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# Gender equality and women's empowerment:

## a critical analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal<sup>1</sup>

**Naila Kabeer**

*This article discusses the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG), on gender equality and women's empowerment. It explores the concept of women's empowerment and highlights ways in which the indicators associated with this Goal – on education, employment, and political participation – can contribute to it.*

Gender equality and women's empowerment is the third of eight MDGs. It is an intrinsic rather than an instrumental goal, explicitly valued as an end in itself rather than as an instrument for achieving other goals. Important as education is, the translation of this goal into the target of eliminating gender disparities at all levels of education within a given time period is disappointingly narrow. However, the indicators to monitor progress in achieving the goal are somewhat more wide-ranging:

- closing the gender gap in education at all levels;
- increasing women's share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector;
- and increasing the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments.

In this article, I interpret this as meaning that each of the three 'resources' implied by these indicators – education, employment, and political participation – is considered essential to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment. Each

of these resources certainly has the potential to bring about positive changes in women's lives, but, in each case, it is the social relationships that govern access to the resource in question that will determine the extent to which this potential is realised. Thus, in each case, there is both positive and negative evidence about the impact of women's access to these resources on their lives. There are lessons to be learned from both. The article also considers some of the other 'resources' that have been overlooked by the MDGs, but could be considered equally important for the goal in question.

### **Conceptualising empowerment: agency, resources, and achievement**

First, however, it is important to clarify what is implied by 'empowerment' in this article. One way of thinking about power is in terms of the *ability to make choices*. To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. In other words, *empowerment entails*

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*change*. People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very powerful, but they are not *empowered*, in the sense in which I use the term, because they were never disempowered in the first place.

However, for there to be a real choice, certain conditions must be fulfilled:

- There must be alternatives – the ability to have chosen differently. Poverty and disempowerment generally go hand in hand, because an inability to meet one's basic needs – and the resulting dependence on powerful others to do so – rules out the capacity for meaningful choice. This absence of choice is likely to affect women and men differently, because gender-related inequalities often intensify the effects of poverty.
- Alternatives must not only exist, they must also be *seen* to exist. Power relations are most effective when they are not perceived as such. Gender often operates through the unquestioned acceptance of power. Thus women who, for example, internalise their lesser claim on household resources, or accept violence at the hands of their husbands, do so because to behave otherwise is considered outside the realm of possibility. These forms of behaviour could be said to reflect 'choice', but are really based on the denial of choice.

Not all choices are equally relevant to the definition of power. Some have greater significance than others in terms of their consequences for people's lives. Strategic life choices include where to live, whether and whom to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, who has custody over children, freedom of movement and association, and so on. These help to frame other choices that may be important for the quality of one's day-to-day life, but do not constitute its defining parameters. Finally, the capacity to exercise strategic choices should not violate this capacity on the part of others.

The concept of empowerment can be explored through three closely interrelated dimensions: agency, resources, and achievements. Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. It is hence central to the concept of empowerment. Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised; and achievements refer to the outcomes of agency. Below, each of these dimensions is considered in turn, as is their interrelationship in the context of empowerment.

### *Agency*

Agency has both positive and negative connotations:

- Its positive sense – the 'power to' – refers to people's ability to make and act on their own life choices, even in the face of others' opposition.
- Its negative sense – the 'power over' – refers to the capacity of some actors to override the agency of others through, for example, the exercise of authority or the use of violence and other forms of coercion.

However, as noted earlier, power also operates in the absence of explicit forms of agency. Institutional bias can constrain people's ability to make strategic life choices. Cultural or ideological norms may deny either that inequalities of power exist or that such inequalities are unjust. Subordinate groups are likely to accept, and even collude with, their lot in society, if challenging this either does not appear possible or carries heavy personal and social costs.

Agency in relation to empowerment, therefore, implies not only actively exercising choice, but also doing this in ways that challenge power relations. Because of the significance of beliefs and values in legitimating inequality, a process of empowerment often begins from within. It encompasses not only 'decision making' and other forms of observable action but also the meaning, motivation, and purpose that

individuals bring to their actions; that is, their *sense* of agency. Empowerment is rooted in how people see themselves – their sense of self-worth. This in turn is critically bound up with how they are seen by those around them and by their society.

### **Resources**

Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised. They are distributed through the various institutions and relationships in a society. In institutions, certain actors have a privileged position over others concerning how rules, norms, and conventions are interpreted, as well as how they are put into effect. Heads of households, chiefs of tribes, directors of firms, managers of organisations, and elites within a community all have decision-making authority in particular institutions by virtue of their position. The way in which resources are distributed thus depends on the ability to define priorities and enforce claims. Equally importantly, it defines the terms on which resources are made available. If a woman's primary form of access to resources is as a dependent member of the family, her capacity to make strategic choices is likely to be limited.

### **Achievements**

Resources and agency make up people's capabilities: that is, their potential for living the lives they want. The term 'achievements' refers to the extent to which this potential is realised or fails to be realised; that is, to the outcomes of people's efforts. In relation to empowerment, achievements have been considered in terms of both the agency exercised and its consequences. For example, taking up waged work would be regarded by the MDGs as evidence of progress in women's empowerment. However, it would be far more likely to constitute such evidence if work was taken up in response to a new opportunity or in search of greater self-reliance, rather than as a 'distress sale' of labour. It is also far more likely to be empowering if it contributes to

women's sense of independence, rather than simply meeting survival needs.

### ***The interrelationship between agency, resources, and achievements***

There is a distinction, therefore, between 'passive' forms of agency (action taken when there is little choice), and 'active' agency (purposeful behaviour). There is also a further important distinction between greater 'effectiveness' of agency, and agency that is 'transformative'. The former relates to women's greater efficiency in carrying out their given roles and responsibilities, the latter to their ability to act on the restrictive aspects of these roles and responsibilities in order to challenge them. For example, in India, the reduction of overall child mortality has been associated with rising female literacy. This can be interpreted as the product of 'effective' agency on the part of women in their role as mothers. However, the reduction of gender disparities in under-five mortality rates has transformative implications, because it shows a form of agency that is acting against the grain of patriarchal values, which define daughters as having less worth than sons.

The focus in this article is on transformative forms of agency on the part of women and on those achievements that suggest a greater ability on the part of poor women to question, analyse, and act on the structures of patriarchal constraint in their lives. The three dimensions that make up the concept of empowerment can be seen as representing the pathways through which these processes of empowerment can occur. Changes in any one dimension can lead to changes in others. For instance, 'achievements' in one sphere of life can form the basis on which women seek improvements in other spheres in the future. Policy changes that provide women with access to new 'resources' may be the result of their collective action to achieve this change. Such changes may occur over the life course of an individual or group or across generations, as mothers seek to give their daughters the

chances that they themselves never had. The reverse is also true. Inequalities in one sphere are likely to get reproduced in other spheres of society if they go unchallenged. Today's inequalities are translated into the inequalities of tomorrow as daughters inherit the same discriminatory structures that oppressed their mothers.

We are, therefore, interested in transformative forms of agency that do not simply address immediate inequalities but are used to initiate longer-term processes of change in the structures of patriarchy. While changes in the consciousness and agency of individual women are an important starting point for such processes, it will do little on its own to undermine the systemic reproduction of inequality. Institutional transformation requires movement along a number of fronts: from individual to collective agency, from private negotiations to public action, and from the informal sphere to the formal arenas of struggle where power is legitimately exercised. The question then is what the three resources identified by MDG 3 contribute to these movements.

## **Access to education**

### ***The positive effects of education***

There is considerable evidence for the claim that access to education can bring about changes in cognitive ability, which is essential to women's capacity to question, to reflect on, and to act on the conditions of their lives and to gain access to knowledge, information, and new ideas that will help them to do so (see review in Jejeebhoy 1995). This is evident in everyday instances. In Kenya, it was found that women with at least four years of schooling were able to correctly understand instructions for administering oral rehydration salts; but only those with at least secondary education were able to explain the environmental causes of diarrhoea. In Nigeria, less educated women were as likely as educated ones to have their children

immunised; educated women were more likely than uneducated ones to know about family planning; but only secondary-schooled women revealed an in-depth understanding about disease and prevention.

Education increases the likelihood that women will look after their own well-being along with that of their family. A study in rural Zimbabwe found that among the factors that increased the likelihood of women accessing contraception and antenatal care – both of which improve maternal survival and well-being – were education and paid work (Becker). In rural Nigeria, 96 per cent of women with secondary and higher education, 53 per cent of those with primary education, and 47 per cent of those with little or no education had sought post-natal care.

There are also other effects associated with education that suggest a change in power relationships within and outside the household. In rural Bangladesh, educated women in rural areas participate in a wider range of decisions than uneducated ones. Whereas the latter participated in an average of 1.1 decisions, the number increased to 1.6, 2.0, and 2.3 among women with primary, middle, and secondary education respectively. A study from Tamil Nadu found that better-educated women scored higher than less educated women on a composite index measuring their access to, and control over, resources, as well as their role in economic decision-making.

Educated women also appear less likely to suffer from domestic violence. A study by Sen in West Bengal noted that educated women were better able to deal with violent husbands: 'access to secondary stages of education may have an important contributory role in enhancing women's capacity to exercise control in their lives ... through a combination of literacy and numeracy skills, and enhanced self-esteem' (Sen 1999, 12). Similar findings were recorded in rural Bangladesh (Schuler *et al.* 1996).

Education appears to increase women's capacity to deal with the outside world, including government officials and service providers of various kinds. In rural Nigeria, uneducated women preferred not to deliver in hospitals because of the treatment they received at the hands of nurses, a treatment not meted out to the more educated and self-confident women who were surveyed (cited in Jejeebhoy 1995). Finally, the exposure to new ideas can translate into direct collective challenges to male prerogatives. The widely documented anti-liquor movement mounted by members of Mahila Samakhyas, a literacy programme for women in India, was sparked off by images of collective action against alcoholism in their literacy primer (Niranjana 2002).

### ***Limits to education as a route to empowerment***

However, there are also studies that suggest that the changes associated with education are likely to be conditioned by the context in which it is provided and the social relationships that it embodies and promotes. In societies that are characterised by extreme forms of gender inequality, not only is women's access to education curtailed by various restrictions on their mobility and their limited role in the wider economy, but its effects may also be more limited. Where women's role in society is defined purely in reproductive terms, education is seen in terms of equipping girls to be better wives and mothers, or increasing their chances of getting a suitable husband. These are legitimate aspirations, given the realities of the society. However, they do little to equip girls and women to question the world around them, and the subordinate status assigned to them.

A second set of qualifications concerns the relationships embodied in the delivery of education. Social inequalities are often reproduced through interactions within the school system. In India, for example, not only do the children of poor and scheduled-caste households attend different, and differently

resourced, schools, but, even within the same school, different groups of children are treated differently. *Dalit* children are sometimes made to sit separately from others, are verbally abused, are used for running menial errands, and are physically punished more often than higher-caste children. There is also evidence of widespread gender bias, with teachers showing more attention to boys and having a lower opinion of girls' abilities. The absence, or minority presence, of female teachers is a problem in many areas. Reinforcing the male dominance of public services, it can act as a barrier to girls' access to and completion of schooling.

Teachers in Africa also have different attitudes towards male and female students, on the basis that boys need careers and girls need husbands. They tend to be dismissive and discouraging towards girls and to give more classroom time to boys, who are usually more demanding. Even when girls are encouraged to pursue a career, they are expected to opt for the 'caring' professions, in other words teaching and nursing. The 'hidden curriculum' of school practice reinforces messages about girls' inferior status on a daily basis and provides them with a negative learning experience, thus creating a culture of low self-esteem and low aspirations.

The less hidden content of the educational curriculum also mirrors and legitimates wider social inequalities, denigrating physical labour (largely the preserve of poor people) and domestic activities (largely the preserve of women). Gender stereotyping in the curriculum portrays girls as passive, modest, and shy, while boys are seen as assertive, brave, and ambitious. This reinforces traditional gender roles in society, and acts to limit the kinds of futures that girls are able to imagine for themselves. The design of educational curricula has not yet taken account of the fact that many more women are entering the labour market around the world, making critical contributions to household income

and frequently heading their own households. Policy makers often continue to see the benefits of educating girls and women in terms of improving family health and welfare, rather than preparing women for a more equal place in the economy and in society. Women's lack of skills partly explains why they continue to be confined to the poorer paid and more casualised forms of paid work.

These limitations to education as a route to empowerment do not negate the earlier positive findings, but they suggest the need for caution in assuming that the effects of education can be taken for granted or that they will be uniform across all contexts. They point to the various aspects of educational provision that militate against not only its empowerment potential but even its ability to attract and retain girls in school, particularly those from poor backgrounds.

## **Access to paid work**

There is also a solid body of evidence to show that access to paid work can increase women's agency in strategic ways.

### ***Positive implications of self-employment***

Even paid work carried out in the home has the potential to shift the balance of power within the family. A detailed study of women engaged in industrial homework in Mexico City noted that in households where women's economic contribution was critical to household survival, women had been able to negotiate a greater degree of respect (Benería and Roldán 1987). Studies of the impact of microcredit in societies where women have traditionally been excluded from the cash economy have found that women's access to credit led to a number of positive changes in women's own perceptions of themselves, and their role in household decision making (Kabeer 2001; Kabeer forthcoming). It also led to a long-term reduction in domestic violence, as well as an increase in women's assets. Such effects were stronger when these loans were used to

initiate or expand women's own income-generating activities, despite the fact that these continued to be largely home-based (Hashemi *et al.* 1996; Schuler *et al.* 1996). A recent survey of the impact of various microfinance organisations (MFOs) in India and Bangladesh noted that longer-term membership of such groups also led to various categories of wider impact, including higher levels of political participation, improved access to government programmes, and practical skills, as well as knowledge of the wider society, self-confidence in dealing with public officials, and the likelihood of participating in protests and campaigns (Kabeer, forthcoming). However, the study notes that these impacts depend not only on the provision of financial services of various kinds, but also on the kinds of group that MFOs promote.

### ***Positive implications of wage labour in agriculture***

However, the most striking feature of recent decades has been the large-scale entry of women into the labour market across the world: the 'feminisation' of the labour force. The rise of non-traditional agricultural export (NTAE) production in a number of African and Latin American countries has led to a rise in wage employment for women in medium- and large-scale production units. Studies suggest that this income has brought about a number of economic improvements for women themselves and for their families, and show that they exercise a considerable say in how their money is spent (see, for instance, the review in Dolan and Sorby 2003). A study in Ecuador found that more than 80 per cent of women in the flower industry managed their own wages. Among female employees in the Kenyan vegetable industry, single women managed and controlled their own wages, while married women usually managed their incomes jointly with husbands.

There is also significant evidence from the vegetable industries of Guatemala and the Dominican Republic, and the flower

industry of Mexico, that women's participation in wage employment has led to greater independence in household decision making. In some cases, as among women working in the fresh vegetable industry in the Dominican Republic, it has allowed them to escape abusive marriages. Women working in the flower industry in Colombia reported widening their social networks in ways that would otherwise have proved difficult in rural areas. Workers in the fresh vegetable industry in Kenya not only reported greater economic independence, but also new opportunities for meeting with women from other parts of the country.

### ***Positive implications of non-agricultural wage labour***

Evidence of changes in women's life chances as a result of entry into waged work appears to be more marked when it occurs in the non-agricultural sector (see the review of literature in Kabeer, forthcoming). This is partly because such employment is generally associated with migration by women out of rural areas and away from the patriarchal controls of kinship and community. In a country where women had previously been denied public forms of employment, women workers in the export garment industry in Bangladesh expressed their satisfaction at having a 'proper' job and regular wages, compared with the casual, poorly paid forms of employment that had previously been their only options. Many had used their new-found earning power to renegotiate their relations within marriage, others to leave abusive marriages. Women who had previously not been able to help out their ageing parents once they got married now insisted on their right to do so. Yet others used their earnings to postpone early marriage and to challenge the practice of dowry. In addition, they valued the new social networks that they were able to build with their co-workers, and the greater sense of independence they now enjoyed.

Similarly positive evaluations are reported in a number of other studies. As in

Bangladesh, women in Turkey had previously been permitted to work outside the home only if it was necessary for family survival. In a study of the clothing industry, however, many of those interviewed no longer saw their work as subordinate to their familial roles, to be abandoned when they got married or had children. Rather, they saw it as a more permanent way of life. The overwhelming majority had made their own decision to enter factory work, giving as their reasons their desire to make use of their skills and to be outside the home. Forty per cent of the workers, who were mainly young single women, indicated their preference to work a considerable distance from home in order to escape the control exercised by their family and neighbours. They wanted to work somewhere where they could move about freely during their lunch breaks and take the opportunity to meet their friends, including boyfriends.

A study of women workers in export manufacturing jobs in the Philippines found that most of them earned at least as much as – and many earned more than – the legal minimum wage, and they also enjoyed more benefits than in alternative forms of employment. They had the opportunity to delay marriage and childbirth, and the scope for personal independence and self-determination that comes with relatively high wages and relatively stable employment (compared with work in the informal economy). While factory employment may not provide much satisfaction in itself, it was suggested that it could gradually lead to positive changes in women's personal and household circumstances.

In China, young, single women migrate from the countryside to live and work in the export-processing zones in the south. Such jobs are fiercely competed for in the countryside, because they are more remunerative than agricultural work. Moreover, many women previously worked on family farms where they never received an independent wage. Young women wanted to earn money,



not only to help their families but also to buy things for themselves without having to account to someone for whatever they spent. Others used their earnings to meet the demand for repayment of bride price or child support by husbands whom they wished to divorce.

In Honduras, women working in *maquiladoras* (assembling manufactured goods for export) earned higher wages than workers elsewhere, and they reported improvements in household relationships and help in domestic work from male members. They were more likely to have voted in elections and more likely to feel that they carried some weight with the government. These trends became stronger over time. This may explain why, while most workers wanted to see improvements, especially in their wages, 96 per cent reported that they were very (49 per cent) or somewhat (47 per cent) satisfied with their jobs. Similarly, married women workers in export-oriented manufacturing factories in a number of Caribbean countries reported improvements in household relations as a result of their greater economic contributions, with greater sharing of decision making with male partners.

### *The limits to empowerment through paid work*

On the other hand, most of these studies also highlight the exploitative conditions of work in which women are generally found. The greatest attention has been paid to women who work in the agro and manufacturing industries, which seek to compete internationally through the promotion of flexible labour practices. Export-oriented manufacturing is associated with extremely long hours of work during busy seasons, often combined with lay-offs in the slack season, and poor conditions. In China, most women from the localities in which these industries are based shunned such work if they could find employment with higher status or that was less tedious. There are also health hazards. *Maquila* workers in

Honduras, for example, were more likely to report a health problem in the previous month than those who had been working elsewhere, and they had less leisure. Studies from Vietnam and Bangladesh both found long hours of work in the same position to be the major source of complaint among women workers in the export sector, together with various ailments associated with this.

Moreover, not all studies report positive findings concerning women's capacity to have greater control over their lives. Many women who leave rural areas to take up jobs in towns, in order to make new friends and build a life for themselves, do not have time to take up such opportunities. The division of labour in domestic chores and child care is rarely renegotiated between the sexes. Despite their increased labour input into paid work, women (particularly married women) either continue to bear the main burden of domestic work, or share it with other female members of the household – often their daughters. By and large, gender inequalities in work burdens appear to be intensified. Despite the collective nature of their work, women workers in these sectors are either forbidden to unionise or find it difficult to do so.

Moreover, despite the visibility of export-oriented waged employment in agriculture and industry, the vast majority of women in low-income countries continue to work in the informal economy in various forms of economic activities that may or may not be affected by global markets, but are characterised by far worse conditions. Within this informal economy, poorer women are concentrated in the most casualised forms of waged labour, and low-value own-account enterprises. It is difficult to see how earnings generated by sex work, domestic service, or daily labour on construction sites – which is where the poorest women are likely to be found – will do much to improve women's subordinate status at home or at work.

## Political representation

The last of the indicators for monitoring progress on gender equality and women's empowerment relates to the number of seats held by women in national parliaments. It moves the focus of empowerment into the arena of politics, and the struggle for participation and representation in decision-making structures.

### *Positive effects of national representation*

As half of the population, women are clearly entitled to at least half the seats in parliament. Such an achievement could, with certain qualifications, represent the most ambitious of the three forms of change singled out to measure progress on women's empowerment and could have the greatest potential for transformation. Furthermore, again with certain qualifications, it could potentially address many of the constraints that limit the life chances of poor women.

However, because these qualifications relate to the same constraints that have prevented women from all social classes and groups from having a 'strategic presence' in national parliaments, it is also the form of social change least likely to be achieved in the near future. A review of the relevant statistics suggests that, regardless of political systems, the proportion of women in national parliaments around the world is extremely low, averaging 13.8 per cent in 2000 (Goetz 2003). This is an extraordinary under-representation of women in the highest structures of governance in their countries. Various forms of bias in the institutions of civil society and the political sphere – more so than conscious discrimination – operate to exclude women, including women from privileged elites.

The structure of the political sphere makes a difference to how many women are fielded as candidates and how many win. This includes the extent to which political parties have taken institutional root in society; have clear rules about candidate

selection; and identify relevant policy concerns. Most important is the political culture in which parties operate and the extent to which it is conducive to the promotion of women's involvement in politics: the strength or weakness of patriarchal ideology, the existence of pluralist forms of organisation, the degree of religious opposition to gender reforms.

Electoral systems are also important. The ones more likely to bring women into political office are those where more than one person can represent a constituency; those that have multiple parties competing for votes; and those that practise proportional representation (PR) in party lists.

Those less likely to do so are majoritarian systems which create the incentive to field a single candidate per constituency and appeal to the majority, rather than accommodating diversity. A review of 53 legislatures in 1999 found that national assemblies in PR systems had nearly 24 per cent of women, compared with 11 per cent in majoritarian systems. In almost every case where women exceed 15 per cent of elected representative bodies, this has been the result of special measures that accord positive advantage to female candidates: Mozambique has 30 per cent female parliamentarians, while South Africa has 29 per cent. Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, India, Tanzania, and Uganda all have reserved seats for women in national or local government.

The way that quotas are applied makes a difference to whether the presence of women is 'token' or a legitimate form of representation. Where, as in Bangladesh, women's seats were filled by the party in power, they simply became an additional vote bank for the ruling regime. In South Africa, on the other hand, there have been attempts by the women's movement to encourage members from within their ranks to enter politics. A woman MP there was active in initiating the process of examining national budgets from a gender perspective; and the Women's Budget Initiative, established in

1995, brought together parliamentarians and NGOs to scrutinise the allocation of public resources (Budlender, Hicks, and Vetten 2002).

At the same time, it should be noted that, at present, the women who enter national parliaments are not generally drawn from the ranks of poor people, nor is there any guarantee that they will be more responsive to the needs and priorities of poor women than many men in parliament.

### ***Positive effects of local government***

There is some debate about whether greater participation and influence in local government structures are more relevant goals for poor women than increasing women's seats in national parliaments. The former, after all, make the decisions that most directly affect the lives of poor people. In recognition of this, a number of states in India, where there is now 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in local government, have added further inducements to local communities to encourage women's participation. Madhya Pradesh and Kerala, for example, require that one-third of participants in the regular open village meetings are female before there is considered to be a quorum. Kerala also allocates 10 per cent of development funds received by local councils from the state to be used for 'women's development' and to be managed by representatives of female groups of the village assembly.

Clearly, all these measures, including the reservation policy itself, are open to abuse. There has been much discussion in India about the possibility that women are merely proxies for husbands or powerful men within their family or caste. Objections are raised on the grounds that only supporters of parties in power attend village meetings; or that women are being harassed to spend funds in ways that do not benefit poorer women. While these are valid concerns, they may also alter over time, as women become more experienced in the political arena. Studies from India, for example, showed

that many of the elected women were gaining self-confidence. They questioned the priorities of *panchayat* (local government) development programmes, emphasised issues affecting women such as fuel and water, and had begun to build broad alliances among themselves. One study showed that women representatives were likely to allocate resources differently from men, suggesting that their presence allowed a different set of priorities to be expressed.

### **Building citizenship from the grassroots**

It is clear that each of the resources in question had the potential to bring about the kinds of change that could lead to renegotiations of the boundaries between public and private life, to collective forms of struggle, and to women's greater representation in the structures of decision making. Together, they could also provide the basis on which women could organise to address the other aspects of the patriarchal structures on which the MDGs are silent: reproductive rights, violence against women, unjust laws, and so on. However, it is also clear that there are likely to be powerful forces, some within the policy domain itself, that will militate against this happening. It is only through the mobilisation of women, particularly poor women, who are primary stakeholders in all of the MDGs, but particularly the MDG on women's empowerment, that policy makers can be held accountable to ensure that the MDGs are followed through in the spirit of the international movements and meetings that gave rise to them. Yet it is precisely this that is missing from the letter and spirit of the MDGs. The vision and values of women's groups and organisations across the world have been translated into a series of technical goals, to be implemented mainly by the very actors and institutions that have blocked their realisation in the past.

If the vision and values that gave rise to the demand for gender equality and

women's empowerment in the first place are to be restored to MDG 3, then those with most at stake in its implementation in accordance with this spirit must be in a position to participate in the processes by which it is translated into objectives, activities, and outcomes. This is most likely to happen if the women in question, together with their allies in government and civil society, are mobilised to participate in these processes. Sometimes such mobilisations have begun to occur because of the nature of certain activities. We have noted the way in which microfinance can provide the basis for building women's capacity for collective action. We have also noted how such action can spill over into the political sphere, not simply in the form of voting, but also in interactions with locally represented officials and participation in protests. We are also seeing evidence of greater willingness on the part of women workers to challenge their employers and the state through organisations such as SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) and Mahila Samakhya in India, and Kormojibi Nari and Nijera Kori in Bangladesh. We have seen the innovation of Women's Budget Initiatives in a number of countries, not simply as a technical exercise but as a way of learning more about how governance structures function and how resources are raised and allocated. It is through the mobilisation of women as women but also as workers, mothers, and citizens that the international community can ensure that the MDGs speak to the needs and interests of half of the world's population. Building this collective capacity of women in all spheres of life to participate and to hold authorities accountable is thus the only basis on which the world's policy makers can keep the promises that they have made on the issue of gender equality.

## Conclusion

Gender relations, like all social relations, are multi-stranded: they embody ideas, values, and identities; they allocate labour between different tasks, activities, and domains; they determine the distribution of resources; and they assign authority, agency, and decision-making power. This means that gender inequalities are multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to some single and universally agreed set of priorities. Any attempt to do so will run the danger of being either too narrow (as the MDGs have been accused of being) or a wish list that is too long and complex to act on. However, gender relationships are not internally cohesive. They contain contradictions and imbalances, particularly when there have been changes in the wider socio-economic environment. Consequently, a shift in one aspect of social relations can initiate a series of changes in other aspects, with unpredictable consequences. To that extent, it could be argued that each of the three indicators embodied in MDG 3 has the potential to make a difference. Each can bring about immediate changes with longer-term consequences. Indeed, the same could be said of any set of policies that seeks to improve women's access to resources. Some may be more strategic than others, but all have transformatory potential as long as the change in question is a genuine expansion of women's choices, rather than a token gesture of paternalist benevolence.

However, this article has also argued that unless provision is made to ensure that policy changes are implemented in ways that allow women themselves to participate, to monitor, and to hold policy makers, corporations, and other relevant actors accountable for their actions, this potential is unlikely to be realised. Women's access to education may improve their chances of a good marriage or their capacity to sign their names on a document, but unless it also provides them with the analytical capacity and courage to question unjust practices, its

potential for change will be limited. Women's access to paid work may give them a greater sense of self-reliance and greater purchasing power, but if it is undertaken in conditions that erode their health and exploit their labour, its costs may outweigh its benefits. Women's presence in the governance structures of society clearly carries the potential to change unjust practices, but if the women in question are drawn from a narrow elite, if they have been invited rather than elected, and if they have no grassroots constituency to represent and answer to, their presence will be only a token one.

The question, therefore, is to what extent the international community is prepared to provide support to women at the grassroots – support which will ensure that they have the collective capabilities necessary to play this role.

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## Note

- 1 This article is an edited version of a chapter in *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and the Millennium Development Goals: A Handbook for Policy-makers and Other Stakeholders*, by Naila Kabeer, published by the Commonwealth Secretariat, London, in 2003.

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