

What we need instead of MDGs

A Speech by Alexandra Rees

Good Afternoon, I am Alexandra Rees and I am a student from the UK here to speak to you today on what needs to be done instead of the millennium development goals.

Back in 2000 when the goals were established, they primarily focused on combating poverty and covered a range of issues that are areas where crucial improvement is needed. Arguably, other aspects of the goals need just as much focus on as poverty. For example, it could be argued that more could be done to diminish current gaps in gender equality than the goals as they currently are set to achieve by 2015. From certain perspectives, the actions within the goals apply more to poverty-stricken countries than to economically developed ones which still need improvement in many of these areas. If we look at the United States of America, where women working full time earn a median weekly wage that is only 81% of a man's weekly median wage, and also in the United kingdom, where a 2003 study found that less than half of young pregnant women and young mothers were able to access a full curriculum, we can see that even in the developed world, where less of us are exposed to the treacherous condition of poverty, the level of gender equality is still not good enough.

Today in Iran, more than 65 percent of university students are women yet in Africa more than 40 percent of women do not have access to even the most basic education. It needs to be noted that for MDGs, poorer countries pledged to improve policies and governance and increase accountability to their own citizens whereas wealthy countries pledged to provide the resources. Amnesty International claims "Governments are not living up to their promises under the Women's Convention to protect women from discrimination and violence such as rape and female genital mutilation." This is because although most countries have ratified to this convention, they are not fully living up to all of its requirements and this is becoming a road block for achieving the MDGs.

I had a look at what areas were prevalent in the case of gender inequality - such as education attainment, health & survival or economic participation and opportunity. Out of all of the areas, I was shocked to realise one that consistently stood out between a variety of countries, those both developed and developing, was the vast distance between roles of women and men's political empowerment. Yes, it's true that women's roles are increasing with female political leaders now in Malawi and South Korea but in comparison to the role of men we are still far from where we need to be & to the side of the MDGs, this issue is in desperate need of being addressed.

The 3rd MDG, to promote gender equality and empower women, sets out to promote mechanisms that give women a voice in politics and governance institutions. This is the only MDG action I found that directly approaches the lack of female roles in governments. It is particularly important that women and girls get a fair and equal involvement in political structures as it makes them more democratic. A lot of electoral systems do not place anywhere near equal amounts of women and men into government and women tend to have a significantly small minority. This has to change. The presence of women in politics world-wide, is helping increase the voice and rights of women and girls and should be credited, even more than it already is in the MDGs, as a key focus of improving the status of women. Females are going to want to pass equality related legislation. An increase in the amount of women in politics would make the composition of the legislature in each country more balanced in concerns to gender and significantly aid the likelihood of more acts and laws being placed in the favour of increased gender equality to all people. This would then help diminish gender gaps, of that can become barriers to efficiently completely other MDGs- this is crucial particularly in countries where in the past the role of women has been very small due to cultural reasons. From all of this we know that the presence of more women in politics is something we need to see more of globally.

So what is stopping us? Nichola Gutgold from Penn State University USA claims that women are at a disadvantage when comparing credentials with their male colleagues. "Men with very skimpy résumés—maybe first-term senators—are considered presidential material. But for women we expect more. It's because we've never had a woman, and the public and press constantly look for reasons to disqualify her".

This is a point I find very interesting as it prompts the idea that a strong share of the public expectation for a female candidate is too unrealistic for them to achieve leaving their work, as successful and impressive as it may be, up for an array of criticism. This may be one of many valid reasons to consider when identifying the limits that face women in entering politics. Perceptions of the political competence of women can be negative in some countries. It was only around 100 years ago when a lot of the rights of women and girls were appallingly distant from those of men. Some perceptions people may have been brought up with in their homes having been passed on from their parents, then continuing to pass the same perceptions on to their own children in time.

It's unfair that in some countries, female candidates can be subject to criticism for focusing energy on campaigning instead of mothering. Females are pinned to this double standard that men do not face. Gutgold also mentions that female candidates are judged for the quality of their parenthood more than men are,". This stems from a perception in a lot of cultures that women traditionally tend to raise children because of their maternal nature, whereas the man is more orientated on providing income to the household.

This sort of negative attitude from the media can be difficult obstacles for women in politics. Women are subject to different types of media attention that men in similar positions do not face. For instance, attention is often taken away from their views and focused more on their appearance. Diana Carlin is co-author of 'Gender and the American Presidency: Nine Presidential Women and the Barriers They Faced' she says that "All the talk about clothing and appearance detracts the media time and attention from the job, the politics, the competence.". She believes that as men do not have much variation between appearance, such as suits and ties, meaning there is not much difference between the attire of a male politician and another. More options are available to women which can define their image in the public's eyes and leave them open to more scrutiny. Kathleen Sebelius was the governor of the state of Kansas in the USA from 2003-2009. In the first debate of her campaign she was against a male republican candidate. Afterwards an associated press article mentioned Sebeilus but focused more on her previous job title than her role as a political candidate, then followed with a description of her sandals and nail polish. As for her male opponent? coverage consisted of biographies, job titles and no mention of outfit depicted.

With all these possible obstacles open to females when they run for political positions aside-it can be done. In the UK New Labour placed female candidates in safe seat constituencies, where the party was almost guaranteed to receive more votes than any of the other parties running under the electoral system, first past the post. This resulted in the former New Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, having 8 female cabinet ministers and a total of 31 women in government, In comparison to the amount of men sitting in the same government this is not a fair representation for women. in 2005, new labour had 97 female members of Parliament out of their 116 Prospective parliamentary candidates, however by the 2010 election, a new conservative party came into power and reduced the number of female MPs, unintentionally in the governing party to 48. There are only 139 female MPs in the UK Parliament today out of a possible 650 MP positions. Nearly a quarter of the MPs are female and only 17.4% of the cabinet are women. With all this in mind, we shouldn't have to put women in safe seats in order for them to come in to power. In MEDCs the media ideally needs to become less attached to more scrutiny of female candidates over males, and focus on the politics of the candidates as even though the inequality is not directly intended it is still generated and has an effect on the candidate's image and how they are seen by the electorate. This wouldn't be a difficult issue to overcome, if the facts were exposed and awareness was raised it could put pressure on the media to accept that in our societies the role of women and girls is ever increasing and needs to be highlighted as stronger in modern times that it

previously has been. In LEDCs, the media isn't likely to be as strong because TVs, radio and internet are not accessible to a lot of the poorest of the population. However previous perceptions of female political competence are perhaps likely to have stayed with the population because the traditional role of women as the full time mothering figure continues to exist strongly in some countries.

With regard to the MDGs, it is my opinion that there are factors greater than poverty that result in the lack of female positions in governing institutions globally. We know that we need women in politics. Around half of the global population are women and yet representation is not close to where it should be. In one third of developing countries women constitute for less than 10% of members of parliament. Everything the MDGs are focusing are incredible to see results in whether big improvements are made or slightly smaller than we would have hoped for as all those areas require some sort of progress. But we could be doing more in the area of politics if we find a way to open and increase the likelihood of women entering governing institutions. This can become a gateway and possibly give ease to securing what needs to be achieved when decreasing gaps in gender equality through legislation.

The presence of more women in a legislature might make bills affecting women's rights have better odds of becoming an act. Depending on the country, this could allow injustice to women to be taken to an appropriate judiciary. This is crucial and needs to happen especially in the case of violence against women and girls. A possible way of increasing the numbers of women is to campaign to change the electoral system in countries. Proportional representation methods tend to increase women's chances of being elected than simple plurality systems such as first past the post. Of course the problem with increasing focus on politics is that not all countries are democracies and have elected governance institutions but almost all have areas in which poverty exists. However, if more focus was put on ensuring gender equality in politics, it would make goals such as the MDGs easier to achieve in the long run. More attention should be given to political empowerment.

Thank you very much for your time I really appreciate it.