Reviews

Gender and the Millennium Development Goals

Edited by Caroline Sweetman
Reviewed by Mary McDermott

This collection of nine papers examines the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from the perspective of gender; specifically, the degree to which they articulate or undermine the hard-won treaties, covenants, and relevant conventions of the 1990's which establish women's rights as human rights. With regard to the MDGs, the contributing authors repeat a common fundamental position. It is that the MDG's fall very far short of an integrated and systemic approach to the generation of just, global, economic, social, cultural and political systems for all people, in particular, systems, policies and practices which acknowledge women fully. They eschew predictable patriarchal clichés: that 'inter/trans/national' or 'economic' development must come before women's rights can be 'catered'for. Indeed, they challenge the idea that such development, even when apparently in progress, bears a causal relation to the equality and empowerment of women. Conversely, they observe that development will not occur until these rights are integrated into policy and practice. Crucially, they observe, that violence against women and their sexual and reproductive rights are ignored in the MDGs to the detriment of women specifically, to hopes for successful development policies and practices generally and to the establishment of justice globally.

Sweetman's editorial summarises succinctly the difficulties in assessing whether, how and why women's organisations, activists and academics should engage with the MDGs at all. Like all debates about where to focus energy and action for equitable social change, these articles reflect the 'inside/outside' dilemma, a debate re-visited in the first issue of this journal in Bourn's article 'Development education in an era of globalisation' (Bourn, p.55). Should feminists ignore the MDGs or engage with them? What has resulted from ignoring them and how should/can they be assessed, implemented and maximised in favour of holistic gender-sensitive, development theory and practice?

In general terms, the authors converge on a pragmatic position: the

MDGs are here to stay and offer the available common framework for the immediate future. Their overall assessment is that the rights-based positions arising from established treaties and conventions must provide the conceptual framework for interpreting the MDGs. At the same time, the MDGs provide concrete goals, targets and indicators against which progress on women's rights may be established and assessed in specific contexts. Several authors attend to the urgency, for development education and advocacy, of avoiding 'aggregated and averaged' methodologies in assessment and research. Reading these articles it is apparent that assimilating the MDGs into a broader, more rights-based, orientation will be hugely time-consuming - they embody the difficulty. Clearly, experience, optimism and pragmatism are necessary companions in this venture - reflected in the authors' positions.

The contrast between Painter and Antrobus, for example, is marked. Painter is quite directive in her assertion that engagement with the MDGs, however flawed, "should" be the approach taken, giving well articulated arguments which any activist could use in advocacy and educational work. While Antrobus, with characteristic ability to draw real life into her analysis, repeatedly sets her pragmatism against a deeper radical feminist position. This is refreshing in a sometimes exhausted and verbose bureaucratic universe.

Similarly, the contrasting articles which focus on education by Aikman/Underhalter/Challender and Johnson bring to light the profound ambiguities surrounding the belief implied in MD Goal 3 that gender equality in access to education will generate an equitable society. Aikman et al challenge the idea of access alone as a solution, calling for a thorough-going transformation of curricula, pedagogical practice, school-community relationships and national networks/structures, in order to establish a society where girls and women, as students and teachers, are truly empowered. Johnson, on the other hand, through his Belizean case study, observes that educational equality has not in any way translated into equality in employment (uptake and stability) or wages for women. Antrobus corroborates this Caribbean experience. They observe that a change in the 'condition' of women does not necessarily induce a change in their socio-political 'position'. In the light of this, Aikman et al, open up the centrality of ideology at the heart of gender apartheid. On this note, all the authors agree that the rise of neo-liberalism and economic/political/religious fundamentalisms is the MDG matrix, casting populations as needs-based stakeholders, rather than rights-based agents. Women in particular suffer from this retrenchment, quite literally bearing the devastating consequences, at all levels.

This collection offers a useful text for advocates in particular. The range of argument and close reading of international documents in conjunction with national studies makes this text a substantive and valuable development education resource.

Mary McDermott teaches graduate courses in Feminist and Queer Theories, Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science at Trinity College, Dublin. She works as a Consultant Educational Mentor with Community Development Projects and Networks to assess and establish educational programmes. She has worked in community development in the Caribbean and Ireland.

Email: marymcdermott@tcd.ie