

Hayley Richardson – UNA Southampton UN Day event – 24 October 2014

Thank you for inviting me to participate in your United Nations Day celebrations. I was especially pleased to receive this invitation as I was a student at the University of Southampton when I did my history degree and so have some great memories of this city.

For the benefit of those who may not know much about the United Nations Association – UK, we're a charity which provides independent analysis on the work of the United Nations, and a grassroots membership body with over 14,000 members and supporters across the UK.

At UNA-UK we believe that a strong, credible and effective UN is essential if we are to build a safer, fairer and more sustainable world. As the only organisation that can claim universal membership, the UN is the one place where all the world's nations can come together to find global solutions to global challenges.

We work to support the UN in two mutually reinforcing ways: through our public outreach and campaigning work, mobilising our members and supporters to ensure that peoples' opinions on the UN are heard; and through our high-level advocacy work, producing briefings, recommendations and holding roundtables on a range of issues for government officials, parliamentarians and international experts.

As Policy & Advocacy Officer I help devise and coordinate this work across UNA-UK's policy areas, and I personally lead our work on gender, human rights and international law. I'm also the editor of our flagship publication, *New World*.

Today we'll be discussing women and development. Two enormous subjects in their own right. But what I'd specifically like to talk to you about is how women's rights and gender equality fit into future development plans currently being debated at the UN. I'd also like to touch on how these plans could affect us here in the UK and hopefully we will have some room for questions at the end.

The topic is a timely one as the coming year is set to be significant for women in development. Many of you will no doubt have heard of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, the eight targets for reducing poverty in developing countries by 2015. With just over one year to go until the deadline, the UN and its member states are busying themselves with analysing whether the MDGs will be met and negotiating what will replace them when they expire.

The MDGs are generally seen as a UN success story, some of their achievements include:

- halving the number of people living in extreme poverty, defined as living on less than \$1.25 a day – a target met in 2010, five years ahead of schedule
- reducing the number of child deaths by 50% - 6 million fewer children died in 2012 than in 1990
- averting millions of deaths from HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases by drastically reducing infections

They have also:

- galvanised action from governments and donors like never before seen
- equipped civil society to independently monitor progress towards the targets hold their governments to account when progress is lacking
- attracted millions in development investment

Unfortunately, by almost all of the MDGs measures, much of this success has bypassed women and other marginalised groups (at just over 50% of the world's population I hesitate to use the term "marginalised group" but sadly that's the reality for many women around the world today).

In March earlier this year, I was fortunate enough to attend the Commission on the Status of Women, the UN's annual global gathering of women's rights activists. As part of the UN's MDG stock-taking efforts, the theme of the conference was "the challenges and achievements in implementing the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls".

Surrounded by over 6,000 delegates from global civil society (there were a further 2,000 or so in attendance who represented member states), I'm afraid the picture was more of challenges than achievements. Here is just a taste of their experiences:

- Firstly, poverty measures are based on household surveys, and these in turn are based on the assumption that the wealth of a household is divided equally amongst its members. We know from various studies this simply isn't the case, and that when data is disaggregated by sex, women are over-represented in the poorest sections of society.
- In addition to this, globally, women are more likely to be unemployed, underpaid, in vulnerable forms of employment and expected to also undertake the majority of unpaid care work in the home.
- Whilst there are now nearly the same numbers of boys and girls enrolled at primary school, there is little evidence to show that girls actually complete the primary level, move on to the secondary level or indeed receive a quality education on the same basis as boys.
- The goal concerning reducing maternal mortality is one of the furthest from being met, mainly due to women's lack of access to appropriate healthcare. In 2011, only around one third of live births were attended by a healthcare professional.
- Women constitute a greater proportion of people living with HIV/AIDS. In sub-Saharan Africa, HIV/AIDS prevalence amongst young women can be up to double that of men in the same age group.

In addition to this, the MDGs have been widely criticised for the limited attention paid to women. The gender equality goal in the MDGs had just one target – to eliminate gender disparity in education.

The MDGs therefore completely overlooked a range of critical issues such as violence against women and girls (described by the UN as a global epidemic), women's restricted access to assets and resources, for example, in some countries, it is still illegal for women to own land, and their unequal representation in decision-making roles in almost all spheres.

The overriding message from the conference was that gender discrimination and the denial of women's rights has not only impeded women's development but also the development of the countries within which they reside. Member states concluded that any future set of development goals must include a much broader standalone goal on gender equality, as well as gender-related targets within all other goals.

Moving on from the MDGs, the UN has been engaged in various efforts to decide what will replace them. A litany of committees and panels have input into this 'blue sky thinking' exercise, to borrow from business jargon. The UK's Prime Minister co-chaired one of these panels, which made its own recommendations last year. The most recent initiative, and the one which looks set to have the biggest influence on the process, is the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals.

A 30-member committee made up of UN member states, the Open Working Group has been tasked with drafting a new set of goals which will not only finish the job of eradicating poverty that the MDGs started, but should also include targets for an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future. In other words, this time, it's got to be the whole package.

Not only that, the SDGs are expected to be universal in scope. So whilst the MDGs were designed with the poorest countries in mind (though very much with the support of richer countries), the Sustainable Development Goals (or SDGs) will be applicable to every single country in the world.

You really can't overstate the importance and ambition of this process.

In September, the Open Working Group handed its proposal for this new framework to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, recommending 17 SDGs covering almost everything from ending hunger to creating sustainable cities and providing decent work for all. I'm pleased to report that it does include a standalone, fairly comprehensive goal on gender equality, as well as gender-related targets within all 16 other goals.

The gender goal includes nine targets on:

- ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
- eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls
- eliminating harmful practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (or FGM)
- recognising unpaid care and domestic work and promoting shared responsibility for this work within the household
- ensuring women's full and effective participation at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life
- ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights
- undertaking reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land
- enhancing the use of enabling technologies to promote women's empowerment
- adopting enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality

The consensus found around a broad, standalone shows just how far we've come. There is now very little doubt that when it comes to adopting a new set of goals in September 2015, it will include a decent goal on gender equality as well as gender targets mainstreamed throughout. This really is a major achievement for women's rights activists, who only 14 years ago had to fight tooth and nail for a small clutch of narrow gender targets. Back then women's issues were fringe issues, today they're at the fore.

That said, we see it as civil society's job to make sure that our governments are doing the best job possible, and whilst the goal they've drafted is good, we think it could be great.

There are a number of ways it could be strengthened:

- Firstly, nowhere in the gender goal does it explicitly refer to women's human rights. In fact, the entire document barely gives human rights more than a cursory mention. This is a concern as it's widely agreed that the root cause of women being held back as they have is the denial of their basic human rights. If we are ever to address these root causes then it is essential that women's human rights are firmly stated in the goal. Unfortunately, there are a number of states who not only think human rights have nothing to do with development, they have fundamental disagreements what constitutes women's human rights.
- The targets underpinning the goal also need to be strengthened. At the moment, most don't have an explicit deadline, and we all know how hard we work without a deadline looming over us! They also need to be more specific, removing any wiggle room for states looking to evade their obligations. There are currently two caveats stating "or as nationally appropriate". In UN circles this is known as the 'sovereignty clause'. Often inserted at the last minute by more regressive member states, it essentially means states can choose to overlook targets they simply don't agree with. As it stand this applies to two targets – on redistributing responsibility for unpaid care work in the home, and on improving women's access economic resources.
- In addition, the targets will be meaningless without vastly improved data collection. As I have mentioned already, very few research methods include monitoring by sex, but we have seen just how different the experiences of men and women are, even those living in the same house. Doing so will greatly improve our understanding of the social norms which restrict the opportunities available to women, such as the preference of educating sons over daughters or unequal inheritance laws.

Now, in relation to the UK, this is all good news. The UK already has an excellent record in its overseas development work. Earlier this year it reached the

internationally agreed target of spending 0.7% of Gross National Income on aid, one of only a handful of countries to have done so.

We have also recently passed a landmark piece of legislation – possibly the first of its kind in the world – which legally obliges the Department for International Development to formally assess each of its projects, before they are undertaken, for their impact on women. By asking questions such as “does this support women’s capabilities and enjoyment of their rights?” or “does this embrace women’s equal participation as actors, leaders and decision-makers?”, the department can amend or end any activities which could inadvertently worsen women’s situations.

The UK also has an excellent record in relation to promoting women’s issues overseas. Some of you will no doubt be familiar with William Hague’s joint initiative with Angelina Jolie on preventing sexual violence in conflict. They’ve done a huge amount to raise the issue of wartime rape on the international agenda, culminating in a global summit held in London earlier this year.

The Department of International Development has a strong focus on helping women and girls, and particularly on challenging harmful practices such as FGM.

This work is no doubt commendable, but what is most interesting in my view, and the radical part if you like, is that this new gender goal, and indeed the other 16 goals alongside it, will this time be applicable in the UK.

This is exciting news. Because although we count ourselves lucky compared to what many women around the world face, our battle for gender equality here at home is by no means over. Because of the gender goal, the UK government will have to redouble its efforts to address issues such as:

- The gender pay gap: according to the Fawcett Society, a women’s rights charity, the difference in men and women’s pay in the UK has risen in the recession years to 19.1%. Like women elsewhere in the world, women in the UK are also disproportionately represented in insecure jobs – since 2008 nearly a million women have moved into low-paid employment.

- Sexual violence: whilst it's right that government shine a spotlight on rape in conflict zones around the world, the same level of attention must be paid to the issue here in the UK. The Office of National Statistics recently reported that despite an overall fall in crime in England and Wales, down 16%, recorded instances of rape increased by 29% in the period of just one year. If that wasn't alarming enough, the Office estimates that only around 15% of women report sexual violence.
- Women in decision-making positions: in the UK, women make up just 21% of executive boards. In parliament women account for on average just 23% of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords – this puts us in 65th place globally. Women do marginally better in local government at 32%, but many, many more need to follow in the footsteps of women like Southampton's very own Mayor, Councillor Sue Blatchford.

The potential impact of agreeing a strong, universal goal on gender equality is huge. It shatters the myth too often peddled that women's second-rate status in many, or in fact most, societies is too complex or impossible to change. For years this has held us back from even trying. But in 2014 we know better. We have a much better understanding of the structural barriers women face, and better tools at our disposal for breaking these down.

Why is this important? In the UK, it means women can make that final leap from empowerment to equality. Easier said than done, yes, but certainly within reach. For developing countries, an entire nation's future can be at stake, for how can any country ever fully develop if 50% of its population gets left behind?

As the UN General Assembly prepares for the final negotiations in the new year, we at UNA-UK will continue to argue the case that for an ambitious set of goals, nothing has the potential to be more transformative than the achievement of gender equality.

Thank you.