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Are the SDGs Doomed to Fail?

The Cost of Inaction on Gender Equality

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Abstract

Gender inequality affects not just women and girls, but families, communities and societies at large. This paper highlights the central role played by gender equality throughout the SDGs, as a prerequisite for the realisation of both human rights and development. Looking at the previous experience from the MDGs and the progress made so far with the SDGs, the paper stresses how failing to address gender equality can compromise the SDGs.

Gender inequality comes at a huge cost to and across the world. Not just for women and girls, but for their families, communities and societies at large. While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have put great emphasis on gender equality – both through a stand-alone goal and targets included throughout the rest of the agenda – the reality when it comes to implementation so far does not bode well for realising these ambitions. This could not only prove detrimental for the SDGs themselves, it would confirm once again that the lack of concerted and transformative efforts to address the gender gap are standing in the way of the realisation and protection of human rights and sustainable development.

More than Just a Women's Issue

When the issue of gender comes up, the tendency of many, including within the human rights and development fields, is to point at women: they are perceived as the ones that either need to address gender equality or are supposed to be the only ones benefitting from closing the gender gap. The token session on gender mainstreaming with a room full of women and a handful of men is still an all too familiar sight during many development and human rights' summits.

On other occasions, the well-intended reason given to promote gender equality is based on the argument that as women

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and girls represent 50 per cent of the world's population, they cannot be left behind. The thinking is that without half of the global population wholly included and participating, it is impossible to fully realise human rights and sustainable development. And this should be reason enough to close the gender gap.

While in itself not entirely untrue, the reality is much more complex. It is not just a simple one-plus-one solution. The way gender inequality affects not just women and girls, but families, communities and societies at large, makes for a much more complicated equation.

More so, gender inequality affects men and boys too. Not including men and boys in conversations and actions related to gender, besides increasing the risk of defensive and obstructive responses by men and boys, also inhibits the possibility to address toxic forms of masculinity that are harmful to all. Examples of this range from stereotypical expectations on how men should behave or what responsibilities they have, to the reality that men die of suicide more frequently than women.¹

The picture becomes even more complex when considering a wider spectrum of gender. Moving away from a traditional binary understanding of gender forces us to look even more critically at traditional and restrictive gender roles and expectations. Gender conformity is at the heart of gender inequality. This makes it impossible to truly address gender equality without accepting and embracing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning (LGBTIQ) people

and sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) rights.

Real Cost of Gender Inequality

The true impact of gender inequality becomes clearer when looking at some specific examples and data on what the real-life implications of the gender gap are. This means we need to look beyond widely held oversimplifications of reality.

However, before doing so, we must note that most data related to gender inequality focusses primarily on women and men, leaving important insights into the position of other genders out.

When it comes to poverty, the long held assumption is that 70 per cent of the global poor are women.² Not only has this proven to be untrue, the simplicity of this message is deceiving. The reality is more complex. There are significant differences between the two sexes across different ages. To begin with, children account for 44 per cent of the global extreme poor. However, among them, there are 105 girls for every 100 boys living in extreme poor households. As they get older, the differences become starker. Of women between the ages of 25 and 34, 122 live in poor households, while the same is only true for 100 men in the same age group. Between the ages of 40 and 65, there seem to be little differences in poverty rates between the genders, but this changes in reverse once reaching the elderly years.³

Having more such complex data is crucial to be able to understand how gender issues manifest themselves in major

global challenges, such as poverty. The need for research and data collection disaggregated by gender, age and other distinguishing factors is not just crucial in itself, it needs to be constantly monitored and updated.

In a more straightforward fashion, research from 2015 showed that two-thirds of the 781 million illiterate adults in the world were women.⁴ The consequences of this do not only relate to their dependency and their involvement in their community, it has also been proven that literacy of women causes improved livelihoods, better child and maternal health, and enhances girls' access to education. Data from 219 countries collected between 1970 and 2009 indicated that for every additional year of education, women of reproductive age had child mortality decreased by 9.5 per cent.⁵

Gender inequality also plays a role in humanitarian emergency situations. Natural disasters, including droughts, floods and storms, kill more women than men. This is likely due to structural gender inequality in the societies they affect.⁶ In Aceh, Indonesia, for example, more than 70 per cent of the people who died in the 2004 Asian tsunami were women.⁷

A similar pattern is discernible when it comes to human rights. Even though the recognition that all women's rights are human rights is gaining ground, human rights violations in many instances still disproportionately affect women and girls. Not assuring gender mainstreaming

is included in any effort striving for the promotion and protection of human rights, guarantees its failure. This applies to a wide variety of concerns related to human rights.

For example, 35 per cent of women worldwide are estimated to have experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence, or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives.⁸

In 2012, a global study estimated that of all female homicide victims worldwide, almost half were killed by an intimate partner or family member, while for only six per cent of men the same was true.⁹

In 2016, another global study found that 51 per cent of all human trafficking victims globally are adult women. When girls are added, it even comes to 71 per cent. Nearly three out of every four child trafficking victims are girls, and almost three out of every four trafficked women and girls are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation.¹⁰

Data collected between 2006 and 2010 showed that female voters are four times as likely as men to be intimidated during elections in fragile and transitional States.¹¹

Could Gender Equality be the Silver Bullet?

The good news, however, is that the reverse is also true. Working on gender equality has proven to have great benefits for our communities and societies. This will require time, investments,

comprehensive and holistic efforts, and lasting commitment. But it is a prerequisite for realising sustainable development and human rights anywhere.

Investing in gender equality, for example, is enormously beneficial for women's political, economic and social rights, and for achieving inclusive economic growth. The 2007 Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific estimated that gender equality could gain the region nearly US\$80 billion a year, primarily stemming from closing gender gaps in employment and education.¹²

In a similar vein, in 2011, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations calculated that access for women to agricultural resources at the same level as men could lead to a production increase on women's farms in developing countries of up to 20–30 per cent. Potentially this could lead developing countries to an increase of agricultural production of 2.5–4 per cent that could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17 per cent, or 100–150 million people.¹³

Similarly, in 2015, it was estimated that if the employment participation gap and wage gap between women and men were closed, women could increase their income globally by up to 76 per cent, representing a global value of US\$17 trillion.¹⁴

When it comes to human rights and justice, data from a 2012 report that looked at 40 countries showed a positive correlation between the proportion of female police and reporting rates of sexual assault.¹⁵

Gender Equality Across the SDGs

The recognition of the importance of addressing gender inequality has increased steadily in the last decades. This has been reflected in several global resolutions, conventions and agendas, among them the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, arguably, all of these previous references fell short of putting gender equality front and centre as a holistic and all-encompassing objective.

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs do. Gender equality and gender mainstreaming are referenced throughout the Preamble and the narrative text of the Declaration itself. More importantly, Goal 5 aims to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. Additionally, there are explicit targets related to gender equality in nine out of the 17 goals, specifically in Goals: 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, and 17. Gender equality has even been identified as an enabler and accelerator for all the other SDGs.

It is noteworthy that Goal 16 aims to “Promote peace and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”, yet does not include such an explicit reference to gender equality among its targets. However, it does, as do other goals, refer to it implicitly when utilising terms such as ‘for all’ or ‘significantly reduce all forms of violence’ that would also impact gender-based violence or violence against women and girls.

The SDGs do stand by a fairly traditional understanding of gender, as there is no reference to LGBTIQ people or SOGIE rights in neither the narrative declaration nor in the SDGs and targets.

Have We Learned from the MDGs?

The comprehensive inclusion of gender equality in and across the SDGs is in line with the knowledge that without addressing the gender gap sustainable development, and thus the SDGs are unattainable. It also means realising gender equality and all the challenges that come with it, have become a prerequisite for fulfilling the entire agenda.

Experience from the MDGs has taught us that much less ambitious objectives have already proved difficult to realise. The MDGs focussed primarily on much more narrow goals, specifically related to improving gender equality in education and improving maternal health. These still proved to be very challenging to attain. One of the main findings was that to close the gender gap, it is needed to address the fundamental and structural causes of gender inequality.¹⁶

Status Alert: Not Enough Progress to Date

Just a few years into the implementation of the SDGs, much focus has been on initial results and on assessing whether implementation plans are likely to lead to the full realisation of the goals and targets. When it comes to Goal 5 and

other gender related targets, it seems clear fundamental changes in strategies and policies are needed.

While the Sustainable Development Goals Reports for 2017¹⁷ and 2018¹⁸ – reviewing progress – show some advancements in certain areas related to education, maternal mortality and the participation of women in politics, overall progress has been challenging. Reasons for this sound eerily similar to the challenges the MDGs faced.

The 2017 report explicitly says, “Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will require much more vigorous efforts, including legal frameworks, to counter deeply rooted gender-based discrimination that often results from patriarchal attitudes and related social norms.”¹⁹

In 2017, the session of the UN High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF) reviewed six different goals, including Goal 5.²⁰ In the lead up to this review, several expert meetings, policy briefs and other assessments identified both key challenges and recommendations for moving forward.

One of the primary obstacles identified was the lack of dedicated investments in addressing gender inequality in a comprehensive and transformative manner. Too often gender equality is added on, many times at the last minute, to broader development or human rights projects. This means that it becomes a side-objective to the primary goals

of any activity or project. Meaningful participation of women becomes a token exercise rather than a central component. And this results in substantive analysis of the root causes of gender inequality being overlooked.

In the cases where gender inequality is at the centre of a given strategy or programme, far too often the focus is only on women's empowerment. While this is a crucial component of addressing the gender gap, such projects still keep the primary focus of change with and among women themselves, rather than structural and transformative change in our broader societies.

Lack of gender-sensitive data has been identified as another key obstacle to the realisation of Goal 5. This applies both to the lack of disaggregated data by sex, age and other characteristics, as well as to the lack of strategic monitoring of trends and challenges in the implementation of Goal 5. Similar challenges were identified with the MDGs.²¹

Of the over 230 indicators that were developed to globally monitor the implementation of the SDGs, 53 make explicit reference to women, girls, gender, or sex, including the 14 targets of Goal 5 itself. However, not all targets have internationally established methodologies or standards for monitoring. These have only been developed for 30 out of these 53.²²

The same applies to many strategies or programmes implemented to realise

Goal 5 or gender inequality at large. This not only makes it challenging to verify or monitor whether any progress is being made, but also implies that adjustments to strategies and programmes are based on presumptions and educated guesses. Given the importance of addressing gender issues, this is highly problematic.

Still, some interesting projects have been undertaken as part of the national plans. Such positive examples should be assessed and promoted, while lessons learned should be distilled and shared with other Member States.

When looking at the few highlights related to the implementation of Goal 5 in Asia Pacific so far, there are two areas that stand out according to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): improvements in women's participation in Parliament across the region; and demands for family planning.²³

There are some particular countries that are worth highlighting, such as: Nepal, where female parliamentary representation increased from 5.9 per cent in 2000 to 29.5 per cent in 2015; Kyrgyzstan saw an increase from 1.4 per cent to 23.3 per cent; and Singapore jumped from 4.3 per cent to 25.3 per cent. More so, in 2015, Timor-Leste, due to electoral law requirements, had the highest rate of female representation in the national parliament in the region at 38.5 per cent.

New Zealand came second with 31.4 per cent of seats held by women.²⁴

When it comes to the demand for family planning satisfied with modern methods, 86.3 per cent of women of reproductive age either married or in-union were being reached in Asia Pacific in 2015. This was slightly above the global average of 82.2 per cent. However, the report did note that this regional figure did not reflect differences across the region, nor did it reflect particular groups from rural or remote areas that were underserved.²⁵

Road Towards 2030

While only three years into the implementation of the SDGs, it can already be said with some certainty that if there is no fundamental change in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Goal 5, the entire SDG agenda will be in trouble. This means certain concerns need to be addressed now, rather than waiting for the eventual review in 2030.

To begin with, it is crucial that all UN Member States, and other stakeholders included in the realisation of the SDGs, focus on truly addressing structural barriers to gender equality. Gender inequality is engrained in our families, our communities and our societies. They are part of our cultural and societal standards, laws and traditions. We need to address the heart of the problem, instead of expecting change from efforts that only touch on the

consequences of these structural causes. Only through holistic, comprehensive and transformative change can gender equality, as aimed for across and throughout the SDGs, be truly realised.

To be able to do so, we need to hold accountable all stakeholders that committed to the SDGs, particularly on a national level. Member States unanimously adopted the SDGs, and in doing so, committed to gender equality. Tokenism or superficial efforts cannot be accepted.

Significantly, more targeted investments and funding to realise gender equality need to be demanded from all Member States, donors and business corporations. Not just because it is the right thing to do, but because the benefits of closing the gender gap would in the end affect us all. This needs to include extensive monitoring mechanisms to assure financial accountability, and promises made are actually realised.

A 2018 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) stated that if there were no significant Government investments in care work across the globe, gender inequality would continue to increase by 2030. This will negatively impact our economies. As women tend to be care providers, and thus highly represented in unpaid work, our aging populations will drive many women out of the paid labour market. According to the report, investments need to be doubled to counter this trend.²⁶

The lack of reliable and comprehensive gender-sensitive data needs to be tackled. Without quality knowledge and information, all efforts to realise Goal 5 and other targets related to gender equality will be like throwing darts in the dark. We might end up hitting something by coincidence, but it is unlikely we will get full marks.

Finally, the traditional, binary view of gender implied in the SDGs needs to be addressed. While the United Nations (UN) is increasingly acknowledging LGBTIQ people and SOGIE rights, this is not reflected in what at the moment arguably is the most important development agenda in the world. Lack of gender diversity in the SDGs is not just unethical, it undermines the effectiveness of the entire endeavour.

Role of Other Stakeholders in Realising Gender Equality Through SDGs

Obviously, Member States are primarily responsible for the realisation of the SDGs. They need to be held accountable to commitments made. But that does not mean that the responsibility ends there. The SDGs were thought out as an agenda for the ‘people, planet and prosperity’, and as such, all people play a role in realising them, including the UN and civil society organisations.

There are several key tasks both various UN agencies along with civil society

organisations should prioritise, including: engaging in the development of national and regional action plans; promoting the prioritisation of gender equality; assuring adequate funding is allocated in budgeting; and monitoring progress and critically reviewing reporting.

However, they should also utilise the SDGs and their language to promote gender equality beyond the SDGs themselves. The SDGs are a tool of great significance to gain sustainable development and human rights, including gender equality, but the struggle should not stand or fall with the SDGs. Therefore, rather than seeing the SDGs as an end in themselves, they should be used to their full capacity to further the work on sustainable development, human rights and gender equality.

This also means both the UN and civil society organisations need to be self-critical when it comes to gender equality, gender mainstreaming and women’s rights. To be able to hold Member States accountable, they need to walk the talk themselves. If gender equality is not a central component of all they do and who they are – whether they work directly on the SDGs or more broadly on sustainable development and human rights – they end up undermining the sustainable development agenda themselves.

Recent incidents and stories coming out of the #MeToo Movement have made it abundantly clear that much remains to be done on that front, including within the UN system and civil society organisations.

Conclusion

The SDGs are ambitious and holistic. This is both their strength and potentially their weakness. The integration of gender equality across and throughout the SDGs is a primary example of this. The central role gender equality has within the SDGs showcases how important it is as a prerequisite for attaining sustainable development and human rights, but this might also end up being the downfall of the SDGs if it is not properly and comprehensively addressed.

The impact that gender equality will have on the realisation of human rights and sustainable development for our families, communities and societies, makes it that much more crucial that the SDGs do not fail. It is the responsibility of each one of us, of Members States, the UN, civil society organisations and many more, to make sure they will not.

Endnotes

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