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On the cusp of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) deadline, a Post-2015 High-Level Panel assembled to build upon the progress that has been made and chart a new global roadmap to eradicate some of the gravest threats to human development. Stressing the need for further integration, the High-Level Panel intends to drive its “universal” agenda forward using five “transformative shifts:” 1: leave no one behind, 2: put sustainable development at the core, 3: transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth, 4: build peace and effective, open, and accountable institutions for all, and 5: forge a new global partnership.1

Originally, the MDG agenda set a 2015 deadline for the world to meet the following objectives:
1: Eradicate poverty and hunger,
2: Achieve universal primary education,
3: Promote gender equality and empower women,
4: Reduce child mortality,
5: Improve maternal health,
6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases,
7: Ensure environmental sustainability, and
8: Establish a global partnership.

Although the High-Level Panel expanded gender-based targets and indicators for the Post-2015 Agenda, this brief examines the MDG progress made to date through a gendered lens to inform future policies, priority-setting, and evaluation. Women and girls “still comprise the majority of the world’s unhealthy, unfed, and unpaid,”2 yet the consequences of this fact extend far beyond women and girls. The maximum productive potential of any given country is also reduced and the impact is felt throughout societies for generations.

Goals 3 and 5 explicitly focus on women and girls, but gender equity is the lynchpin without which the MDGs cannot be achieved, and, as such, should appropriately underpin the Post-2015 Agenda as well. Moreover, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, passed in 2000 and coinciding with the establishment of the MDGs provides an additional, invaluable opportunity to examine the gains made by women and girls in areas of conflict around the globe. The interrelated nature of peace, security, and

development demands such cross-sectoral analysis when formulating and implementing effective policies and programs. Nowhere is this more critical than in conflict-affected countries, where the fewest advances have been made on both the MDG and 1325 agendas.\(^3\)

Although significant strides have been made in the last 13 years to meet the MDGs, the components deemed “most off-track” and “least likely to be achieved” hinge on gender equality.\(^4\) As greater attention focuses on the Post-2015 Agenda, the international community must recognize the centrality of the equality of women and girls in societal development - the world cannot address global poverty, the scourge of disease, family nutrition, economic deprivation, and more, without them.

**Millennium Development Goals through a Gendered Lens**

On a global scale, the established benchmarks to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (Goal 1) have been met five years ahead of schedule. Between 1990 and 2010, the percent of people living in extreme poverty, denoted as less than $1.25 a day, plummeted from 47 percent to 22 percent, particularly as a result of China and India’s rapid growth.\(^5\) This global achievement signals the possibility for tangible progress when governments, international donors, aid recipients, the private sector, and civil society work cooperatively. However, this benchmark measures progress in the most macro-economic terms, and fails to account for discrepancies between and within countries. Furthermore, it omits interpersonal indicators that reveal, “Improvements in household welfare are typically more pronounced when women hold the rights.”\(^6\) This reality creates roadblocks to sustaining Goal 1.

Take the intersection of poverty and education for example. Educating girls, in particular, holds great promise for eliminating poverty. The World Bank asserts, “An extra year of secondary schooling for girls can increase their future wages by 10 to 20 percent.”\(^7\) Yet, women remain disproportionately less literate than men; the disparity most glaring in rural settings. In Cambodia, 48 percent of women in rural areas are illiterate compared to 14 percent of rural men.\(^8\) Education increases opportunities for women and their families, supports their ability to enter the formal economy, safeguards them from engaging in transactional sex as a means of survival, and enables their decision-making across a spectrum of social, political, and economic issues. Eradicating poverty and hunger in the long run requires deploying cross-cutting, gender-centric policies and programs.

Along these lines, primary education enrollment (Goal 2) jumped from 82 percent in 1999 to 90 percent in 2011.\(^9\) Throughout most of the world – except for cases where political oppression and violent conflict remain the norm, such as in Somalia – access to primary education increases opportunities for women and their families, supports their ability to enter the formal economy, safeguards them from engaging in transactional sex as a means of survival, and enables their decision-making across a spectrum of social, political, and economic issues. Eradicating poverty and hunger in the long run requires deploying cross-cutting, gender-centric policies and programs.

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education became a reality for the majority of children. Despite this achievement, sex-disaggregated data in secondary and post-secondary schooling reveals significant gaps in overall education-based parity persist. This disparity is especially pronounced in conservative societies where tradition elevates boys over girls, prompting families to invest in their sons often at their daughters’ expense. Lack of basic infrastructure compounds the problem vis-à-vis culturally imposed limits on girls’ mobility. A study by the UN reveals that in Pakistan, “a half-kilometre increase in the distance to school decreases girls’ enrollment by 20 percent.”

While long-term solutions must encompass various sectors – from education to infrastructure – progress can be secured if these linkages are harnessed and resources are allocated accordingly.

Furthermore, the infant mortality rate (Goal 4) dramatically declined since 1990, “from 87 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 48 in 2012.” Dropping by 41 percent, the current child mortality rate represents real progress, but more must happen to meet the MDG target of a two-thirds reduction. From a medical standpoint, baby girls born to impoverished families have higher survival rates than baby boys born into similar conditions, but infant girls remain at the highest risk. In many poor or socially conservative families, preference for baby boys triggers and intensifies the global, female infanticide epidemic. Access to adequate health services alone cannot safeguard baby girls from this threat nor can it bring and keep the infant mortality rate down to Goal 4 levels.

In the last twenty years, maternal mortality (Goal 5) rates also fell by 47 percent, “from 400 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 210 in 2010.” Comprehensive public-private partnerships formed to produce tangible results, increasing access to and reducing the costs of maternal and neonatal health services. Still, even with this progress, “nearly 800 women” die every day from pregnancy and childbirth complications, with “99% of these deaths occurring in developing countries.”

Reaching the MDG goal of a three-quarters reduction in maternal mortality demands sustained engagement. The case for saving mothers and newborns during childbirth has been made but how to ensure this ideal continues to demand a concerted political and economic commitment.

At the close of 2011, 8 million people were on antiretroviral therapy for HIV (Goal 6), an increase of 1.4 million persons over the course of one year. Efforts also reduced incidences of mother-to-child virus transmission. Yet, HIV/AIDS remains a deadly scourge across Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, India, China, and much of Eastern Europe. Young women are the most vulnerable when it comes to the disease; “they account for 64 percent of HIV infections among young people worldwide.” The world cannot eradicate HIV/AIDS without addressing violence against women and girls and focusing on their unique vulnerabilities.

Five years ahead of schedule, the world met the Goal 7 target of “halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.” However, as the effects of

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climate change become more pronounced, so too does the need for efficient and sustainable water and land use. Success in this arena requires empowering women to own and access land and a safe, consistent water supply, as they are the primary food producers in the agricultural sector.

Increasingly, global partnerships have tailored aid efforts to affect change in the lives of women and girls. By 2006, slightly over half (51 percent) of all International Development Association (IDA) assistance, which funds World Bank operations in the poorest states, contained a gender component. By 2007, the World Bank unveiled its Gender Action Plan (GAP), officially tying gender to advances in the land, labor, agriculture, financial, and infrastructure arenas. Between 2010 and 2011, more than 20 percent, $20.5 billion out of a total of $91.9 billion, of MDG-focused aid honed in on gender equity and women’s empowerment. USAID gender guidance policies have been implemented as well, mirroring other development agencies. Still, critical gaps linger in both our collective understanding of and capacity to act through gender-sensitive development mechanisms. Current limitations impact the sustainability of the entire MDG agenda.

Fundamentals for Sustainable Development

As the world begins to formulate the Post-2015 Agenda, it is essential to calibrate the daily insecurities women and girls endure because they effect the development of the state. Current macro-level measurements fail to draw out the dynamics that make girls living in rural areas the “most disadvantaged” sector of society. One must come to appreciate how “the doors to productive economic livelihoods,” which “are often closed” to girls impact the macro-economic and social development of the state. To spur lasting development, greater attention must be paid not only to women and girls’ daily challenges, but also to their untapped potential. Women and girls represent the core of the world’s potential productive capital. In 2011, women controlled 70 percent of the world’s purchasing power. Women remain central to familial and state-level food security as well. Today, women produce and manage 60-80 percent of food across the developing world. If women received equitable access to resources, their “agricultural yields could increase 20 to 30 percent, national agricultural output could increase by an average of 2.5 to 4 percent, and the number of undernourished people could be reduced by 12 to 17 percent.” Educating girls also delivers enormous returns on investment for society. For each additional year a girl stays in secondary school, “her eventual wages will be boosted

22 Tran, M. (2011, October 7). Girls are key to food security in poor countries, report says. The Guardian.
23 Tran, M. (2011, October 7). Girls are key to food security in poor countries, report says. The Guardian.
by 15 to 25 percent.” Women’s income has a multiplier effect. Investing in women raises the standard of living for families and communities. Evidence shows that with her income, a woman “reinvests on average 90 percent of it into her family, compared to only 30 to 40 percent among men.” If women and girls had greater agency in their daily lives, “an additional 13.4 million children in South Asia and 1.7 million children in Sub-Saharan Africa would be adequately nourished.” Child mortality also plummets as women and girls learn more. Data culled from 68 countries cites a woman’s education as “key” for “determining whether her children will survive past the first five years of life.” In Latin America and the Caribbean, children born to uneducated mothers are “3.1 times more likely to die than those with mothers who have secondary or tertiary education and 1.6 times more likely to die than those whose mothers have primary education.” To achieve the MDGs, to build healthy societies and create long-term growth, we must invest in women and girls.

Advancing Women and Girls to Advance Peace and Security

Conflict exacerbates the vulnerabilities of women and girls and undermines their status as decision-makers and citizens. Civil wars are often described as “development in reverse” because they “reduce growth by around 2.3 percent per year.” In other words, “the typical seven-year war leaves a country around 15 percent poorer than it would have been” had no conflict occurred. Although economically significant, in humanitarian and non-material terms, the consequences of conflict are equally – if not more – catastrophic and prolonged. As conflicts become more complex and protracted, so does the transition, recovery, and rebuilding process. The greater the humanitarian suffering and infrastructural loss due to armed conflict, the more effort, resources, international cooperation, and political will that is required in the post-conflict phase. And gender mainstreaming is critical to creating effective post-conflict reconstruction processes.

Women are not only beneficiaries of development assistance in the post-conflict phase but they are also leaders, and, as such, must engage with their communities, their governments, and the international system in the development and design of development and reconstruction programs. The World Bank’s 2012 World Development Report, on “Gender and Development,” notes that to date, the participation of local women in post-conflict reconstruction efforts – especially in the design and implementation of programs – has been relatively low but this is unsurprising considering the fact that between 1992 and 2010, women comprised only 2.5 percent of signatories to agreements and 7.6 percent of negotiating parties. When women play such a small role in official peace processes, the chances of their involvement in post-conflict reconstruction processes can hardly be expected to grow. In fact, historical experience suggests that women, even when instrumental to peacemaking, are not necessarily able to continue to

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participate in decision-making in the post-conflict phase. This must be a focal point of the Post-2015 Agenda. The 2012 World Development Report also acknowledges, “In Burundi, Guatemala, Sudan (Darfur), and Uganda, when more women participated in the process and their inputs were channeled into decision-making, gender-related issues such as support to victims of sexual violence during the conflict, services for widows and displaced households, and health and education services were more likely to make it onto the policy agenda.”

Similarly, “In post apartheid South Africa, and some Latin American countries (such as Guatemala and Colombia), women’s active participation shifted public spending toward social and economic programs.” It follows that “women’s experiences (and typically greater vulnerability) during conflict are also likely to shape their priorities for the reconstruction agenda.”

Rape, often used as a weapon of war, makes conflict doubly dangerous for women and girls. Entrenched violent conflict, not only produces growing rates of sexual violence, but it exacerbates the spread of HIV/AIDS. In places like DR Congo, government soldiers and rebels alike target women and girls intentionally, transforming rape into a weapon that destroys communities and social fabrics. When women and girls lack individual-level security and when critical gendered issues are overlooked in the conflict context, the MDGs and the larger peace and security agenda get left behind.

Child marriage arises out of a mix of cultural customs and financial burden. Its prevalence is also a serious violation of human rights, affecting millions of girls. Child marriage is often exacerbated during times of crisis; in places marred by conflict and political upheaval, such as Yemen, where girls as young as 8 years old become brides, and Syria, where families are now living in a state of protracted crisis. Because cultural norms often consider girls more dispensable than boys, their devalued status makes it more commonplace for families in dire straits to compromise the safety and wellbeing of their daughters. Eradicating child marriage is not only instrumental to realizing Goal 3 and pivotal to the remaining seven MDGs, “it is measurable.” Prioritizing this in the Post-2015 Agenda could “build a new cycle of empowerment and opportunity” for developing states.

The status of girls in every MDG remains key to long-term sustainable development. As we look to creating a new timeline to fully realize the MDGs, leaders must – through research, analysis, policy development, and implementation – zero in on advancing the role girls can play in society. Girls will be tomorrow’s women, and their empowerment nurtures sustainable progress for all, with political, economic, and social reverberations.

40 The Elders. (2013, June 5). *Post-2015 goals include peace and ending child marriage*.