

The MDGs and gender

Key points

- Gender issues cuts across all eight of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
- Progress on the MDGs requires a coordinated policy approach that is sensitive to gender-specific discrimination and risks
- Social protection could support progress towards the MDGs, but only if gender equality is seen as critical for programme effectiveness

‘Addressing gender issues is not merely a technical task to be completed. It is critical to programme effectiveness and the achievement of the MDGs’

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The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have highlighted the policy challenges of poverty reduction, but the policy debate on poverty reduction, and on many of the other MDGs, has been relatively gender-blind.

Gender inequality is only explicit in MDGs 3 and 5. MDG3 measures gender parity in education, the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector, and the proportion of seats held by women in national legislatures. MDG5 focuses on reducing the maternal mortality rate and, since 2005, on universal access to reproductive health.

This is too narrow and sidelines other gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities.

Gender inequality causes and perpetuates poverty and vulnerability, especially for women, while greater gender equality can help to reduce poverty and vulnerability and contribute to pro-poor growth.

The MDG focus and debate on addressing key development challenges is unlikely to lead to sustainable poverty reduction unless there is a recognition that the gender dynamics of power, poverty vulnerability and care run through all of the goals.

MDGs 1 to 8

The goal of eradicating poverty and hunger (MDG1), now and post-2015, means tackling the discrimination that underpins and perpetuates gender inequality.

When women own and control resources, and have a good education behind them, the result is reduced poverty and greater productivity. Yet many are barred from ownership and education by prevailing attitudes and discriminatory laws. Women already account for the majority of those working in agriculture and in employment that is insecure or poorly paid. Now the global economic crisis has pushed up income poverty and unemployment in developing countries and there are a projected 200 million new working poor earning less than \$2 a day – mostly in the informal economy, and the majority of them women.

Around 64% of the MDG targets for service-related goals (2, 3, 6 and 7) are ‘off track’. Looking at these through a gender lens helps us to understand why. Women may lack the time, resources and freedom to access services. Another challenge is their time poverty, including their dual roles as income earners and caregivers (which is of particular relevance for

This policy brief draws on ODI's work on gender:

<http://www.odi.org.uk/work/themes/gender>



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both MDG4 on child mortality, and MDG5 on maternal mortality). Women's time poverty also has implications for MDG6 (combat diseases such as HIV and malaria), and MDG7 (environmental sustainability). It can prevent women accessing health care if clinics are far away and environmental degradation and time poverty can exacerbate each other if women and girls travel long distances to find unsustainable sources of firewood and water.

An additional constraint is the limited routine use of gender-sensitive indicators. The goal of universal primary education (MDG2) is seen as very attainable, relative to other MDGs, but indicators to measure progress do not acknowledge the links between gender and quality of education, i.e. enrolment does not necessarily mean regular attendance or completion. This is vital for an assessment of sexual parity in education (MDG3).

Finally, women's lack of voice – their lack of influence – is a major barrier to the achievement of MDG8, the creation of partnerships for development.

Policy recommendations

An understanding of how gender equality links to poverty reduction needs to resonate across the MDGs, backed by renewed commitment to, and implementation of, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. These spotlight gender issues not visible in the MDGs, but vital for their achievement, and underscore the accountability of governments and the international community.

Social protection is seen increasingly as a key poverty reduction strategy. Ensuring that social protection policy and implementation is gender sensitive can help to link gender equality and the MDGs if policy and programme design is guided by a clear analysis of gender risks, and with strong political commitment, strategic coordination, and long-term funding to achieve real change.

Programmes need to integrate gender from the outset. For example, equal wages and the provision of childcare facilities are vital for women's participa-

tion in public works programmes. In cash transfer programmes, better use could be made of the regular interactions between programme workers and local communities to address issues such as domestic violence, early marriage and child labour.

Sex-disaggregated data collection and analysis should be part of the monitoring and evaluation of social protection programmes. Mechanisms need to be put in place to create performance indicators that are monitored, and to reward programme implementers for good performance. Concrete measures include:

- community childcare in public works schemes, giving women equal access to income generation and freeing girls from extra domestic responsibilities;
- a care-giver allowance that recognises the true costs of care;
- education stipends for girls;
- awareness-raising programmes about gender-based violence, and programmes that include financial support for women fleeing such violence;
- opportunities for women and men to be involved in the design and evaluation of social protection programmes;
- gender-awareness and analysis training to help programme staff spot gender-specific risks that need to be tackled;
- a rigorous monitoring and evaluation system, underpinned by a baseline with sex-disaggregated data; and
- a centralised database to keep track of the well-being of programme participants and provide links to complementary services, such as micro-credit.

Above all, it is essential to recognise that addressing gender issues is not merely a technical task to be completed. It is critical to programme effectiveness and the achievement of the MDGs.

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Useful resources

This policy brief draws on two ODI Briefing Papers: No. 42, 'Gender and the MDGs: a gender lens is vital for pro-poor results', (<http://bit.ly/odibp42>); and No. 61, 'Gender-sensitive social protection and the MDGs', (<http://bit.ly/odibp61>).