

Expert group meeting on
'Structural and policy constraints in achieving the MDGs for women and girls'
Mexico City, Mexico
21-24 October 2013

CONCEPT NOTE

EGM/MDG/INF.1
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ENGLISH only

I. Background and objectives

1. In accordance with its multi-year programme of work (2010-2014), the 58th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2014 will consider the “Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls” as its priority theme.
2. As the 2015 target date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) approaches, Intergovernmental and UN-led processes are well under way to inform and design a post-2015 development agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 58th session of CSW in 2014 will provide a critical opportunity for evaluating the current MDG framework from a gender perspective to better understand the achievements and challenges in implementing the MDGs for women and girls, accelerate the progress in achieving the MDGs and inform the ongoing debate on the post-2015 development framework and the 20 year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
3. In order to take stock on current research and assist the Commission in its deliberations, UN Women in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) will convene an expert group meeting (EGM) on “Structural and policy constraints in achieving the MDGs for women and girls” from 21 to 24 October 2013 in Mexico City, Mexico. The EGM will:
 - Identify the challenges, including the structural and policy constraints, for achieving the MDGs for women and girls;
 - Identify the policy priorities and critical issues for achieving the MDGs for women and girls and for the post-2015 agenda; and
 - Develop action-oriented recommendation to accelerate achieving the MDGs for women and girls.
4. The EGM will focus on key measures taken by different stakeholders for implementing the MDGs for women and girls as well as challenges and impediments to progress, including the following key issues:
 - Structural and policy constraints on the achievement of MDGs for women and girls;
 - Politics of accountability for women’s rights and gender equality;
 - Financing for gender equality, especially since the 2008 crisis;
 - Poverty, gender inequality and women’s rights;
 - Girls’ access to quality education at all levels;
 - Maternal mortality in the context of the sexual and reproductive health and rights;
 - Women’s paid and unpaid work and paths of empowerment;
 - Gender equality, women’s rights and sustainable development, including food security, nutrition, access to water and sanitation, climate change and environmental sustainability;
 - Violence against women and girls;
 - Women’s participation and voice at all levels in public and private institutions;
 - Women, peace and security;
 - Indicators and data availability;

5. The EGM will examine the implementation of all eight MDG goals from a gender equality perspective. It will assess the critical issues, identify good practices that can be scaled up and formulate concrete recommendations for relevant stakeholders.

II. Global legal and policy framework

6. The achievement of the MDGs for women and girls is grounded in several international agreements. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is an international bill of rights for women. It defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. It is the only human rights treaty that affirms the reproductive rights of women and targets culture and tradition as dominant forces in shaping gender roles and family relations. It calls on State Parties to take in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men.”¹ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) also requires State Parties to ensure that the rights within each covenant are enjoyed without discrimination on the basis of sex.
7. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted by 189 Member States in 1995, is a global agenda for women’s human rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women. The Platform for Action (BPfA) covers 12 critical areas of concern: poverty; education and training; health; violence; armed conflict; economy; power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms; human rights; media; environment; and the girl child. For each critical area of concern, strategic objectives are identified, as well as a detailed catalogue of related actions to be taken by Governments and relevant stakeholders, at national, regional and international level. However, BPfA includes very few concrete targets or indicators to monitor progress. At the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly in June 2000, Governments reviewed the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and agreed on further actions to accelerate the implementation of the Platform for Action and to ensure that commitments for gender equality, development and peace are fully realized.
8. In the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, Governments reached a consensus that gender equality and empowerment of women is a global priority. The ICPD Programme of Action² approached it not only from the perspective of universal human rights, but as an essential step towards eradicating poverty and stabilizing population growth. It highlights a number of critical areas for advancing gender equality and empowering women, including universal access to family planning and sexual and reproductive health services and reproductive rights; equal access to education for girls; equal sharing of responsibilities for care and housework

¹ United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1249, No. 20378, Article 3. See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>.

² A/CONF.171/13.

between women and men; individual, social and economic impact of urbanization and migration; and sustainable development and environmental issues associated with population changes.

9. Adopted at the Millennium Summit on 8 September 2000, the United Nations Millennium Declaration,³ built upon the outcomes of the major summits and world conferences of the 1990s, including the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. In the Declaration, Member States affirmed six fundamental principles essential to international relations including freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility, and called for action in key areas including development and poverty eradication, peace and security, and democracy and human rights. Governments also confirmed their resolve to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate truly sustainable development. The importance of ensuring equal human rights of women and men and the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women were also highlighted in the Declaration.
10. Inspired by the Millennium Declaration, the eight MDGs, accompanied by a set of time-bound targets for advancing development and reducing poverty by 2015, were introduced one year later in Secretary-General's implementation plan for the Declaration as a road map to monitor the progress. The MDGs aim to: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (Goal 1); achieve universal primary education (Goal 2); promote gender equality and empower women (Goal 3); reduce child mortality (Goal 4); improve maternal health (Goal 5); combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (Goal 6); ensure environmental sustainability (Goal 7); and develop a global partnership for development (Goal 8). These eight goals were initially accompanied by 18 global targets and 48 technical indicators to measure progress towards achievement of the MDGs. This monitoring framework was subsequently expanded into 21 targets and 60 indicators with additional new targets on: full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people; universal access to reproductive health services; universal access to HIV/AIDS treatment; and biodiversity.⁴
11. In 2010, the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals reviewed progress and concluded with the adoption of a global action plan towards achieving the MDGs by the 2015 target date and recommendations to advance the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015.⁵ To accelerate progress, Member States also committed to new initiatives to fight against poverty, hunger and disease, especially new efforts on women's and children's health.

³ A/RES/55/2.

⁴ A/RES/60/1.

⁵ A/RES/65/1.

III. Current situation and rationale

12. As a set of time-bound targets, the MDGs have been successful and important in positioning gender equality and women's empowerment a global priority, particularly through MDG 3 (Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women) and MDG 5 (Maternal Health). The MDGs have spurred international action to address the goals, shaping global, regional and national policies, development programming and financing. As the 2015 deadline approaches, it is a critical time to review how the MDGs have contributed to gender equality and the broader women's rights agenda, the remaining challenges and policy actions and commitments that are needed to accelerate progress towards achieving the MDGs for women and girls.
13. An assessment of the MDG framework reveals a mixed picture with success in some areas such as improving girls' access to education, but less progress in others such as reducing maternal mortality.⁶ While MDG 3 has been an important platform for galvanizing resources and policy attention, the MDG framework has been broadly recognized as a narrow platform to promote the full spectrum of women and girls' rights. While the MDGs may have provided a practical entry point for work on gender issues, they may at the same time have narrowed the space for transformational work on gender equality and women's rights. The review of the MDGs from a gender perspective will provide an assessment of which gender equality and women's rights issues have been prioritized in the MDG era, the broader context for promoting women's rights and where challenges and gaps remain.
14. There are several processes underway to take stock of the MDGs and the actions needed to accelerate progress including special events during the 68th session of the General Assembly. The 58th session of the CSW will build on these processes with a specific focus on gender equality and women's rights. A review of the MDGs from a gender perspective is particularly timely to inform broader discussions at a global level including on the post-2015 framework, Sustainable Development Goals and the 20 year review of the Beijing Platform for Action.

IV. Key issues

- a. Policy, structural and political environment for achieving the MDGs for women and girls
15. In reviewing the achievement of the MDGs for women and girls, it is useful to assess the broader structural and policy environment for gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment. Current global economic governance arrangements including the succession of global crises, have thrown into sharp relief the shortcomings of economic models that have deepened inequalities (both within and between countries) and increased vulnerabilities of marginalized groups. The severe and enduring job losses associated with the crises continue to have an impact on women's rights and livelihoods. Recent data from the International Labour Organization shows that the gender gap in unemployment has

⁶ United Nations (2013) The Millennium Development Goals Report, United Nations, New York.

widened between 2007 and 2012 with an estimated number of job losses for women at 13 million.⁷ The experience of previous crises suggests that the current crisis is also likely to see a significant deterioration in the quality of employment on offer, which often disproportionately affects women.⁸

16. As countries increasingly shift to austerity, cuts in public spending are affecting the quality and accessibility of services such as health and education, which has direct implications on the achievement of the MDGs for women and girls. Diminishing resources for social protection systems and services to support survivors of violence also increases the vulnerability of women and girls in the context of the crisis. The reduction of access to public services and lower levels of investment in infrastructure also puts a greater burden on unpaid work within the household, which is commonly performed by women and girls.⁹
17. Many countries have been simultaneously affected by spikes in food prices and shortages which affect both urban and rural women. For small scale farmers, the large majority of whom are women, food price rises often lead to greater vulnerability and food insecurity given that they are the net food buyers.¹⁰ At the same time, environmental changes are increasing women's burden of unpaid work and further limiting women's access to and control over natural resources, thereby intensifying gender inequalities and vulnerabilities.
18. Special attention is also needed on the persistence of conflict and insecurity and its impact on the achievement of the MDGs for women and girls. Countries experiencing conflict and fragility face the most significant challenges in achieving the MDGs.¹¹ From a gender perspective, conflict and fragility has negative impacts on access to health and welfare services, economic opportunities and political participation for women and girls. Alarming high levels of violence against women and girls associated with conflict, including sexual violence, intimate partner violence, trafficking and gang violence, is a grave violation of women's human rights and a challenge for achieving the MDGs.

b. Areas of progress and remaining challenges for achieving the MDGs for women and girls

19. There have been notable achievements on the MDGs for women and girls, but there remain many serious gaps within and between countries and between regions. Despite

⁷ International Labour Organization (2012) Global Employment Trends for Women 2012, International Labour Organization, Geneva.

⁸ van der Hoeven, R. and Lubker, M. (2006) External Openness and Employment: The Need for Coherent International and National Policies. Working Paper No.75, ILO, Geneva; Razavi, S., Braunstein, E., Arza, C., Cook, C., and Goulding, K. (2011) Gendered Impacts of Globalization: Employment and Social Protection. UNRISD Research Paper, October 2011.

⁹ Ghosh, J. (2012) Economic crises and women's work: exploring progressive strategies in a rapidly changing global environment, UN Women, New York.

¹⁰ Ghosh, J. (2012) Economic crises and women's work: exploring progressive strategies in a rapidly changing global environment, UN Women, New York.

¹¹ A/68/202.

the global reduction of more than 800 million people living in extreme poverty from 1990 to 2008, women continue to be more likely to live in poverty than men. Household surveys indicate that women in sub-Saharan Africa are over-represented in poor households, mainly because they are less likely to have paid work, and when they do they are, on average, paid less than men.¹² However, a challenge for assessing the full extent of gender inequalities in poverty is that the poverty in the MDGs continues to be measured at the household level and does not capture intra-household gender inequalities in the allocation of resources, opportunities and power.

20. In the area of gender equality in education where the MDGs have had a strong focus, the last two decades have witnessed solid progress towards gender parity in primary education. However, only two out of 130 countries with available data have reached the target of gender parity in all levels of education.¹³ Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest rate of girls out of primary school, at 26%. Gender gaps in education are particularly stark amongst poorer, rural and minority populations. The MDGs have had a strong focus on enrolment and getting girls and boys into school. There has been less policy attention to quality of education or gender equality in learning outcomes.
21. Despite a decline in the maternal mortality ratio by 47% in the last two decades, it is estimated that around 800 women die every day due to childbirth and other pregnancy related complications, falling far short of the MDG target to reduce maternal mortality by three quarters. This is the MDG goal that is least likely to be met. Nearly 50 million infants worldwide are delivered without skilled attendance and more than 140 million women worldwide have an unmet need for family planning. Globally women represent 54% of all adults living with HIV, rising to 60% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Violence against women and girls, a fundamental dimension of women's and girls' empowerment that is missing from the MDGs, is pervasive across all countries with nearly 1 in 3 women experiencing physical violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.¹⁴
22. Improvements in women's workforce participation rates in the last two decades have coincided with deterioration in the quality of paid work, especially for women. In 2012, more than half of all employed women worldwide were in vulnerable employment. In Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, vulnerable employment makes up more than 80% of women's total employment.¹⁵ In every region of the world, women are more likely than men to be contributing family workers – jobs that are characterized by poor pay, insecurity and a lack of basic rights such as occupational health and safety, let alone access to health insurance, unemployment benefits, or a pension. The burden of unpaid work – which has not been monitored by the MDGs – is disproportionately borne by women and often poses a significant obstacle to women's ability to access education and training, decent employment opportunities, and engagement in politics.¹⁶ For countries

¹² United Nations (2012) The Millennium Development Goal Report Gender Chart

¹³ United Nations (2013) The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013, New York.

¹⁴ World Health Organization (2013) Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, Geneva.

¹⁵ International Labour Organization (2012) Global employment trends for women, Geneva.

¹⁶ United Nations General Assembly (2013), Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, A/68/293, 9 August 2013.

where data is available, women spend on average roughly twice as much or more time than men on domestic work and this work is often intensified in contexts of poor infrastructure, crisis and vulnerability.¹⁷

23. The small numbers of women in public decision-making, from national parliaments to local councils, is another manifestation of gender inequality, putting significant brakes on their voice, agency and capacity to govern. Despite some impressive gains for women in terms of representation in national parliaments over the last two decades, globally only around 1 in 5 parliamentarians are women.¹⁸ The gaps are much greater on indicators of women's public participation that are not monitored by the MDGs. As of January 2012, only 17% of government ministers were women.¹⁹ Only 8 women served as Head of State and 13 served as Head of Government as of June 2013.²⁰
24. It is broadly recognised that gender equality and women's empowerment are critical for achieving all the MDGs. Gender inequalities have held back progress on the other MDGs on reducing poverty and hunger, increasing enrolment in education, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS and promoting environmental sustainability.²¹ Yet, gender equality concerns have not necessarily been effectively mainstreamed into the achievement of all MDGs goals. A 2003 UNDP review on gender in MDG national reports found that no report identified gender as a 'cross-cutting' issue.²² A later 2005 UNDP review of 78 MDG reports showed little progress, indicating that the majority of the reports concentrated only on the minimum indicators for MDG 3, failing to think 'outside the MDG box'.²³ It found that references to women and gender were 'ghettoized' under Goals 3 and 5, and that Goal 7 on the environment and Goal 8 on partnerships were almost always gender-blind.
25. A strong focus on the targets and lack of attention to the policies needed to achieve the MDGs is a key challenge for accelerating progress. The MDG targets and indicators were not fully aligned to the broader principles outlined in the Millennium Declaration, leading in some instances to unintended effects or narrow – or statistically expedient – measures of human development. For example, the heavy focus on skilled birth attendance as an indicator for maternal health has drawn attention away from ensuring access to emergency obstetric care, as well as other factors that contribute to maternal morbidity and mortality such as early marriage, lack of physical security, constrained sexual and

¹⁷ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2010) *The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics*, New York.

¹⁸ United Nations (2013) *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013*, New York.

¹⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2012) *Women in Politics: 2012*.

²⁰ Calculated by UN Women, checked monthly against updates from the United Nations

²¹ UN Women, *A transformative stand-alone goal on Achieving Gender Equality, Women's Rights and Women's Empowerment: Imperatives and Key Components in the context of the Post-2015 Development Framework and Sustainable Development Goals* (New York, 2013).

²² UNDP. 2003. 'Millennium Development Goals: National Reports through a Gender Lens', UNDP: New York City.

²³ UNDP. 2005. 'En Route to Equality: A Gender Review of National MDG Reports' UNDP: New York City.

reproductive choices such as when to have children and how many, and women's weak access to health care systems.²⁴

26. By focusing on national averages, the MDGs targets have often masked sub-national differences in achievement which has in turn diverted policy attention and resources away from the most marginalized groups. The intersection of gender inequalities with other inequalities based on class, race/ethnicity, disability, age, location, marital status, gender identity and sexual orientation and health status, often lead to specific forms of discrimination and disadvantage. For example, girls in the poorest 20 per cent of households have the least chance of getting an education: they are over three times more likely to be out of school than girls in the highest income quintile.²⁵
27. These gaps in the MDGs also reflect a wider challenge of data availability and quality. The MDG targets on gender equality were selected based on the availability of data, rather than what dimensions of gender inequality and women's empowerment were most important to monitor. Further, the need to monitor the MDGs has driven data collection efforts over the past decade and although this has led to increased availability of data in areas that are covered by MDGs indicators, the many gender equality and women's empowerment issues not included in the MDGs have been neglected in data collection efforts.

c. Commitments and actions needed to achieve the MDGs for women and girls

28. Concerted action is required to achieve the MDGs for women and girls by 2015. As a starting point, gender equality and women's empowerment cannot be achieved without the realization of the full spectrum of women's and girls' rights. There is a need for a human rights-based approach which recognizes the interdependence between different dimensions of gender inequality. In particular, policies and programmes to achieve the MDGs for women and girls must go beyond the MDG targets and indicators to address the structural drivers of inequalities, tackling issues such as violence against women and girls and women's disproportionate share of unpaid work. Greater efforts will be needed in mainstreaming gender concerns across other goals, in recognition of the synergies between gender equality and the achievement of all targets.
29. Achieving the MDGs for women and girls will require a renewed commitment to adequate levels of investment in gender equality and women's rights. This includes investment in social sectors that are important for gender equality such as health, education, social protection, care services and services for survivors of violence. Investment is equally needed to ensure gender equality in other areas of the economy such as agriculture, industry and infrastructure, which need to be supported by a broader gender-sensitive macroeconomic policy agenda for economic development. There is also

²⁴ Sen, G. and Mukherjee, S. (2013) 'No Empowerment without Rights, No Rights without Politics: Gender Equality, MDGs and the post 2015 Development Agenda'. Working Paper Series, The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of MDG Targets for Human Development and Human Rights.

²⁵ United Nations (2010) Millennium Development Goals Report. New York.

a need to recognize and support women's organizations as they play a critical role in advancing women's rights, monitoring progress and holding decision-makers to account.

30. A wide range of integrated policies and interventions will be needed to accelerate progress on the MDG targets for women and girls, requiring alignment across all ministries at a national level and across global institutions. These policies should be grounded in existing international human rights standards and agreements including CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. Boosting investment in and commitments to improving gender statistics is vital, particularly for areas where gender statistics remain limited such as the measurement of poverty, time use and violence against women and girls.

d. Priorities for women's rights and gender equality in the post-2015 agenda

31. The review of the MDGs from a gender perspective is timely to feed into the processes of defining a universal post-2015 framework and Sustainable Development Goals. Building on the lessons from the MDGs, a holistic approach is needed which addresses the full spectrum of women's and girls' rights. Specific priorities for women's rights and gender equality areas that were overlooked in the MDGs include violence against women and girls, gender-based wage discrimination, women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work, the broad range of women's and adolescent girls' sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, women's limited access to decent employment, asset and property ownership, and unequal participation in private and public decision-making at all levels.

V. Profile of participants

32. The EGM will be attended by approximately 20 relevant experts (to be finalized) appointed by the Under Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women. In selecting the experts, the criteria of geographical balance and, to the extent possible, gender balance, will be taken into consideration. Experts will include academics and practitioners from relevant fields, as well as representatives from networks and associations which are working on the MDGs, in accordance with the objectives identified above. UN Women will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance to appointed experts.

33. Observers from the United Nations system, inter-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and academia are welcome to attend the EGM at their own expense.

VI. Documentation

34. The documentation for the meeting will include:

- Background papers commissioned by UN Women as follows:
 - Opportunities and challenges in achieving the MDGs for women and girls
 - Politics of women's rights and accountability;

- A review of national MDG reports and UNDG national consultations on post-2015 reports from a gender equality perspective;
- Financing for gender equality and the MDGs in the context of the global crisis.
- Short written inputs (no more than 2,500 words) prepared by experts on specific issues in line with their expertise;
- An overview of trends on the achievement of the MDG targets from a gender perspective, constraints for gender mainstreaming, future actions for accelerating progress and priorities for the post-2015 agenda, compiled by UN Women based on written inputs prepared by thirteen UN agencies which have responsibility for monitoring MDG targets; and
- Papers prepared by observers, which will be made available but not formally presented at the EGM.

VII. Organization

35. The EGM will be convened by UN Women in collaboration with ECLAC from 21 to 24 October 2013 in Mexico City, Mexico.
36. The EGM will be conducted in English and all documentation will be in English.
37. The EGM will meet in plenary and in working groups. Presentations by the experts in plenary will create the framework for discussions. Experts will work in small working groups to discuss specific issues/themes and draft concrete policy and programme recommendations targeted at various stakeholders. The recommendations of working groups will be reviewed and finalized in plenary.

VIII. Expected outcome

38. The outcome of the EGM will be a report, containing a summary of the discussion and recommendations directed at Member States and other stakeholders. The report will be made available at the fifty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women and on the website of UN Women.