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**Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in  
regard to gender equality and empowerment of women**

Gender equality and poverty eradication:  
good practices and lessons learned \*

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## **1. Introduction**

Gender equality is central to the attainment of development goals and poverty reduction. Gender issues play a prominent role in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have been commonly accepted as a framework for measuring development progress. Of the eight goals, four are directly related to gender: achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, reducing infant and child mortality, and improving maternal health. Gender also plays an important role in the remaining MDG goals related to reducing poverty and eradicating hunger; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; and ensuring environmental sustainability. Given these linkages, it is difficult to see how it would be possible to meet the MDGs without reducing gender inequalities across health and development outcomes.

## **2. Linkages between gender equality and poverty reduction**

The poverty reduction agenda would benefit greatly from paying attention to gender issues. One study (Abu-Ghaida and Klasen 2004) estimates the costs in terms of growth, and forgone fertility, mortality and undernutrition reduction for the 45 countries that are unlikely to meet the target of gender equality in primary and secondary education. The authors' estimates suggest that, by 2005, the countries that are off track are likely to suffer 0.1–0.3 percentage points lower per capita growth rates as a result, will have 0.1–0.4 more children per woman, and, by 2015, an average of 15 per 1,000 higher rates of under five mortality, and 2.5 percentage points higher prevalence of underweight children under five. Simulations from comparable studies using nationally representative samples from Egypt (1997) and Mozambique (1996) have shown that mothers' education is crucial to poverty reduction (Datt and Jolliffe 1998; Datt, Simler, and Mukherjee 1999). In Egypt, research indicates that increasing mothers' schooling to primary level completion would reduce the proportion of the population below the poverty line by 33.7 percent. Similarly, increasing one adult female's education to the primary level per household in Mozambique leads to a 23.2 percent decrease in the proportion of the population living below the poverty line. In both of these country studies, female education had a much larger impact on poverty than other factors, including male education. Similar examples can be found for women's access to productive resources, such as land.

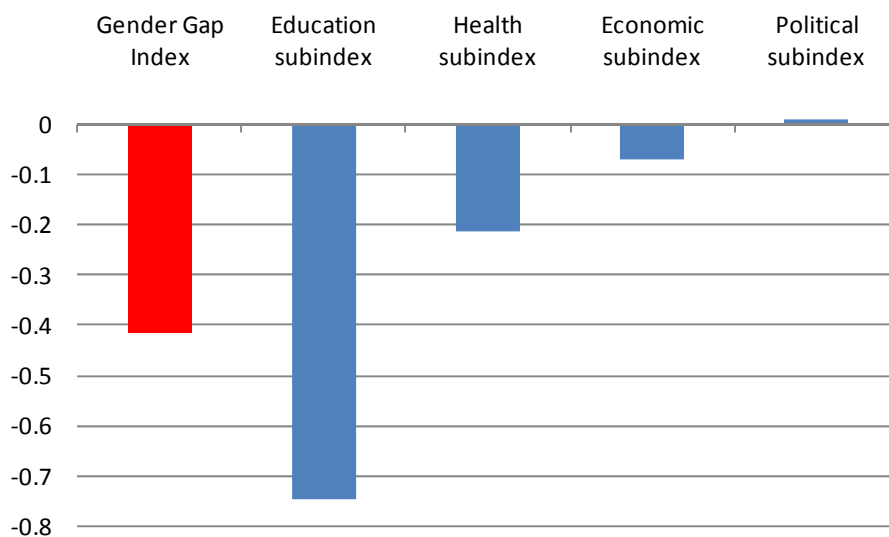
Recent work from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) reinforces the argument for gender equality: gender inequality is highly correlated with global hunger (von Grebmer et al. 2009). The Global Hunger Index (GHI) is a tool adapted and further developed by IFPRI for regularly describing the state of global hunger.<sup>1</sup> The GHI incorporates three hunger-related indicators: (1) the proportion of undernourished as a percentage of the population (reflecting the share of the population with insufficient dietary energy intake); (2) the prevalence of underweight in children under the age of five (indicating the proportion of children suffering from weight loss); and (3) the mortality

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<sup>1</sup> For background information on the concept, see Wiesmann (2004), and Wiesmann, von Braun, and Feldbrügge (2000).

rate of children under the age of five (partially reflecting the fatal synergy between inadequate dietary intake and unhealthy environments). In 2009, IFPRI researchers correlated the global hunger index with the Global Gender Gap Index developed by the World Economic Forum (Hausmann, Tyson, and Zaidi 2008), which is made up of four subindices: economic participation, educational attainment, political empowerment, and health and survival. The overall correlation shows that high levels of gender inequality are highly correlated with higher levels of global hunger (Figure 1). The strongest relationship is with the education sub-index, that is, higher levels of hunger are associated with lower literacy rates and access to education for women. It is not women's lower levels of literacy and education per se, but gender *inequalities* in education that are driving this relationship. High rates of hunger are also linked to health and survival inequalities between men and women. Women who are unable to seek health care for themselves and for their children are less able to provide for their children's food and nutrition security. Reducing gender disparities in key areas, particularly in education and health, is thus essential to reduce levels of hunger.

Figure 1. Relationship between the Global Hunger Index and the Gender Gap Index and Sub-indices



Note: In the Global Hunger Index, higher scores mean higher levels of hunger, whereas for the Gender Gap Index and its subindices, the highest possible score is 1, representing perfect equality, and the lowest possible score is 0, representing total inequality. A negative relationship means that higher gender inequality is associated with higher levels of hunger.

### 3. Good practice examples from Africa, Asia, and Latin America

Because gender relations and constraints to achieving gender equality are culture- and context-specific, patterns of gender inequality will vary across and within regions and countries. Depending on legal and institutional mechanisms (whether women and men are equally entitled to hold property in their own name), production structure (whether the country is predominantly rural or agricultural, whether men or women are more heavily involved in agriculture, or whether the non-agricultural and urban sectors are

growing), existing gender differences in human and physical capital (gender disparities in boys' and girls' schooling, gender disparities in ownership of land and other assets), and differences in women's status, the priority areas to be targeted by policy interventions to reduce gender inequality will vary across countries.

Smith et al. (2003) have proposed a two-pronged approach to eliminate gender inequality. First, eradicate discrimination against women, and second, promote catch-up by implementing more active measures in key areas. Since the specific set of actions that are most appropriate in a given situation will be context specific, I will discuss three "good practice" examples from Africa, Asia, and Latin America that address important constraints faced by women. The first example illustrates the role of legal reform to eliminate discrimination, and the latter two, promoting catch-up by addressing key gender-specific constraints and targeting resources to women. Although the examples will be specific to particular countries, they are by no means the only solutions to gender inequality, but are proposed as part of a portfolio of potential interventions.

#### *Reforming Legal and Property Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa*

Policy reform to eradicate gender discrimination aims to create a level playing field for women and men. Improving women's *political voice and participation* is vital to any fundamental shift that increases women's effective participation. The strengthening of democratic institutions via legislation, the rewriting of constitutions so that they explicitly disavow discrimination, and the reform and enforcement of an antidiscriminatory rule of law are important steps. In Uganda, for example, the National Constitution encourages participation by requiring that at least one-third of people in all elective undertakings be women. The new South African Constitution, passed into law in 1996 by democratically elected representatives, explicitly guarantees freedom from discrimination on the basis of, amongst other things, race, gender, and disability. While such declarations do not automatically translate into changes on the ground, they provide an important signal of the government's commitment, to which women can appeal for stronger rights.

Eliminating gender discrimination in ownership and access to economically productive assets is also critical, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where women play an important role as agricultural producers. For example, the ability to inherit land, to join a credit and savings club, to join a water users group, to access extension advice, to start up a small enterprise, and to survive in the event of a family breakdown must be equal for women and for men. Customary laws in many countries treat women as minors, thereby restricting their rights to such assets and opportunities. Two examples from Ethiopia and Uganda illustrate how women's property rights have been strengthened.

#### Using low-cost, rapid, and transparent community land registration to strengthen women's land rights in Ethiopia.

With more secure tenure, women farmers are more likely to engage in market transactions. In Ethiopia, land certification was carried out through a low-cost, rapid, and transparent process (Deininger et al. 2007). Land administration committees at kebele level (the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia) were required to have at least one female member and land certificates were issued after public registration for transparency. The land certificates included maps and pictures of husband and wife as

joint holders of the land. After land certification was carried out in Tigray, female heads of households were more likely to participate in land rental markets, mostly as landlords, because tenure security increased their confidence in doing so.

Strengthening and increasing knowledge of women's property and contractual rights through legal reform in Uganda.

Change is needed in property rights laws so that women may hold individual or joint title to land. But for legal change to translate into change on the ground, women need to be aware of their rights in order to claim them. In Uganda, knowing more about legal rights to land that are guaranteed under the 1998 Land Law encourages women to invest in soil conservation, suggesting that legal literacy campaigns can increase agricultural productivity. Several innovative pilot interventions have also been used to build awareness about women's property rights. In Zambia, the Justice for Widows and Orphans Project, a network of NGOs, has established community-level advice groups for women and trains them on property law and the writing of wills. In Zimbabwe, Women and Law in Southern Africa trains community-based paralegals on inheritance laws. And in Rwanda and Kenya, NGOs are promoting marriage registration, oral and holographic wills and memory books because lack of identification cards among women is a major impediment to acquiring land title.

*Targeting Financial Services to Women in Bangladesh*

The active promotion of catch-up in women's status is a more controversial proposition, even if the increase in the overall size of the pie more than compensates for males' reduced share. Redistributing resources towards females may be especially contentious in areas where gender discrimination against females is well-entrenched, such as South Asia. For example, out of 43 studies reviewed by Haddad et al. (1996) across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, pro-male bias in nutrient allocations appears to be most prevalent in South Asia; boys in this region are also more favored in the distribution of nonfood health inputs, such as healthcare. Such gender biases in the allocation of health- and care-seeking results in higher mortality rates for girls, despite boys' biologically higher risk of mortality. Smith et al. (2003) also found that the low status of women relative to men is an important factor explaining higher child malnutrition rates in South Asia relative to Sub-Saharan Africa. Rural households headed by women are more likely to be among the poorest. Even with Food for Education and other incentive programs for female education, girls still have lower educational attainment than boys.

A number of NGOs in Bangladesh have attempted to improve women's status and the well-being of children in their households by directing credit to women. In Bangladesh, among the best-studied programs are microfinance programs directed to poor women, in which group liability acts as a substitute for personally-owned assets that can be used as collateral. Various evaluations have examined several aspects of microfinance programs. Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley (1996), for example, have found that Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) programs have had significant effects on a variety of measures of women's empowerment, including mobility, economic security, control over income and assets, political and legal awareness, and participation in public protests and political campaigning. Pitt and Khandker (1998), using data

collected during 1991-92 from 87 villages in Bangladesh, found that welfare impacts on the household were significantly better when borrowers were women—increases in household consumption, improved nutritional status for both sons and daughters, and increased investment in nonland assets. Kabeer (1998), using participatory evaluation techniques, found that despite increased workloads due to receipts of credit, women feel empowered by it, clearly feeling more self-fulfilled and valued by other household members and the community.

Apart from the credit that women are able to access by belonging to a microfinance group, group-based approaches provide a mechanism through which outside programs and women themselves can increase women's control of assets, improve their productivity and enhance their status. In fact, the social capital that groups generate has been recognized as an important asset in itself. Women already draw upon a range of social networks for personal and family livelihoods. In development policy intervention strategies, social networks are being used as an instrument for women's participation and empowerment. Women's clubs, various forms of women's groups, kinship/kinship ties, for example, are being used to further women's empowerment through building social capital, especially trust and norms. Delivery of other development interventions—such as new agricultural technologies—through women's groups may also help women build physical capital (in addition to social capital) and reduce gender asset inequality within the household in contrast to other implementation modalities that target resources to the household—which men are more likely to control (Kumar and Quisumbing 2009).

#### *Conditional Cash Transfers to Improve Girls Schooling in Latin America*

Conditional cash transfers (CCTs), many of them targeted to women in the household, have been used to increase investments in child schooling, health, and nutrition. Perhaps the most well-known example of CCTs is Mexico's PROGRESA, now renamed Oportunidades. In August 1997 Mexico initiated a large new countrywide program called Programa Nacional de Educación, Salud y Alimentación (PROGRESA) to fight "extreme poverty" in the country's rural areas. With a budget of US\$500 million, the program offered monetary assistance, nutritional supplements, educational grants, and a basic health package to its beneficiaries for at least three consecutive years. The program gave cash transfers to women, conditional on children's school attendance and visits to health clinics. The targeting of transfers to women was influenced by research showing the differential impacts of male and female income on household allocation outcomes. An impact evaluation (see Skoufias 2001 and studies cited therein) showed that PROGRESA increased enrollment rates of girls by 11-15 percent and boys by 5-8 percent (Schultz 2004); reduced morbidity of children and adults; and significantly reduced the probability of stunting for children aged 12 to 36 months (Behrman and Hoddinott 2005). The program also put additional resources under women's control, gave women greater control over their movements, educated them on health and nutrition issues, provided new spaces in which to communicate with other woman, educated girls to improve their position in the future, and increased their self-confidence and self-esteem (Adato et al. 2003).

While CCTs are perhaps most famous in Latin America, they are now being adapted to other settings, such as in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and are being modified to achieve other development outcomes, such as delaying marriage and preventing risky sexual behavior. The Government of India recently launched a pilot CCT program that will pay beneficiary families over 18 years, conditional on birth registration, immunization, school enrollment (with 80 percent attendance) and marriage after age 18 (American India Foundation 2008). And in Malawi, the World Bank is implementing a randomized intervention that provides incentives (in the form of school fees and cash transfers) to adolescent girls (Baird et al. 2009), to keep them in school and reduce the risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS.

#### **4. Improving the gender-responsiveness of poverty reduction programs**

A recent review of interventions that addressed women's specific needs as farmers and workers (Quisumbing and Pandolfelli 2010) has identified a number of "promising approaches" that can be adapted more generally to poverty reduction programs. These are:

*Continue strengthening women's property rights and investing in schooling.*

Control over productive assets is essential to women's productivity; control over physical assets and being better-educated also improves women's bargaining power within the home. Thus, efforts to strengthen women's property rights through legal reform and to invest in girls' schooling by reducing the cost of schooling and increasing physical access to services, improving the design of service delivery, and investing in time-saving infrastructure must continue.

*Adapt program design or service delivery to client needs.*

Successful programs are able to vary program design to adapt product or service delivery to clients' needs, whether it involves changing the terms of credit provided through microfinance institutions, providing different types of savings instruments, tailoring agricultural extension messages to client groups, designing culturally appropriate and acceptable technology, or providing culturally acceptable ways of marketing agricultural produce. Indeed, unless interventions are tailored to meet men's and women's needs, they likely will fail.

*Take gender roles into account when designing and implementing interventions.*

Interventions that explicitly took into account gender roles were more likely to succeed than those that neglected them, and interventions that neglected gender roles were also more likely to reinforce or exacerbate inequitable access to resources between men and women. While there are limitations to what individual projects can accomplish, at a minimum they should not perpetuate gender inequities, and at best, they can set in motion and support extant change processes within communities.

*Evaluate anti-poverty programs to increase effectiveness, and pay attention to gender-differentiated impacts.*

Large-scale anti-poverty interventions represent a substantial commitment of public resources. They should therefore be evaluated, with a view towards measuring impact, increasing effectiveness, and potentially scaling up effective programs. Such evaluations should pay special attention to gender-differentiated impacts. Program designers should also continue to explore alternative design and delivery mechanisms systematically. Anti-poverty programs are often modified in an ad hoc manner, without systematic evaluation. Without evaluation, it is difficult to recommend what programs can be scaled up. Likewise, it is difficult to know what design features can be modified for local conditions without adversely affecting the overall outcome of the intervention.

*Take account of women's diverse needs.*

Gender norms are complex. They change in response to shifting economic, political and cultural forces, which can create new opportunities for women and men. Yet, gender norms do not change overnight and attempts to directly challenge such norms may unintentionally result in an erosion of women's claims to resources. Thus, development planners who seek to increase women's control of resources need to consider the tradeoffs entailed in challenging or respecting local gender norms. In the gender and development literature, this is often referred to as meeting women's practical versus strategic gender needs, and a range of policy approaches, from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD), have focused on strengthening women's economic participation to challenging structural causes of women's disempowerment. Strategies that challenge gender norms must be weighed against other project objectives, such as increased food security or better management of natural resources, which, over time, may transform gender norms. Encouraging women to define their needs and preferences prior to the design of projects may help ensure balance between challenging and respecting local norms.

Development planners still too often assume that women are a homogeneous group with identical goals and identical resources with which to achieve them; consequently, development projects are targeted to "women" without any further stratification among target populations. Moreover, researchers often fail to collect the data necessary to assess the importance of women's heterogeneity for project sustainability.

*Remain sensitive to culture and context.*

Gender norms are also context-specific; interventions targeted to female farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa are likely not to work in South Asia, or other parts of the world, without extensive modification. Even within specific countries, there may be substantial heterogeneity in gender roles and women's property rights. The existence of significant variation within countries has important implications for understanding gendered policies and programs in other countries and regions. Designing and implementing gender-responsive poverty reduction programs involves tailoring interventions to the specific sociocultural context in which gender relations unfold.



**Selected references (complete references available from the author):**

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