

II. 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 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and equality between the sexes is expressly guaranteed in many constitutions and statutes. Gender equality—and the empowerment of women to fully participate in social, economic and political life—is also recognized as an important development outcome, reflected in countries’ national development plans and their specific policies and action plans for the advancement of women.

In addition to the intrinsic benefits of equality for women and girls, many cross-country and country-specific studies have confirmed the instrumental benefits of gender equality for the general well-being of households, communities, and societies; for productivity and economic growth; and for good governance. More specifically, these studies have estimated the substantial costs of gender *inequality* in terms of higher population growth; children’s mortality, poor health and lower school performance; less efficient allocation of household resources; lower economic growth; and higher levels of corruption.¹¹ For example, one study recently estimated some of the costs to countries of not achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education. For a country with substantial gender gaps at primary and secondary levels, the estimated costs between 2005 and 2015 could include an

average annual loss of 0.4 percentage points in economic growth, up to 0.6 additional children per women, up to an additional 32 child deaths per year (per 1,000 live births), and an average 2.5 percentage points higher prevalence of underweight children.¹²

Yet despite countries’ formal commitments to gender equality, and the demonstrated benefits to societies and economies, gender discrimination remains pervasive throughout Asia and the Pacific. There have been advances in several areas over the past 20 years. However, there are significant variations across and within countries, and gender gaps persist in access to education and quality health care, employment and business opportunities, political participation and decision making, personal security, and access to justice.

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 a general commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment, the UN *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 (see Box 1). In particular, the only

The World Summit in September 2005 confirmed that the gender-specific MDGs—Goals 3 and 5—should be broadly interpreted within the frameworks of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action.

Box 1: Millennium Commitments to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

United Nations Millennium Declaration Resolutions

- To promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.
- To ensure that, by [the year 2015],...girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education.
- By the same date, to have reduced maternal mortality by three quarters...
- To combat all forms of violence against women and to implement [CEDAW].

Millennium Development Goals Targets and Indicators

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

Indicators

9. Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education
10. Ratio of literate women to men (15–24 years)
11. Share of women in wage employment in the nonagricultural sector
12. Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments

Goal 3, Target 4, Indicator 9 (above)

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Target 6: Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality rate

Indicators

16. Maternal mortality ratio
17. Proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel

No goal, target or indicator.



target for the gender equality goal (Goal 3) relates to education, although the indicators for Goal 3 also cover employment and national decision making. However, there is no corresponding MDG for the *Millennium Declaration* commitments to combat violence against women and to implement CEDAW.

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. Gender inequalities operate on several levels—within households and in communities, markets and government institutions—and in virtually all spheres of social, economic and political activity. International instruments, such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action,¹³ and national policies and action plans to promote gender equality, therefore, have taken a comprehensive approach to address gender inequities. The Beijing Platform, for example, includes 12 critical areas of concern, including poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, the economy, power and decision making, human rights, media, the environment, and the particular needs and vulnerabilities of girls. In contrast, the MDG targets only address education and maternal deaths (although the indicators for MDG 3 also include women’s participation in nonagricultural employment and national legislatures). 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 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. At the same time, the gender dimensions of all of the other MDGs need to be recognized and monitored.¹⁴ As the UN Millennium Project and others have pointed out, the MDGs are interdependent. Countries are unlikely to make meaningful progress in reducing poverty, improving children’s access to education and quality health care, reducing the burden of infectious diseases, or improving access to safe water and improved sanitation, unless they take into account the different vulnerabilities of poor women and men, and the sociocultural and other conditions that



limit poor women’s and girls’ access to basic services (see Box 2). As discussed further below, several countries have also “localized” the MDGs, including Goals 3 and 5, to better reflect the progress they have already made in several areas as well as the more ambitious targets they have set in their national development plans.

In September 2004, 44 governments from Asia and the Pacific convened in Bangkok to review the region’s 10-year progress in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. The “Bangkok Communiqué” issued at the conclusion of the meeting confirmed the importance of linking governments’ commitments in the *Millennium Declaration*, the Beijing Platform, and CEDAW. The Communiqué also identified areas of progress, continuing gaps, and challenges in pursuing gender equality and women’s empowerment in Asia and the Pacific. These findings are also pertinent to this year’s review of the region’s progress toward the MDGs, and particularly Goals 3 and 5 (see Appendix 1). Notably, the World Summit held in September 2005 endorsed the broader view of gender equality goals reflected in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (see Appendix 2).

Box 2: Gender Equality and Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals

Millennium Development Goals	Importance of Gender Equality for Specific Goals
Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gender equality in capabilities and access to opportunities can accelerate economic growth• Equal access for women to basic transport and energy infrastructure can lead to greater economic opportunity• Gender equality in interventions helps to increase agricultural production because women farmers are a significant proportion of the rural poor• Equal investment in women's health and nutrition contributes to reducing chronic hunger and malnourishment, increasing productivity and well-being
Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Educated girls and women have greater control over their fertility and participate more in public life• Mothers' education is a strong and consistent determinant of their children's school enrollment and attainment, and health and nutrition
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Related indicators include parity in educational enrollments, wage employment and representation in national parliaments
Goal 4: Reduce child mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mothers' education, income, and empowerment have significant impacts on lowering child and maternal mortality rates
Goal 5: Improve maternal health	
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Women's economic independence, ability to negotiate safe sex, awareness of need to alter traditional sexual norms, access to treatment, and support for the care function that women perform are essential to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gender-equitable property and resource ownership policies enable women to manage their resources more sustainably
Goal 8: Develop global partnership for development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gender equality in the political sphere may lead to higher investments in development cooperation

Source: UN Millennium Project, *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women* (2005).

ENDNOTES

- 11 World Bank. 2001. *Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice*. Washington, DC; UN Millennium Project. 2005. *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*. Task Force on Education and Gender Equality. (Both reports include references to the specific studies.)
- 12 Dina Abu-Ghaida and Stephan Klasen. 2004. The Costs of Missing the Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equity. *World Development*, Vol. 32, No. 7, pp. 1075-1107.
- 13 The outcome document of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.
- 14 UNIFEM. 2004. *CEDAW, Beijing and the MDGs: Pathways to Gender Equality*. New York; World Bank. 2003. *Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals*. Washington, DC.