

Foreword

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the Asia and Pacific region will require a concerted effort by all countries and their development partners. More than 5 years have already elapsed since the *Millennium Declaration* was adopted and considering the distance still to traverse by 2015, there is little time to lose. If success is to be achieved, ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment will be essential, given the relevance of gender concerns to all of the MDGs. This fact was recognized by governments at the September 2005 World Summit who collectively affirmed that “progress for women is progress for all.”

The Asia and Pacific region's performance on gender-related issues has been mixed. Despite substantial progress toward gender parity in education, the region is seriously “off track” on other indicators of women's capabilities and opportunities. Given the importance of gender equality to the MDGs in general, slow progress on gender issues may harm the overall MDG achievement. It is essential, therefore, to prioritize efforts toward gender equality and women's empowerment.

This paper has been prepared to inform policymakers in the region about the current situation and provide a guide to interventions urgently needed in this crucial area. It is the result of a tripartite regional partnership on the MDGs between the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and the

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. The partnership supports preparation of reports and technical papers, the dissemination of their findings and consultation, and dialogue with policymakers and stakeholders in order to ensure that the MDGs are achieved in the region.

This technical paper is part of a series studying in detail identified critical issues and problems concerning the timely achievement of the MDGs and complementing the regional MDG reports, two of which have so far been published: the first in June 2003 (*Promoting the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty Reduction*) and the second in September 2005 (*A Future Within Reach: Reshaping Institutions in a Region of Disparities to meet the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific*). The paper assesses regional performance related to gender equality and women's empowerment, identifies some of the main challenges to further progress, and provides examples of promising interventions and supportive institutions to guide future actions.

This paper is intended to help all those committed to achieving the MDGs and improving the lives of the millions of poor and marginalized women, men, and children in this region. We hope that they find the information and technical advice presented here useful in their endeavors.



Geert van der Linden
Vice President
Asian Development Bank
Manila



Kim Hak-Su
United Nations Under-Secretary
General and Executive Secretary
United Nations Economic and
Social Commission for Asia and the
Pacific, Bangkok



Hafiz Pasha
United Nations
Assistant Secretary General and
UNDP Assistant Administrator
for Asia and the Pacific,
New York

Acknowledgements

This paper was prepared under a partnership among three agencies: the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and the United Nations Development Programme.

Shiladitya Chatterjee (ADB), Nanda Krairiksh (UNESCAP), and Anuradha Rajivan (UNDP) coordinated the publication of this paper on behalf of their respective agencies and provided comments and overall direction and supervision.

The paper was prepared by Eugenia McGill, a consultant and adjunct associate professor at Columbia University, with data support provided by Joseph Addawe. Valuable comments and suggestions were received from members of all three agencies. These included Shireen Lateef, Sri Handayani, Francesco Tornieri, Yuriko Uehara, and Suzanne Wendt from ADB; Tone Bleie from UNESCAP; and Ramesh Gampat, Susan Howes, Roohi Metcalfe, Koh Miyaoi, Cecilia Valdivieso, and Claire Van der Vaeren from UNDP.

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Abbreviations

ADB	- Asian Development Bank
AMDD	- Averting Maternal Death and Disability program
APEC	- Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	- Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRAC	- Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CAR	- Central Asian Republic
CBO	- community-based organization
CEDAW	- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
EmOC	- emergency obstetric care
GMS	- Greater Mekong Subregion
GRAP	- gender reform action plan
HIV/AIDS	- human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome
ICT	- information and communication technology
ILO	- International Labour Organization
IPU	- Inter-Parliamentary Union
Lao PDR	- Lao People's Democratic Republic
LGED	- Local Government Engineering Department (Bangladesh)
MDG	- Millennium Development Goal
NCFAW	- National Commission for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam
NGO	- nongovernment organization
ODA	- official development assistance
OECD	- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PNG	- Papua New Guinea
PRC	- People's Republic of China
SAARC	- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SEWA	- Self-Employed Women's Association
STI	- sexually-transmitted infection
TB	- tuberculosis
TRIPS Agreement	- Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UN	- United Nations
UNAIDS	- Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDP	- United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	- United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCAP	- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCO	- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	- United Nations Population Fund
UNIFEM	- United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNRISD	- United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
WEDO	- Women's Environment and Development Organization
WHO	- World Health Organization
WTO	- World Trade Organization

Executive Summary

Introduction

The *Millennium Declaration* endorsed by the world's governments in September 2000 recognizes that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are among the most effective ways to “combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.”¹ At the World Summit in September 2005, governments reaffirmed their conviction that “progress for women is progress for all.”² This paper (a) analyzes the progress of developing countries in Asia and the Pacific toward achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that explicitly promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; (b) examines the gender dimensions of countries' progress toward the other MDGs; and (c) recommends future directions that countries and their development partners can take to make more consistent and sustainable progress in closing gender gaps and empowering women and girls in the region.

Gender, Development, and the Millennium Development Goals

The countries of Asia and the Pacific recognize equality between men and women as a matter of fundamental rights and citizenship. Virtually all countries in the region are parties to the Con-

vention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and equality between the sexes is expressly guaranteed in many constitutions and statutes. Yet despite these formal commitments, and the demonstrated benefits of gender equality to societies and economies, gender discrimination remains pervasive in the region.

At the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000, governments from this region and elsewhere committed to address gender inequities in several areas in order to reduce poverty, hunger, and disease and promote more sustainable development. In addition to the general commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, the *Millennium Declaration* adopted at the Summit included time-bound targets to achieve equal access at all levels of education, to reduce maternal mortality by three quarters, to combat all forms of violence against women, and to implement CEDAW. The MDGs that were subsequently developed to implement the *Millennium Declaration* capture most, but not all, of these commitments. While there is broad support for the gender-specific MDGs—Goal 3 on gender equality and women's empowerment, and Goal 5 on maternal health—the MDGs as a whole have been widely critiqued for their narrow approach to gender issues. In addition to Goals 3 and 5, only two other MDGs—Goal 2 on education and Goal 6/Target 7 on HIV/AIDS-

include gender-specific or gender-disaggregated indicators. (In contrast, international instruments, such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action,³ and national policies and action plans to promote gender equality, take a much more comprehensive approach to address gender inequities.) In light of these limitations, there is widespread agreement that Goals 3 and 5 need to be broadly interpreted within the frameworks of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. Notably, the World Summit held in September 2005 endorsed the broader view of gender equality goals reflected in the Beijing Platform. Several countries in Asia and the Pacific have already interpreted Goals 3 and 5 more broadly through their own MDG targets and indicators.

Progress on the Gender-Specific Goals

Despite substantial progress in narrowing gender gaps in educational enrollments, the region's overall performance in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment has been mixed. This is reflected most clearly in the "tracking" analysis undertaken by the joint regional MDG report prepared by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB),⁴ which found that more than three quarters of countries in the region are "on track" in narrowing gender gaps in educational enrollments (Goal 3/Target 4), while more than two thirds of countries are clearly "off track" in reducing maternal mortality (Goal 5/Target 6). When all of the indicators for Goal 3 are considered including nonagricultural wage employment and representation in national parliaments the picture is even more uneven.

Goal 3—promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Virtually no country in Asia and the Pacific is making equal progress on all of the indicators for Goal 3. Several countries in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand, as well as Sri Lanka and some Pacific countries,

have achieved gender parity in education at relatively high levels of enrollment, but this has not translated into equal participation in economic and political affairs. Cambodia has one of the highest levels of women's economic participation in the region, but women's education and literacy remain low with gender gaps at all levels. Central Asian countries, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyz Republic, have struggled to maintain education services since the fall of the Soviet Union, and girls' enrollment levels have remained high although gender gaps are widening at the secondary level. At the same time, women's wage employment and representation in national parliaments have fallen sharply.

Although the basic Goal 3 indicators track progress only at the national level, MDG progress reports of several countries in the region note much slower rates of progress in rural areas, among ethnic minorities and disadvantaged castes, and among displaced people and migrants. Women within these groups are likely to have much lower levels of education, wage employment, and participation in national politics than women generally in their countries. These groups are particularly affected by limited access to basic services. Refugee and internally-displaced women, and women in conflict-affected areas, are also exposed to high levels of harassment and violence.

Most of the MDG progress reports for countries in the Asia and Pacific region go beyond the international target and indicators for Goal 3, and report on progress and challenges in other areas related to gender equality and women's empowerment. Some of the frequently identified issues include (1) the persistence of gender-based stereotypes and discriminatory practices; (2) pervasive patterns of violence against women; (3) gender inequality in landownership; and (4) different impacts of migration, trafficking, and displacement of women and men. Several countries have also developed additional targets and indicators beyond the core international indicators for Goal 3 that are consistent with the broader set of gender equality objectives endorsed at the World Summit.

Despite substantial progress in narrowing gender gaps in educational enrollments, the region's overall performance in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment has been mixed. Further progress also requires strong political commitment at all levels and changes in prevailing social norms and attitudes.

Goal 5—improving maternal health.

Despite substantial investments in health interventions by governments, donors, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs), women in many countries across Asia and the Pacific continue to suffer high rates of death or disability associated with childbirth, respiratory and waterborne diseases, and malnutrition and anemia, as well as increasing rates of HIV infection. The MDGs take a fragmented approach to women's health, with the main focus being on maternal health (Goal 5) and more specifically maternal mortality (Target 6). Conspicuously absent from the MDGs is a goal directly addressing women's sexual and reproductive health, although this is a core element of women's general health and also critical to women's control over their own lives. The recent World Summit addressed this omission by explicitly endorsing "equal access to reproductive health" in its commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment.

As in education, some regional patterns emerge. In the Greater Mekong Subregion⁵ and South Asia, most countries started from extremely high levels of maternal mortality, with very limited maternal health services provided in rural areas. These countries are reducing maternal deaths as they extend and improve basic health services in the rural areas (albeit at very different rates of progress). In contrast, before 1990, the Central Asian countries generally had well-developed health facilities staffed with skilled personnel in rural as well as urban areas, and relatively low maternal mortality rates. These health systems came under considerable strain during the 1990s as health budgets were cut, and several of these countries as well as Mongolia have seen their maternal mortality rates climb as the quality of rural health services has deteriorated (in Azerbaijan, from 22 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 94 in 2000). By 1990, Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Thailand, had already made significant progress in lowering their maternal mortality rates through steady and strategic investment in their rural health systems. Now they are finding it harder and more expensive to extend maternal health services to the

most underserved groups, migrant women and women in the very remote rural areas. In the Pacific, maternal mortality rates and rates of skilled attendance at birth are generally better than for the region as a whole (with Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands lagging behind). However, women on remote islands and in the highlands of Papua New Guinea have little access to maternal health services.

Notwithstanding these regional differences, MDG progress reports and other sources point to several common factors contributing to the high levels of maternal deaths in Asia and the Pacific. These include: (1) lack of quality emergency obstetric care provided by skilled and culturally appropriate health personnel; (2) lack of public investment in basic health services, especially in poor provinces in the context of decentralization; (3) formal and informal fees for health services; (4) low levels of contraceptive use; (5) women's poor nutrition and overall health; (6) adolescent pregnancy and early marriage; and (7) lack of male involvement in reproductive health matters. Consistent with the commitments made at the World Summit, several countries in the region have expanded their national targets and indicators under Goal 5 to include access to reproductive health services.

Gender Dimensions of Progress on Other Goals

Apart from Goals 3 and 5, the MDGs do not expressly address gender issues, although the Goal 2 target ensuring that both boys and girls complete primary school has a gender equity dimension. Even so, MDG progress reports and other studies from Asian and Pacific countries confirm the interrelationships between the gender-specific MDGs and all of the other goals, as well as the importance of including a gender perspective in any strategy to achieve these goals. The paper reviews the gender dimensions of regional progress under several of the MDGs, including Goal 1 (eradicating extreme poverty and hunger), Goal 2 (achieving universal primary education), Goal 4 (reducing child mor-

Strategic initiatives to reduce gender gaps and empower women and girls are more effective when they are supported by equitable and responsive institutions.

tality), Goal 6 (combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases), Goal 7 (ensuring environmental sustainability), and Goal 8 (developing a global partnership for development).

Future Directions

The Asia and Pacific region has made progress toward Goal 3, particularly in narrowing gender gaps in primary and secondary education and raising literacy rates. However, progress on the indicators of economic and political empowerment under Goal 3 has been mixed, and most countries are not reducing maternal mortality rates fast enough under Goal 5. The region's uneven performance under the other MDGs also affects the prospects for improving women's capabilities, access to resources and opportunities, and security. The paper summarizes some of the common challenges to gender equality and women's empowerment in the region, and then provides examples of promising interventions and supportive institutions to guide future actions.

Regional challenges. Some of the challenges to gender equality shared by countries in the region include (1) addressing entrenched attitudes and behaviors related to gender roles and women's status; (2) mitigating the risks and negative impacts of migration and displacement, especially on young women and girls; (3) maximizing the benefits and minimizing the costs of regional integration, especially for poor women and men; (4) managing decentralization processes to ensure equitable delivery of basic services and opportunities for women to participate in local decision making; and (5) strengthening the implementation of national laws and policies and the effectiveness of national institutions to promote gender equality, and improving legal awareness and access to justice, especially among women in poor and marginalized communities.

Promising initiatives. Based on a comprehensive survey of worldwide trends, initiatives, and research results, the UN Millennium Project⁶ has recommended seven strategic priority areas for achieving gender equality and empowering

women, almost all of which were endorsed by governments at the recent World Summit. These include: (1) ensuring postprimary education for girls and young women; (2) guaranteeing sexual and reproductive health and rights; (3) providing time-saving infrastructure; (4) ensuring equal property rights; (5) improving employment opportunities and working conditions, especially for poor women; (6) combating all forms of violence against women and girls; and (7) improving women's representation in political bodies, especially at the local level. These strategic priorities are already reflected in the national gender action plans of most countries in the region, as well as in specific initiatives supported by governments, development agencies and banks, NGOs, and community-based organizations. The paper highlights examples of initiatives already being taken in each strategic area.

Supportive institutions. Strategic initiatives to reduce gender gaps and empower women and girls are more effective when they are supported by equitable and responsive institutions. These include law and policy frameworks, government planning and budget processes, accountability and enforcement mechanisms, and partnerships with women's organizations and other key actors. Regional partnerships can also play a key role, especially on gender issues that have cross-border implications. The paper considers some of the gender-responsive institutions already in place in Asia and the Pacific, drawing on countries' recent progress reports on their implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Asia and Pacific region faces a number of challenges to the achievement of gender equality, but it is also home to some of the world's most innovative and successful strategies for narrowing gender gaps and empowering women. These success stories provide possible models for other countries to adapt and follow.

Building on the commitments in the

Millennium Declaration, the recent World Summit endorsed a clear set of actions to promote gender equality over the next 10 years and beyond. These World Summit commitments support the broader view of MDGs 3 and 5 that many countries in the region have already taken through their own national development goals, targets, and indicators. The World Summit commitments to gender equality, therefore, provide a sound framework for governments, civil soci-

ety groups, and development agencies to pursue more gender-equitable development outcomes in the region. The final section of the paper recommends a number of actions that each of these key stakeholder groups can take to implement these commitments and further their own gender equality goals. However, meaningful progress will not be made without strong political commitment at all levels and changes in prevailing social norms and attitudes.

ENDNOTES

- 1 UN General Assembly. 2000. *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, para. 20. UN Doc. A/RES/55/2. 18 September.
- 2 UN General Assembly. 2005. *2005 World Summit Outcome*, para. 58. UN Doc. A/60/L.1. 15 September.
- 3 The outcome document of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.
- 4 UNESCAP, UNDP, and ADB. 2005. *A Future Within Reach: Reshaping Institutions in a Region of Disparities to Meet the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific*.
- 5 Consisting of Cambodia, People's Republic of China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam.
- 6 An independent advisory body commissioned by the UN Secretary General to propose best strategies to achieve the MDGs.

