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Beyond Parity: Development, Freedom and Women

Notes on Women's Rights in the Millennium Development Goals

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* The views expressed in this paper, which has been reproduced as received, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

The 90's was a decade of commitments among nations to achieve more significant progress in making human rights a worldwide and daily life reality. Beyond reaffirming shared principles and values, the nations agreed plans of action with concrete and detailed measures to reassure not only in theory but in practice every citizen's human rights.

At the end of the decade the gap between the commitments made by the nations and its true implementation was overwhelming. Closing the gap became the most defying challenge of the new millennium.

In the year 2000, the 189 United Nations Member States signed the Millennium Declaration which conveys a new strategy for making progress: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are a unified framework for the 90's Conferences and Plans of Action, but most importantly, it's a communication and political strategy to mobilize political will and resources more effectively. The strategy identifies 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators that are measurable and verifiable, most of which were already in the Plans of Action. The goals must be reached by the year 2015. This strategy by no means implies substituting the Plans of Action of the 90's with the MDGs. On the contrary. The purpose is creating momentum for the full implementation of the already agreed Plans of Action. The MDGs do not provide a comprehensive programmatic view and proposal for human development but leverage to enhance commitment, political will and resource mobilization.

At the threshold of the MDG+5 monitoring process, the purpose of this paper is to examine the links that in practice are being made or not between the MDGs and the Beijing Platform for Action through the revision of the Millennium Development Goals Country Reports (MDGR) officially rendered in 8 countries of Latin America: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Paraguay.

The main conclusions of the review through a gender lens of other 13 country reports are also included: Albania, Armenia, Bolivia, Cameroon, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nepal, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, and Vietnam.¹

I. Women and Gender in Country Reports: Latin America

Poverty and hunger

Country reports evidence the absence of a reflection and debate on the gender dimensions of poverty and hunger. Women are mentioned as household heads; in a way that suggests that they are seen as a group that needs special attention because of their vulnerability, the same as pregnant women. The condition of women as mothers, that is to say, as a channel to the well-being of families, prevails in the analysis of poverty and the identification of challenges and priorities. Educated women appear to be key agents of well-being but only in reference to their traditional family and domestic roles and

¹ UNDP. Millennium Development Goals. National Reports. A Look Through a Gender Lens. May, 2003.

responsibilities. In the MDGR from Guatemala higher malnutrition rates than the national average are associated with mothers that live in rural areas, uneducated and indigenous.

Country reports do not express the vision that women are over-represented among the poor, or that women suffer disproportionately or carry most of the burden. Furthermore, it is worth underlining that one of the countries' reports state that "no gender differences regarding poverty rates were found" and a similar percentage is presented for women and men. It must be stressed that in the Latin American countries, data used for reporting on progress made on reducing poverty is based on a "household income" methodology that impedes differentiating the particular situation of women and men regarding their living-poverty conditions. Rather, the statistics resulting from this measuring of poverty show that there is no difference between the proportion of women and men living in poverty.

A Look Through a Gender Lens. National Reports

Armenia, Albania, Bolivia, Cameroon, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, etc.

Poverty and hunger

... although gender issues and/or women and women's issues have been mentioned in nine out of the 13 MDGs studied, the content of the mention is not substantive in all cases.

... the opportunity provided by the MDGRs to bring gendered perspectives definitively into the larger poverty debate has not been sufficiently or effectively used. More than half of the reports studied reflect a clear and welcome recognition that women are disproportionately affected by poverty. However, empirical evidence has not been presented to support this statement.

Education

According to the MDGRs in 6 of the 8 countries, parity in education enrolment has been reached and in some of them women's enrolment is even higher and it is men that are lagging. Not all reports provide an explanation, but those that do state that boys are more pressed than girls to work outside the home to generate income.

MDGRs of countries that have reached parity in education, when reviewing Goal 2 (universal education) emphasize the need to go beyond parity and identify as a key challenge and priority eliminating sexism in education, through mainstreaming gender in all components and actors of the schooling system.

In Guatemala, where women are way behind men in education enrolment mainly in rural areas, the issue of sexism is not mentioned. Bolivia is the other country where globally parity has not been attained, due to deep rural-urban differences; in rural areas gender disparities in education persist, not so in urban areas. It is important to bear in mind that

Guatemala and Bolivia have each one of the largest indigenous population, most of who live in the rural areas.

Most of the reports disaggregate data not only by sex, but also by rural-urban residence and in some cases by ethnic origin. As has been repeatedly affirmed in different documents and fora, globally Latin America has already met Goal 2. MDGRs show, nonetheless, profound disparities affecting indigenous and black women, and women in rural areas.

A Look Through a Gender Lens. National Reports

Armenia, Albania, Bolivia, Cameroon, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, etc.

Education

... gender issues have been mainstreamed to a certain extent under Goal 2 in most reports.

The greater visibility of gender issues under Goal 2 as compared to Goal 1 appears to be an outcome of the fact that gender equality is an explicit component of the target. On the other hand, the fact that an education target is also incorporated into Goal 3 may be a factor behind the absence of any attempt to go behind the data to even list, if not analyze, the reasons for gender gaps in education.

Gender equality and women's autonomy

Explicitly posed in the MDGRs, a second key conclusion that arises from the fact that women have reached parity with men in education enrolment and literacy is that the true challenge and priority for advancing in gender equality and women's autonomy is not attaining parity in education, but economic and politic equality with men.

On reporting on Goal 3, countries went beyond the set targets and indicators and in some cases restated them with a more ambitious mindset. With the purpose of providing a sense of the approach used to the Goal, the following illustrative affirmations have been extracted from the reports:

Argentina. The targets of Goal 3 were redefined and two new targets were adopted: 1) By 2015, the target is to reach further gender equity through a better economic participation of women, the reduction of the salary gap between men and women, while keeping the levels of gender equality in education obtained by 2000. 2) Increase women's participation in decision-making in public and private institutions.

Bolivia. The priorities identified include driving women's participation in economic circuits of resource assignment through the access to income, productive resources, and to capital, goods and the labor market. In addition, improve women's opportunities in the market place, the same as women's access to land property, credit and to a broad deliberation on the current unequal distribution of domestic and family chores.

Brazil. In the Brazilian case, the targets and indicators are insufficient to address the issue of gender inequality. A better access of women to education is not enough to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. On the contrary, emphasizing women's better access to education hides the real situation of gender relations in the social, professional and political sphere. Gender equality in Brazil implies two key objectives: economic equality and political equality.

El Salvador. On referring to the objective of gender equality and women's autonomy the report points out that it must not be reduced to the target and its indicators, rather gender equality and women's autonomy embodies all the spheres of human development and for that reason requires a broader view.

Guatemala. In this country, women, especially indigenous women and those living in rural areas, suffer severe inequalities regarding their access to education. This is the only case in which the MDGR does not go beyond the set targets and indicators and places emphasis exclusively on the education targets.

Honduras. As a starting point the report notes that gender equity and equality cannot be viewed solely through the relationship between boys and girls access to education. In order to have a better understanding of gender equality and women's full participation it's necessary to analyze other social indicators. "The report identifies global goals that do not apply to Honduras, one of them being Goal 3 that refers to the promotion of gender equality which has only one target related with equal access to education in reference to which in the case of Honduras it is possible to observe that the problem of gender equity does not have to do so much with access to education, but with women's access to the political and economic sphere.

Panama. The reports points out that no matter women's higher education, the conditions of her participation in the market place are unequal and unjust. It stands out that a major effort has to be made regarding women's empowerment.

Paraguay. One of the challenges identified in the report states that the strengthening and development of women's capacities requires a new culture of equality able to reverse the unfavorable stereotypes that affect women and that promotes the building of new masculinities. The report adds the challenge of complementing the actions taken to broaden women's opportunities in the market labor with the provision of the necessary back-up infrastructure, as for example daycare facilities.

These are not isolated remarks. MDGRs place in the core of the diagnosis and the agenda of challenges and priorities for advancing women's equality and autonomy the concern of the disconnection between the achievements in women's access to education and higher schooling compared to men, and the unequal and discriminatory conditions of her participation in the labor market expressed, among other things, in unquestionable wage and income gender disparities. Countries provide market labor statistics that go

beyond the indicator set of percent of women employed in the non-agricultural sector to show the disconnection.

Evidence in Latin America shows that only effectively implemented mechanisms of affirmative action like female quota systems increases significantly women's access to Parliament seats. MDGRs report on those advances, the same as setbacks in countries that do not have the quota or it is not adequately implemented.

However, it is not clear from the reports how Governments plan to address the challenges and priorities set in the agenda.

A Look Through a Gender Lens. National Reports

Armenia, Albania, Bolivia, Cameroon, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, etc.

Gender equality and women's autonomy

... discussions under Goal 3 in all reports have attempted to foreground some critical aspects of gender inequality.

Since the target for Goal 3 is phrased in terms of education, it is not surprising that all the reports provide information against the education indicator. Similar attention has not been given to the other two indicators (the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments), that are equally if not more critical to the achievement of gender equality.

It is significant that most reports have skirted discussion of 'difficult' issues such as violence against women – practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage, where they are mentioned, are referred to as 'harmful traditions' rather than as violations of women's human rights.

Health

Women are frequently mentioned when reporting on child mortality, in terms of the importance of educated women to provide better and adequate health care to children for preventing disease and deaths. Women's education is also associated with pregnant women using health services and seeking care on time to prevent child and maternal mortality. Once again, women seem to matter merely in their role of mothers and agents of children well-being.

Child and maternal mortality are analyzed mainly from the point of view of medical causes and public health interventions: coverage of health services, availability of trained medical personnel, quality of care, and information and education strategies.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are scarcely mentioned and when the issue is pointed out, it is not clear what exactly the reports are referring to. When mentioned, the

concern for sexual and reproductive health is not clearly knitted in the diagnosis, challenges and priorities, but casually raised and understood mainly as education, information, counseling and the availability of services. The links between child and maternal mortality and women's reproductive and sexual health and rights are not clearly established, except in regards to maternal/reproductive care.

It is not necessarily that the data is not there. Guatemala reports that child mortality increases when the mother is less than 20 years old at the time of giving birth, when it is her seventh childbirth, when less than 2 years have gone by since the last birth, and when the mother is indigenous and uneducated. This situation is not conceptualized or analyzed from the perspective of women's sexual and reproductive rights, but in terms of the relation between certain socio-demographic characteristics and child mortality.

Honduras' MDGR points out that maternal mortality is closely related to women's reproductive health, family planning, the use of contraceptives and the couples' active participation. This is an isolated remark and the view it expresses does not reflect on the rest of the analysis of the Goal.

In Argentina's MDGR a significant statement is made: maternal mortality is an indicator of structural, economic, social and cultural aspects that determine the level of well-being a society provides women in regards to her health and nutrition, as well as of her access to education and other resources. Again, this assertion does not structure or guide the rest of the analysis.

Health care is, at least, a two way flow. Public health interventions must take into account, they must even grow out of, precisely understanding bone and flesh people and real life. Fully comprehending and implementing sexual and reproductive rights and health care starts by understanding the importance of identifying social, economic and other environmental (non-physiological) determinants of health and disease. This means placing people, their views, expectations, restraints, fears, opinions and preferences as a key determinant of their health and disease. However, when reviewing the MDGRs, women (and people) are clearly absent.

It is worth mentioning the case of the MDGR from Bolivia because it emphasizes the need to adapt health care services and facilities to cultural diversity, especially because indigenous women (and people) restrain from using services that do not respect their view of health care and disease.

There are some few and some timid mentions to the need of a perspective that envisions women's health more broadly.

A Look Through a Gender Lens. National Reports

Armenia, Albania, Bolivia, Camerún, Egypt, Lithuania, Mauritius, etc

Health

Women's issues find a fairly prominent place in discussions of infant mortality. However, mention of gender issues is absent in discussions under this goal in the majority of reports.

In the majority of reports, discussion on women's issues is based on the perception that women are, and should be, solely responsible for the care and survival of infants. Given the importance placed on women as mothers in most countries, the complete absence of any mention of women in four out of 13 reports is surprising.

Mainstreaming of gender issues into MDGRs (other than under Goal 3) has perhaps been most visible in the context of Goal 5. This goal has been defined in terms of maternal mortality in the global framework of MDGs, but a number of countries have chosen to redefine it in the broader context of reproductive health.

The incorporation of a gendered perspective into the analysis of maternal mortality in the majority of reports is encouraging, as is the placing of the issue in the broader context of reproductive health and rights. Commitments are made in several reports to policy measures for the promotion of women's rights.

Despite the ongoing global and national debates around the gender impact of HIV/AIDS, most of the MDGRs reviewed do not reflect a gendered perspective on the epidemic. While there is certainly recognition that women are among the most vulnerable groups, no connections are made between vulnerability and gender inequality, or the implications of vulnerability for women's lives. A positive feature is the desegregation by sex of data on HIV/AIDS incidence.

Environment and world partnerships

Because of the sexual division of labor and women's socially assigned main responsibility of washing, cleaning, cooking and caring for children and the elderly, access to drinkable water and adequate sanitation is critical to them.

Access to water for drinking and sanitation facilities is determined mainly through household surveys or census. Attempting to explore gender differences, the MDGR from Guatemala reports the proportion of households headed by women and those headed by men that do not have access to potable water. This is the closest any MDGR gets to differentiate between men and women's access to water and sanitation.

Because the absence of drinking water and poor sanitary conditions affect the household as a whole and each of its members individually, men and women in these living conditions seem to be "gender neutral".

It is interesting to note that in contrast to the importance given under Goal 3 to women's economic equality and empowerment, when it comes to reporting on access to information and communication technologies, women are not mentioned at all. An explanation for this is either that it is seen as a "gender neutral" issue or/and no data is available disaggregated by sex. No MDGR mentioned the need for this information. On the other hand, women's need for secure land tenure is mentioned in only two of the reports.

Policies and mechanisms

Most MDGRs have a section where policies and programs related to the issues addressed by the MDGs are described, including those related to advancing women's rights. However, only two MDGRs mention explicitly CEDAW or Beijing's Platform for Action. The report from the government of Argentina points out that the Women's National Council was created in 1992 as the institutional mechanism responsible of the implementation of the CEDAW. The MDGR from Bolivia notes that the Plan for the follow-up of the recommendations conveyed in the Beijing's Platform for Action has had operating problems due to scarce financial and human resources.

II. Concluding remarks

Rather than fully threaded concluding arguments, this section lists several issues for debate.

Feminization of poverty?

The Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes that women are over-represented among the poor, suffer disproportionately compared to men, and carry the heaviest burden, because of the gender inequalities and the sexual division of labor.

In the context of the States in Latin America, its institutions and policy making processes, the statistics and arguments to base these remarks are neither clear nor forceful. Rather, the statistics being used show that women are not significantly over-represented among the poor. Instead, the feminization of poverty has been associated with the increasing rate of female-headed households. Noteworthy, the broadly disseminated concept of "feminization of poverty" related to women household heads has shown to be very complex and the links require a more careful analysis. It is worth clarifying, as simple as it may be, that not all women-headed households are poor and that not all poor households have a women head. Statistics show quiet the contrary. Associating poverty to women-headed households and thus to vulnerability, reflects a prejudice.

While poverty affects households as a whole, because of the gender division of labor and responsibilities for household welfare, women bear a disproportionate burden, attempting to manage household consumption and production under conditions of increasing scarcity. (Platform for Action - Paragraph 50)

Going a step further, feminization of poverty has been understood in terms of acknowledging that “women live poverty differently”, but different does not seem to mean “unequal or disproportionately”, just different.

To explore and characterize this difference, it is essential to use a qualitative approach that addresses its multidimensionality, in line with the Beijing Platform for Action, but this is exactly what the MDGs are not about. Even if the debate can and should take a multidimensional and differentiating perspective, at the end reporting is being done with quantitative indicators that are measurable and verifiable and those that are at hand to Governments show that there are no differences in poverty rates between men and women.

It is thus key to propose new ways of thinking, maintaining income as an indicator but at the same time being able to differentiate between men and women’s individual income. In this line of thought, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean - ECLAC- has worked out a set of useful and promising individual income indicators. In addition to the well-known labor market related indicators (wages disparities, for example) three additional indicators are being used to enlighten the reports: 1) Percentage of women older than 15 who have no income of their own on poor and non-poor households. 2) Percentage of women with a spouse or partner who have no income of their own, on poor and non-poor households, and 3) population aged 15 and over, by individual income quintile. The information needed for these indicators is readily available in the household surveys data bases and have the advantage of not viewing income as exclusively related to the labor market.

While poverty rates do not show significant sex differences when the household is taken as the unit of analysis, enormous differences show up when individual sex income is estimated. In Latin America, 46.7% of women aged 15 and over do not have an income of their own in contrast with 21.0% of men. In 13 out of 15 countries in the Region, more than 50% of spouses and women partners do not have an income of their own. Thus, a high proportion of women, even if they do not live in poor households, do not have individual income by which they can satisfy their needs autonomously or with the power of deciding over income distribution within the household.

Women’s dependency, or lack of autonomy, within the household, though not synonymous with income poverty, affects their economic self-sufficiency and decision-making capacity. Their vulnerability in the case of widowhood, termination of a marriage or breakup of the family is also aggravated by the lack of an income of their own.

Parity does not lead to equality

It is frequently forgotten or at least barely mentioned that one goal was set not for 2015 but for 2005, and that is target 4 (Goal 3): *Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than*

2015. As UNICEF and the United Nations Secretary General have remarked, parity in education is the first step towards the achievement of the goals set for 2015 and thus the most urgent of them all. Gender parity in education has been stated as a previous and critical measure to achieve gender equality, without which the other goals cannot be attained and sustained.

“Parity” and “equality” are often used if not as synonymous, as interchangeable concepts, and they are not. Parity indicators measure quantitatively a particular situation in a fix moment in time and serve to determine progress being made. Since progress in parity between women and men express a better position of women in society, parity constitutes a first crucial step to get women closer to the same starting point as men.

Parity indicators have, nevertheless, limitations. Parity may seem to express advances in women’s situation because the gaps between men and women close, however this may happen not as a result of women’s advancement but because of men’s setback. On the other hand, parity between women and men does not lead necessarily to equality with men. The MDGRs call the attention to fact that even if parity in education has been reached, deep economic and political inequalities persist.

Gender equality must ultimately express itself in real equality of results, as evidence that the constraints social norms impose to women have been eliminated. Gender inequality has its origin in unequal power relations and progress toward further gender equality, not just parity, must be determined by the degree in which these relations are significantly modified.

The MDG gender trap

Considering strictly the MDG targets and indicators may lead to a miss-reading of gender inequalities like the following: “Statistics show that there is no difference in poverty income rates between women and men. Immediately following this conclusion, the reviewing of Goal 2 shows that women are better of in terms of education enrolment and literacy and that it is men that suffer disparities. And to add up to this, in most countries malnutrition and child mortality is higher among boys than girls and HIV/AIDS prevalence is higher among men. Access to water and sanitation, as well as to communication and information technologies appear as “gender neutral”. Certainly, it is only women that die for maternal causes.” A reading in this perspective can easily result from analyzing and reporting progress based exclusively in the MDG targets and indicators. CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action are a needed reference for a broader perspective of women’s rights.

Health: women are absent

The main argument of the Millennium Project Task Force on Child and Maternal Health, is that dramatic, meaningful, sustainable progress toward improvements in child health and maternal and reproductive health requires adopting a perspective that clearly makes a distinction between 1) an evidenced-based understanding of the medical, behavioral or

public health interventions, and 2) an evidenced-based understanding of an approach to the social, political, economic, and institutional structures that will enable societies to ensure that all people have access to those interventions.

In recent decades much work in the public health field has focused on the first perspective, that is, on the primary causes of poor health, the medical interventions to address those causes and the most effective delivering strategies. Instead, it is important to open a second line of inquiry, analysis and evidence-building, one that begins, not ends, with the social and political dimensions of health and health care, as they are experienced by people. From the perspective of women's rights that means taking into account, furthermore, viewing as the starting point gender power relations and women's possibility and capacity to decide freely if, when and how to reproduce, the number, spacing and timing of children, and to decide on matters related to their sexuality, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

Reproductive health *implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how to do so. It also includes sexual health, the purpose of which is the enhancement of life and personal relations, and not merely counseling and care related to reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases.* (Platform for Action - Paragraph 94)

This mindset is crucial in order to adopt a women-rights-based approach to child and maternal health that understands sexual and reproductive health and rights as defined in Cairo and Beijing. But this perspective of health policy is not there not only in regards to women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, but, with few exceptions, nowhere in the health systems. Advancing women's health rights is deeply connected to meaningful overall changes in the health sector.

Reproductive rights are human rights and embrace the *recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and the means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health.* (Platform for Action - Paragraph 95)

The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. (Platform for Action -Paragraph 96).

Educated women: Whose well-being and change?

Educated women have fewer children; seek medical care for themselves and her children, to who they provide better attention and nutrition. Children of educated women go to and remain in school. The advantages associated with women's education multiply from one generation to the other.

Being an essential instrument of change and well being for others, does not necessarily mean women's well-being, and in many cases it implies a double and triple burden due to a heavier load of domestic chores and family responsibilities. In order to avoid using women as instruments for others welfare without major advances in their well-being and even at their expense, a rights-based approach must be promoted and adopted. CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action provide such an approach.

To insist in women's education because of her key role as agents of well-being may altogether simply mean to insist in strengthening and reproducing women's traditional gender roles. But being agents of change and well-being may also turn to mean power. Without doubt one of the most important challenges but also the most promising opportunity women are currently facing is converting the power that means being agents of change and well-being for others, into personal power, freedom, and the autonomy to be and do what they value most for themselves and their life projects. How is the power of change for others well being turned into power to broaden the options available to women to pursue their best interest? This involves much more than just parity with men in education.

The Goal 3 paradox: a “half empty or half full glass”

One cannot say there is not a gender perspective in the implementation, monitoring and reporting on progress made in achieving the MDGs. Rather, reports are characterized by a paradox and suffer from schizophrenia.

In reviewing progress made in reducing poverty and malnutrition, child and maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS and serious diseases, prevails a vision of women mainly as mothers and as a vulnerable group that requires special attention. On deep contrast with this view, the reporting on the advances on women's equality and autonomy under Objective 3, emphasizes a rights-based approach dealing with such core issues as economic and political equality and the need to transform the gender distribution of domestic chores and responsibilities.

This sometimes difficult to define sense of the “glass half full or half empty”, has driven some to think the MDGs narrowed women's rights agenda doing away with decades of struggle, but have also led others to think that MDGs should be taken as one more useful strategy and opportunity to advance women's agenda as evidenced by the perspective adopted by governments to report on Goal 3.

This schizophrenia is the result of the “ghettoisation” of gender concerns that produced Goal 3. But in the other hand, having bet just on mainstreaming gender in all the objectives instead of identifying a gender equality goal on itself could have led to the already well-known practice: “because gender must be everywhere it ends up being nowhere”.

How to link the MDGs when there are no existing institutional and policy mechanisms for the implementation of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action?

In practical terms, linking the MDGs with the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW, requires the existence of concrete and functioning institutional mechanisms that make it possible to establish the bridge.

To start with, it requires explicit, well-known and concrete institutional mechanisms and policy instruments for the implementation and follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW. This is not the case in most of the countries. At most, National Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women were consulted or asked to prepare the report for Goal 3.

On the other hand, many of the reports were prepared by the United Nations country teams or with its technical support, because the MDGs are not still clearly embedded in development mainstream policies in each of the countries and there are no clearly defined institutional arrangements for its implementation and follow-up. In synthesis, making the links in a concrete and explicit way requires institutional arrangements that in many cases are not in place.²

However, it is important to bear in mind that, exactly for the same reasons it is incorrect to conclude that because an issue or an approach was not mentioned in the MDGRs, it does not mean that countries are doing nothing about it or have not adopted the due perspective.

Gender equality in the reign of social inequality

Women's parity with men in Latin America, the most socially unequal region of the world, might only mean for women being "equally unequal". Parity in misery does not empower women nor men. Attaining the same low enrolment secondary education rates as men is a limited and shortsighted aspiration that does not constitute a significant advance for women. Effectively advancing women's human rights, their well-being, freedom and autonomy depends on attaining parity in prosperity.

Gender equality is not possible without social equity and this means rethinking not only gender power relations but development strategies, as well as globalization dynamics and governance.

Equal capacities between men and women do not lead to equal opportunities, and equal opportunities do not result in equality of results. Economic and social constraints, norms, and prejudices distort the transit from capacities to opportunities to results. Because social norms and constraints are based in power relations, neither market forces

² An exception to this remark are the Poverty Reduction Strategies of Honduras and Bolivia (HIPC initiative), where the MDGs have been defined as key objectives to be attained.

nor time will change them naturally. Public policies are needed to compensate and reverse these distortions. The Beijing Platform for Action provides a comprehensive public policy proposal with this purpose. However, it is a proposal that does not fit with current development strategies and the role defined for the State, making it really difficult to follow Beijing. It is not only difficult to pursue gender equality, but social equality too. Beijing embodies a development strategy with a strong sense for “income, land, and productive resources distribution” as a means to assure the benefits of development reach women, but that is not the development strategy being followed by countries in Latin America.

In the context of the current development strategies, mainstreaming gender in public policy, particularly in economic policies, has become an ever-growing challenge because in many sectors “the policy is not to have policies”. One of the clearest examples is the case of the non-existing employment policies that makes it almost impossible to mainstream a gender perspective into labor market dynamics. Who, how, where and when individuals participate in the labor market is left to the market forces to decide.

Freedom: broadening women’s options

Equality. Fraternity. Freedom. Women’s movements since the French Revolution have struggled to make equality a truly universal value and right. Women’s movements have also given Fraternity a new meaning that includes women and women’s perspective of solidarity with other women and with men. Freedom, however, has not been addressed as directly and vehemently.

Freedom can be understood as the expansion of the capabilities of women (persons) to lead the kind of lives they value and have reason to value, and development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that women (people) enjoy. (Amartya Sen)

It is broadly recognized that poverty is not characterized solely by insufficient monetary income or material deprivations. A fundamental side to poverty is impotence, or unfreedom, understood as the impossibility of individuals to change things and living conditions as they are.

Having greater freedom to do things one has reason to value is significant in itself for the person’s overall freedom and important in fostering the person’s opportunity to have valuable outcomes and thus crucial to society’s development. (Amartya Sen)

Women as well as men, suffer from different forms of unfreedoms, but there are unfreedoms that are specific to women’s position in society.

Women’s opportunities and options to change things are limited by social norms that control and restrict their movement, their social relations outside the home, and their possibility to make decisions independently, as well as by cultural patterns that undervalue women’s viewpoints, words and actions and limit their public voice. Women’s options are severely restrained by unequal access to land property, credit,

technology, because of gender discrimination in the labor market and salary gaps due to prejudices and taboos. Time poverty due to women's double function in the productive and reproductive spheres also limits their options.

Freedom and autonomy are the building-blocks of women's equality. There will be no equality without freedom.

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Final Conclusions

Gender equality perspectives are not adequately mainstreamed into the DGRs. Discussions on gender are primarily confined to Goal 3 (gender equality), Goal 5 (maternal mortality) and Goal 6 (HIV/AIDS).

This 'ghettoisation' of gender issues within women-specific sectors appears to be independent of the authorship of the report – there is no significant difference on this score between reports authored by the UN System, national governments or independent consultants.

The inclusion of gender perspectives and women's concerns under Goals 5 and 6, when seen in conjunction with the total invisibility of women in discussions on Goals 7 (environment) and 8 (development cooperation) in the overwhelming majority of reports, suggest that women are still being seen in terms of their vulnerabilities, and cast in their traditional roles as mothers or victims rather than as actors in development.

Further, despite the rights-based perspective reflected by most reports in discussions on Goal 3, the approach to women in discussions under other goals continues to be instrumental rather than rights-based. Examples are the discussions on child mortality in several reports, where women's lack of knowledge of care and feeding practices is most commonly identified as a barrier to achieving the goal. Such a formulation ignores the gendered variables that mediate child survival, while accepting without comment the invisibility of fathers in parenting and care.

Similarly, while several reports make mention of women in the context of discussions on poverty, these are usually limited to identifying them as a particularly vulnerable group. The statements in some MDGRs about feminization of poverty are indicative of a welcome shift from earlier approaches that were insensitive to the differential concomitants and implications of poverty for women and men. However, when they are not backed up by data or policy commitments, such statements are of little value either as entry-points for refocusing the direction of poverty policy or as benchmarks for tracking change. Instrumental perspectives are also reflected in language - One report assesses the situation with regard to women's education in terms of the "total stock of educated women in the country".