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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women
and to the special session of the General Assembly,
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development
and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation
of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of
concern and further actions and initiatives**

Statement submitted by VAAGDHARA, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

The analysis of challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls in India, or in South Asia, for that matter, has revealed a mixed bag of success stories and challenges that have historically been associated with the lives of women and girls. In fact, in some cases, these challenges have multiplied in spite of the Millennium Development Goals. On the face of it, the targets of several of the Goals have been met or are close to being met; a deeper analysis indicates, however, that there have been no significant changes in the power structures within families and communities that have determined a subservient role for women and girls, resulting in a perpetual state of vulnerability to poverty and exclusion from many decision-making processes concerning their lives, including sexual and reproductive rights.

Millennium Development Goal: eradicate extreme hunger and poverty

In India, defining poverty itself has been a hugely contentious issue. Economists have used arguments to support their point of view depending on their allegiance to a particular type of political formation. However, in real terms, using the Multidimensional Poverty Index, the empirical evidence indicates that the target of halving poverty, especially in the case of women, has been missed. There are little gender-disaggregated data on the issue of poverty, because income and/or consumption are typically measured at the household level. The information that is available shows that female-headed households have significantly higher poverty rates in both income poverty and Multidimensional Poverty Index terms.

The target of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger was so basic and low in aspiration that if the latest estimates of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) of chronic hunger are to be believed, the target seems to have been achieved. However, what is a matter of concern in India is the status of malnutrition. The available data indicate that the incidence of undernourishment went down in Latin America (from 6.5 to 5.6 per cent), China and Viet Nam, but in South Asia, including India, it actually increased, from 32.7 to 35.0 per cent. Further, FAO also tells us that the difference between the prevalence of undernourishment and the prevalence of food inadequacy seems significant, showing that a considerable share of the population is suffering from inadequate food intake, even though chronic undernourishment is not widespread. This is the case of countries that do not rank among the highest in terms of undernourishment, such as India.

The empirical evidence indicates that there are gender gaps in nutritional outcome indicators. Again according to FAO, vulnerable women are at greater risk of malnutrition than men, and more girls die of malnutrition than boys. Different forms of nutritional deficiency are of particular relevance for women at various stages of their life cycles. In India, the National Family Health Survey of 2005/06 found that only 52 per cent of women were at a healthy weight for their height, with less than desired weight dominating. This was more prevalent among women in rural areas and those with less education, where the gender gap was also greater.

Millennium Development Goal: women's empowerment

One of the key indicators of women's empowerment is political participation, in particular the number of women in national parliaments and provincial assemblies. In India, there was a marginal increase in the number of women elected at the national level in 2009. The constitutional amendment bill aiming to reserve one third of seats for women has been pending in Parliament for over a decade. Although the participation of women in local governance has improved owing to the quota system, this still has to translate into strategic opportunities for participation in decisions concerning their own lives as well as in the affairs in their communities. Therefore, it is amply clear that the goal of ensuring gender equality and empowering women is very far from being met.

Violence against women

Violence against women continues to be a huge concern. The true picture in this regard is gradually emerging. So far the information has been insufficient and there is a widespread tendency to underreport such violence. Although specific legislation, the Domestic Violence Act, is in place, its implementation at the grass-roots level is poor and riddled with bureaucratic inefficiencies. The recent cases of sexual violence against women and girls across India are a matter of serious concern and require a long-term vision as well as a plan of action. Likewise, process indicators need to be developed with respect to the timing and nature of implementation of the law.

Reasons for underachievement of the Millennium Development Goals

One significant reason why progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals has been disappointing on several counts could be that, in some ways, they have missed the point, by focusing exclusively on certain outcome indicators without adequate recognition of the policies and processes that would enable or assist the achievement of the proposed targets.

For instance, reducing child mortality and maternal mortality require a range of interventions in nutrition, sanitation and public health as well as women's access to education and employment. Gaps in one set of indicators would lead to underachievement in another. Secondly, the scale of operation had to be such that it would actually make an impact, overcoming the immediate obstacles that might crop up on the way, because it is not possible to position the Millennium Development Goals in a vacuum. Progress towards the Goals is very often linked to the overall social and economic policies of Governments and the associated processes unfolding in those societies.

Another important factor is that aid from the North, both bilateral and independent, shrunk further, despite the promises made. Although resources were made available by the Government of India through State funding, in the absence of external aid the space and possibilities for innovative approaches and practices were severely constrained.

Monitoring and accountability at the level of the State have been poor. One of the key problems in monitoring the Millennium Development Goals has been the lack of information with respect to actual trends, and the absence of disaggregated

data that would allow for a systematic assessment of conditions on the ground in a timely manner.

In conclusion, we would like to state that the Millennium Development Goals have largely been disappointing in terms of real achievement, even though they were already modest in scope. One of the key reasons for the underachievement of the Goals has been the fact that they have focused on specific individual outcome targets without taking into consideration the larger processes that are determined by macroeconomic, developmental and social policies on one hand, and social and cultural factors in specific societies, on the other. If one desires aims to measure achievement of a composite indicator, such as women's empowerment, the emphasis should be on institutional arrangements, policies and processes that can deliver positive outcomes.
