

**Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fourth session
New York, 1-12 March 2010**

INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

**Linkages between implementation of the Platform for Action and
achievement of the MDGs**

Moving the agenda forward: championing implementation of the Beijing
Platform for Action for the achievement of the MDGs*

Submitted by

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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.

Introduction

The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the international community has been a landmark in the move from “an era of commitments to an era of implementation” (Annan, 2000) especially in regard to the Beijing Platform for Action. The MDGs were expected to increase the focus on national-level implementation of the Platform for Action, with time-bound targets and indicators, while the implementation of the Platform for Action was expected to ensure the achievement of all the MDGs. Five years before the agreed target date for the achievement of the MDGs, and 15 years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, it is worthwhile to look at the lessons learned from its implementation in order to take the necessary policy actions for addressing the shortcomings and challenges that have led to setbacks for several MDGs.

The first part of this paper highlights some key lessons learned from the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The second part discusses strategies and processes for bringing the priorities and needs of women and girls to the center of the MDG framework. The last part focuses on the accountability framework for gender equality and provides recommendations for policy actions to ensure its effectiveness.

1. Lessons learned from the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action

1.1. Women’s empowerment requires a coherent and multisectoral approach

While important advances have been made globally, progress in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action has fallen short of expectations in several areas of concern. Among these, the 15-year regional and global review of the Beijing Platform for Action “showed that progress remained uneven and inadequate in all critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action” (UNDAW, 2009: 5). In particular, progress in the areas relating to Women and Poverty, and Women in the Economy lags far behind and is even likely to be reversed as a result of the multiple and systemic global crises.

The feminization of poverty is projected to increase despite the growing recognition that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond low income and inadequate command on economic resources to encompass restrictions in opportunities, vulnerability to shocks and social exclusion. However, this conceptual shift in the approach to poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon has not been matched with a similar approach to women’s empowerment. By and large, poverty reduction strategies have focused on efforts to reduce poverty in general, without any specific efforts to address the gender dimensions of poverty, and to monitor their gendered impacts (UN, 2010). In particular, most MDG-related processes at the national level have failed to address critical aspects of women’s poverty related to social exclusion and participation. This mismatch in the approaches to poverty and women’s empowerment has contributed significantly to the high levels of chronic poverty among women.

Furthermore, the successive reviews of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action over the last 15 years point to the fragmented and piecemeal approach to its objectives, which has tended to overlook the interlinkages between women’s poverty, their position in the economy and the overall development framework. This is exemplified by the disproportionate impacts of the

climate, food, energy, financial and economic crises on women's livelihoods and rights, which should be seen as a reminder that such as a fragmented and piecemeal approach cannot lead to the effective implementation of the BPFA or the achievement of MDGs.

1.2. Women's empowerment and gender equality require an alternative development framework

The orthodox neoliberal approach to development that prevails since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action has been translated into measures that hinder the achievement of its objectives and undermine women's rights. For instance, the fact that half of all maternal deaths (265,000) occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, and that "giving birth safely is largely a privilege of the rich" (UN 2009: 26) is a blatant violation of the right to health of millions of women. As it is also well known by now, the multiple crises that affect the neoliberal development system have thrown millions more people into poverty, including a majority of women, and derailed progress in the achievement of many MDGs, particularly in the developing countries.

Against this backdrop, the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action has proceeded as if it was taking place in a vacuum, and de-linked from the political economy of mainstream development processes. As such, there had been very little understanding that the objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action as well as the MDGs cannot be achieved when essential social services are being eroded by privatisation and deregulation, and when the role of the State is reduced to promoting free-market policies that do not bring about sustained growth of employment and incomes, and inclusive development which benefits poor people. Likewise, halving poverty by 2015 is not possible when women are contained in low-paid and vulnerable forms of employment (UN, 2009), and women's crucial contribution to poverty reduction and the economy through their reproductive and unpaid work is persistently ignored in statistics and economic policies.

As evidenced by both the Beijing+15 review and MDG reports, "progress for women and girls in many areas covered by the Millennium Development Goals lags behind overall gains. This outcome is indicative of the insufficient attention given to the gender equality dimensions in national development policies and strategies related to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals" (UN, 2010: 84). Furthermore, this also points out that it is women and girls who are the most affected by the deficiencies of the mainstream development model whereby social policies are not considered as an integral part of the development process, and reduced to safety nets for the billions of people who are deprived of their fundamental human rights to food, health, education, and social protection.

1.3. Women's empowerment and gender equality require an effective accountability framework

Whereas the MDGs were expected to provide a framework for holding Governments accountable for their commitments, civil society and women's organizations have underlined that "on one hand there is the failure to transform the MDGs into a legally binding agreement thus allowing impunity in terms of their implementation and on the other there is the failure to focus on social exclusion, discrimination and human rights and a lack of concrete and strong measures to develop an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system that addresses the needs of developing countries" (ICAE, 2010: 5).

Although a similar case can be made about the lack of accountability with respect to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, unlike the MDGs the main issue is not the absence of a normative framework, but the lack of political will on the part of many Governments to domesticate the legal framework and to apply the normative standards of equality and non-discrimination provided by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

In the face of the gravity of the multiple global crises and hardship affecting a growing number of people, especially women and girls, it is clear that there is need for an effective accountability framework that can ensure that MDGs are implemented with due attention to the structural factors that inhibit gender equality and women's empowerment.

2. Strategies and processes for bringing the priorities and needs of women and girls to the center of the MDG framework

The substance of the lessons learned from the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action is that more than ever, a rights-based approach to gender equality and women's empowerment is a moral obligation as well as a development imperative. It is high time to move away from the service-based approach to women's rights which discriminate against their impoverished majority, and to take the rights-based approach more seriously in the implementation of the MDGs in order to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment.

There is no excuse for maintaining the *status quo*, since the necessary normative standards and programmatic measures are provided by the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action itself, as well as in the numerous recommendations from its successive reviews. The resources are also available, as demonstrated by the fact that within a few days, the world leaders have been able "to mobilise \$US18 trillion to bail out corporations and financial institutions, more than has ever been spent on funding for development in the last 40 years" (ICAE, 2010:5). The resources that are needed for the effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action represent only a drop compared to this massive amount of resources.

In operational terms, the CEDAW provides a useful tool for tackling the root causes of gender inequality and discrimination, which undermine the implementation of MDGs. Since rights draw attention to process as well as to results, they would ensure that MDGs are implemented with due attention to the structural factors that inhibit gender equality. A rights-based approach would also strengthen the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action because it requires the *de facto* realization of MDGs. Consequently, it would require the precise identification of the different actors responsible for meeting the goals, the allocation of the necessary resources and the establishment of mechanisms for holding these actors accountable.

This also requires the re-definition of the development process, such that it becomes a process of structural change and transformation that fully integrates social policy; prioritizes public development goals over private interests, and generates equitable growth together with productive and decent employment for all. Such a structural transformation implies that women's labour should no longer be considered as a basis for international "comparative advantage", and that the interactions between macroeconomic policies and microeconomic

conditions will be taken into account in order to prevent detrimental effects on women's livelihoods and rights. For instance, the provision of microfinance will have little positive effects on poverty if unbridled trade liberalization leads to the loss of employment and incomes, as happened in many sub-Saharan African countries.

3. Strengthening accountability for gender equality: key recommendations for action in 2010¹

The most urgent task at hand is the establishment of an accountability framework for both the MDGs and gender equality. In this regard, the accountability processes set up under CEDAW provide a model for assessing the process by which the MDGs are translated into results. The related monitoring and review processes should also be used to hold Governments accountable for the implementation of MDGs and MDG-based poverty reduction strategies. Unless such mechanisms are established within the MDGs implementation process to fulfill women's rights and to address inequality along gender, class, race and other axes of identity, the MDGs will be no more than 'the most distracting gimmick' (Antrobus, 2004, cited in Randriamaro, 2005) from the gender equality agenda.

The policy actions to accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the achievement of MDGs should take into account the impacts of the multiple global crises, and address the gaps and challenges in the twelve areas of concern in a holistic manner, through coherent and well-sequenced policy actions in the short and longer term.

In the short term, there is need to focus on the development and financing of gender-sensitive social protection and insurance systems in order to compensate for the reduction in real household incomes, with the recognition that universal programs (as opposed to targeted programmes) are the most appropriate for poor women. This would also involve the expansion of employment opportunities for women and public provisioning of adequate support mechanisms in order to alleviate women's work burden for social reproduction (Beijing areas: 1, 2, 3,7,9,12).

Influencing and monitoring budgets is also critically important in order to ensure that expenditures give priority to the needs of women and girls in terms of decent employment creation, social spending, agriculture and infrastructure investment, as well as to prevent regressive and gender-blind fiscal policies. This should apply not only to the national budgets of developing countries, but also to those of donor countries who are part of the duty-bearers for the realization of the rights of women and girls.

This short-term actions should be accompanied by the intensification of campaigns and actions on violence against women, in light of past experience which demonstrates that domestic and gender-based violence have increased with economic hardship (Beijing areas: 3,5).

In the longer-term, it will be critically important to acknowledge that it is high time to address past policy neglect in relation to the agricultural sector, particularly the subsistence subsector where women are concentrated. The recent food crisis has demonstrated the inadequacy of the

¹ This section draws on a position paper commissioned by UNIFEM on "The Economic Crisis and Its Impacts on Women and the Achievement of Gender Equality Targets in the Twelve Critical Areas of the BPFA".

prevailing market-based model of agricultural policies, and calls for alternative policies that build on and value women's central role in agricultural production, processing and marketing, and as the main custodians of biodiversity, indigenous plant varieties and traditional knowledge (Beijing areas: 1,11). In particular, such policies should focus on smallholder farms and subsistence agriculture, and be based on the principles of food sovereignty which give prominence to the right to food as well as to women's right to have access to property and productive resources, and to define their own food and agricultural systems (Beijing areas: 1, 2, 7, 8, 9).

Furthermore, linking the gender equality and women's rights agenda to the MDG process demands more than the specific gender interventions that have been undertaken hitherto. A rights-based approach implies a paradigmatic shift towards a gender-responsive and people-centered macroeconomic framework, which requires at least three types of macroeconomic reforms:

- tax reforms in order to promote progressive and pro-poor taxation, that is reducing the tax burden that has been shifted onto consumers, especially women, and finding alternative sources of taxes, such as the currency transactions tax² proposed by feminist economists (Seguino 2009);
- financial reforms in order to reverse the trend that has widened the gap between the haves and the have nots; undercut jobs and growth; and, privatized profits while socializing risks;
- trade reforms in order to put an end to the hardship resulting from trade liberalisation for the rural and working poor, most of whom are women.

² A small tax on speculative currency transactions that aims to discourage speculation and to make the trading parties involved pay for the costs of the negative social effects, in the same way as a pollution tax.

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