

# Bush Betrays Poor Women Again

By Yifat Susskind | September 13, 2005

This week's United Nations World Summit—originally intended to assess governments' progress on pledges to reduce poverty and promote development by 2015—is in danger of being derailed by the United States. The meeting itself is proceeding with much fanfare, but the United States is working to ensure that its outcome will do little to alleviate the suffering and human rights violations experienced by the world's poorest people—most of them women and their children.

Two weeks before the Summit, John Bolton—recently appointed by Bush to the post of UN Ambassador despite his notorious hostility to the UN—put forward his own draft of the outcome document for the Summit. Bolton made a whopping 750 changes to the UN draft of the document, which has been under negotiation for more than six months. His revisions block potential progress on issues that are critical to everyone in the world, including development, nuclear disarmament, and global warming. Bolton even deleted all mention of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—the internationally agreed-upon framework for reducing poverty—even though evaluating the MDGs was supposed to be the main purpose of the Summit.

To most of the world, Bolton's obstructionism looks more like bullying than negotiating. It's a tactic that we've seen before from the Bush administration: barge in at the final hour of negotiations, demand drastic changes, and then gradually relent, but only to the point that you were willing to accept all along. That way, the outcome document will reflect your demands (and the *New York Times* will describe your machinations as "compromise").

This is the Bush administration's idea of multilateralism, and it benefits the administration by lowering the bar on human rights commitments, especially those that threaten to restrain profit-making in favor of protecting the world's poor. In fact, the bar was pretty low to begin with. The proposed formula for achieving the MDGs (their "targets" and "indica-

tors") downplays governments' human rights obligations, and paradoxically, touts economic policies that benefit the rich as a way to achieve development for the poor.

For more than 30 years, studies by academics, development practitioners, and international agencies have shown that safeguarding women's human rights facilitates key objectives of the MDGs, including enhancing child health, improving nutrition and food security, lowering rates of HIV infection, and boosting incomes. Yet the MDGs fail to even mention sexual and reproductive rights, women's labor and property rights, or one of the most fundamental obstacles to ensuring these rights, namely, violence against women. The glaring absence of these issues reflects demands made by the United States (along with other fundamentalist and right-wing governments) in earlier negotiations over the MDGs.

Instead of promoting human rights, the MDGs rely on the very economic policies that have reduced public spending on water, healthcare, and education in poor countries, thereby exacerbating poverty and inequality. Women—who have had to step in to provide these services at the household level—have been hardest hit. In fact, in nearly every country where these policies have been implemented, women's workloads have increased drastically, while rates of female school enrollment, food intake, and life expectancy have fallen.

Despite the serious weaknesses of the MDGs, MADRE—like many of our sister organizations around the world—maintained that the goals had the



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potential to create opportunities for advancing the rights of poor women and their families. But that potential depended on women's priorities being reflected in national strategies for achieving the MDGs—and on a genuine commitment to the MDGs from the United States. Now that women's organizations, along with all non-governmental groups, have been excluded from the World Summit, it's left to UN Member States to ensure that the summit's outcome document can lead to policy changes that will benefit the world's poor. That will require standing up to the blustery demands of the United States and insisting that human rights, not neoliberal economics, guides the process of realizing the MDGs as a minimum standard for development.

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