
UN Women

In collaboration with ECLAC

Expert Group Meeting

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

Mexico City, Mexico

21-24 October 2013

**Beyond the silos and the silences:
Addressing violence against women and girls within the post 2015 agenda**

Expert paper prepared by:

Marai Larasi*

Imkaan & End Violence Against Women Coalition
United Kingdom

“Despite their successes, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have not fully addressed the values and principles outlined in the Millennium Declaration, particularly in relation to human rights and equality. Gender-based violence, in particular, is inadequately addressed in the current framework... ”¹

This paper briefly reflects on some of the implications of missing violence against women indicators in the current MDG framework, and considers key areas which should be monitored in the post-2015 framework.

Violence against Women and Girls and the MDG Framework

*“Violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life². Violence against women and girls³ (VAWG) is a global problem - one which has consequences not just for individual women and girls, who are victimised, but for families, communities and for *all* our societies. VAWG is recognised within, and is the focus of, a number of international and regional legal and policy frameworks. In these*

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

¹ Global Thematic Discussion on Addressing Inequalities: Gender-based Violence and Inequalities Online Discussion Synopsis. <http://www.worldwewant2015.org/sitemap#thematic>

² United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

³ Throughout this paper, the term ‘violence against women and girls’ (VAWG) is used in acknowledgement of the impact of gender inequality and violence on the girl child.

frameworks, VAWG is often recognised as inextricably linked to a backdrop of wider gender inequality i.e. *'violence against women and girls is rooted in historical and structural inequality in power relations between women and men, and persists in every country in the world as a pervasive violation of the enjoyment of human rights'*.⁴

The agreed conclusions on the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls from this year's Commission on the Status of Women notes that, *"...violence against women impedes the social and economic development of communities and States, as well as the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals"*.⁵

For many VAWG experts, the above statement would be unsurprising. The question then is - how could we have expected to achieve equality and empowerment for women and girls while this violence persists? Each day, across the globe, women and girls are subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation, rape, torture, physical assault, psychological abuse, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, financial abuse, harassment, violence perpetrated in the name of honour, stalking, and more. Whole industries are constructed around the buying and selling of women's and girls' bodies, with men's 'right' to pleasure and entertainment being prioritised over women's bodily integrity, safety, well-being and freedom; and while violence has historically been understood as a connected to the 'private' or 'public' spheres, women and girls are now negotiating new threats and experiences of violence within virtual spaces.

The current MDG framework includes a commitment to *'promote gender equality and empower women'*. While this goal has been valuable for targeting important areas, such as eliminating gender disparity within primary and secondary education, the absence of a VAWG indicator effectively narrows the approach to this and any other manifestation of gender inequality. States, and their supporters, have had no requirement to address VAWG as a fundamental violation of women's and girls' human rights and therefore a major barrier to women's and girls' empowerment; or to address the intersection of VAWG and other areas of gender inequality, allowing issues to be de-linked and therefore not considered, resourced or monitored. As a result, where gains have been made, for example around gender parity within primary education, these gains are being compromised by phenomenon such as child marriage, which disproportionately affects girls.

Thus, we may envisage a world where women and girls achieve their full potential e.g. going to school, participating in public life, holding independence and autonomy, exercising their reproductive rights and more. However, despite the resilience demonstrated by countless numbers of women and girls, achieving this potential is simply not possible if for example: a girl is prevented from attending school, because she is forced to marry; or if school becomes an unsafe space because a young woman is subject to constant sexual bullying and assault; or if a woman is prevented from going out to work by her partner and family; or if she is forced to work and all her earnings are taken away from her by her partner; or if she simply cannot go to work or to study because she is so severely injured; or if years of sexual exploitation

⁴ Commission on the Status of Women 2013 - Agreed conclusions on the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls:

[http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_\(CSW_report_excerpt\).pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_(CSW_report_excerpt).pdf)

⁵ Commission on the Status of Women 2013 - Agreed conclusions on the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls:

[http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_\(CSW_report_excerpt\).pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_(CSW_report_excerpt).pdf)

result in such trauma that she is unable to function; or if when she does escape violence and seeks help – she finds that she is not believed, or that there are no places to go.

Learning from the Past: Constructing the Post-2015 Agenda

The post-2015 agenda offers opportunities to construct and embed a more integrated, strategic approach to achieving gender equality and empowerment for women. Yet, in a period of widespread economic downturn, cuts to aid budgets, cuts to public sector funding, and the erosion of crucial specialist, women-led independent, non-governmental VAWG provision, the post-2015 context is one which is potentially fraught with challenges in relation to eliminating VAWG and achieving gender equality. In addition, phenomena such as the rise of ideological and religious fundamentalisms, increased objectification of women and girls in media spaces and heightened political tensions and associated armed conflict in different country States, threaten to undermine the work done so far to address violence against women and girls. In practice, women and girls may be pushed into increasingly vulnerable situations, with fewer resources being made available to offer safety, support and opportunities for recovery. However, it is precisely because the situation has become more fragile, why the post-2015 agenda requires a significantly more robust approach to addressing VAWG. A failure to ensure the accountability of key actors may result not only in a halt in progress, around this agenda, but could also lead to the unravelling of important gains.

Critically, it is vital that the post-2015 context is one which supports accountability of *all* country States. In an international context, human rights lenses are often focussed on ‘developing’ countries, reinforcing what theorists such as Stuart Hall refer as ‘*The West and The Rest*’⁶ discourses; with the assumption that liberal, ‘Western’⁷ societies have made major gains in areas such as VAWG and are therefore able to expect accountability from other States. Yet VAWG remains a global concern and one which has not been effectively addressed by *any* country or region. The post-2015 agenda therefore should be one of increased transparency, ensuring that all States, irrespective of income status or perceived human rights advancements, invest in effective, appropriate and consistent actions to eliminate VAWG.

Given the scope and prevalence of VAWG, it is not possible in this paper to do justice to all the work which is required to address the issue in a meaningful way. As such, this section briefly focusses on four over-arching (and overlapping) areas which are particularly pressing in the current context.

Laying the Foundations: Developing Legislative and Policy Frameworks

While legislative and policy commitments to address VAWG do not, in and of themselves, result in societal change – they are a fundamental aspect of creating a zero tolerance approach to VAWG. Despite global efforts, far too many countries have failed to develop laws which protect women and girls and hold perpetrators to account. In some cases, where laws have been put into place, they are often inadequate or fail in their implementation. For example, a number of States have introduced legislation designed to address domestic violence, but have refused to outlaw marital rape. As such, it is essential the post-2015 agenda includes

⁶ Hall, S., 1992. *The West & The Rest: Discourse & Power*. In: S. Hall & B. Gieben, eds. *Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 275-331.

⁷ Throughout this paper, the terms *Western* and *the West* will be used as expressed by theorists such as Stuart Hall i.e. as a historical and conceptual construct to denote industrialised, urbanised, capitalist, secular societies

monitoring criteria around legislative and policy narratives and their implementation - which require that States develop systems which address the complexities and wider spectrum of VAWG, including approaches which address emerging areas of concerns such as harassment in virtual spaces.

It is critical that any approach by country States which take strands of violence outside of a VAWG context and fail to present a clear analysis of gender is critiqued as insufficient and inappropriate. For example, the use of the term ‘family violence’ can create a context of gender neutrality⁸ which fails to give sufficient recognition of the role of gender inequality in violence which disproportionately or primarily affects women and girls. This in turn can have a negative effect on everything from programming priorities and data collection, to the limiting of spaces for strategic advocacy and services which are rooted in a feminist, human rights analysis of VAWG i.e. in such situations anti-VAWG advocates become increasingly silenced while preference is given to State and non-State actors who comply with a gender-neutral agenda. In addition, where good legislative and policy frameworks exist, it is essential that shifting political and ideological approaches do not serve to undermine the effectiveness of those structures. For example, the UK government’s VAWG strategy⁹ is in many ways an example of good practice in that it offers an integrated, gendered approach to VAWG which is based on the UN definition of VAWG. Yet the effectiveness of the strategy is undermined by the government’s own localism agenda which limits central government leadership around key areas such as funding for refuge services, prevention activities in schools and access to specialist support for women and girls from marginalised communities.

Transforming the Context: Preventing Violence against Women and Girls

‘...prevention of violence against women and girls before it occurs, that is, by identifying and addressing its underlying causes and promoting shifts in the social environment that ultimately reduce the number of new incidences of violence against women and girls’¹⁰

Much of the work that has been done to address VAWG has necessarily focussed on crisis support and intervention. Yet violence against women and girls is preventable. The importance of, and approaches to, prevention have been considered in a previous Expert Group Meeting¹¹ and the associated documents offer a comprehensive picture of VAWG prevention. However it is important to note that the post-2015 agenda offers opportunities for States to fulfil obligations and policy commitments¹² to prevent VAWG from happening in the first place and to build on existing MDG successes. For example, a legacy of the current work to achieve gender parity in primary and secondary education within the current MDG

⁸ For example in the case of New Zealand: See Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Fifty-second session, 9-27 July 2012, Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/co/CEDAW-C-NZL-CO-7.pdf>

⁹ Call to End Violence against Women and Girls, November 2010:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118150/vawg-paper.pdf

¹⁰ Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls, UN Women in cooperation with ESCAP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO, Bangkok, Thailand, 17-20 September 2012 <http://www.unwomen.org/~media/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/57/EGM/Report-of-the-EGM-on-Prevention-of-Violence-against-Women-and-Girls%20pdf.pdf>

¹¹ Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls, UN Women in cooperation with ESCAP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO, Bangkok, Thailand, 17-20 September 2012 <http://www.unwomen.org/~media/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/57/EGM/Report-of-the-EGM-on-Prevention-of-Violence-against-Women-and-Girls%20pdf.pdf>

¹² For example within Beijing Platform for Action

framework should be a requirement to integrate work around gender equality and VAWG into school curricula in all country States.

It is important to acknowledge that given the current economic challenges, a reluctance to invest in preventative activities is perhaps understandable. Yet, these very challenges offer possibilities for increased creativity, partnership and State commitment to removing barriers to addressing VAWG. For example, much of critique of sexualisation in media settings becomes hijacked by debates on issues such as censorship. Yet States could move this forward by providing leadership and exploring opportunities to work with media agencies on approaches such as co-regulation which support media outlets to address sexism in media spaces and offer counter-narratives to dominant [*patriarchal*] discourses.

In the long term, effective, appropriate work to prevent VAWG will ensure the safety and well-being of women and girls, contribute to achieving gender equality, support women's and girls' empowerment and reduce the social and economic costs to the State

Protecting Victims and Survivors of Violence

As previously noted, the current economic context presents major challenges around addressing VAWG. A key concern in this area is cuts to public spending which has implications for the resourcing of both public and non-governmental services to victims and survivors of violence.

The post-2015 agenda should therefore build on this year's Commission on the Status of Women agreed conclusions, which urge governments to,

*'Establish comprehensive, coordinated, interdisciplinary, accessible and sustained multisectoral services, programmes and responses at all levels, and with the support of all available technologies, for all victims and survivors of all forms of violence against women and girls based on their needs...'*¹³

The recognition and resourcing of independent women-led services, rooted in a feminist approach is critical to addressing VAWG. Such agencies are not just 'service providers' but often hold decades of expertise, which facilitates effective support to women and girls, as well as offering the foundation for research, strategic advocacy and effective monitoring of government approaches to VAWG.

Addressing Multiple, Intersecting Forms of Discrimination

It is critical that the post-2015 development agenda moves beyond a rhetorical acknowledgement of the ways that some groups of women and girls are subjected to increased or specific forms of violence on the basis of their social identity, status, and / or activism. While the nature of the violence and the specific groups will vary from State to State, there are women that are widely recognised as being particularly vulnerable to victimisation in a number of settings. This includes, but is not limited to, women who face discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, disability, age (girls, young women and older

¹³ Commission on the Status of Women 2013 - Agreed conclusions on the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls:

[http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_\(CSW_report_excerpt\).pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_(CSW_report_excerpt).pdf)

women), sexual orientation, widowhood, class / caste, or on the basis of their activism e.g. human rights defenders. This also includes indigenous women, refugee and asylum-seeking women, who are living with HIV and women who are subject to immigration control.

It is critical that the specific needs of vulnerable and / or marginalised women and girls are taken into account and addressed within all VAWG activities, including work which is focussed on prevention. For example awareness-raising work which is focussed on sexual violence prevention, should consider the ways that some groups of women, such as lesbians¹⁴, are targeted specifically because of their identity. Work which is focussed addressing the needs and aspirations of women who are marginalised must go beyond tokenistic ‘inclusive’ processes to building autonomy and leadership.

It is also crucial that the role of State structures and actors in marginalising and victimising groups of women through inflicting or sanctioning violence or through preventing access to services is brought into focus in an international context. This includes situations, such as the targeting of human rights defenders, or the silencing of women protesters through the use of sexual assault. Consideration should also be given to situations where State actions support the victimisation of women, for example where measures to control immigration increase women’s vulnerability to violence and limit / deny their access to services.

Conclusion

While it is clear that there are major gaps in the existing MDG framework, the post-2015 context offers new opportunities for meaningful action to address violence against women and girls. However, moving this agenda forward requires collaboration, creativity and resources. It also requires revisiting old terrain, ensuring that the expertise that has been developed over a number of decades is not lost to glossy ‘quick-fixes’ or to anti-human rights and ant-feminist backlashes.

It *is* possible to achieve gender quality and women’s empowerment, and eliminating violence against women and girls is an essential component of that process. Ultimately if we are to create a world which is safer, healthier, more economically stable and more equal – we need women and girls to be safe, healthy, economically stable and equal.

¹⁴ This is referred to as ‘corrective rape’ in settings such as South Africa, but occurs with varying degrees of prevalence in many country States