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Making Change Happen

Actions Necessary to Accelerate the Achievement of all Millennium Development Goals

Why is attention to gender equality and women's empowerment essential to enable countries and the international community to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)?

Women have multiple roles. At any given time they can be mothers, leaders, students, decision-makers, farmers, workers, voters and much more. In each of these roles, the ability to be educated and healthy, to have voice and influence, and to enjoy opportunities and choices are critical to the attainment of the Goals. Gender equality and women's empowerment are central to achieving the MDGs because without these capabilities and opportunities, women are less able to reach their full potential, live a life of dignity, and be productive citizens.

Gender equality helps accelerate achievement of each goal. In addition, there is solid evidence that progress in gender equality in one goal often contributes simultaneously towards progress on a number of other development goals. For example, gender equality in education also makes significant contributions to a nation's economic growth and poverty reduction as well as to reduced malnutrition, fertility, and child mortality.



Goal



1. Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

Almost two thirds of employed women in the developing world are in vulnerable jobs as own-account or unpaid family workers.¹

Actions

Support women's fundamental role in food security. Women are the cornerstones of food production and utilization. With more equitable distribution of assets, such as credit, improved seeds and fertilizer, and information and technology, women can achieve significantly higher agricultural productivity.

Eliminate legal restrictions. In order to overcome feminized poverty, legal restrictions that perpetuate poverty must be addressed, such as: rights to own, inherit and acquire property and land and to retain property brought into marriage; limits on access to reproductive health information; rights to access credit; rights to birth registration, travel abroad, and a passport.

Guarantee equal social protection and employment rights for all. Whether in the formal or informal economy, women need equal protection of their rights and entitlements as workers, equal adherence to labour standards and conventions, and a safe workplace free of harassment and violence.

Enforce women's rights and enable claims to realize those rights. Legal reforms can only translate into greater food security and reduced poverty if they are enforced. Through harmonizing statutory and customary laws, promoting legal literacy, and helping women make land and other claims, women's roles as important economic actors in the household and the community can be supported and protected.

Upgrade women's skills and protect assets so they can compete in the modern global economy. Only through continual investment can women move up the value chain and seize opportunities in this era of globalization. In many cases, the opposite is happening; lack of women's ownership over the land they farm can lead to eviction of female subsistence farmers from areas turning to commercial crops.²

Educate women. A one-year increase in schooling of all adult females in a country is associated with an increase in Gross Domestic Product per capita of around \$700.³ In addition, educated mothers place higher value on schooling their own children, improving productivity in the next generation. Higher education tends to be associated with higher labour productivity, greater ease in finding formal sector employment, and higher income.

Expand paid work opportunities for women. Access to paid work offers income and much more. It often allows fundamental shifts in gender relations--- greater sense of self-worth and societal respect, a say in critical life choices such as postponing the age of marriage, and a greater role in household decision-making and ability to speak out against abuse.^{4,5}

Share caring and household work. In virtually all countries, women work more hours per day than men, disproportionately caring for children, the sick, and the elderly and managing food, cooking and many household affairs. This time poverty can limit their ability to generate income, build literacy and other skills, and participate in community affairs.



2. Achieve Universal Primary Education

Ten million more girls than boys are out of primary school.⁶

A country failing to meet gender education targets would suffer a deficit in per capita income of 0.1 to 0.3 percentage points.⁷

Continue to focus on girls' education. There has been significant progress in primary education enrolment for boys and girls. But the gender gap persists, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and North Africa. To meet the target of universal primary education, action must focus on girls' school completion rates.

Improve school conditions for girls. Lack of female teachers as role models, lack of safe transport to school, lack of separate sanitation facilities, and school fees continue to be deciding factors for whether a girl goes to school.

Address parental concerns about female modesty, safety, and the lack of economic returns to girls' education, which can hamper girls' school attendance.

Educate mothers. Mothers with at least a few years of formal education are considerably more likely to send their children to school.

Overcome traditional gender-based division of labour in the home, which often extends to children. In cases of economic hardship, families are often forced to pull children out of school – for girls to help with housework and, in some cases, for boys to tend livestock.



3. Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

In one third of developing countries, women constitute less than 10 per cent of members of parliament.⁸

Educate girls and women. Educated girls tend to become women with greater economic independence. They have an increased ability to negotiate and bargain in home, community and economic life. Educated girls and women tend to participate more in public life, and they can manage natural resources in a more sustainable manner.

Overcome barriers to schooling for girls. There has been tremendous MDG focus on expanding enrollment in primary school. But these gains for girls are often lost in the transition to secondary school due to lack of separate, private, safe girl's sanitation facilities, sexual harassment or violence at and en route to school, and due to the need for curriculum reform and teacher training for higher quality schools with greater relevance to girls' lives.

Promote mechanisms that give women a voice in politics and governance institutions. These mechanisms can vary widely from proportional representation systems that increase the probability women will be elected, to more transparent political party selection processes, public funding for campaigns, and more. But in countries around the world, women in politics are strengthening the credibility of democracies through their participation, reinvigorating political accountability, and contributing to improved efficiency in policymaking through bringing their diverse perspectives.

Enact and implement equal economic rights for all. Legislation on equal pay for equal work, free choice of profession or employment, equality in hiring and promotions, leave and unemployment benefits, freedom from sexual harassment in the workplace, and other critical rights are increasingly being legislated. But weak implementation of these laws continues to constrain women's equality and empowerment.

Count women's work. Continued lack of political will and financial resources necessary to collect good quality data disaggregated by sex hampers the ability to make effective policies on wages, informal employment, unpaid care work, and other issues critical to women's economic participation.



4. Reduce Child Mortality

The greatest progress in child mortality is in the richest 40 per cent of households, where mothers have some education and basic healthcare access.⁹

Prioritize care of mothers. Adequate nourishment and care during pregnancy and childbirth could prevent three of the four million infant deaths in the first four weeks of life.¹⁰

Invest in mothers' education and empowerment. Women's education is a main determinant of child mortality. Better educated women space childbirths over longer periods, ensure their children are immunized, are better informed about children's nutritional needs, and adopt improved sanitation practices. Literate mothers are more likely to have read about health concerns and to be confident in explaining problems to health providers. Literate women often bring sick children for treatment at an earlier stage.¹¹ All of these practices lower infant and child mortality rates.

Fight discrimination. Discrimination against girls-- which can include, at worst, female infanticide and systematic neglect, but more commonly, unequal sharing of food and resources--fuels higher under-five death rates for girls than boys.

Ensure equitable access for the most vulnerable women and girls to health services. Untreated syphilis of mothers during pregnancy results in a stillbirth rate of 25 per cent. Particularly vulnerable groups, such as girls who live apart from their parents or who are out of school as well as women and girls who have recently migrated to cities or are domestic workers, often fall outside the attention of social service delivery and protective social networks and must be targeted to reduce child mortality.¹²



5. Improve Maternal Health

Maternal mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia have barely changed over two decades.¹³

A woman dies in childbirth every minute.¹⁴

Support women's greater bargaining power and control. Women die for lack of family planning, inability to negotiate the number and spacing of their children, lack of money to pay for transport to and for skilled birth attendance or emergency obstetric care, and from violence. One in three maternal deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth could be avoided if women who wanted effective contraception had access to it. Further, evidence shows that in societies where men traditionally control household finances, women's health expenses are often not a priority.¹⁵ Women's empowerment is a prerequisite to forward progress on this stalled goal.

Increase the share of women in decision-making positions in the health sector. Women at all levels of health services can make sure the specific health needs of women and girls are not neglected, can ensure attention to local health care provision, the front line providers of health care to most women, and can help to redress inequalities in health outcomes and access that exist in every region.

Cease practices that bring danger to mother and child. Child marriage, female genital cutting, dietary restrictions, and all other forms of violence against women must end if maternal mortality is to be reduced.

Increase young girls' opportunities, support and knowledge. Girls age 15-20 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as women in their twenties.¹⁶ Significant investments in programs focused on adolescent girls, including education, a fair legal environment, more equitable social services, and greater protection from gender-based violence, will pay off big dividends for reducing maternal mortality.

Switch to clean energy alternatives for cooking. More than half of the world's households cook with wood, crop residues, or untreated coal, which exposes them to indoor air pollution—and acute health problems such as lung cancer and respiratory infections. Women and girls suffer disproportionately from these illnesses. Cleaner alternatives, such as gas, electricity or solar energy, vented stoves and hoods can significantly reduce mortality among women and girls.



6. Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases

In every region, women represent a growing share of people living with HIV since 1990.¹⁷

Enact and enforce legal measures against discrimination that drives the feminization of HIV and AIDS. Social and cultural factors such as child marriage, female genital cutting, dietary restrictions for girls, and other harmful traditional practices have resulted in a growing HIV prevalence among young women.

Stand up against gender-based violence that perpetuates the spread of AIDS. Rape, trafficking of women, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation of women and girls in situations of conflict are all recognized as significant risk factors for HIV transmission.¹⁸

Educate girls. HIV and AIDS spreads twice as fast among uneducated girls as among girls with even some schooling.

Advocate equality in marriage and family relations. Girls and women must acquire the negotiating power, confidence, and information to insist on safe sex in marriage and to be an equal partner in family planning decisions.

Reorient donor priorities for HIV and AIDS. The largest HIV and AIDS programs in low-income countries are funded by international donors. Donors should direct resources to the needs of the most vulnerable populations, which in many cases are adolescent girls and young women.

Offer HIV prevention and care in maternal health services. About 35 per cent of children born to HIV-infected mothers will also contract HIV. Yet only 11 per cent of pregnant women living with HIV today receive services to prevent HIV transmission to their children.¹⁹

Expand economic opportunity. Women's greater economic independence can reverse the spread of AIDS and other epidemics through increasing their bargaining power and reducing the chance they will be sexually exploited.

Enlist men and boys to fight the feminization of AIDS. Men can play a critical role in advocating positive attitudes towards women, promoting prevention, and taking a stand against practices that perpetuate gender inequality and gender-based violence.

Invest in HIV prevention programmes for sex workers. There is strong evidence that targeted programmes combining treatment of sexually transmitted infections, condom provision and promotion with workers and male clients, and improved health services for sex workers can help reduce transmission of HIV. Doing so can also help to avert the spread of HIV to members of the wider population.²⁰

Share the burden of caring for people living with HIV and AIDS. Caring for sick family members is seldom paid, rarely recognized, and most often done by women. Women, who are more likely to be employed in jobs with little sick leave and other benefits than men, pay a heavy price in terms of lost labour and skills-building opportunities, overwork, and less time for other responsibilities.



7. Ensure Environmental Sustainability

1.6 billion more people need access to improved sanitation to reach the MDG target.²¹ Searching for privacy to defecate exposes women to ridicule, sexual harassment, and rape.

Reform policies for equitable property and resource ownership. Without title to land, women are often denied access to technologies and resources-- such as water resources, irrigation services, credit, extension, and seed-- that strengthen their capacity to manage natural resources (of which they are often the primary users) in a more sustainable manner.

Reverse the loss of environmental resources. Water contamination and deforestation increase the time women must spend and often the distance they must travel to secure fuel and water.

Improve access to safe drinking water. Women are most often the primary users, providers, and managers of water in rural households, and guardians of household hygiene. With improved access to safe drinking water, women have more time to earn income, girls are more likely to attend school, family health and hygiene are improved, and women suffer less from the burden of carrying heavy loads.

Bring sanitation services to the billions who lack them. Lack of safe, private, nearby sanitation facilities exposes women to harassment and assault and erodes their dignity.

Fight climate change. Because of their higher levels of dependence on local natural resources for their livelihood, women are disproportionately affected by extreme weather events resulting from climate change.



8. Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Seven percent of 2006 aid flows (totaling \$104 billion) in 2006 had gender equality as a major objective.²²

Build capacity for gender analysis and programming among donors and partners alike.

Track resources spent on gender equality as an integral part of overall development performance assessment.

Increase gender equality in the international sphere. Greater voice and influence of women in decision-making positions in international organisations has been shown to lead to higher investment in gender equality.

Demand global rules and institutions that strengthen gender equality. Building an enabling international environment for women's empowerment requires rules, standards, practices, and institutions that support gender equality and accountability for progress on these issues.

Strengthen systems to collect, analyse and use sex-disaggregated data. Only then can we measure the impact of aid on gender equality and have the necessary evidence to change course to make aid more effective.

Many of the actions summarised above are well-trodden territory — issues that have been discussed and researched starting well before the Millennium Declaration. But there is increasing evidence and understanding that a few of these actions in isolation will not contribute to progress on agreed goals and targets. For example, even if girls are in secondary school at equal rates with boys, this does not guarantee they will then be able to find safe, decent work. And even when opportunities for school and work are expanded, there is no guarantee of immunity from the harassment or sexual violence that is the lived experience of too many women in every country and at every age. Women's empowerment, though much harder to measure than school attendance or salaries, and perhaps requiring more time to develop, is the "mortar" that helps to build a solid wall of development and progress. For women and girls worldwide, achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, a set of yet unsolved basic challenges, are a prerequisite to the much more ambitious goal of reaching their full potential and having full control over their destiny at home, in their communities and beyond.

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