

Human rights are key to the MDGs: Indonesia

by Salil Shetty

Ratna started working as a domestic worker when she was just 13. She found her first employer through her neighbours, but things were not as she expected. She was forced to work seven days a week, from five in the morning until midnight. She was not allowed to take any breaks, and the only time she could go outside was once a week when she hung clothes to dry.

Her employer abused her, both physically and psychologically, throwing hot water on her and criticizing her work. She had to sleep on the kitchen floor without a mattress and was locked in the room every evening, supposedly for her protection. Although Ratna had been told that her salary would be 350,000 Indonesian Rupiahs per month, in the end, she was only paid Rp.150,000 per month. As a child domestic worker, far from her family, there was little she could do.

Sadly, Ratna's story is all too familiar in Indonesia, a country where an estimated 2.6 million domestic workers – primarily women and girls – face multiple forms of discrimination in law, policy and practice that limit their choices and opportunities. They remain unprotected by legislation safeguarding workers' rights and are subjected to physical, psychological and sexual violence. Some are even killed. They also face various barriers in accessing reproductive health information and services.

Gender equality and women's empowerment are widely recognized as essential for tackling poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Indonesian government has consistently expressed its strong commitment to achieving the MDGs. The MDGs represent an unprecedented promise to address global poverty, adopting eight targets addressing a range of issues from extreme poverty and health to education and living standards to be met by 2015.

But, a decade on, the fate of the MDGs is in doubt. The UN has issued a clear warning that many of the MDGs will not be met in time unless efforts are radically ramped up. Even by the most conservative estimates, more than a billion people are being left behind.

Amnesty International's work over the years has shown how discrimination and exclusion can often cause or exacerbate many of the problems the MDGs seek to address. In rich countries as well as developing ones, vulnerable people on the fringes of society are frequently subjected to violations of their right to adequate housing, health, water, sanitation, and education, among others. They are often left out of consultations about things that will affect them, or ignored when they try to make their voices heard. As Amnesty has also shown, equality and inclusion are essential for making things better.

Ten years on, it is worthwhile to reflect upon where we are and where we need to go to meet the MDG goals. The architects of the MDGs established the original targets as a starting point for progress. They always intended that states should set their own individual targets, adapted to their national contexts but within the MDG framework. This was left for states to do so voluntarily. Unfortunately, most countries have chosen not to act.

Some countries have adopted targets above the MDG level. For example, Latin American and the Caribbean countries have expanded their commitments on education to include secondary education. In Africa and South Asia, Kenya, South Africa and Sri Lanka adopted targets stronger than the MDGs for access to water and sanitation. Peru has taken steps towards addressing health barriers for poorer women and Nepal has explored improving maternal health care.

These countries have shown that it is possible to adapt the MDGs to address some of their most pressing needs and to bolster the rights of some of their most vulnerable people. The rest of the world should be working to do the same.

We have an opportunity to ensure that the political momentum around the MDGs can be used as a catalyst to bring about the far deeper and longer-term change that is necessary for people living in poverty.

But this can only be achieved if world leaders make a commitment at this month's MDG Summit to uphold the human rights of those who need the greatest support. Discrimination against women and exclusion of the marginalized must be addressed in all MDG efforts, if they are to be effective.

To achieve this, all governments should make an honest assessment of their progress on the MDGs. They should work to end discrimination and promote equality and participation, ensuring that progress towards the MDGs is inclusive, aimed at ending discrimination, guaranteeing gender equality and prioritizing the most disadvantaged groups.

Finally, they should remember that the Millennium Declaration – from which the MDGs are drawn – promised to strive for the protection and promotion of *all* human rights, civil, cultural, economic, social and political rights, for *all*.

As the members of the UN gather this month to reflect upon the progress made on the MDGs, little has changed for domestic workers in Indonesia. For many, there are no mechanisms for monitoring or protecting their rights. The result is that women and girls employed as domestic workers continue to live and work in abusive conditions. It is up to us to help change that.

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