



GENDER EQUALITY: A KEY ELEMENT TO ACHIEVE INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Both in theory and in practice, in the last decades ‘development’ gradually came to be seen as a holistic notion, encompassing economic, social, cultural, political and environmental dimensions. More recently, the concept of inclusive development has gained prominence in general international development fora, most notably as a central element of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are the heart of the global United Nations (UN) development agenda for the period 2016–2030.

Twenty years ago, the adoption by 189 governments of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action marked a turning point in the history of women’s rights. This progressive blueprint remains a powerful source of inspiration in the effort to realize equal opportunities for women and girls.

But while much progress has been made in the intervening decades, much more remains to be done to ensure that women and children are guaranteed healthy lives, education, and full social inclusion. In just 42 countries do women hold more than 30% of seats in the national legislature, and girls still do not have

the same educational opportunities as boys in Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and western Asia.

Gender equality is not just the concern of half of the world’s population; it is a human right, a concern for us all, because no society can develop – economically, politically, or socially – when half of its population is marginalized. We must leave no one behind.

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations, Women Empowerment, Human Rights.*

Introduction

For the SDGs, human rights NGOs and researchers and other stakeholders sought to engage meaningfully throughout the process of developing, discussing and deliberating on the goals for a new more rights-based development era. There was plenty of opportunity for such engagement during a broad and long process including early thematic and country consultations, the Rio+20 negotiations, and the Open Working Group on the SDGs. Many NGOs were deeply engaged in the process, National Human Rights Institutions outlined what their position and role might be, and UN treaty bodies and Special Rapporteurs sought to influence the process to keep human rights at the centre¹.”

Not even two years post adoption, the fanfare and optimism at the 2030 Agenda launching has waned. While ministers from nearly every state, both high- and low-income, embraced the SDGs enthusiastically at the UN Summit in 2015, the SDGs do not appear

¹ Nelson PJ, Dorsey E: At the nexus of human rights and development: new methods and strategies of global NGOs. *World Dev* 2003, 31:2013-2026.



to be maintaining national interest in many of the better resourced countries since². For example, they were not election issues in the US and were referred to fleetingly and only by the Labour Party in the British election. The Goals, which after all, focus on sustainability, and acknowledge the risk posed to all and especially the poorest people by climate change (SDG 13), have not just been ignored by the US, but the science behind them denied. Similarly, the SDGs addressing gender equality (SDG 5) and sexual and reproduction health and rights (SDG 3.1, 3.7) have been dealt serious blows, with US funding cuts both domestically and internationally for sexual health services hurting the poorest women the most.³ This matters not only for the US but globally, because without support from high income countries the goal of leaving no one behind cannot be achieved.

It is critical that we continue to engage men and boys actively in the fight against gender-based discrimination and violence. We have an opportunity to secure a better future and raise a new generation of girls and boys who respect one another and work together to protect the rights of all people.

The implications of not providing girls with equal voices, choices, and opportunities affect not just their lives, but the future of the planet. Efforts to promote inclusive sustainable development and fight climate change are inextricably linked. If we care about development, we must care about the consequences our greenhouse-gas emissions are having around the world. And if we do not take urgent action, we will irreparably

damage the natural systems on which life depends.

This is not a threat that we can set aside until we have eradicated poverty worldwide. Nor is it a problem that we can leave to future generations to address. Left unchecked, climate change – along with other unsustainable patterns of development – could wipe out the gains of recent decades. All countries – developed and developing – have a role to play in ensuring a stable world for our children.

Women are among those most vulnerable to the impacts of unsustainable practices and climate change, because they often have no independent income or land rights. In many countries, women are responsible for the provision of water and food for their families. And when the usual sources of these resources are disrupted, women are forced to travel farther and spend more time working for less return. Scarcity requires them to make difficult choices like pulling children out of school or deciding which family member can afford to skip a meal.

In many homes around the world, women are at the heart of the household's nexus of water, food, and energy – and thus often know firsthand about the challenges and potential solutions in these areas. In our conversations with women around the world, we hear about their struggles, but also their ideas, many of which, if applied, could facilitate change. Women are the most convincing advocates for the solutions that they need, so they should be at the forefront of decision-making

² Nelson PJ: Human rights, the millennium development goals and the future of development cooperation. *World Dev* 2007, 35:2041-2055.

³Gready P, Vandenhole W: *Human Rights and Development in the New Millennium: Towards a Theory of Change*. Routledge; 2014.



on sustainable development and climate-change mitigation.

Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Women's Empowerment

Food security is an intersectional issue touching on income, poverty, access to resources, gender-based discrimination and health. Women face systemic gender inequality in agricultural production.

Voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs) can contribute to gender equality in agriculture. Sustainable production practices, for example, can contribute to a diverse and nutritional diet because different crops are cultivated simultaneously in the same land plot.

The Economics of Gender

The economic crisis has led to heightened criticisms of the capitalist model, where growth is fuelled by competition and the quest for profits. A lack of corporate responsibility among financial institutions — in the United States and banks worldwide — brought economic collapse and a recession that has touched almost all countries. It may not be a coincidence that this economic model has been built largely on the ambitions and perspectives of men. As one female leader hypothesized,

“If Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, we would not be in this economic mess.”⁴

The management and boards of all the failed banks and financial institutions are nearly 100 percent male leading some to blame our current economic problems on the gender gap. Even in 2010, highly paid men are to receive large bank bonuses while lower-paid women continue to suffer the consequences of the crisis. Why is it that women do not participate in the labor force to the same extent as men and, when they do, earn 18 percent less? About 60 percent of eligible women work in the richer nations and 40 percent in the poorer, but this work — whether formal or informal — is undervalued in all countries. And very few women reach the top ranks of business and management. This is curiously ascribed to traditional attitudes, the glass ceiling or the old boys' network.⁵

It may be due more to an institutionalized form of gender discrimination embedded in the failure to adjust the male work model to fit the needs of women. All over the world, women bear most of the responsibility for children and households and thus suffer from time poverty and lack of mobility. They tend to drop out of the labor force to have children at the same time men are climbing to the top. They then return at an older age and often peak later than men owing to greater family responsibilities. Women have a different career trajectory than men and also need to work flexible hours and schedules to accommodate the heavy demands on their time. The biggest problem for working women is lack of adequate childcare.

⁴Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). 2009. Embedding Gender in Sustainability Reporting: A Practitioner's Guide. Amsterdam: GRI. Available at www.globalreporting.org

⁵Hausmann, Ricardo, Laura D. Tyson and SaadiaZahidi. 2009. The Global Gender Gap Report 2009. Geneva: World Economic Forum. Available at www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2009.pdf.



For women who work and have children, appropriate and affordable childcare options need to be in place. Countries with government funded childcare and mandated family-oriented practices such as the Nordics (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) and France have both more working women and higher birth rates than those without enlightened gender policies such as Japan and Korea. It is the latter countries which most need women workers to boost growth and productivity as well as more babies to counter their ageing populations and provide a future labor force and financial security. Helping women achieve more work/life balance is the answer to both their economic slump and their skewed demographics.

Although the female presence in the workplace is growing, women do not yet share in economic and political leadership. Among Fortune 500 companies, women are only three percent of CEOs, six percent of top managers and 15 percent of board members. Studies by Catalyst, McKinsey and other groups indicate that firms with more women in leadership positions tend to have better performance and higher profits. But women remain on the sidelines even though their “risksmart” approaches, people skills and leadership strengths are sorely needed in business and government.⁶

The corporate world is slowly awakening to the economic benefits of more gender equity.

⁶Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2008. *Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life: A Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries*. Paris: OECD. Available at www.oecd.org.

⁷Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2008. *Gender and Sustainable Development: Maximising the Economic, Social and*

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) now includes a guide for gender reporting by firms with the aim of improving corporate management and creating new business opportunities. Both the UN Global Compact and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises are exploring the addition of guiding principles on gender for the corporate sector.⁷

Such prescriptions would go beyond equal employment opportunity and human rights to recommend specific corporate practices targeted to women including flexible work arrangements, child care, career development, equal pay, and employment in non-traditional jobs.⁸

The private sector may need not only a set of tools for assessing their behavior and progress on gender equity but also a compelling driver for change. Because there are signs that gender trends may not change unassisted, more governments are proposing quantitative targets and quotas for corporations with regard to hiring and promoting women.

Since 2003, Norway has required corporate boards to be at least 40 percent women and the country now leads the world in the number of female directors. Norway also has quotas for the number of women managers in government at all levels.

Environmental Role of Women. Paris: OECD. Available at www.oecd.org.

⁸Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2010. “A Family Affair: Intergenerational Social Mobility Across OECD Countries,” Chapter 5 in *Economic Policy Reforms: Going for Growth 2010*. Paris: OECD. Available at www.oecd.org.



The French government has recently proposed that at least half of all company board members must be female within five years. The economic situation of women in developing countries is far worse, but the solution is not that different: let women manage the money.

Seventy percent of the world's 1.3 billion people living on less than US\$ 1 a day are women or girls. United Nations and World Bank studies show that focusing on women in development assistance and poverty reduction strategies leads to faster economic growth than "gender neutral" approaches. Financial aid put in the hands of men tends to lead to a higher share wasted on personal use. Women are essential to poverty reduction because of their role in assuring the welfare of households.⁹

The World Bank publishes regular assessments and a newsletter under the banner "Gender Equality as Smart Economics" to underline those increasing economic opportunities for women is the cornerstone of development.

Investing in women and girls — in their education, health and gainful activities — can have a multiplier effect on poor economies. However, the share of bilateral and multilateral aid focused on gender-specific projects remains insufficient, about 30 percent. Banks and donors need to see women as active players in economic development. More aid should be focused on increasing income-generating initiatives based on women's traditional roles in the

home, health services, nutrition, and agriculture. Gender-sensitive development assistance can be a powerful force for empowering women to compete in land, labor and product markets enabling them to make economic, social and environmental contributions to sustainable development.¹⁰

Society and Gender

Although economists are now going beyond GDP to more inclusive measures of well-being, money is essential to both ecological and social progress. It is how that money is distributed and used that determines sustainability. The sustainable development vision of Gro Harlem Brundtland, the female former Norwegian Prime Minister who headed the Commission that prepared the first sustainable development report *Our Common Future* in 1987, can be interpreted as "Don't take more than your share!"

This equity tenet applies to money, natural resources and welfare, whether now or in the future. The social pillar of sustainable development — and its emphasis on equity and equality — is the most politically-sensitive of the three dimensions and thus the hardest to address. It involves confronting negative social trends such as growing income disparities, rising unemployment, and a persistent gender gap. In response to the economic crisis, many countries are implementing strategies for green growth, green economies and green jobs to put them on a lower-carbon trajectory. But if they ignore basic social requirements such as income equity, job quality and gender

⁹Stevens, Candice. 2009. "Europe Leads the World on Sustainability." In *Europe's World*, Spring. Available at www.europeworld.org.

¹⁰Stevens, Candice. 2009. Guest Editor. "Special Issue on Gender and Sustainable Development." *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development (IJISD)* 4(2-3).



equality, these initiatives will fail to be fully sustainable. Unless they are addressed head-on, social concerns will continue to block progress on economic and ecological aims and the overall achievement of sustainable development.¹¹

The direst trend of the current era is the widening gap between rich and poor both within and across countries. The 2008 Sustainable Society Index, which combines economic, environmental and social indicators to compare country performance, puts the United Kingdom at 50th and the United States at 66th place. Their low standing is due largely to rising poverty levels. The two countries have among the fastest growing divides between rich and poor in the OECD area. Unfortunately, it is single mothers who are the poorest members of these rich societies and many have lost their jobs and homes in the economic crisis. Green growth does not compensate for income disparities in the sustainable development equation.

Environment and Gender

Last but certainly not least, surveys in a range of countries are revealing a difference between men and women in the environmental sphere. OECD studies of household behavior show that women are more likely than men to buy recyclable, eco-labeled and energy-efficient products. Women now account for some 80 percent of household purchases in developed countries, so the question is why this eco-consciousness

hasn't translated transportation. Another recent study found that Japanese women are also more concerned than men about the environment and are willing to pay more for sustainable products.

Women in developing countries are starting to realize the financial advantages of eco-markets. According to the Fair-Trade Federation, women are increasingly behind the organization of cooperatives producing artisanal goods as well as agricultural products from coffee to chocolate in the quest to enhance their livelihoods, their communities and local ecosystems. Women now account for 76 percent of the workers engaged in non-agricultural Fair-Trade production, many fabricating crafts from local natural resources. In Colombia, women coffee growers increased profits while enhancing the environmental sustainability of production and community living standards by marketing female produced Fair Trade coffee.

It is far from proven that women are more environmentally conscientious than men as a rule. But women are more likely than men to be affected by environmental problems because of their social roles and more impoverished status in all countries. Coping with the effects of climate change and damage from extreme weather events such as storms, floods, and cyclones tends to fall on women who hold together families and households.¹²

¹¹SustainLabour. 2009. Green Jobs and Women Workers: Employment, Equity, Equality. Draft Report for SustainLabour/International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Available at www.sustainlabour.org/dmdocuments/en255_2009.pdf.

¹²Wittenberg-Cox, Avivah and Alison Maitland. 2008. Why Women Mean Business: Understanding the Emergence of Our Next Economic Revolution. West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



Women in developing countries who supply water and fuel for families find this increasingly difficult as environmental changes negatively affect resource supply and infrastructure. Increased costs for energy, health-care and food caused by the disrupting effects of climate change disproportionately affect women, especially single mothers.

Even in richer countries, women are vulnerable because of their lesser access to finance and reduced ability to adapt to climate change impacts.¹³

Conclusion

As indicated by both theory and evidence, the lack of progress on gender equality may be at the heart of the failure to advance on sustainable development. If women were in more productive and decision-making roles, we could be moving faster and more assuredly towards sustainability in the economic, social and environmental sense. Sustainable development is a political concept because it is about good governance, which will be hard to achieve until we get closer to gender parity. Research is needed to test the hypothesis that women are more risk-averse than men and those women leaders would be more apt to follow sustainable development pathways. Given the importance of gender to sustainability, these issues should feature more prominently in sustainable development discussions and be highlighted in a 2012 UN Conference on Sustainability Development.

¹³The World Bank. 2009. Gender Equality as Smart Economics. Washington, DC: The World Bank. Available at www.worldbank.org/gender.