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The Post-2015 Agenda: Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Ending Gender-Based Violence

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I. Introduction

Following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, the world came together to codify eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to address poverty globally. These goals are a global consensus on the main priorities for tackling development challenges and a political commitment to implement them. Fourteen years later, substantial progress has been made in all areas, particularly those with a health focus. However, women and girls remain on the margins of progress, with uneven and insufficient advances in many areas, especially those related to gender based violence.

An integrated and systemic gender perspective and strong political commitment to women's rights must be a central part of the development framework that will succeed the MDGs. The Post-2015 Agenda must comprehensively address persistent discrimination and violence against women and girls. Gender equality and human rights must be a core focus of the Post-2015 Agenda and should be treated as a stand-alone goal, integrated through targets and indicators in all dimensions of the new development framework. Using the framework proposed by UN women, advocating for the adoption of this standalone gender goal should be a key priority for all women's rights and gender equality activists.

Additionally, gender-based violence remains a major obstacle to the full realization of human rights for women around the world—from North Carolina to South Sudan. Ensuring all women live lives free from violence can be achieved by analyzing best practices models that empower women to create safe spaces. Global information sharing of effective practices is in the best interests of all women and allies.

The work being done by local North Carolina organization NC Women United (NCWU), a coalition of women's groups active in that state, serves as a best practices model in this regard. Specifically, NCWU's Women's Advocacy Day and Women's Agenda Assemblies mobilize women and train them to be self-advocates, providing opportunities and methodologies to approach legislators and lobby for positive change in the realm of violence against women.

I. North Carolina Women United, a local model with a global statement.

Gender unequal communities are home to higher rates of gender-based violence, exacerbated by a range of underlying determinants such as poverty and unhealthy attitudes toward women's empowerment. While the world focuses on the future development agenda, it is instructive to assess local best practices models. Local organizations in North Carolina are already tackling gender based violence in a manner congruent with the guiding principles of the standalone gender goal. Namely, working to strengthen the causal link between women's empowerment and freedom from violence. One such organization is NC Women United.

Women's empowerment in the democratic world is often directly related to political



participation. In North Carolina, women voted at a higher rate than men in both the 2008 and 2010 elections, with 69% of women going to the polls in the 2008 presidential elections—a 3% lead over male voters in the same year (NCDOA, 2013). Despite this, in the two main theatres of democratic representation in the state, women only hold 5 of 50 seats in the Senate and 35 of 120 seats in the House of Representatives. This represents a combined total of 23.5% of all electable seats in North Carolina, below the national average for female representation at 23.7% (NCDOA, 2013). These results are significant because, as has been shown in other democratic settings, women in government tend to be the main drivers of progressive legislation for women.

Additionally, the health, well-being and security of women in North Carolina continues to be hindered by the sustained presence of gender based violence. A recent study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention has proposed that women in North Carolina experience higher rates of female victimization from sexual violence and rape than US national estimates (CDC, 2011). An unacceptable one in five (21.6%) North Carolina women aged 18 and older reported being raped in her lifetime with just over half (51.0%) of all respondents reporting that they had experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime aside from rape (NCDOA, 2013). Both of these statistics place North Carolina above the US national average in a negative way, painting a critical picture for women and girls in the state. Organizations such as North Carolina Women United recognize these challenges and seek to remedy them through working to empower women in the state.

NC Women United (NCWU) is a coalition of progressive organizations and individuals working to achieve the full political, social, and economic equality of all women across North Carolina, with membership including WomenNC. The organization works to build women's power through grassroots activism, community organizing, legislative advocacy, and engagement in the political process. In seeking to remedy gender inequality in North Carolina, NCWU's mission statement sets several specific legislative priorities including increasing the participation of women as voters, leaders, and decision-makers in the political process; ensuring freedom from domestic violence and sexual assault; providing full and equal civil rights; ending discrimination; and eliminating hunger, poverty and homelessness. Echoing the same framework of the proposed standalone gender goal, NCWU categorizes their goals into four broad categories, two of which are civic participation and equality (women's empowerment) and violence against women. NCWU advances their legislative agenda through two principal best-practices models: Women's Agenda Assemblies and Women's Advocacy Day.

Women's Agenda Assemblies

The Women's Agenda Assembly (WAA) was established in 1988 by North Carolina Women United and has since become the organization's signature program, marrying local political mobilization with NCWU's larger legislative priorities. Women across the state meet in their counties prior to the long legislative session to participate in a facilitated discussion led by a volunteer host trained by NCWU on public policy issues of importance to North



Carolina women. The goal of the WAA is to improve local women’s capacity to express their views on key issues affecting women, engaging women to participate through advocacy in the General Assembly. Through round table discussions guided by the priorities of NCWU’s annual Legislative Draft Agenda, participants share their experiences and views with one another, building solidarity, statewide networks and political fluency.

NCWU describes a Women’s Agenda Assembly (WAA) as “a gathering of women in a North Carolina community.” This underscores the grassroots nature of the event and indeed of NCWU itself. The WAAs act as a staging ground and waypoint for information flowing between NCWU and women across the state. In encouraging women to use their voices and speak out about priority issues, NCWU builds its legislative agenda to ensure it is reflective of the progressive goals of the state’s women. This information sharing is a best practices model and are described by NCWU as “key input... [informing] the topics that appear on the Final Agenda presented to the Legislature at Women’s Advocacy Day, and the Draft Agenda in the following cycle” (NCWU, 2013a). The statewide consultations and capacity building inform the activity of NCWU’s second signature program, the *Women’s Advocacy Day*.

Women’s Advocacy Day

Women’s Advocacy Day is the second signature program of NCWU. After consulting women’s groups and Assemblies located across the many counties of the state, NCWU prepares a Women’s Agenda that includes information on bills before the legislature relevant to NCWU’s priority areas, including of course violence against women (see figure 1). NCWU, in collaboration with its coalition partners, helps organize the transportation of women to the state capital Raleigh where they meet with their representatives—legislators debating issues of importance to women. Women’s Advocacy Day takes place in the Legislative Building of North Carolina and is the culmination of a year of information sharing and political activism.

Building off of the momentum established during the statewide Women’s Agenda Assemblies, Women’s Advocacy Day empowers women to directly approach the legislators during one of the most important sessions of legislation. Confidence is built by allowing women to approach legislators in group appointments and through an opening session where lobbying training is provided by members of NCWU. Information is provided by NCWU on key priority issues and participants are free to select their main concerns. Further, NCWU, harnessing the expertise of coalition partners, provides ‘issue experts’ on the bills who stay at the Legislative Building during the day, speaking with participants desiring more information on certain bills and legislative priorities. In fact, the coalition element of NCWU’s structure is crucial to the success of Women’s Advocacy Day. NCWU actively encourages women to “use the power of the coalition to reach out to others on the issues of the Women’s Agenda to get the answers that ... legislator[s] need” (NCWU, 2013b).



Further, in an effort to be as inclusive and representative as possible, NCWU makes available virtual advocacy options, whereby easily accessible contact information to connect with legislators digitally is provided. In this same vein, NCWU harnesses social media with guides on effective online advocacy, even providing a “TweetSheet” that suggests hashtags (#NCWU, #NCWomen) and the twitter accounts of various state media, political parties and individual representatives.

END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Maintain funding for victim assistance programs, including state appropriations that are distributed through the NC Council for Women. Ensure that the Rape Victim Assistance Fund and the Crime Victims Compensation Fund are adequately funded.

Clarify and enhance statutes relating to violence against women. Ensure that DVPOs entered by consent without findings of fact are enforceable. Clarify consent in the rape statute and ensure that sex crime statutes are gender neutral.

Strengthen Response to Criminal Domestic Violence Offenses. Strengthen penalties for domestic violence crimes, require mandatory minimum sentences for repeat offenders, and require entry of pre-trial release conditions into the NC AWARE system.

Support legislation that would end and address human trafficking, including, but not limited to, a comprehensive approach to addressing all forms of sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and sexual exploitation.

Figure 1 2013 NCWU's Legislative Agenda on GBV.

Source: <http://www.ncwu.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/2013-NCWU-WAD-legislative-agenda.pdf>

These two programs of North Carolina Women United are best practices models that demonstrate the importance of empowering women first by improving political literacy on key priority areas for women and then by providing a direct means for political action. In this sense, Women’s Agenda Assemblies and the Women’s Advocacy Day are two programs that seek to remedy a lack of power among women by targeting some of the structural causes of gender inequality. A full understanding of this recipe for ending gender inequality is essential in effective efforts to combatting gender-based violence—an ugly manifestation of gender unequal spaces, communities and societies.

II. Gender-based violence, gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Violence against women and girls is “... a manifestation of gender discrimination that seriously inhibits their abilities to enjoy rights and freedoms on the basis of equality with men and boys. It is perhaps the most pervasive human rights abuse in the world today, happening



in all countries” (UN Women, 2013a). Globally, one in three women have reported experiencing physical and sexual violence at some point in their lives (UN Women, 2013b).

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is intricately connected to gender inequalities, representing both a cause *and* consequence. From a human rights perspective, GBV is one of the most pervasive of all human rights violations—affecting women and girls at every rung of the socio-economic ladder, within all cultural groups and in every country. A shocking one in three women will be physically or sexually abused in their lifetime and one in five will experience rape or attempted rape (WHO, 2009). GBV is a damaging experience for women and girls, causing emotional, psychological and physical harm with a wide-range of negative implications for families and communities. The World Bank divides GBV into four separate, but not mutually exclusive, categories:

- (1) *Domestic Violence (DV)* by an intra family members and *Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)* including physical, sexual or psychological harm by a current or former partner;
- (2) *Sexual Violence (SV)* including rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy and prostitution;
- (3) *Traditional harmful practices* including female genital mutilation (FGM), honor killing and dowry-related violence; and
- (4) *Human trafficking*. (World Bank, 2009).

Indeed, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognizes the severity of GBV and violence against women, asserting that it “violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms... [cutting] across lines of incomes, class, and cultures.” Affecting women of all nationalities and all ages, GBV threatens the full realization of equal rights for women.

It is important to note that there is no singular cause of GBV. Instead, gender inequalities and environments where women and girls lack power contribute to risk factors that dramatically increase rates of GBV. A social-ecological framework assists in the comprehension of the various and interwoven determinants for gender-based violence, making clear that simply combatting one among many does little to address the structural cause of gender inequality (Table 1). The framework supports the notion that effective approaches must be comprehensive and transformative, mainstreaming the ideals of gender equality into every rung of the social-ecological framework (individual, interpersonal, community, and society). Indeed, organizations like North Carolina Women United do this with success, carrying out programs that are structural in nature, challenging harmful norms and influencing the political process.



Table 1: Risk factors for GBV expressed through a social-ecological model

<i>Societal</i>	<i>Community</i>	<i>Interpersonal</i>	<i>Individual</i>
<i>Poverty Economic, social and gender inequality Masculinity linked to aggression & dominance No legal rights for victims Social and cultural norms that support violence</i>	<i>High unemployment, population density Social isolation of females Lack of education/information Weak community norms against GBV Poor safety in public spaces Traditional gender roles Victim blaming</i>	<i>Family dysfunction Inter-generational violence and poor parenting Association with those who engage in violent behaviour Low socio-economic status Friction over women's empowerment</i>	<i>Gender, age, education Family history of GBV Unemployment Mental health and behavioural problems Alcohol & substance abuse Prostitution Disabilities</i>

Table 1 Source: World Bank, 2009

Building off of the knowledge that gender based violence affects all women and girls, is exacerbated by structural determinants that occur at all levels of the social-ecological framework, and is effectively countered by women's empowerment demonstrated by local best practices models, it becomes critical to assess current and past efforts to improve women's rights to determine the best way forward.

III. **Assessing the legacy of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for women and girls**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have greatly impacted the global discourse on development. The universally agreed upon Millennium Declaration sets out six 'fundamental values' of which, it should be noted, several are only partially represented. Freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility underpin this development framework, formally endorsed by the United Nations and all member states as guiding principles for fifteen years of work. The purposes of the MDGs are twofold. For one, they serve as a rallying cry and normative framework for the mobilization of Official Development Assistance. Secondly, they are an accountability mechanism with a results-based management structure that incentivizes poverty reduction against a MDG benchmark (Sumner & Tiwari, 2010).



Yet, the conceptual basis underpinning the MDGs is inherently limiting. An oft cited critique of the development programme is that in defining and setting development indicators, the MDGs fall short of the human rights entitlements that all humans are guaranteed. Further, application of the MDGs has been uneven at best, showing a lack of understanding of the structural causes of poverty, equity, rights, and exclusion—especially for women and girls.

Table 2: Source: (Sumner, Tiwari 2010)

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>A “rallying call” for international actors and donors to operate under a shared understanding of poverty reduction.</p> <p>Quantifiably verifiable targets and indicators that create accountability in the development process.</p> <p>More data on poverty.</p>	<p>No unifying theory on the structural causes of poverty—near universal lack of reference to human rights, exclusion, or equity.</p> <p>Defining human development as purely based on quantifiable outcomes.</p> <p>Gender equality is not integrated into targets and indicators.</p>

This inequity is further highlighted when one considers that gender inequality is only an explicit focus of MDGs 3 (Gender Equality, measured through primary school enrollment of girls, share of women in wage employment, and proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments) and 5 (Maternal Mortality and Reproductive Health). While admirable first steps, these goals are indicative of the narrow focus with which the Millennium Summit of 2000 approached gender equality. The MDGs fail to recognize that gender equality is both a means *and* an ends in development, and that isolating gender equality into simply one Goal amongst many renders gender invisible in policy dialogues (Subrahmanian, 2004).

As explained by UNICEF and UN Women, the Millennium Development Goals have not managed adequately to integrate all principles outlined in the Millennium Declaration, especially in relation to human rights and equality, including gender inequality. Furthermore, the MDGs’ focus on national and global average and progress can mask much slower progress or even growing disparities at the sub-national level and among specific populations. Addressing inequalities is a moral imperative from a human rights perspective” (AWID, 2012).

Therefore, in seeking to design a post-2015 Development Agenda that is equitable for women and girls it becomes important to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the MDGs, the legacy of which is being decided even today in boardrooms and community forums around the world. Is it possible to circumvent the weaknesses of the MDGs to create a truly inclusive model for sustainable development with a focus on human rights and gender equality?



IV. Putting gender equality at the heart of the Post-2015 Agenda

Gender inequality can both cause and perpetuate poverty and vulnerability, especially for women and girls. In fact, a global consultation co-led by UN Women and UNICEF in 2012-2013 revealed that gender-based inequality remains the most widespread form of inequality, found in all societies and communities, and impacting a larger proportion of the world's population than any other form of inequality (UNICEF, UN Women, 2012-2013). Addressing the structural gender gaps in the MDGs and implementing a new sustainable framework that both addresses these concerns and mainstreams gender into all targets and indicators is essential to the long-term success of ending gender inequality and GBV worldwide (Jones, Holmes, Espey, 2010).

An integrated and systemic gender perspective and strong political commitment to women's rights must be a central part of any new development framework, empowering women to create spaces where they can exercise their rights and act against gender-based violence. This becomes further important in recognition of the fact that gender based violence is the product of multiple risk factors that operate at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal level (Table 1). Organizations in the United States like North Carolina Women United already practice these values with great success, showcasing best practices models that can inform the legacy of the MDGs. It is essential that these ideas gain traction and form a central component of the Post-2015 Development Framework (Post-2015 Agenda).

The Post-2015 Agenda represents a global opportunity to re-imagine development as more inclusive, sustainable, and just—recognizing and valuing the right of all people to have their rights respected, protected, and fulfilled (Schoenstein & Alemany, 2011). The need for this framework is recognized in UN Member States' previous commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment. In global treaties, this is seen in the commitments enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); in policy commitments such as the Programme of Action agreed upon at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and, more recently, the outcome from Rio+20, which states:

We recognize that gender equality and women's empowerment are important for sustainable development and our common future. We reaffirm our commitments to ensure women's equal rights, access and opportunities for participation and leadership in the economy, society, and political decision-making (UN general Assembly 2012, paragraph 31.)

These agreements, accords, and platforms form a universal normative framework for approaching gender issues. This framework establishes a platform from which to advocate for the establishment of a comprehensive and transformative approach to gender in the Post-2015 Agenda. It is imperative that we critically evaluate the legacy of the MDGs and approach the Post-2015 Agenda with a fundamentally different understanding of



development, placing gender equality and human rights at its core (AWID, 2013). The creation of a standalone gender goal around which efforts to empower women and ensure freedom from violence is imperative in realizing the legacy of the MDGs and rendering into existence a strong framework upon which future efforts to end gender inequalities can be based.

V. **The Standalone Gender Goal, a framework for transformative action.**

A standalone gender goal in the Post-2015 agenda, as proposed by UN Women, would address the *structural cause* of gender inequality, which facilitates gender-based violence and impedes women's empowerment and agency globally. The proposed standalone gender goal must be used as “an intersectoral approach to address [the] multiple dimensions of gender equality and the way they play out across different development sectors... [moving] beyond inadequate gender mainstreaming approaches to recapture the essence of what it would mean to integrate gender equality and women’s rights at the core of every development priority, area and sector” (AWID, 2012).

Human rights must act as a set of guiding principles for the Post-2015 Development Agenda. To this end, it becomes essential that the Agenda take a human rights approach to gender equality, harnessing human rights as a global ethical lens through which policies to end gender-based violence and empower women are judged (AWID, 2013).

To this end, UN Women has proposed a tripartite framework from which the standalone gender goal may spring forth. The agency developed the framework using existing normative human rights frameworks; research-based evidence on economic, social, and political factors and effective policy approaches that allow women to articulate strong claims for equity; and the lessons learned from the history of women’s collective action calling duty-bearers to account (UN Women, 2013a). The three priority areas of the proposed standalone gender goal are:

- **Freedom from violence**
- Capabilities and resources
- **Voice, leadership and participation**

This paper will focus on the first and third element of the tripartite framework, 'freedom from violence' and 'voice, leadership and participation' under which a selection of targets have been proposed. These suggestions have been enormously influential in guiding discussions on gender in the Post-2015 agenda thus far. For instance, targets including preventing and responding to violence against women and girls, changing perceptions, attitudes and behaviours that condone and justify violence, and ensuring justice and support services have all been proposed (UN Women, 2013a).



It is the opinion of the author that these two elements of the tripartite framework are inextricably woven together. In societies and spaces where women are deprived of agency and participation there are greater rates of violence—interpersonal and otherwise (Caprioli, 2005). In fact, available data makes clear the inverse relationship between gender equality and violence against women. Simply put, as gender equality improves, rates of gender-based violence are lower (UNIFEM, XX).

Further, as women become involved in the political process they advance laws and policies that address gender-based violence, further leading credence to the interwoven nature of these two-elements of the tripartite framework in addressing violence against women (UNIFEM, XX). This reality is recognized by North Carolina Women United, an organizations whose work focuses on involving women in the political process—both locally and at a state-level—and encouraging the development of female political leaders who enthusiastically advance progressive voting agendas. To further underscore the importance of involving women in the political process, in Argentina, women representing just 14 percent of the national legislature introduced almost 80 percent of legislation related to women’s rights and domestic violence prevention (Jones, 2009).

A focus on these two priority themes, alongside a commitment to mainstreaming gender into all targets part of the Post-2015 Agenda, and actively emulating the practices of organizations like NC Women United is essential for ensuring the Post-2015 is equitable and just for women around the world. In conjunction with the revitalization of other core elements of the universal normative framework on gender such as the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW, the standalone gender goal has the potential to be truly transformative, a milestone in the fight against gender-based violence and inequality.

VI. Conclusion:

The need for a standalone gender goal that focuses the world’s attention on the links between women’s empowerment, gender equality and freedom from violence comes at a critical time. At this very moment, a global consultation process is deciding the legacy of the Millennium Development Goals, through redefining the targets, indicators and sustainable development goals that will make up this Post-2015 Development Agenda. It is critical that civil society and advocates for equality join hands and encourage the adoption of a transformative and inclusive framework that firmly entrenches gender equality as both a means and an ends to the development process.

Local models such as North Carolina Women United provide evidence that these linkages and priorities are effective in empowering women to create safe spaces in their communities. Focusing specifically on enhancing political fluency and encouraging North Carolinian women to approach the state’s political decision-makers, NCWU espouses the values of the standalone gender goal—making real the connections between voice, leadership and participation and ensuring women are free from violence. Further, NCWU



recognizes the multifaceted nature of gender equality and actively works to address the structural causes of inequality, especially when confronted with pieces of proposed legislation seeking to perpetrate harmful practices for women.

An analysis of the effects of the MDGs makes clear the need for a new approach to gender in development. Instead of merely relegating gender to individual indicators and goals that are not comprehensive and do little to address the structural cause of gender inequality, a new standalone gender goal could serve as a rallying cry and signal a global paradigm shift. Focusing on human rights with a full understanding of the underlying determinants of gender inequality and subsequently gender-based violence could radically improve the living and social conditions for millions of women.

As advocates for gender equality, we must support best practices models such as North Carolina Women United, signalling support for the overarching premise of the standalone gender goal. Further, involvement in and support of global networks of women's rights activists involved in the Post-2015 Development Agenda is important in assisting the full realization of an equitable development framework. The Association For Women's Rights in Development (AWID) is one such organization where individual membership guarantees access to a global network of researchers, academics, students, policy-makers and activists working in over 156 countries. Last, support for the UN Women proposal of a standalone gender goal will help shape the global conversation on this critical topic.



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