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The Millennium Development Goals, Gender Equality, and Empowerment in India

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More than two of the seven billion people that inhabit the world live in China and India. Human resources form a fundamental asset to both countries, which are vying for world status through their respective markets, services, trade, and labor. Their success toward achieving greater human development lies in how they are channeling their human resources. A fundamental aspect of realizing the human resource capacity of a nation lies in its promotion of gender equity. Especially for a rapidly developing country such as India, which is also dealing with some pulls from traditional and social conservatism that imposes certain restraints on women's full and equal participation in educational and economic enterprises, it is a challenge to assess the country's progress toward gender equity. Given the complexity of the phenomenon, this chapter uses the template provided by the indicators set by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to examine India's progress toward achieving gender equity.

In 2000, under the leadership of Secretary General Kofi Anan, the United Nations launched the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At that time, all 192 countries agreed upon the MDGs by 2015. The MDGs, as outlined by the United Nations, are:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
2. Achieve universal primary education.
3. Promote gender equality and empower women.
4. Reduce child mortality.
5. Improve maternal health.
7. Ensure environmental sustainability.
8. Develop a global partnership for development.

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Each of these overall goals also identifies specific targets to be achieved by nation states, with the cooperation of international agencies and other actors.\footnote{http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml, accessed 9/19/2011.} As is evident from these goals, the primary purpose is to alleviate extreme poverty and the ancillary challenges that are embedded within the challenge of such poverty. The MDGs also recognize that many, in fact all, of these issues are interconnected; hence the need for a global partnership to combat the challenges.

Another important aspect of these goals is the role and place of gender equity.

At first glance, it seems that only two of the eight goals are geared toward the development of the capacity of women to combat issues pertaining to health, poverty, and so on. However, a more careful examination of the two goals reveals the entire panorama of challenges that women face, especially in developing and poor countries.

Since gender empowerment is a holistic process that covers much more than gender equality and maternal health, and since the achievement of these are also immersed in the other MDGs and other social policies, this chapter will attempt to cover them as they pertain. Furthermore, gender equality itself can only be assessed through some specific yardsticks, which in turn may be more manifest in ancillary aspects of empowerment such as equal access to education, work, health benefits, family status, etc. Therein lies the difficulty in assessing gender equality – where should we focus?

Recognizing the gender disparities that continue to challenge many parts of the world despite more than a decade of the implementation of MDGs, several attempts are being made to alleviate such inequalities. UNESCO, for example, has launched a new global initiative to target education of girls and adult literacy. This initiative, titled, “Better Life, Better Future”, calls for a new partnership to ensure that more girls have access to education. In assessing the need for the partnership, the initiative outlines the following reasons:

- 39 million girls of lower secondary age are currently not enrolled in either primary or secondary education, or 26% of the 11–15 age group.
- Only about one third of countries have achieved gender parity at the secondary level. In some instances, the dropout rate of girls from school has increased in the past decade.