender distribution and control of resources (land, property and financial capital), constraints on women's socio-economic mobility due to cultural, legal and labour market barriers, gender-based violence and women's lack of decision-making power are all contributory factors.¹⁵ These gender disparities also leave poor women and girls disproportionately vulnerable to shocks – such as rising food or fuel prices or environmental disasters – because they often have fewer assets like education, resources and social networks to cushion them.¹⁶

Gender disparities remain particularly pronounced among the poorest women and among women from socially excluded groups.¹⁷ Some of the poorest women in the world are subject to multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage, including on the basis of ethnicity, caste and disability in addition to gender inequality. As a result, they are often some of the most marginalised women in their communities and experience

particularly intensified levels of poverty and exclusion.¹⁸ Work to combat inequalities on the basis of ethnicity, caste, race, sexuality, age and disability is therefore also essential.

2. Impact: gender inequality is a barrier to progress

i) Gender inequality holds back progress on other development outcomes

“Progress on all the MDGs is dependent on progress on gender equality and women’s rights. It is evident that continuing discrimination against girls and women will make it difficult to fully achieve any of the MDGs.”
OECD¹⁹

It is now widely recognised that gender inequality blocks progress on development goals in significant and tangible ways. It is no coincidence that gender inequality poses a central barrier to meeting both the most off-track MDG goal (on maternal health) and the most off-track MDG target (on sanitation). As Ban Ki-Moon notes in the forward of the most recent UN report on the MDGs: “...achieving the MDGs depends so much on women’s empowerment and equal access by women to education, work, health care and decision-making”.²⁰

Reports from the OECD,²¹ UNESCO,²² UNDP,²³ the World Bank²⁴ and ODI²⁵ all stress the importance of achieving the third MDG goal of gender equality as a prerequisite to progress on the other MDGs. For example, research by the OECD’s Development Centre has demonstrated the relationship between gender inequality and other development outcomes. It showed that women’s access to resources is strongly correlated with child health outcomes; countries where women lack any right to own land have on average 60% more malnourished children and where women have no access to credit, the number of malnourished children is 85% above average. A similar correlation was found between women’s access to resources and child mortality, and between levels of discrimination against women and maternal mortality.²⁶

ii) Gender inequality causes women to lag behind on development progress

“Gender inequality causes and perpetuates poverty and vulnerability, especially for women, while greater gender equality can help to reduce poverty and vulnerability and contribute to pro-poor growth....The MDG focus and debate on addressing key development challenges is unlikely to lead to sustainable poverty reduction unless there is a recognition that the gender dynamics of power, poverty vulnerability and care run through all of the goals.” Jones et al.²⁷

Gender inequality also causes women and girls to lag behind men and boys in overall (or average) progress on development goals. This is because gender relations assign men and women different and unequal roles and entitlements, which act as barriers to women being able to benefit fully from development interventions. For example, girls

are still disproportionately losing out on positive advances in universal primary education because of gendered barriers. These include violence against girls in school, the lack of priority given by parents to investing in their daughter's education, girls' heavy domestic workloads, lack of or poor quality sanitary facilities and access to sanitary protection, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, and poor infrastructure and transport which pose a particular threat to girls' physical security. Likewise, new employment opportunities will have little impact for women whose heavy care responsibilities in the home restrict them to low-paid, low-status and often part-time and home-based work.²⁸ An ODI report further demonstrates how women's time poverty (due largely to their unpaid role in the care economy) prevents them from accessing services.²⁹

It is clear from the evidence cited above that a continued and enhanced focus on gender equality is necessary in any post-2015 framework if we are to make real progress towards development, rights and peace and security goals, and towards addressing the poverty of the poorest people. Moving beyond rhetoric, the next challenge is to ensure commitments on gender equality are turned into lasting and effective action.

How gender equality should be addressed in the post-2015 framework

1. Mainstreaming gender equality into all other goals

“An understanding of how improvements in gender equality – from improved access to resources and asset ownership, to more gender sensitive service delivery and support for caregiving responsibilities, to greater voice and agency – impact poverty reduction and natural resource management needs to resonate across all the Goals between now and 2015, and equally importantly to inform post-2015 development strategies.”
Jones et al.³⁰

Mainstreaming gender equality requires that women and girls are specifically considered throughout any post-2015 framework, with gender sensitive targets and indicators and sex-disaggregated data included under each goal.

Targets are essential to address the particular barriers that women and girls face under each goal area due to gender inequality. For example, a target was included under MDG1 to 'achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people'. This recognised the specific gendered barriers that women face in accessing decent work, such as their substantial unpaid work burdens in the home, constraints on female mobility in the public domain as a result of gender norms, gender discrimination in the workplace, and the disadvantages women face in education and training. Indicators also need to be gender-sensitive. For example,

primary school enrolment as an indicator obscures the fact that girls are more likely than boys to have poor attendance at school once enrolled.³¹

Including gender sensitive targets and indicators under all goals is also important to ensure that failure to address women's poverty is not hidden behind averages. It could be the case that a substantial number of people have benefitted from a particular intervention, but that the majority of them are men or boys. This also highlights the importance of the disaggregation of data by gender.

Finally, targets are essential in creating the necessary political will and resources needed to achieve gender equality.

2. The need for a dedicated goal on gender equality

Important as gender mainstreaming is, it is vital to also retain a standalone goal or domain on gender equality. This is critical both because gender inequality has such profound impacts on other development outcomes, and because achieving gender equality is an important development and human rights goal in itself. Having a gender equality goal will also mobilise resources and garner essential political will.

i) Tackling gender inequality at its roots

“Gender equality has long been recognized both as a human right and a core development goal. In addition, discrimination against women and girls impairs progress in all other areas of development. The global development agenda should seek not only to address and monitor the elimination of specific gender gaps, but also to transform the structural factors that underpin the widespread persistence of gender inequalities, gender-based violence, discrimination and unequal development progress between women and men, girls and boys. The empowerment of women and girls and the protection of their rights should be centre-pieces of the post-2015 agenda” UN System Task Team Report on the Post-2015 Development Agenda³²

As discussed above, gender inequality is a major driver of women's poverty – whether in relation to health, education, or water and sanitation outcomes. Mainstreaming gender equality across each of the goals is important to address the gender-specific barriers that women face in that particular area, and to tackle the ‘symptoms’ of inequality such as high school drop-out rates among girls.

However, mainstreaming does not necessarily allow for the specific determinants of gender equality to be dealt with. To tackle gender inequality at its roots, a specific goal is needed which focuses on the underlying causes of gender inequality. Only a standalone goal allows space for the targets and indicators that would most reflect the changes needed in order to achieve gender equality.

Women living in poverty also face additional barriers that are gender specific which would be lost without a standalone goal. For example, gender-based violence can have a profound impact on women's and girls' lives and choices.³³ The care economy, and the extent of women's unpaid labour, also prevents progress for women in every area of the MDGs. Lack of access and control over economic resources, especially land, and absence of political voice, further restrict women's ability to benefit from policy interventions.

ii) The limits of gender mainstreaming

Numerous studies have shown that policy commitment to gender equality tends to evaporate when gender is mainstreamed.³⁴ Only when a twin-track approach (mainstreaming *and* standalone) is used does gender equality receive the attention it requires. For example, a UNDP report found that gender was often inadequately mainstreamed in the national strategies it reviewed, and that in too many cases gender policies were seen as an instrument to achieve other priorities rather than as a way of improving women's own lives.³⁵ Reviews of bilateral aid programmes have shown the growing realisation by donors of the need for both mainstreaming and specific gender goals.³⁶

iii) Moving forwards – not backwards

In spite of its limitations, MDG3 has shown the impact a dedicated gender equality goal can have. A World Bank report found that MDG3 had “spurred” national and international efforts to improve measurement of gender equality and women's empowerment and identify what was needed to accelerate progress.³⁷ MDG3 has also forced countries to report on gender equality and enabled women's rights organisations to hold their governments to account. It has proved a powerful advocacy tool that has contributed to increased attention to women and girls by influential donors. For example, the World Bank chose gender equality as the focus of its 2012 World Development Report.

Most critically, it has galvanised new investment, leading to the creation of gender equality-specific funds or budget lines in many donor agencies. Examples range from the Dutch MDG3 Fund, to NORAD's dedicated gender budget line, to UN Women's Gender Equality Fund, as well as new funding to Women's Funds by donors like Irish Aid and Danida.³⁸

There is therefore an emerging consensus on the importance of gender equality which offers a crucial opportunity to tackle the gender gaps that still persist in many areas. Yet without a specific gender goal and targets to motivate action, it is likely that donor and government commitment to gender equality will be downgraded, wasting much of the effort already expended.

What should the new gender equality goal be?

Any new gender equality goal or domain in the post-2015 framework must be determined through a broad and inclusive process of consultation to ensure it reflects the priorities of marginalised women and girls themselves. That said, a number of key areas have already emerged as likely contenders, that illustrate the kind of targets needed to achieve gender equality.

1. Learning from MDG3

There is wide recognition that realising gender equality and women's empowerment will require action on a broader range of gender equality issues than those included under MDG3, which contained just one target on girls' education.³⁹ The Millennium Project Task Force on Gender and Education identified seven strategic priorities necessary to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment: post-primary education (including secondary school, but also other kinds of non-formal education); sexual and reproductive rights and health; investment in infrastructure; property and inheritance rights; employment; seats in national parliaments and local governments; and ending violence against women.⁴⁰ The 2005 Task Force report on Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women also contains recommendations.⁴¹ Similarly, the OECD identifies four strategic priorities that will have a catalytic effect on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment: women's ownership and control of productive assets; girls' secondary education; improving reproductive health and access to family planning; and supporting women's leadership.⁴² Two areas that are consistently cited as priorities by a range of actors are guaranteeing women's inheritance and property rights and ending violence against women.⁴³

2. Transformative targets

Whatever issues are prioritised, it is important that targets promote women's strategic interests (leading to a long term transformation in their control over their own lives), rather than only meeting women's immediate practical needs.⁴⁴ Transformative targets could include women having more control over when and whether to have children, greater voice and influence in political decision-making, or greater ownership and control of economic assets such as income, land and property. For example, research across very different contexts has found that women's ability to exercise control over their lives is linked to being able to generate regular and independent sources of income.⁴⁵ Supporting women to earn the income to purchase what they need will have more strategic value than, for example, the distribution of food aid or cash transfers.

3. Existing international commitments

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. International human rights instruments all contain agreed priorities for the achievement of gender equality. These include the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), the International Conference on Population and Development's (ICPD) Programme of Action, and UN Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889 and 1960.⁴⁶ Goals and targets at the global level should directly reflect the priorities that have already received intergovernmental endorsement.

4. Incentives to reach the most marginalised women

In some countries several of the MDG targets will be achieved, for example on gender parity in education and reducing child mortality, because richer, urban populations have gained access to public services with little improvement for those from poor, rural groups.

A new gender equality goal will need to move away from measuring average progress at country level towards a focus on the most marginalised groups. One way of doing this is through the inclusion of incentives, where progress among the poorest groups is weighted higher than richer groups and is measured and reported separately.⁴⁷

Who to consult?

The Beyond 2015 global civil society campaign has articulated the importance of consultation and GADN supports this.⁴⁸ Consultation needs to happen at every level (regional, national and local), and extra effort is needed to ensure the poorest and most marginalised communities are able to input substantively.

Women are often excluded from consultations because they do not have the capacity to input in the ways required, because they are unable to participate due to childcare responsibilities, because they are not permitted to participate by family members or because it is assumed that they share men's opinions. Particular attention is therefore needed to ensure that women's voices are heard, including through the participation of women's rights organisations that represent and work most closely with poor and marginalised women and girls.⁴⁹

Recommendations

1. A new post-2015 framework should:
 - Focus on the most marginalised people in society, recognising that the majority of these people are women and girls
 - Reflect an understanding that women's poverty is, in part, a result of their socially enforced gender roles and relations and that without specifically addressing the causes of gender inequality women's poverty will persist.

2. Gender equality should be mainstreamed throughout the framework by:
 - Agreeing specific targets under each goal that reflect the gender barriers women and girls face
 - Developing gender sensitive indicators, based primarily on need rather than availability of data
 - Providing incentives within targets and indicators to reach the poorest and most marginalised people in society, explicitly including women from socially excluded groups
 - Ensuring all indicators are disaggregated by sex
 - Substantially increasing the availability of data disaggregated by sex.

3. There should be a standalone goal or domain on gender equality that:
 - Prioritises the poorest and most marginalised women and girls
 - Reflects the priorities of these women themselves
 - Meets their long term strategic interests by tackling the roots of gender inequality
 - Reflects commitments already made under existing international agreements.

Endnotes

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⁴⁴ Practical gender interests are the immediate needs of women such as access to food, water, shelter and childcare. Strategic gender interests are the longer-term changes needed to transform women's status in society and end the existing unequal relationships between women and men.

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The Gender & Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights. Our role is to support our members by sharing information and expertise, to undertake and disseminate research, and to provide expert advice and comment on government policies and projects.

For more information or to join the Gender & Development Network, please e-mail: info@gadnetwork.org.uk

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Working groups

GADN brings together development practitioners, experts and academics working on thematic issues through working groups. The post-2015 working group is aiming to improve the Beyond 2015 framework so that it better promotes women's and girls' rights and gender equality.

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