



The Current Column
of 2 March 2009

Small-time gender-agenda

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Bonn, 2 March 2009. March 8 is International Women's Day. On this occasion countless events and publications will, once more, point out that the world is a different place for women than it is for men. While women do two thirds of all the work done in the world, they are paid only one tenth of what men earn, and they own no more than one percent of all property. 70 percent of the extreme poor are girls and women. "Gender equality is the key to overcoming poverty," as German Development Minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul noted last November, cogently summing the matter up on the occasion of the presentation of the World Population Report 2008. But is this insight really reflected in development policy?

In 2000, 189 countries committed themselves, in the Millennium Declaration, to contribute to worldwide poverty reduction by consistently implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The demonstrative unity displayed by the actors on the stage of international development policy in pledging, by 2015, to follow up their well-meant words with well-made deeds may have been a positive surprise, and one also that garnered a good measure of international attention. But the goals derived from the Millennium Declaration cannot be said to be overly innovative. As regards gender equality in particular, the MDGs may even be viewed as a step backwards. The Platform for Action of the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing was far more broadly conceived, more concretely formulated, and substantially more consistent in the demands it voiced.

In other words, there is good reason to ask – and not only on the occasion of International Women's Day, and because we have just passed the halfway stage of the period set for reaching the MDGs – how significant the latter in fact are when it comes to the issue of gender equality. It must, first of all, be seen as a positive fact that MDG 3 explicitly addresses the need to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. However, the target formulated to measure concrete progress - Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education – seems remarkably isolated, and it disregards other important factors involved in achieving gender equality. While MDG 3 refers, in the indicators used to review progress in reaching it, to women's participation in education, gainful employment, and political decision-making, when we look at the MDGs as a whole, we gain the impression that the empowerment of women called for in MDG 3 is an element of no more than secondary import. The MDGs reflect only the insight that women are more often affected and harder hit by poverty than men. While this insight is not new, there is no doubt that it is true. However, the MDGs accord no consideration to the role of women as actors in development processes and do little to address the need to change existing power relations. And yet no one would actually dispute a - wholly apposite - statement once made by Kofi Annan: "The future of the world depends on women."

Other passages in the list of goals deal with women mainly in connection with their traditional gender role: in pregnancy (MDG 4) and in motherhood (MDG 4). In one of its targets, which calls for "... full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people," MDG 1 (Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger) at least deals directly with women. And the achievement of universal primary education called for in MDG 2 applies – a highly welcome development – equally to boys and girls. But that, sadly, is the end of the small-time gender agenda of the MDGs.



In other words, the MDGs address gender equality at best intermittently, though not as a cross-cutting issue, in the sense of gender mainstreaming, as might actually have been expected. Inequality between men and women inhibits development. But the MDGs do not reflect any more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which progress on gender equality may entail direct positive impacts on poverty reduction efforts. Nor are the purely quantitative targets set for the MDGs sufficient to alleviate gender inequalities. Even if worldwide 100% of girls actually had access to education, this would not necessarily ensure that what they learned would serve to reduce existing forms of discrimination. An education that, while teaching students to read and write, does nothing to break down traditional role assignments may very well reduce illiteracy among women. But it will do nothing to strengthen their position in society.

For the year 2009, Dr. Renée Ernst from the UN Millenniumkampagne Deutschland has demanded: "Discrimination of women must stop. This is one of the main factors preventing the Millennium Goals from being reached, for only women with equal rights are able to provide their full contribution to a society's development." Looked at in this vein, violence against women is an ugly fact, one whose impacts are massively obstructing the implementation of all the MDGs, and yet one that is not mentioned explicitly in any one passage of the goals. Violence against women impairs their ability to work and causes major costs for medical care. Girls who have fallen victim to abuse are unlikely to be able to continue to attend school as regularly and successfully as they otherwise would and should. When very young girls become pregnant, they and their children are faced with a higher health risk. Rape exposes women to a higher risk of infection with HIV... The list, terrible as it is, could go on and on.

For 2009, the German Development Minister has announced plans to expend 60 million Euro in the framework of the "MDG 3 Call to Action," an initiative launched by the Danish Foreign Ministry as a means of intensifying efforts to reach the third of the MDGs. These efforts will have prospects of success only if women's rights are anchored far more broadly in the MDGs than they are at present. Be that as it may, presenting women merely as a target group for investment in education and health is, ultimately, more minimum than millennium.



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