



## Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals

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## INTRODUCTION

# Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals

Valeria Esquivel<sup>†</sup> and Caroline Sweetman

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the UN member states on 25 September 2015. It provides the nations of the world with a global framework for advancing sustainable development in its three dimensions, the economic, the social and environmental, over the next decade and a half.<sup>1</sup> The SDGs (Figure 1) replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were operational from 2000 to 2015. The SDGs have the potential to do much more than their predecessors in terms of their scope, aspirations and the vision of development they reflect. In contrast to the narrow focus of the MDGs on poverty, the SDGs are founded in a commitment to realising human rights, and an acknowledgement of the links between inequality, marginalisation, and poverty. The vision of development in Agenda 2030 and the SDGs is more complex and nuanced, thanks in part to the considerable input of different groups from civil society in the SDGs process – in contrast to the MDGs, which were formulated by bureaucrats with minimum consultation with the real women and men, girls and boys whose lives they aimed to improve.

In this issue of *Gender & Development*, a range of prominent women's rights activists and advocates – many of whom have been directly involved in the creation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs – offer their 'first-cut' analysis of them. Authors are differently positioned in this shared struggle for gender equality and women's rights. They are from women's organisations, research think-tanks, academia, and international agencies, including both the UN and international NGOs. They focus on the outcomes of the negotiation process, and the potential these offer to feminists working inside and outside official 'development' circles to progress gender equality and women's rights.

Because this is a 'first-cut' analysis, these articles are notable for being tentative evaluations of the SDGs. This is reflected in the fact that the majority of titles are posed as questions for the future. Authors are still assessing the SDGs' potential, while cautiously embracing them. The value of the agreement on goals and targets, including the dedicated 'gender goal', Goal 5, will be revealed in their implementation. At the time we go to press in January 2016, the process of agreeing indicators is still ongoing.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>†</sup> The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the position of UNRISD, The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

### **The Sustainable Development Goals**

- Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts\*
- Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

**Figure 1:** The Sustainable Development Goals

### **The role of international declarations in progressing women's rights**

The SDGs will form a significant element in the constellation of international agreements which will shape the world for women in the next decade and a half. They should offer an entry point to movements fighting for rights and social justice, including women's movements, and to all involved in fighting economic inequality and poverty.

Principles enshrined in strongly aspirational documents written in a few majority languages may, of course, seem a world away from the realities faced by women and girls (and men and boys) living in poverty in the global South, and may not clearly translate into actions that unequivocally benefit the people they aim to help. Yet, international agreements have been hugely important in directing policy decisions and resource flows to social goods, acting as a rallying cry for those fighting injustice and marginalisation, and influencing the cultural and social norms which we all live by.

The period from 1975 to 1995 was particularly important for a series of milestone global agreements on women's rights, marked by the four UN World Conferences on Women (namely, Mexico City in 1980; Copenhagen in 1985; Nairobi in 1990; and Beijing in 1995) and others, perhaps most notably the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994. Each of these resulted in a Platform for Action which provided a stimulus to governments and national policymakers, both directly and also indirectly, through the efforts of women's rights movements to hold their governments to account. International law has also provided milestones, notably the agreement of CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) in 1979.

Since the Millennium, however, progress on women's rights and gender equality has been challenged. First, the environment has been hostile to women's rights and activists have been on the defensive, protecting the gains of Cairo and Beijing in the face of 'attacks mounted by an "unholy alliance" led by the Vatican and supported by a shifting group of countries and religious groups' (Kabeer 2015, 377). The fact that energies have been elsewhere has perhaps led to a comparative lack of focus on the economic factors which continue to contribute to women's marginalisation and poverty (*ibid.*).

Second, the MDGs themselves were a setback for rights-based approaches to development, and for gender equality and women's rights specifically. As Sakiko Fukuda-Parr observes in her article in this issue, the MDGs were dubbed 'Minimum Development Goals' (Harcourt 2005); they were the result of a minimal process of consultation, drafted in traditional top-down style by bureaucrats. They cast development as a narrow, technical process of poverty alleviation with little reference to the factors which cause economic want and inequality. They also addressed poverty separately from peace and human rights.

As such, the MDGs might most generously be seen as a donor-driven agenda that did not tackle the structural causes of poverty and inequality. But poverty cannot be reduced when the people affected are relegated to the margins of development processes, and their economic, political and social rights – including those of women and girls – denied and targeted with safety nets or residual policy interventions while economic growth fails to create jobs, deliver services, or provide other means through which securing their livelihoods and realising their rights (UNRISD 2010).

Agenda 2030 and the SDGs will be more useful to women's rights movements than the MDGs, because they reflect the input of civil society, including women's rights and feminist movements, in their formulation. The encounters, discussions, debates, coalition-building and alliance-forming involved in the process of advancing an international framework on development are valuable in their own right, as they strengthen civil society and catalyse movement-building. In her article here, Sascha Gabizon of the Women's Major Group examines the experience of the women's movements in participating in the lead-up process to the SDGs, via the complex and linked activities of consultation, influencing and advocacy that have shaped the end result. Both Sascha Gabizon and Daniela Rosche from Oxfam, who participated in influencing the SDGs process as a part of the organisation's work on gender justice, present first-hand accounts (in the form of personal accounts, or 'herstory') of the role that women's movements played at forging the agreements consolidating a strong 'gender language'.

Yet this potential of international processes and declarations to be helpful to progress is often hampered by poor will to implement international agreements, lack of clarity of the policies needed to do so, and lack of sufficient resources – particularly those devoted to ‘difficult issues’ like women’s rights. With the activism in mind which influenced and shaped the SDGs, to what extent do feminists consider the SDGs will contribute to improve the realities of women and girls, in particular those living in poverty in the global South? Does the sustainable development framework recast development itself so that it works for women, rather than using women in their current unequal roles and relations to bolster up the existing, fundamentally unsustainable, development model?

### The SDGs: the vision and the implementation

From a perspective which compares the SDGs to the MDGs, the new Agenda and goals look relatively better – even good. Several authors in this issue see the hope of real change for women and gender equality, analysing the ‘architecture’ of the new framework to see how the features of women’s and girls’ realities are captured in the design of each element, and how they are simultaneously separated and singled out, and connected and collated. The SDGs’ conceptual foundations, however, are also critical. The preamble of the Agenda 2030 document is strongly framed in human rights. The potential this offers to hold governments to account for development choices which either further or compromise human rights should not be underestimated – for its moral power as well as for its usefulness to activists. However, even while the human rights framing is prominent in the preamble, and there are allusions there to Cairo and Beijing, the overarching visionary statement leads to a number of goals, linked to targets and associated monitoring indicators, which are not themselves framed as rights.

Formulating policies to respond to the goals and targets and funding them will be the point at which the SDGs are ‘translated’ into concrete action in countries, on the part of governments but also NGOs, often working in coalition with a range of donors. In her article here, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr suggests that there is a danger that the SDGs and targets which contain most potential for transformation will be ‘neglected in implementation through selectivity, simplification, and national adaptation’ (this issue). *Selectivity* could lead to neglect of goals and targets that address the need to challenge power relations, reform institutions, and achieve other changes in the structures of political, economic and social life. The MDGs were admired by many for their *simplicity*, but this was also the reason for their limited ability to bring about real change for millions facing marginalisation and acute or chronic poverty, since life is complicated, and problems multifaceted. National adaptation of an international development framework can lead to a dilution of the ambitions of the SDGs – again, most likely for the most potentially transformative goals, in particular those addressing inequalities.

To protect us against these dangers, then, what are the policy choices that could be made to enact the SDGs, and continue the progress envisioned at Beijing and Cairo? Gabriele Koehler’s article in this issue provides a tremendously useful ‘tool’ for the use of gender-equality advocates and activists, by surveying the other international conventions and

agreements on women's rights and gender concerns and drawing out the potential in them to create a mosaic of policy possibilities.

### Gender and women's rights in the SDGs

Gender equality and women's rights receive a stand-alone SDG – Goal 5 – just as they did in the MDGs. While the gender analysis was weak or non-existent in the 'other', non-gender, MDGs, it is relatively strong in the SDGs and as a result, many gender issues are clearly articulated in the 'non-gender' goals. The number of goals, and hence the range and the analysis, of the SDGs is much wider – with 17 goals instead of the MDGs' 8. Goal 5 is formulated on a strong gender analysis which understands gender inequality to possess economic, political and social aspects which are interconnected. The scope of the concerns addressed by Goal 5 and its targets is both qualitatively and quantitatively improved as compared to the SDGs. However, as Elizabeth Stuart and Jessica Woodroffe point in their article focusing on the SDG's 'Leave No-one Behind' agenda, while Goal 5 is worded more strongly than its predecessor ('eliminate gender inequality' is certainly better than 'promote gender equality'), its targets are not time-bound. Big promises are made, but there is no obligation to actually achieve the goal by a given date – only to implement the means to (eventually) get there.

The articles in this issue analyse not only Goal 5 – since their lens is the reality of life as women and girls experience it, they are looking throughout the framework of all 17 goals. Shahra Razavi's article extends across all goals, but finds them lacking on the policies needed to achieve the goals and targets as featured in Goal 17, which focuses on the means for implementation and forging a partnership for sustainable development. Valeria Esquivel reads across the goals, and in particular Goal 8, a renewed emphasis on a traditional take on growth, which is not fundamentally challenged by the Agenda. Nicole Bidegain Ponte and Corina Rodríguez Enríquez focus on the structural obstacles to women's rights that remain, and are particularly concerned about the (lack) of funding for the SDGs.

Particularly critical to feminists and women's rights activists is the way collective action is – or is not – addressed in the SDGs. In the lead-up to 2015, UN Women called for a target on strengthening women's collective action by supporting and building women's movements, for the standalone gender goal. Yet this did not make it into Goal 5, which in target 5.5 speaks about women's full and effective participation, but emphasises equal opportunity for leadership. In their article, Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins analyse the potential of Goal 16, on peace and governance, to explore the room for women's participation as part of the goal's 'inclusivity' language. They argue that the terms 'community' and 'for all' have been used in the SDGs to signal 'the need for equity and universality in the achievement of many of the targets and goals in the 2030 Agenda' (this issue), therefore including women in their multiple identities.

In addition to Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins' article on Goal 16, two other articles in this collection provide specific analysis of the gender dimensions in other key goals: Goal 1, on poverty (Elizabeth Stuart and Jessica Woodroffe), and Goal 3, on health (Gabriele Koehler).

Ideas about how to enact the SDGs in today's political and economic context are clearly of number one importance in this collection of articles. In the remainder of this Introduction, we will briefly flag up some of the key issues.

### The economic model behind Agenda 2030: feminist critiques

Several authors in this collection voice their concerns about some underpinnings of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs – in particular, the Agenda's understanding of power and economic growth; the role of the corporate sector and private finance in development; and the damaging role of unregulated financial flows in a globalised economy, where inequalities are growing while elite interests 'play the system'.

In her article, Valeria Esquivel notes that powerful actors – be they big countries, international financial institutions, transnational corporations, and even INGOs – are hardly challenged in their positions by the agreements in Agenda 2030. The few provisions that exist to hold these actors accountable, she notes, are either not binding, or rhetorical, lacking concrete mechanisms to be effective. Similarly, Shahra Razavi reviews challenges of implementation of the SDGs, highlighting the paradox that while Agenda 2030 is anchored in human rights principles and 'talk of transformation, [yet it] seems to take for granted some key elements of the currently dominant economic agenda, centred on continued growth, trade liberalisation, and 'partnerships' with the private sector' (this issue). She points out that even the consultative processes with civil society actors which preceded and shaped the SDGs, giving 'a picture of wide civil society consultations' (*ibid.*), need to be placed in a broader context – the corporate sector was in a pole position to influence the agenda, as 'part of a longer-standing trend of widening, and increasingly intimate, relations between the UN and corporate interests which has raised many concerns' (*ibid.*).

In their article, Nicole Bidegain Ponte and Corina Rodríguez Enríquez echo these concerns in an analysis of the role of private interests in development. Offering a perspective from the Southern women's movements, they also focus on two other aspects of feminist economic analysis which go unaddressed: the issue of economic and financial volatility, which reduces the extent to which states can control and protect the interests of those they should serve, and the question of how to mobilise resources in-country for development. These authors argue that it is paramount to ensure public funding for the policies which will realise gender equality and further women's rights, but developing countries have a very limited ability to raise money via taxation, due to corruption and the rules of globalisation which disadvantage them: 'the dynamic of financialised globalisation which is the root of macroeconomic instability, persistent crisis and their negative impact on women and equality, is still not being strongly challenged or confronted' (this issue).

Together, these three articles highlight the fact that there is no fundamental challenge in the SDGs to the economic model of development pursued over the past forty years, which has focused on resource-intensive economic growth as a pre-condition for progressive (redistributive) policies. Authors point out that the 2030 Agenda does not present a strategy for structural reform to tackle poverty and inequality, nor does it challenge existing

trade, tax or financial architectures. In that sense, the Agenda thus fails to provide the right 'enabling environment', as well as the necessary financing, for the realisation of women's rights.

### Women and poverty: gender and complex inequalities

The Leave No-One Behind agenda of the SDGs, which is discussed by Elizabeth Stuart and Jessica Woodroffe from a gender-equality perspective, opens the door to an intersectional analysis of power in which economic, political and social marginalisation based on identities clearly leads to the experience of 'being left behind'. If the Leave No-One Behind agenda is realised, it may help solve the problem of the limitations of simpler, goal-oriented development in the MDGs, which were able to realise targets because they had less ambitious goals, and therefore left the more difficult development challenges unaddressed. This is often referred to as the issue of picking 'low-hanging fruit', which is discussed, also, by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (this issue). However, it may prove impossible to square the circle here, by continuing to ignore the divisive and destructive elements of economic globalisation while pursuing a development agenda that takes into account the complexities of poverty and inequality, and why poverty often seems unresponsive to the conventional mantras of 'economic empowerment' (discussed also by Valeria Esquivel in this issue).

Leave No-one Behind highlights the fact that the issues facing women in poverty in the global South do not arise from gender inequality only; rather, they are at the intersection of different dimensions of inequality, including race and class. Oxfam's political understanding of the complex causes of poverty, rooted in complex inequalities, has informed its involvement in the SDGs work. In her article drawing on Oxfam's experience, Daniela Rosche explains that the organisation chose to focus on four priorities arising from its programme work with women living in poverty. These are: violence against women, women's unpaid care burden, women's economic rights, and women's equal leadership and participation. Daniela Rosche's article reminds us that to address and end poverty for women and girls, the structures of gender discrimination need to be dismantled. Within the women's movements, large NGOs focusing on development can offer support and solidarity in coalition with others located in the global South, allowing their experience with women living in poverty in developing countries to flow through into advocacy work on gender equality.

### Conclusion

A key message from the collection of papers in this issue is that there are many complementary roles for women's rights and feminist activists in development to play, not least to hold a wide array of development actors to account. Policy and programme development will require attention to ensure that the policies and activities which will contribute to women's and girls' enjoyment of their rights are planned for, resourced, implemented and monitored (including choosing the best possible monitoring indicators).



Women's rights activists can strategically use target 5.5, on women's full and effective participation, to keep attention on the obligation to include and invite women's rights organisations and movements to participate in SDGs processes, and to demand resources for that.

As both Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Shahra Razavi stress in their articles, there is indeed going to be a need for strong involvement of women's movements to defend the ground won for women's rights and gender equality in Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. But, as Valeria Esquivel points out, the implementation of the SDGs will not be a technocratic exercise but yet another political struggle, taking place at many levels, and women's movements will need to forge strong and broad alliances with other progressive actors to make the promise of the SDGs, 'transforming our world', a reality. In the words of Gabriele Koehler, the coming years will need all our creativity and subversion – which is a major challenge to us all.

## Notes

1. See the full Declaration at [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E) (last checked by the authors 6 January 2015).
2. In their article here, Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins forecast that although there are relatively few gender-specific targets, there will be many sex-disaggregated measurement indicators that will make progress assessment possible on many of the targets.

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