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Structural and policy constraints in achieving the MDGs for women and girls

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**Have the Millennium Development Goals promoted
gender equality and women's rights?**

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In the United Nations Millennium Declaration, governments recognized their collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality, and equity at the global level, and highlighted how fundamental equality and shared responsibility is to international relations in the XXI century. To tackle development and poverty eradication, governments resolved *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*. Furthermore, governments committed themselves to *spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for all internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development*. And therefore resolved *to combat all forms of violence against women and to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.

The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) related targets and indicators, issued by the UN Secretary General the following year, were the “road map” for implementing the Millennium Declaration commitments, but on the road critical dimensions fell away: the MDGs did not integrate a full vision of gender equality and women's rights as enshrined in key human rights instruments¹ and significant inter-governmental agreements like the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), or the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Program of Action in 1994.

Still, the MDGs brought some opportunities to advance women's rights and gender equality. First, with MDG3 (on gender equality and women's empowerment) governments recognized the importance of women's rights, empowerment, and leadership for development and put pressure to take action to governments and the donor community. This created a strategic opportunity to open dialogue between governments, donors and civil society, especially

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

¹ For example, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women.

women's rights organizations that allowed for further analysis related to the barriers to women's full enjoyment of rights. As well, the MDG country reports² created an opportunity for awareness raising, advocacy, alliance building, and renewal of political commitments at the country level, as well as to build national capacity for monitoring and reporting on goals and targets. Furthermore, women's organizations and movements had the opportunity to develop parallel reports with additional goals and indicators, and thus push further the gender equality and women's rights agenda at country level. Last but not least, the MDG3 played an important role in galvanizing financial and institutional support for women's rights and gender equality. AWID's research on the Dutch MDG3 Fund presents the importance of allocating specific funds to the advancement of women's rights, particularly for women's rights organizations and movements, and crucial actors, for the advancement of gender equality and women's rights worldwide.

However, while the goals acknowledged the multiple dimensions of poverty alleviation, as well as the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment, the choices of targets and indicators derailed the purpose of the Millennium Declaration, which omitted structural inequalities and sustainability frameworks. Furthermore, the MDGs treated development in isolation, which undermined the inter-linkages with human rights standards and the successes achieved in the previous decades to create human rights based development agendas. Lastly, the MDGs failed to include key areas within the women's rights agenda from reproductive and sexual health and rights, to the gendered impact of fiscal policies and the recognition of women's unpaid work.

A number of additional challenges and limitations to the MDG framework should also be mentioned.³ In terms of participation, the MDGs were not defined through a participatory multi-stakeholder dialogue, but in closed doors sessions between powerful countries and institutions. The Monterrey Consensus on Financing for Development agreed by governments in 2002, provided the financing framework and confirmed a market approach to development and its financing. In addition, the MDGs did not acknowledge the global financial and economic context and its impact on their (MDGs) implementation. The International Financial Institutions, the World Trade Organization, along with transnational corporations are driving a free-market economy, under neoliberal macroeconomic policies that is threatening sustainable development and human rights. At the same, this approach undermines democracies and the role of the State, leaving citizens with a shrinking institutional space to demand accountability for the advancement of the MDGs. Lastly, the 1.25 USD baseline to measure progress on poverty eradication (MDG 1) fails to incorporate a multidimensional definition of poverty with a very low "extreme poverty" line.

Specifically regarding gender equality and women's rights, the MDGs failed to make explicit mention of the gender dimensions of poverty, "*as women are generally the poorest of the poor [...] eliminating social, cultural, political and economic discrimination against women is a prerequisite of eradicating poverty [...] in the context of sustainable development*" (ICPD, 1994). In addition, the MDGs did not recognize that gender equality is not just an objective by itself, but also key to achieving the other seven Development Goals. Because the goals are conjointly reinforcing, progress towards gender equality have a potential to advance other goals. Likewise, success in achieving other goals may also positively affect gender equality.

² So far at least 85 countries have submitted at least 1 MDG country report (according to: <http://www.un-ngls.org/orf/MDG/countryregionalaction.htm>).

³ AWID (2008): Women and The Millennium Development Goals: <http://www.awid.org/Library/Women-and-the-Millennium-Development-Goals>.

MDG3 and its indicators were developed in isolation, missing the multiple dimensions of gender inequality. Furthermore, choices made were reductionist and limited the multi-dimensional aspects of women's empowerment. For example, sexual and reproductive health and rights were excluded from this framework, which would have been critical to achieving some of the goals of the MDGs. Finally, the MDGs did not take into account women's diversities and compounding oppressions: gender intersects with other identity dimensions and together they contribute to create unique expressions of oppression and privilege.⁴

Over the past 3-6 years there has been a key shift in development positions with increased interest, by different mainstream institutions (the private sector, the World Bank, amongst others), in the potential and possibilities that "investing in women and girls" and "investing in gender equality" have for ending poverty, increasing security, as well as enhancing women's status and livelihoods⁵. In an effort to understand these trends, AWID conducted an action research initiative of new actors, mapping 170 initiatives and found a \$14.6 billion in partnership commitments focused on women and girls. Astonishingly, only a 9% of it went to direct funding for women's rights organizations.

While AWID acknowledges the potential opportunities that increased funding offers, the instrumentalization of women as economic growth indicators, reduces the recognition of the central role of women in development and in advancing social justice. Gender equality is a right, not merely a means to an end: economic growth. Thus, poverty alleviation and economic development strategies must challenge economic models based on unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, the privatization of public systems, and the exploitation of unequal gender and social relations⁶.

Furthermore, political commitment must go beyond rhetoric to concrete action and prioritization of resources.

In 2008, the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) raised concerns about the lack of political support and commitment, as well as specific budget allocations to gender equality and women's rights. Low funding and the lack of sector prioritization by governments and donors were identified as affecting the integrity and ability of national machineries and women's organizations to fully implement and advocate for gender equality and women's rights.⁷ Furthermore, a World Bank report estimated that a doubling of resources was needed in order to achieve MDG3⁸.

⁴ AWID (2004). Intersectionality : A tool for gender and economic justice. AWID: Canada, Mexico and South Africa.

⁵ See for example the World Development Report for 2012 on Gender Equality and Development: <http://www.worldbank.org>

⁶ AWID – Friday Files : *Financing For Gender Equality: Rhetoric Versus Real Financial Support*, 16/03/2012 : <http://awid.org/News-Analysis/Friday-Files/Financing-for-Gender-Equality-Rhetoric-versus-real-financial-support> .

⁷ Ibid. 6.

⁸ Danish Prime Minister's Office: Press release: Statsministerens tale ved MDG3 konferencen om Economic Empowerment of Women den 17 April 2008 i København : http://www.stm.dk/_p_7572.html.

The status of financing for women's rights organizing and gender equality

History has shown that women's rights organizations and movements are a vital catalyst for gender equality and the realization of women's rights⁹. Thus, although, national governments hold ultimate responsibility for promoting and protecting gender equality and women's rights, sustainable change requires governments and donors to work in partnership with those working on the ground – women and women's rights organizations¹⁰. Women's rights organizations can empower and mobilize women, including the poorest and most marginalized, to come together to know and claim their rights¹¹.

Currently, women and girls are in the public eye, and recognized as key agents in development as never before. However, although the donor community has acknowledged gender equality as a cornerstone for development, and that some governments and multilaterals are financing at greater levels, overall commitments and interest in gender equality are not necessarily translating into more resources. Funding data illustrates the extent to which gender equality and women's rights gets overlooked at the bilateral and multilateral levels, despite the strong rhetoric in support of it: data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) - (sector code 15170 on funding to women's organizations and institutions), shows that \$331.8 million dollars in the 2010 budget went to women's organizations and gender institutions (including national machineries)—this represents 1.3% of all DAC screened funds dedicated to gender equality (\$24.9 billion). Moreover, the largest dedicated multilateral agency for gender equality, UN Women, had a budget of \$235 million in 2011, which equals 4% of the total UN budget for 2011 at approximately \$5.4 billion. This does not even reach half the target of \$500¹² that was expected by UN Women to have in its first year¹³.

Concerning funding for women's organizing in particular¹⁴, data from AWID's 2011 global survey of over 1,000 women's organizations indicates moderate growth: median annual income doubled between 2005 and 2010, reaching \$20,000 and a full 7% reported 2010 budgets of over \$500,000. Yet the large majority of these organizations remain quite small—not by choice, but due to challenges to mobilize the resources they need to fulfill their program plans and visions. An important new finding that emerged in this most recent survey was increasing reliance among many women's organizations on self-generated resources, from income-generating activities, membership fees, or other sources.

⁹ Htun, M. and Weldon, L. (2012) 'The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975–2005', American Political Science Review, Cambridge University Press and the American Political Science Association

¹⁰ Esplen, E. (2013). *Leaders for change: why support women's rights organisations?* Womankind Worldwide: UK .

¹¹ Ibid 12, p. 3.

¹² Clearly governments have not fulfilled their commitments to the new entity, which set a target of mobilizing USD 700 million for its 2012-2013 budget. But what is most telling is that UN Women, with a mandate of advancing equality and rights for half the world's population, has an income budget that is not even a quarter of its counterparts. From: Arutyunova, A. et al. (2013). *Watering the Leaves and Starving the Roots: The status of financing for women's rights organizing and gender equality*. AWID: Canada, Mexico and South Africa (printing pending). Pg. 38.

¹³ Ibid. 6.

¹⁴ For more detailed information please check: Arutyunova, A. et al. (2013). *Watering the Leaves and Starving the Roots: The status of financing for women's rights organizing and gender equality*. AWID: Canada, Mexico and South Africa.

Trends among bilateral and multilateral donors present a mixed picture for women's rights organizations. Official development assistance (ODA) was negatively impacted by the financial crisis, as well as by conservative influences in many donor countries, however total aid levels are beginning to rebound. Although a small 'drop in the bucket' compared to total aid, ODA to non-governmental women's equality organizations has doubled; Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the UK in particular registered significant increases from 2008 to 2011. The UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and the UN Fund for Gender Equality, managed by UN Women have also been important multilateral sources of support for women's rights work.

Women's organizations report from international NGOs (INGOs) show a significant drop in the share of income, down from 14% in 2005 to 7% in 2010. This may be related to some of the strategies that many INGOs are using for resource mobilization, particularly in the face of challenges following the 2008 financial crisis. Rather than serve as 'intermediaries' and offer direct grant-making to local NGOs, more INGOs are expanding their own program implementation role, establishing or increasing the number of 'country offices' they operate and, in some cases, competing for funding with women's organizations.

While private foundations remain an important source of support for many women's organizations, and a number of newer foundations in particular are highlighting their interest in women and girls, available data on US and European foundation giving in this area shows that it has been largely stagnant overall. On the top, the foundations most-frequently mentioned by respondents to AWID's 2011 global survey were Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundation, Sigrid Rausing Trust, Oak Foundation, Gates Foundation and MacArthur Foundation. There are also a growing number of private foundations in the global South, though data on their giving is limited.

Regarding women's funds, the combined 2010 income reported by 42 women's funds exceeded \$54.5 million. The majority of these funds, however, operated with relatively limited resources, with 57% of respondents reporting income of \$500,000 or less in 2010. Total grant-making by 37 women's funds was close to \$28 million in 2010. For their own resource mobilization, many women's funds have been working to tap resources that are not as readily available for women's organizations. For example, AWID survey results confirm that women's funds in the sample relied on individual donations for 51.8% of their budgets (though the two largest international funds and two others based in the US account for most of these resources, so this data needs to be read in light of this reality). Some women's funds have been spearheading an array of collaborative resource mobilization and grant-making efforts, as well as carefully exploring opportunities to leverage resources or other supports from private sector actors.

The final sector to present is the field of individual philanthropy. There has been a proliferation of new faces and mechanisms in philanthropy, with strong growth in emerging economies as individual wealth is on the rise. In addition to the geographic diversity, women are increasingly significant actors in philanthropy worldwide, as are young people. Both of these segments could hold promise for women's organizations to tap. However other trends in the field raise potential concerns, including the philosophy of "philanthro-capitalism" linking the notion of social responsibility held by wealthy individuals to reliance on market mechanisms and measurable 'evidence' for distinguishing programs worthy of support. The growth of crowdsourcing has also captured tremendous interest as a mechanism to facilitate mass participation in philanthropy; now even with a site dedicated to crowd funding for

gender equality (see www.catapult.org). While concerns have been raised regarding the kinds of projects that can be packaged to appeal to a crowd funding audience, this type of mechanism has no doubt been opening new funding opportunities for some women's organizations. In general however, while growth and diversification of philanthropy is a positive trend, it is important that these private efforts not be seen as substitutions for state obligations to protect and fulfill human rights and allocate the maximum available resources, including through the framework of international cooperation.

As regards to effective funding strategies to support women's rights organizing and movements, it is necessary to take into account the diversity of women's rights organizing, including groups that may be smaller or harder to reach, working at the grassroots, which play crucial roles in transforming the lives of women and girls around the world. In that regard, the community of women's funds plays a tremendously important role, as have larger women's organizations that have a re-granting function. Thus, considering existing intermediaries within women's movements could be a strategy to reach these smaller organizations.

Multi-year and core funding is key to facilitate strong results. Core funding is critical because it allows for flexibility to respond to changing circumstances and context, as well as investment in organizational strengthening and learning, which ultimately enhances impact. Flexible, multiyear commitments facilitate greater predictability of resources and financial sustainability allowing women's organizations to stay focused on programmatic priorities and plan more effectively.

Women's rights and gender equality for a just post-2015 development framework

In AWID, we believe that there is much to be done to address the structural issues and challenges that still impede the full realization of human rights, and that prevent sustainable development for all. Unequal power relations (within and among countries, between men and women, donors and recipients, and between different social groups - to name just a few) are some of the main drivers of poverty, inequalities, and environmental degradation.

Women's rights organizations have long called for a development paradigm that is inclusive, sustainable and just – recognizing and valuing reproductive and care work and enabling everyone to have their rights respected, protected, and fulfilled.¹⁵ While there is no single and ideal development model applicable to diverse local realities, some basic principles, grounded in a human rights based approach, can serve an important basis for any development framework.

As well, it is vital to acknowledge that gender inequality places women and people with non-hegemonic gender identities at a greater disadvantage economically, socially, and culturally. Gender discrimination is not just one of many inequalities, but it is one present at the very foundation of how we organize our societies and economies – thus, no development goal or agenda can be achieved without addressing it seriously.

¹⁵ Schoenstein, A. et al. (2011). *Development Cooperation Beyond the Aid Effectiveness Paradigm: A women's rights perspective. A discussion paper*. AWID: Canada, Mexico and South Africa. Available in: <http://awid.org/Library/Getting-at-the-roots-Reintegrating-human-rights-gender-equality-in-post-2015-development-agenda>

To tackle that, it is essential to go beyond gender mainstreaming,¹⁶ by building on the knowledge and institutional mechanisms that have already been created and strengthening them. Gender equality and women's rights advocates (across sectors: civil society organizations, governments, international organizations, private philanthropy, UN agencies) must be prepared to recapture the essence of Beijing and what it would mean to integrate gender equality and women's rights at the core of every development priority, area and sector.

For AWID this means applying a three-dimensional approach: on the one hand, making gender equality and women's rights central to each and every goal and outcome of the post-2015 agenda, with clear targets and indicators within each that are also in line with international agreements; secondly, it would mean including women's rights and gender equality specific goals and strategies; and thirdly, supporting, promoting, and ensuring the participation of women's rights advocates in all development and related policy making processes.

Specific development goals are already being proposed as part of the new framework and there is active debate around a dedicated gender equality goal. AWID is concerned that this hurry to define goals takes attention and energy from the fundamental questions and discussions that are crucial for building an effective overall development framework post-2015, and shadows the fact that other widely international agreed commitments are still far from being implemented. Given the shortcomings of the MDGs (some which have been mentioned above), AWID is convinced that the new development framework must draw from lessons learned and critically question the long-standing assumptions that drive dominant development models.

On mechanisms to facilitate and monitor the delivering of development commitments:

- Go beyond existing economic indicators (like GDP) so that diverse communities can claim their own indicators of well-being and sustainability which respond adequately to their own realities, and which are rooted in the socioeconomic condition of each nation (and still in line with universal human rights commitments). This would require broad and deep discussions between the different development actors to unearth the principles and priorities that would guide these indicators. Empowerment, development, and the well-being of people should be at the centre of all discussions and dealt with in a holistic manner so as to be able to tackle different issues that intersect.
- Apply a “multiple accountability”¹⁷ approach, which recognizes and includes different developments actors, including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) – thus ensuring participation from feminist and women's rights organizations - parliamentarians, local governments, the private sector, and others, working at all levels (from national to regional and global).

¹⁶ Gender mainstreaming became the main tool in the 90s aimed at integrating gender equality throughout all phases and layers of development cooperation policies, international organizations, and national policy processes. However, while it offered opportunities, in practice, many challenges emerged (often a process incomplete or not properly implemented). In: Moro-Coco, M. et al. (2013). *Getting at the roots: Re-integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in the Post-2015 Agenda*. AWID: Canada, Mexico and South Africa.

¹⁷ This approach recognizes and includes diverse development actors such as CSOs (including feminist and women's rights organizations), parliamentarians, local governments, the private sector and others. Multiple accountability is stronger than mutual accountability, which is based on bilateral development relationships that no longer reflect the reality of the complex development cooperation system.

- A post-2015 framework must link existing human rights accountability mechanisms to both the regional level and global level. This means building on existing accountability mechanisms within the UN human rights system that allows for CSO participation, such as the Universal Periodic Review process. Such an approach becomes ever more important with the increase of new actors, particularly private and corporate sector institutions that are engaged in development.
- UN Secretary General Report A/28/202 emphasizes the role of the public and private sector in development financing. AWID acknowledges the financing opportunities the private sector could bring to development. However, references to the private sector's role in driving development post-2015 must be coupled with visible and effective mechanisms for monitoring and regulation, in order to ensure that private sector actors are accountable for upholding human rights and environmental agreements/ standards.

While donor governments must meet their ODA obligations (0.7% of GDP), new mechanisms of financing for development need to be implemented, thus replacing the current aid system with one of international solidarity and cooperation in which democratic governance ensures participation and accountability of all countries regardless of their economic power. Furthermore, women's rights organizations, with their grounding in diverse communities and contexts, in-depth analysis of problems of gender inequality and rights violations and history of experience and tested strategies to counter these problems, should be a priority partner to making sustainable change happen for gender equality and women's rights.

AWID offers these considerations as an initial contribution to the important debates and discussions currently underway. We look forward to the continued active dialogue towards ensuring that the future of the international development agenda is aligned with human rights principles, and that it integrates gender equality, builds a strong long-term foundation, is sustainable, and that it is inclusive of each and every person.