



**11<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of The Light Millennium**

**GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERING WOMEN**

**14 NOVEMBER 2011,**

**STEVENS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, HOBOKEN, NJ**

*Time: from 7 – 9 pm*

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MS. DIAKHOUNBA GASSAMA**

**UNDP GENDER TEAM**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening to all of you.

I am delighted to be speaking here today on behalf of Ms Ngone Diop and Ms Winnie Byanyima, Director UNDP Gender Team, who could unfortunately not be here with us. They sincerely apologize and wish us all a successful event. They look forward to receiving the outcomes of this important event.

I would like to start by sincerely thanking Ms Bircan Unver and the College of Arts and Letters of the Stevens Institute of Technology for the invitation and the opportunity given to the UNDP Gender Team to not only share our knowledge and experiences on the issues relating to gender equality and women's empowerment but also to learn from various distinguished experts from different regions of the world and interact with a wide audience.

Gender Equality and women's rights have been proclaimed in several international treaties. The most relevant to our discussion today is the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) also called the international bill of rights for women. Nearly all the countries in the world have ratified it except Iran, Palau, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Tonga, and the United States . Within its preamble and 30 articles,

CEDAW clearly not only defines what constitutes discrimination against women but also sets legally-binding principles and standards for realizing women's rights.

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is another international commitment to the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere. It builds on commitments made during the United Nations Decade for Women, 1976-1985 and on related commitments made in the cycle of United Nations global conferences held in the 1990s.

The convention on the rights of the Child also enshrines some provisions which protect women's rights (the girl child) such as protection from early and forced marriage and the rights to education.

The unanimous adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in 2000 are yet other examples of world leaders' international agenda to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

A number of regional conventions and declarations have also been adopted and provide a further framework of protection for women's rights and gender equality.

I would like to pay particular attention to the Millennium Declaration which enshrines eight time bound and measurable goals along with a roadmap to address key issues of human development by 2015. These goals became known as the Millennium Development Goals: (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; (6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) Ensure environment sustainability and (8) Develop a Global Partnership for Development.

While two specific MDGs are dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, MDG3 and MDG5, it has been gradually acknowledged that gender equality is not only a goal in its own right; it is a prerequisite to the achievement of all goals.

The 2010 United Nations 'assessment of the MDG concluded that tremendous efforts and progress have been made 10 years after the adoption of the goals, however, several challenges remain and the MDG promises are not yet a universal reality especially for women and girls around the world. The report clearly shows that the MDGs targets are unlikely to be met in countries where the needs and status of women and girls are not prioritized.

According to some estimates, women represent 70 percent of the world's poor. This is the result of systematic discrimination in key sectors such as education, health care, employment and control of assets. This places them at a higher risk of poverty and hunger than men.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, poor children particularly girls and those living in rural areas are less likely to finish primary school making it difficult for the world to achieve the 100% target by 2015.

Child deaths are falling, but not quickly enough to meet the target of reducing the 1990 rate by two thirds. In developing countries, the rates have dropped by 28%.

The WHO's 2010 World Health Statistics report suggests that no region achieved the 5.5% annual reduction in maternal mortality levels that would have been necessary to achieve this target.

This lack of attention to women's maternal health needs is not only tragic and avoidable; it has also dire consequences on their break out of poverty. Indeed, when women's sexual and reproductive health needs go unmet, their chances to complete their education and get access to employment are drastically reduced.

There is enough evidence to say that despite notable progress, MDG 5 is the least likely goal to be achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/women\\_poverty\\_economics/](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/)

The global share of women in parliament has increased slowly and is estimated at 19.3%. While a gain has been registered since 1995 when only 11% of parliamentarians worldwide were women, we are far short of the target of 30% of women's leadership positions that was to be achieved by 1995 and further still from the MDG target of gender priority.

We cannot speak about gender inequalities without mentioning violence against women. It is estimated that one in every five women faces some form of violence during her lifetime and as many as one in four women experience physical and/or sexual violence during pregnancy which increases the likelihood of having miscarriage, stillbirth and abortion. Women and girls constitute 80 per cent of the estimated 800,000 people trafficking annually with the majority (79 percent) trafficked for sexual exploitation)<sup>2</sup>.

Violence against women is not only a major obstacle to women's empowerment, it also hampers progress in achieving the MDGs.

Those gender inequalities in all areas of development impede any effort made to achieve MDGs. Unless women and girls have equal access to education, health,

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<sup>2</sup> UNIFEM, Fact Sheet on Violence against women worldwide

decision-making and economic opportunities and unless violence against women and girls is eradicated, MDGs will not be met.

The MDGs provide a framework for the entire UN system to work coherently together toward a common end. UNDP, global development network on the ground in 177 countries and territories, is in a unique position to advocate for change, connect countries to knowledge and resources, and coordinate broader efforts at the country level.

I would therefore like to highlight key interventions that UNDP has been undertaking globally to mainstream gender equality and promote women's rights:

1. To **promote gender equality and accelerate achievement of the MDGs**, UNDP is providing hand-on skills to government planning officials, parliamentary staff and civil society organizations, to enable them to address the most critical gender issues in all aspects of economic policy and budget management. The ground-breaking Gender and Economic Policy Management Initiative (GEPMI), aims to promote inclusive and gender-equitable growth, and empower women economically.

2. UNDP is supporting a **global governance initiative** that will bring together UNDP's recognized expertise and leadership **on public administration reform**; enabling legal frameworks; working with political parties; and promoting women's participation and financing for gender equality in post conflict contexts, as a comprehensive package designed to address and advance multiple aspects of women's participation in decision-making, including in transition and conflict and post conflict contexts.
  
3. UNDP is also playing a leading role in **bringing gender equality issues into global and national climate change policy-making**. Sustained advocacy and capacity-building efforts led by UNDP have resulted in tangible gender equality gains at the ongoing global climate change negotiations. UNDP is also working to introduce gender equity principles in the operations of various climate funds including the Global Climate Fund (GCF) still being created. At the national level, developing countries are being supported to build enough capacity to design and implement gender-responsive climate change adaptation policies and programmes.

One cannot talk about gender equality and women's empowerment without addressing the particular issue of those women and girls who find themselves at the



crossroad of various forms of discriminations. The issue of what has been called the intersectional discrimination has been highlighted by our Administrator Helen Clark last year when she explained that “Global progress tends to obscure the lack of traction for significant populations both within countries and across regions. In particular, women, rural inhabitants, ethnic minorities, and other excluded groups often lag well behind national averages of progress on the MDG targets – even when nations as a whole are moving towards the goals. There is a pressing need to target support to those who are excluded, build on the lessons countries and communities have learned, and make a concerted effort to overcome the bottlenecks which constrain progress.”<sup>3</sup>

I would like to share with you two key resources developed by UNDP to address this challenge and which could be replicated in other region or for other marginalized groups:

1. The 2009 Study by the UNDP Pacific Center on Women with disabilities: it provides an overview of key issues requiring attention and has a detailed list of recommendations regarding legal protection, education, healthcare, employment and infrastructure. It calls for tailored interventions and

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<sup>3</sup> Helen Clark Addresses National Human Rights Institutions, 23 March 2010

responses to their specific needs so they not only enjoy the same rights as their non-disabled peers but also as men and boys.

2. The 2010 *Marginalised Minorities in Development Programming: A UNDP Resource Guide and Toolkit* which helps to pave the way towards an increasingly systematic and decisive contribution by the UN system and its partner (government and CSOs) towards full realization of minority rights.

With less than 5 years left until the 2015 deadline we need to collectively accelerate our actions towards the realisation of gender equality and women's rights. I am delighted that we will hear later tonight several civil society representatives. In the fight for gender equality and women's rights, CSOs around the globe have contributed immensely to make international agreed principles, local realities for all. I really want to salute your work and use this opportunity to acknowledge all the women's organizations at local, regional and international levels, which are regularly supporting their countries, UNDP and other UN agencies in our work towards a more equitable and just world for women, men, girls and boys.

I thank you for your kind attention.