



# Development and Women's Human Rights

*Sunila Abeysekera*

The Millennium Declaration affirms both gender equality and human rights as central commitments made by governments at the UN Millennium Assembly in 2000. The Millennium Development Goals constitute an attempt to set quantifiable priorities in the development arena, but cannot be understood outside of the context of the broader Millennium Declaration. Equality, including the “equal rights and opportunities of women and men,” is one of the core values of the Declaration, in which member states of the UN resolved to “respect all internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms,” and to strive for the “full protection and promotion in all our countries of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all;” as well as to “combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, or the “Women’s Convention”).” Thus, the Millennium Goals are fundamentally about human rights, and about women’s human rights in particular.

The MDGs affirm that a development agenda for economic and social goals cannot be separated from an agenda for the promotion and protection of human rights and of gender equality. One of the limitations of a technical approach focusing on economic growth as a path to poverty eradication is that it tends to look on hunger, housing and health as needs to be met when feasible, rather than as inherent, fundamental human rights to be claimed by all peoples and delivered to all. Contemporary debates on the ‘progressive realization’ of economic rights and recent General Comments issued by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have made it very clear that neither economic nor political arguments can any longer be used by states to justify their failure to deliver basic needs to their peoples. This is why re-framing the debates on the MDGs from a human rights perspective that highlights women’s human rights changes the parameters of the discussion. It emphasizes the fact that people are the agents of change who claim these rights and hold both state and non-state actors accountable for their failure to deliver. The discussion also enables a shift of focus from pure economic growth, or donor assistance or policies and programs, to sustainable development that is based on principles of participation, social justice and dignity as well as on international and national legal obligations.

If we look at the MDGs in terms of women’s human rights, MDG3 refers to the promotion of equality and the empowerment of women as principles of delivery which should frame the development goals in and of themselves. The Goals then go on to address a range of economic and social rights, to income, health, education, environmental sustainability and the right to development which should all be delivered to people within a framework of gender equality. At surface reading,

this may seem as if the MDGs are reaffirming the historic divide between political and civil rights, and economic and social rights, although the indivisibility and inter-dependence of rights have been the subject of much international debate and accord, as, for example, in the Vienna Platform for Action from the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993.

Work on women’s human rights in the years since 1993 has clearly demonstrated that the indivisibility approach is critical for the achievement of gender equality and for an end to discrimination against women. For example, it has long been recognized that the capacity of a woman worker to enjoy to the full her freedom to work, to receive equal pay, to organize or to be an active member in a workers’ organization is restricted by the roles and obligations ascribed to her within the family and community. Social expectations that she fulfil her role as wife, housewife and mother combine with cultural sanctions that impose restrictions on her mobility and on her ability to interact on equal terms with male colleagues in public spaces. Together these create a situation in which a woman worker’s capacity to become a leader in the workers’ movement is severely hampered. Thus, the implementation of the MDGs and the continuing development of indicators that recognize the implications of dividing civil and political rights from economic, social and cultural rights becomes imperative for the achievement of MDG3.

Human rights instruments and standards have tended, historically, to define women primarily in terms of their child-bearing and familial responsibilities. The family, which is a site of violence and oppression for many women, continues to be described as the primary unit of society. The division of the world into “public” and “private” spheres in law continues to be justified by appeals to culture, tradition and custom, and constitutes the basis of multiple forms of discrimination against women. The primacy accorded to women’s biological and reproductive roles in defining her political, social and economic identity is reinforced by the fact that critical areas of human life such as marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody of children and inheritance continue to be determined according to religious, traditional and customary practices in many countries. The fact that the Women’s Convention, which calls for changing unequal power relations between men and women, remains the instrument with the largest number of

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reservations by governments speaks to the resistance to this area of women's rights.

Violence of all forms that takes place within the family and the community is often perceived as a "private" matter and therefore "outside" the purview of the law. Women's autonomous capacity to own and control resources including her own income, and movable and immovable property, remains the key to her ability to enjoy economic and social rights. Patriarchal social norms and legal frameworks often place constraints on her social mobility and economic dependence and affirm her secondary and subordinate status in society. Women's rights activists have long recognized the existence of such limitations within the existing human right regime in spite of commitments to equality and non-discrimination, and have challenged discriminatory standards and frameworks as they now exist, insisting that human rights are ever evolving and changing.

Linking violence against women with their ability to enjoy the full range of human rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women has pointed out, "Among the historical power relations responsible for violence against women are the economic and social forces which exploit female labor and the female body. Economically disadvantaged women are more vulnerable to sexual harassment, trafficking and sexual slavery. They are also employed as bonded labor and low-paid labor in many economic enterprises. As migrant workers, they often face innumerable hardships... Economic exploitation is an important aspect of modern female labor. In addition, a study of 90 societies in relation to wife beating found that economic equality was a key factor which prevented violence against women."

In this context, MDG4, on the reduction of child mortality, and MDG5, which calls for the improvement of maternal health, could be viewed as once again restricting and reducing the right to health of women and children and, in particular, placing women's rights to health within a purely biological role. This happens despite commitments by the WHO and other organizations to look at women's health using a life-cycle approach and to appreciate the needs and claims to healthcare of single women, menopausal women, lesbian and bisexual women and adolescent women.

However, if one looks at the MDGs as simply providing a skeletal framework for the achievement of certain specific goals within a specified period of time, then women's rights activists confront the challenge of reshaping the indicators and structures within which the achievement of the goals is being implemented and monitored at the national level in order to ensure that commitments to MDG3, on gender equality and women's empowerment, are also being honored. Some of the MDG Reports submitted so far show that, at the

national level, indicators are being changed in keeping with what states are identifying as national priorities.

As feminists and as women's rights activists, we must continue to maintain a critical surveillance of the implementation of MDGs in order to protect our interests in equality and non-discrimination. Since civil and political rights have dominated human rights concerns in the past decades, the focus of much of our lobbying and advocacy in early years was on fulfilment of state obligations on individual rights, emphasizing the negative obligations of the state to refrain from actions that impinge on the freedom of the individual, rather than on its positive obligations to intervene to guarantee economic and social rights to its citizens. This approach, in turn, strengthened the private/public dichotomy, with the state being expected to refrain from interfering in the private sphere.

In the contemporary world, the ever-expanding outreach of global economic and political forces is rapidly undermining the capacity of states to determine their own futures. The emphasis of the traditional human rights regime on the state is being challenged as non-state actors such as multinational corporations, international trade and financial institutions and political groups enter the arena forcefully. The feminist critique of the nation state as an essentially patriarchal and masculinist model of maintaining unequal power relations in society comes into its own in this context, and enables us to engage in a critical view of the MDGs as

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being state-centric to a fault. The identifying of MDGs relating to universal primary education, and maternal and child mortality in an environment in which these very services are being eroded by a combination of privatization and removal of subsidies and focus on the state as being the primary actor responsible for the implementation of the MDGs in an era when state sovereignty is in crisis seems rather ironic. As women's rights activists we are, thus, faced with the challenge of engaging in a serious attempt to transform the MDGs at the national level to fulfil at least some of our most primary aspirations in terms of women's health and education, while at the same time engaging in a critical evaluation of the overall implications of reducing the sum total of human aspirations in the twenty first century to a few 'basic needs' with no consideration for the full complexity and diversity of human beings and human society. In particular, if the framework for the implementation and fulfilment of the MDGs does not confront and overcome violence and discrimination against women and guarantee the equality of women within the family and in the "private" sphere, with no recourse to arguments of culture, tradition and custom, we will reach 2015 with few if any changes in women's position and role in modern society.



# Mobilizing People to Claim Rights

Mary Robinson

A human rights approach is essential to achieving the MDGs and women, as agents of change, are critical to their success. The human rights approach is fundamentally about empowering vulnerable groups so that they can demand economic and social rights. This is very different from a technical approach to poverty eradication, and is central to real change.

There is an organic linkage between the MDGs and human rights, embodied particularly in the Millennium Declaration<sup>1</sup> which includes—in addition to the eight MDGs—six commitments for promoting human rights, democracy, and good governance. Through the Declaration, governments commit to respect and fully uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to strengthen the capacity of all countries to implement the practices of democracy and human rights, to implement CEDAW, to ensure respect and protection for the rights of migrant workers and families, to work collectively for more inclusive political processes allowing genuine participation by all citizens in all countries, and to ensure freedom of the media and public access to information.<sup>2</sup>

Although the MDGs reflect many parts of the human rights agenda, most of the strategies to achieve the MDGs currently operate in a predominantly economic framework. The MDGs need to be solidly embedded in a human rights framework. It is encouraging to see that the Human Development Report for 2003<sup>3</sup> includes a detailed analysis of the value-added of the human rights framework in achieving the MDGs, and of the multiple connections between the MDGs, human development and human rights. These connections were reaffirmed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, where the NGO participants acted under the motto: “No sustainable development without human rights,” as well as in the more recent report of the Commission on Human Security, which links human rights and development with human security.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to hear criticisms made by human rights and grassroots activists concerning the MDGs. When I addressed the ESCR-net launch in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in June 2003, NGOs raised concerns about separating the Millennium Declaration from the MDGs. A strong critique emerged from the Asia Pacific Civil Society Forum in its Statement on the Millennium Development Goals and the Eradication of Extreme Poverty.<sup>5</sup>

The statement crystallized the concerns and recommendations of NGOs from 14 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, affirming that: “The MDGs sideline the more critical and important issue of human rights. Certain norms and standards

are particularly pertinent in addressing the problem of poverty, such as effective non-discrimination, the recognition of vulnerable groups, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to be free from hunger, the right to economic self-determination and the right to development.” The Statement also criticized the concept of poverty as formulated by the MDGs as too narrowly construed in terms of income, noting that durable and sustainable solutions to poverty will require the active involvement of the poor and civil society, in addition to an adequate measurement of poverty, and a commitment to tackling the roots of poverty.

The Statement urges the international community “to take into consideration political, social, cultural and human rights dimensions, determined by factors like class, gender, race,

geography and ethnicity. This broader definition is necessary in designing more sensitive and responsive policies and programs on poverty.” The guidelines and recommendations proposed conceive the MDGs not as a policy prescription externally imposed, but as an inclusive process. The statement notes:

*At macro level, decision on poverty reduction policy and project must seek the consultation of civil society and organizations of the poor prior to implementation.*

*The consultation and selection of participation process must be transparent and accountable. At micro level, poverty reduction projects must seek the majority endorsement of the poor of the affected areas prior to approval of the indicators...*

*To link the MDGs with a particular set of policy prescriptions would be the wrong approach...because there is no single correct policy for all societies and circumstances. Externally imposed one-size-fits-all policies such as the way the current PRSP initiative of the World Bank and IMF is being practiced is to be rejected...*<sup>6</sup>

From a human rights perspective, the MDGs may be too narrow, leaving out important issues, and too limited by numeric indicators that purport to assess the achievement of greater dignity and quality of life.

A recent report commissioned by UNICEF on child poverty

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in developing countries<sup>7</sup> might be a useful example of a human rights-based approach. The study measured child poverty on the basis of the non-fulfilment of basic human rights and demonstrated how far we are from ensuring the rights of children around the world: over a billion children—more than a half of all children in developing countries—suffer from severe deprivation of at least one basic human right, and over a third of children in developing countries suffer from absolute poverty, which means they suffer two or more severe deprivations.

If poverty eradication is to be carried out using a true human rights approach, a broad definition of poverty is required. One definition of poverty can be found in the UN Statement of Commitment of the Administrative Committee on Coordination for Action to Eradicate Poverty: “Poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively



in society...It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal and fragile environments without access to clean water and sanitation.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, “poverty eradication” would address all of these elements in an integrated way.

A human rights approach must also highlight the need for empowerment, particularly the empowerment of women. The 2000 Human Development Report,<sup>9</sup> for example, links civil and political rights with empowering people to achieve their economic and social rights. An example is the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, where HIV/AIDS patients have utilized the right to organize and speak up in order to demand access to essential medicines. The 2003 Human Development Report<sup>10</sup> includes good language on women’s capabilities and agency as a key to achieving the MDGs. These findings are supported by a 1995 study by Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze<sup>11</sup> on the impact of women’s education and access to ownership rights for the well-being of the household. Women’s education is linked to poverty reduction, maternal health and declining child mortality.

The human rights approach to poverty reduction should focus on vulnerable groups: women bearing a disproportionate burden of poverty, children, older people, indigenous people,

refugees and internally displaced persons. All these groups are more vulnerable to the consequences of disasters and conflicts, their access to services is limited because of poverty, and they are more exposed to correlative health risks. A human rights approach to the MDGs should also include socially responsible and gender-responsive budgeting. Empowering vulnerable groups would mean that these groups could demand economic and social rights rather than charity.

Once all these limitations are recognized there is no question that the MDGs can be a useful tool in mobilizing all stakeholders towards the eradication of poverty, which is a major obstacle to the development of human rights, not only in developing countries but also in rich countries. However, in order to be effective, global goals must be country-owned and people-centered.

If we have a strong sense of what a human rights-based approach to MDGs means, the human rights community can show that the human rights framework is essential to achieving the MDGs. Equally, taking the MDGs seriously will advance the human rights agenda, particularly economic and social rights.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The UN Millennium Declaration, G.A. Resolution 2, U.N. GAOR, 55th Sess., U.N. Doc.A/RES/55/2 (2000); World Leaders Adopt ‘United Nations Millennium Declaration’ at Conclusion of Extraordinary Three-Day Summit, reprinted in, G.A. Press Release, U.N. Doc. GA/9758 (8 September 2000) available at [www.unmillenniumproject.org/html/doc\\_lib.shtml](http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/html/doc_lib.shtml)*
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Human Development Report 2003: Millennium Development Goals: A compact among nations to end human poverty, *New York: United Nations, p.28. See [www.undp.org/hdr2003](http://www.undp.org/hdr2003)*
- <sup>4</sup> Human Security Now, Final Report of the Commission on Human Security, *New York: United Nations, May 1, 2003. See [www.humansecurity-chs.org/](http://www.humansecurity-chs.org/)*
- <sup>5</sup> “Statement of the Asia-Pacific Civil Society Forum on Millennium Development Goals and the Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Hunger”, 6-8 October 2003, Bangkok, Thailand. Facilitated by Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ECAP) and hosted by FOCUS on the Global South.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> “Child Poverty in the Developing World,” David Gordon, University of Bristol, and Peter Townsend, London School of Economics, (paper commissioned by UNICEF), London: University of Bristol, October 21, 2003. See [www.unicef.org/media/media\\_15082.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_15082.html).
- <sup>8</sup> UN Doc. E/1998/73, para. 3. See also Amartya Sen, “Poverty as Capability Deprivation,” in *Development as Freedom* (1999).
- <sup>9</sup> *Human Development Report 2000, Chapter 4. See [www.hdr.undp.org/reports/global/200/en/](http://www.hdr.undp.org/reports/global/200/en/)*
- <sup>10</sup> See UNDP, *supra* note 4, at 86-87. Available at [www.undp.org/hdr2003](http://www.undp.org/hdr2003)
- <sup>11</sup> Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze, *Economic Development and Social Opportunity, 1995; Oxford: Oxford University Press.*



## Local Voices

# Lessons of Civil Society Engagement

Marjorie Mbilinyi

My skepticism about the MDGs derives from earlier analysis of feminists' active participation in a gender budget initiative and the PRSP process in Tanzania during the late 1990s through 2000. In poor, indebted African nations, the IMF and World Bank (WB) have embraced the MDGs in the context of their ongoing initiatives for 'development,' debt relief and poverty reduction. That is, the MDGs are goals that must be implemented within the existing structures of 'macro-economic stabilization,' i.e. Structural Adjustment, the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) and the process of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) negotiated with the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). This means that efforts to halve extreme poverty, provide universal primary education, achieve gender equity and combat infectious diseases, among other important goals, are occurring within the same *Washington Consensus* that has exacerbated poverty and gaps between rich and poor nationally and globally.

Our disenchantment with the Tanzanian PRSP process, illustrative of the new MDG initiative, taught us that participation in policy formulation processes and the whole idea of gender or poverty mainstreaming needs to be seriously reconsidered. Is this a process to realize our vision or somebody else's? How prepared are we to engage in and win policy debates? How grounded are we in a popular movement involving a broad cross-section of the population? How do we sustain autonomy and a critical edge, once we succeed in getting "space at the table" of local, national and global governance?

## HIPC and PRSPs in Tanzania

Global state actions are responses to the real resistances and struggles against globalization which are taking place within Africa and other continents in the South and the North. HIPC, and the MDGs, are a political response to strong pressure by global civil society against the debt and the global economic system which is responsible for debt and poverty. Resistance has grown worldwide.

The resistance against corporate-led globalization in Tanzania has been led by women and gender activists through organizations such as the Tanzanian Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) and the Tanzania Coalition for Debt and Development. These groups are a dynamic force which challenges the economic reform process associated with globalization, and calls for an alternative development strategy.

According to the World Bank<sup>1</sup> HIPC is the first international response to provide comprehensive debt relief to the world's poorest, most heavily indebted countries. HIPC was launched by the World Bank and IMF in 1996, and revised in

1999 after severe criticism from civil society activists for the delayed payments, small sum of money provided in relative terms, and the conditions. The so-called "enhanced" HIPC has not met those criticisms, however. Only partial debt relief is provided, which is scheduled to take 20 years. HIPC recipients must implement a series of guideline steps to confirm their commitment to neo-liberal economic reform, in order to receive debt relief. Government actions and economic and fiscal performance will be monitored on a regular basis by the World Bank and IMF, and debt relief can be cut off at any time. Finally, recipient countries must not falter in making debt payments throughout the 20-year period. This puts countries in a contradictory situation regarding the MDGs, since the required economic reforms are considered by many to be the major cause of increased poverty and social inequality.

At the end of 20 years of 'reforms,' the goal is only to reduce debt to a sustainable level. What is sustainable debt?—"levels that will comfortably enable them to service their debt through export earnings, aid and capital inflows," according to the WB. In an ironic twist, the IMF will provide new grants to help a nation service debts to the IMF, rather than outright cancellation. Economic growth within the current model is likely to lead to more poverty and social inequality; HIPC measures will be used to soften the blow by strengthening social services and infrastructure, much as social welfare was used in the developed countries in times of crisis.

In these initiatives, the Bank retains its leadership position and has used this to exert more control over micro policy-making and poverty reduction as well as the macro sphere, and to intervene ever more directly into national level governance.<sup>2</sup> Strategies include enhanced foreign private investment, liberalization and privatization.

## The Gender Budget Initiative

The Tanzanian Gender Budget Initiative (GBI) is organised by Feminist Activists (FemAct), a coalition of some 10 activist organizations led by the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP). It exemplifies efforts by civil society

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organizations to engage more directly in the policy-making process at all levels, including the PRSP negotiating process. Since 1996, the GBI Initiative has worked to understand how national budget policy is set, to sensitize budget officials to gender analysis, and to lobby for their support for gender budgeting. Research addressed not only the budget-making process, but also education, health, agriculture, water, industry and trade policies. Members of Parliament, government officials, and civil society organizations participated in workshops and dialogue on these issues.

The results were extraordinary, yet ultimately contradictory. The GBI was able to influence officials in the Ministry of Finance and the President's Office as well as sectoral ministries and Members of Parliament. The government adopted its own gender budget initiative and contracted TGNP to work with government officials to mainstream gender into six sectoral budgets. TGNP became part of a public expenditure review. In this way, GBI has succeeded to mainstream gender into government budget making processes. In the process, the FemAct coalition was strengthened and built capacity in analytical, advocacy, communications and persuasion skills, as well as knowledge about the structures of power that are reflected in government policy-making.

Underlying these achievements, however, are real problems about the ultimate outcome and meaning of GBI. Integrating gender into existing policies and government structures of power may become part of a legitimizing process which supports the overall globalization process and its economic reforms. Gender mainstreaming in Tanzania, as elsewhere, has meant that feminist goals may have to be adjusted to fit government institutional goals. Controversial issues may be avoided in order to acquire consensus on other feminist goals. While GBI made progress on engendering budgets, none of the sectoral policies prioritize the need for radical change in macro-economic policy from the present liberalization and privatization policy, led by the market, towards an alternative sustainable development strategy.<sup>3</sup> Nor is there a call for the democratization of government along participatory lines, and the transformation of structures of power. GBI also tended to adopt the mainstream discourse at this time, calling for partnership and consultation between government, donors and civil society.<sup>4</sup> The ideological discourse of "partnership" ignores the existence of conflicting interests between different "stakeholders," as well as their different levels of power. It was far distant from TGNPs usual demands for participatory decision-making at all levels.

Taking advantage of lessons learned during this first phase, FemAct launched a national campaign, 'resources back to the people,' in 2003, whereby GBI explicitly challenges macro-economic reforms and neo-liberal ideology. The focus is on

exposing the link between escalating rates of HIV/AIDS infection, control over resources, and gender. The campaign is being organized at local and national level, with linkages made at the Pan African level as well.

TGNP was also incorporated into the group that oversaw the PRSP process for Tanzania. In our assessment, HIPC has provided a means of furthering the external governance of African countries by IFIs. In return for little, if any, additional debt relief, countries are locked into 20 more years of structural adjustment and economic reform.

Efforts to address the poor and unemployed in this "poverty reduction" strategy include safety nets provided through local communities.<sup>5</sup> This shifts the burden once again onto the shoulders of the impoverished themselves. Relying on "traditional arrangements" based on kinship and clan perpetuates many of the discriminatory systems which oppress women, youth and children. There are no specific targeted actions on behalf of the poor. In fact, seven of the 11

action strategies listed to reduce poverty directly support the large scale private sector, including a private sector development programme. There are no gender-specific dimensions with respect to actions which focus on poverty reduction. CSOs were excluded from the monitoring and evaluation processes.

Since 2001, a few urban-based CSOs have become involved in the Poverty Monitoring System, the Participatory Poverty Assessment Program, and the current Poverty Reduction Review process, in response to advocacy pressure. There is much more openness in sharing information

at the central government level. The focus on poverty reduction and of civil society participation have been major demands of the global feminist movement. Yet these are overshadowed by the 'ultimate' condition, the perpetuation of structural adjustment, liberalization and privatization policies. A critical analysis is needed of the impact that *poverty* mainstreaming by donor agencies and sectoral ministries has had—or may have—on gender activists' ability to maintain a critical, oppositional perspective when needed.

In conclusion, civil society organizations need to be more proactive in challenging the globalization process; demand greater transparency and accountability from government and donor institutions alike; and demand more democratic processes of decision-making within donor agencies as well as government. It is important to increase the participation of self-organized people living in poverty, especially women, and to involve them in policy debates. Finally, a collective human rights approach needs to be adopted, which recognizes the right of civil society organizations, and all citizens, to participate in policy analysis and review on their own terms.

We have to keep our "eyes on the prize" and hold on to

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our goals and principles. It is easy to forget that participation in government processes, from PRSPs to the MDGs, is a means, not an end—a means to transform the whole system of governance and the goals of development. Without strong grounding at the grassroots, and the building of a powerful social movement for change, activist organizations may rapidly find themselves transformed into state appendages, providing legitimacy for policies and practices diametrically opposed to the needs and interests of the people, and women most of all.

## Notes

1 World Bank 1999, "The HIPC Initiative: Background and

*Progress through April 2000*," Washington, DC ([www.worldbank.org/hipc/progress-to-date/May1999](http://www.worldbank.org/hipc/progress-to-date/May1999)).

2 Lusaka Declaration in African Agenda 1999:14-16

3 Mhina, Edward, 1999, "Tanzanian Experiences on NGO and Government Research Partnership," University of London, Development Planning Unit. See also Tanzania Gender Networking Programme, "Gender Budget Initiative, Dar es Salaam Report, 1998, and "Agriculture Sector Study," GBI Reports 1999, Dar es Salaam.

4 TGNP 1998, *ibid.*; 1999 *ibid.*; TGNP, "Tanzania's Gender Budget Initiative: A Success Story on Working with Government to Mainstream Gender," Dar es Salaam, 2000.

5 Tanzania Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, United Republic of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, July 2000.

# Tools for Advancing a Feminist Agenda in Russia

Marina Malysheva

The MDGs have their contradictions and limitations, but in the context of Russia they may prove to be an effective tool for advancing a feminist agenda in national political policy circles. Russia is a country with a small feminist presence and a male-dominated political system impassive to feminist concerns, a relatively weak civil society, and increasing repression.

A blanket rejection of the MDGs ignores the specificity of national and regional realities. Such generalizations could damage the fragile texture of women's movements in many developing countries and countries in transition. In the Russian Federation, the "underdevelopment" of both civil society and democracy as a whole calls for different tools and strategies.

Some of the concerns raised by global feminists about the inadequacy of the MDGs have a great deal of validity—their failure to fully address women's global demands; concerns about the co-optation of "gender mainstreaming" by governments and multilateral agencies; and the danger for NGOs of using an "insider-strategy" that builds relationships with, and seeks to influence, government officials.

Despite these potential risks, I would argue that women's NGOs in Russia have few other options. With enormous frustrations, our fledgling feminist movement is starting to show signs of influence, although it's often two steps forward and one step back. In an environment where our economy and our civil society have been shaped from the outside, we see the MDGs as an external tool that is pushing our leaders to attend to gender concerns in ways we have been unable to accomplish on our own. From within Russia, women's organizations can then use this momentum to seek greater and deeper gains.

## Building the Women's Movement

Russia's modern women's movement emerged from the Soviet system, where there was almost no independent civil society.

NGOs did not naturally develop from the demands of the people, but emerged through the sponsorship of Western, particularly US, donors. The establishment of NGOs, especially feminist NGOs, was met with great skepticism and cynicism both at the top and at the bottom of the society. They were perceived as artificial western units or corporate entities that value their own survival more than their social mission, with unrealistic goals that are inapplicable to Russian realities. The women's NGOs agenda was undermined by this political and institutional context.

The Russian feminist movement is very young, geographically splintered and poorly connected to global feminist organizing. It is a small minority that has had difficulty impacting the broader civil society movements, much less official policy. The first formal women's NGOs appeared only ten years ago, and struggled for five years just to make the word "gender" heard.

## The Complexities of an Insider Strategy

In 2002, the women's movement had to undertake numerous efforts to avoid marginalization when the Ministry of Labor and Social Development issued the paper, "Gender Strategy of the Russian Federation."<sup>1</sup> Generated with support of the Canadian government it lacked a global perspective and an understanding of the role of neo-liberal policies in growing gender disparities. Women's NGOs were invited to discuss the document and make contributions after it was written. While the document made no reference to the role of International

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Financial Institutions in Russia despite the central role these have played in Russian policy-making over the past decade, the paper was nonetheless shared with World Bank gender advisers for comment. This brought mixed results for gender advocates. The advisers praised the document's premise, seemingly suggesting that efforts to transform and modernize gender relationships in Russian families could play a significant role in enhancing the effectiveness of neo-liberal reforms. They focused on gender relationships in the family as a key to gender equality, including a re-estimation of "fatherhood," without addressing the larger policy context of growing male unemployment and despair that is destroying families. Russian feminists mobilised to impact the Strategy Paper via World Bank officials and were able to make important insertions in the "Gender Strategy."

As a result, women's NGOs made considerable progress in integrating gender goals at the Ministerial level. Despite late efforts to "add" women's NGOs to the process, the national strategy paper at the highest level enabled civil society to address the World Bank gender officers, and through them the government. This is access and influence we would not otherwise have had within Russia.

### Engendering the MDGs

The UNDP Report, *Gender equality and extension of women rights in Russia within millennium development goals*,<sup>2</sup> focuses on industry and occupational segregation but does not make any reference to the neo-liberal policies that are decimating jobs and livelihoods for both men and women in Russia or to dramatic shifts in the Russian economy within the broader context of globalization. These policies utilize and exacerbate gender, race, and class inequalities.

We raised these concerns with the report's author in a public forum. The reply was, "Since feminism is an 'ideological' not a scientific approach, and is a 'non-objective' instrument of evaluation, it cannot be applied to the matrix of indexes requested in the MDGs. Globalization is a separate issue and there is no reason to create a mess." This points out how far we have to go at the national level in instilling a gender and macro-economic perspective into development policy.

### The MDGs as a Tool

Within this context, UNDP made great efforts to introduce the MDGs into the "Gender Strategy of the Russian Federation." This has proved valuable, as it obliged the political elite to adopt *gender* as a relevant and decisive category in measuring economic and social advancement in Russia. From seminars to a series of workshops with regional officials, the issue of gender equality has been introduced through the priority of the MDGs.

Women's NGOs are elaborating concrete plans to go beyond the formal MDG framework to raise a feminist agenda inside a

variety of social and political institutions. By 2015 both regional and national Russian entities will have to report on implementation of the MDGs. UNDP held an international conference to help officials understand the nature of commitments they have made through the MDGs. Particularly encouraging is the establishment of educational courses on gender issues for high-level administrative officials from across the country at the Presidential Academy of State Services.

### Progress in Spite of the Challenges

In Russia the gender mainstreaming strategy is occurring with some NGO oversight, despite efforts to the contrary. In the current context of growing corruption and bureaucratic monopolization of power, it would be extremely difficult for NGOs to make substantive changes in economic or social policy of the country in the short term. Thus, we have chosen to focus on slow, incremental changes, both in gender equality and economic policy.

Certainly, gender mainstreaming in itself, cannot halt the implementation of neo-liberal policies. But it can enable us to advocate for and monitor legislation and their application and it can broaden women's access to information and educational resources. It can create space for a serious evaluation of gender relations in the country as a whole and within the regions, in order to establish concrete interventions at multiple levels. It can enable us to define basic elements of accountability within state institutions.

It is our expectation that a more feminist vision of the society will emerge as a result of this "insider strategy" of cooperation with gender sensitive Russian officials in legislative and executive bodies. Russian women parliamentarians and members of the local governments are increasingly consulting with women NGO leaders across the country, which gives them greater political backing for their public positions and agendas, especially in the field of reproductive rights, domestic violence, trafficking, social services, and small and medium business development.

In this context, we look forward to a lively engagement with the MDGs, in order to reclaim and redefine them while seeking systemic transformations. It will be a challenge to engage with external (Western) actors, who bring both progressive perspectives on gender equality that help to advance our cause, while imposing draconian privatization and liberalization policies that undermine our cause for equality, democracy and human rights. We are both alert to this challenge, and optimistic.

### Notes

- 1 Gender Strategy of the Russian Federation, *Project Ed.*, G. Karelova; Moscow, 2002. Printed with the support of the UNFPA.
- 2 Roshchin, S.Y., 2003 Gender equality and extension of women rights in Russia within millennium development goals, *UN Gender Theme Group, UNDP*. September 2003 ([www.owl.ru/rights/undp2003/eng/index.htm](http://www.owl.ru/rights/undp2003/eng/index.htm)).