Gender Equality as a Tool for Sustainable Development

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Abstract
An increasing number of studies indicate that gender inequalities are extracting high economic costs and leading to social inequities and environmental degradation around the world. This paper adopts a three-pronged approach in its analysis of how gender inequality impedes the attainment of sustainable development and how on the other hand gender equality can hasten its attainment. This approach is based on the three pillars of sustainable development viz: economic, social and environmental development. The paper found that sustainable development cannot be achieved in any of the pillars of sustainable development in the absence of gender equality and that gender equality cannot be divorced from sustainable development. The paper recommends that equal or reasonable representation be given to women in political and economic sectors so that their long delayed inputs will be made towards attainment of sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, Social inequalities

Introduction
Dominant patterns of growth and development are clearly unsustainable economically, socially and environmentally (ILO, 2012). Human activities account for the majority if not all of earth system processes, resulting in over utilisation of natural resources, the loss of key biodiversity and habitats as well as land, air and water pollution. Researches by scientists make it clear that these activities have huge negative economic, social and environmental impacts especially as we approach the so called “planetary boundaries” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2013; Rockström et al, 2009), producing as it were, record shocks and stresses, resulting in floods, droughts and devastation of landscapes and livelihoods. These in turn add to poverty and inequality, particularly for a substantial part of the people on earth who directly depend on earth’s natural resources for their survival, and threaten the possibility of future generations meeting their needs (Unmüßig, Sachs and Fatheuer, 2012).

Development patterns that endorse certain species of under regulated market-led growth and the continuation of unequal power relations between women and men are the underlying drivers of unsustainability and gender inequality (Wichterich, 2012; Fukuda-Parr, Heintz and Seguino, 2013). These development patterns place reliance on and reproduce gender inequalities, exploit women’s labour and unpaid care work. They also cause environmental
problems due to the fact that actors seek to maximise profit by overexploiting natural resources and polluting the environment. These unsustainable patterns of growth and development have led to a consensus on the need to ensure sustainable growth and development. However, certain methods employed in a bid to promote sustainable growth and development undermines women’s rights and gender equality, thus making it difficult to achieve sustainability. The Commission on Sustainable Development found that: “Women are key to achieving sustainable development. Thus, the inequities and prejudices that confront women also hinder general progress towards sustainability. Specific obstacles concern lack of representation and credit, as well as poverty, trade and debt-related issues”.

The Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG No. 5 has injected fresh momentum in the quest for gender equality at the global level. However, there is unevenness in the march towards this equality. Progress has been made, but a lot still needs to be done. Women are now as well or even better educated than men in most countries and their participation in the labour market has increased, but they still spend fewer hours in paid work per week than their partners. And in certain countries where there is high if not equal percentage of women in employed labour, there is still incidence of high gender wage gaps and absence of women in senior management positions.

The relevance of gender equality, women’s empowerment and the realization of women’s rights to the achievement of sustainable development has been increasingly recognized in recent decades. This recognition is evident in a number of international norms and agreements. For instance the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development entitled “The Future we want”, adopted in 2012, recognises the importance of gender equality in the realisation of sustainable development thus:

We recognize that gender equality and women’s empowerment are important for sustainable development and our common future. We reaffirm our commitments to ensure women’s equal rights, access and opportunities for participation and leadership in the economy, society and political decisionmaking...We underscore that women have a vital role to play in achieving sustainable development. We recognize the leadership role of women, and we resolve to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment and to ensure their full and effective participation in sustainable development policies, programmes and decision-making at all levels (General Assembly Resolution 66/288, annex, paras. 31 and 45).

Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development also made this recognition in its statement regarding the full participation of women being essential to achieving sustainable development (Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992). In the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, governments were called upon to integrate gender concerns and perspectives into policies and programmes for sustainable development (Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995). It has been noted that the achievement of gender equality and the realization of the ‘human rights, dignity and capabilities of diverse groups of women is a central requirement of a just and sustainable world’ (United Nations, 2014). Progress in achieving sustainable development goals has been abysmally slow due to economic, environmental and social crises on a global scale. Advances in attaining gender equality have been equally sluggish. Is there a link between these two trends? How can gender equality enhance the
achievement of sustainable development? These questions and more will be addressed in this essay.

**Meaning of Terms**

(a) **Sustainable Development**

The most widely accepted definition of sustainable development is that given by the Brundtland Report of 1987. The Report defines sustainable development as both an objective and a method. It is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without jeopardising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” This clearly expresses what is fair and how it is imperative to act in a responsible manner so that the fundamental needs of all peoples can be met today and far into the future. The above definition has both a ‘horizontal’ dimension – which addresses solidarity and poverty reduction today throughout the world – and a ‘vertical’ dimension in the form of solidarity with future generations. The World Survey defines sustainable development as economic, social and environmental development that ensures human well-being and dignity, ecological integrity, gender equality and social justice, now and in the future.

(b) **Gender equality**

Gender equality in the present context refers to a state of affairs in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities in all walks of life. It also means the presence of a gender perspective in decision-making of all kinds and that women’s interests are given the same consideration as men’s in terms of rights and the allocation of resources (Johnsson-Latham, 2007). Substantive or de facto gender equality according to CEDAW therefore entails women’s equal enjoyment of their rights, especially in regard to results and outcomes.

**The Link between Gender Inequality and Sustainability**

This subtopic will be dealt with in such a way as to cover the three pillars of sustainable development viz: social, economic and environmental development. The social pillar of sustainable development emphasises equity and equality. It involves confronting negative social trends such as growing income disparities, exclusion of women from the green economy owing to gender segregated employment patterns and discrimination, rising unemployment, and a persistent gender gap (SustainLabour, 2009). 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, however, if they ignore gender 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. Economic progress can improve the status of women, but a country cannot advance if its women are left behind. With respect to this social pillar of sustainable development, it has been found that there is a greater likelihood for allocation of more resources to human development priorities, including child health, nutrition and access to employment when women have greater voice and participation in public administration (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). Unfortunately, due to gender inequality, fewer women are involved as decision makers, planners, managers, scientists and technical advisers in the design, development and implementation of policies and programmes for sustainable development. This makes it difficult if not impossible for allocation to be made to such human development priorities.
Furthermore, World Bank studies show that focusing on women in development assistance and poverty reduction strategies brings about faster improvement than “gender neutral” approaches and that when financial aid are put in the hands of men they tend to waste a large percentage of it on personal use (The World Bank, 2009). On the other hand, because women play enormous role in the welfare of households, they will ensure social development and sustainability by making sure that whatever is available is properly disbursed. With respect to economic pillar of sustainable development, it is found that certain aspects of gender equality, such as female education and women’s share of employment, can have a positive impact on economic growth, although this impact is dependent on the nature of growth strategies, the structure of the economy, the sectoral composition of women’s employment and labour market segregation, among other factors (Kabeer and Natali, 2013).

The world’s most rapidly growing economies, including those of Asia, Southern Africa and Latin America, have also seen rapid rises in inequality. Inequality itself threatens economic sustainability, fuelling unrest and conflict and undermining the stability, level playing field and consumer demand on which growth relies (Stiglitz, 2012). In many economies, participation of women in remunerated work both in the formal and informal labour market has improved considerably. In addition to their usual involvement in subsistence agriculture, women are now seriously involved in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and, in some cases, have become more dominant in the expanding non-formal sector. Unfortunately, economic policies of many States geared towards commercialisation of agriculture and increment in exportation are shackled by gender-based inequalities which limit the participation of women. For instance, in many parts of the world, cash crops and commercial production of goods and services are considered the domain of men and subsistence crops the domain of women. This impedes the ability of women to access funds for these ventures and this in turn greatly hurts the economic pillar of sustainable development.

A research conducted by UNCTAD on the level of participation of women entrepreneurs in the economies of developing countries reveal that women’s enterprises are the smallest among SMEs in those countries and that they are concentrated in a limited number of sectors (textile and garment manufacturing and sales, food and beverages production and sales and other retail trading and services), producing similar goods and suffering the defect of limited access to production technology and market access (UNCTAD, 1998). The Economic and financial crisis that is rocking the global economy is a product of the capitalist model of competition and quest for profit, which lacks in corporate responsibility among financial institutions. 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.” The management and boards of all the failed banks and financial institutions are nearly if not 100 percent male. This has prompted some to blame the current economic meltdown on the gender gap (Wittenberg-Cox, Avivah and Alison Maitland. 2008).

Despite the increased presence of women in the workplace, they are yet to attain equality in the economic and political leadership. According to the UN, when women are well represented on governing bodies, the overall quality of governance tends to rise and levels of corruption sink. Women constitute just three percent of CEOs, six percent of top managers and 15 percent of board members among Fortune 500 companies. Despite findings that with more women in leadership positions we experience better performance and higher profits
given their “risksmart” approaches, people skills and leadership strengths which are sorely needed in business and government (Candice, 2009), they remain on the sidelines. Generally, research has revealed the following link between gender equality and economic development: that improved gender equality with respect to agricultural inputs and education could significantly increase agricultural productivity in Africa; that failure to invest in a gender-balanced primary and secondary education lowers GNP; that equality in occupation and pay package would increase both women’s income and national income; gender inequality negatively affects supply response to structural adjustment measures by reducing women’s incentives to produce tradable goods; Improved gender-balance contributes to productivity gains in the future, because the probability of children being enrolled in school increases with their mother’s educational level and improved or extra incomes going to the mother tend to have a more positive impact on household investment in nutrition, health, and education of the children than extra income going to the father (Elsen, Evers & Gideon, 1998).

With respect to the environmental pillar of sustainable development, 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. This can be seen in the after effects of Hurricane Katrina in the United States, in the 1991 cyclone disasters in Bangladesh as well as in the 2004 Asian tsunami. This special role of women make them better placed to formulate and implement effective environmental policies, unfortunately, they are still rare in leadership positions and they have little power and influence to affect environmental policy. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), about 18 percent of legislative seats worldwide are held by women and in many countries there are no female representatives at all. IPU studies also show that women in government give greater emphasis than men to social welfare and ecological issues (Candice, 2010). Despite decades of effort, overall progress in improving women’s lives has been inconsistent. Moreover, environmental benefits and burdens affecting human capabilities are inequitably distributed. Women are still underrepresented in all levels of government and other decision-making arenas, whether at work or, for many, at home.

Proposals on how the tool of Gender Equality can aid Sustainability

1. Due to women’s role as biodiversity conservators, smallholder farmers, which is described as the mainstay of sustainable food production and their description as “sustainability saviours”, governments and donor agencies should target women as critical agents for community adaptation to climate change and environmental problems. Doing this will ensure that they are recognised and respected for their knowledge, capabilities and bodily integrity, and that their roles are matched with rights, control over resources and decision-making power.

2. With respect to policies aimed at national and local food sufficiency and low-chemical and environmentally sustainable agriculture there should be consultation with smallholder farmers, particularly women, about their priorities and constraints rather than assume that their interests are already aligned with preconceived policy aims and visions before such policies are formulated and or implemented.

3. There is need to remove legislative, policy, administrative and customary barriers to achieving women's equal rights to access natural resources, including access to and
control over land (and other forms of property), credit, inheritance, information, and new technology.

4. The absence of women in power is linked to higher levels of female poverty, especially in rural areas of developing countries where women are responsible for 60–80 per cent of food production as well as fuel and water provision yet have little access or control over natural assets such as land, water and ecological conditions that create opportunities for a better life. Sustainable development is a political concept; it is about good governance thus it will be hard to achieve until we get closer to gender parity. There is need therefore for more women to be elected or appointed into political posts.

Conclusion
It is highly unlikely to achieve or sustain the three pillars of sustainable development-economic, social and environmental development- without paying careful attention to gender-based differences. Due to socially-constructed roles, men and boys usually have an advantage over women and girls in access to resources, decision-making, and capacity to take advantage of social, political, and economic opportunities. To enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of development interventions, these differences need to be understood and factored into policies and programs. 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. But change will not happen if gender equality is only pushed by women and for women. Men need to be champions as well if barriers and gender stereotypes are to be broken down. And there is a lot in it for men too. If gender barriers and stereotypes are broken down, there will be more freedom to choose one’s role in society and less pressure for men to be the sole or main breadwinner of the family. Having more income from women’s work will provide greater financial security for their households and nations generally. It will bring about stronger economic growth, higher productivity, and improved sustainability of social, economic and environmental protection systems. Children on the other hand will be able to spend more time with both of their parents, and as they grow up, they will find it normal for fathers to spend more time at home and mothers to spend more time at work. More gender equality is thus a win-win proposition for everyone involved. A sustainable development pathway must be established which has an explicit commitment to gender equality and seeks to enhance women’s capabilities, respect and protect their rights and reduce and redistribute their unpaid care work. Women must have full and equal participation in decision making and policy development to create this pathway.

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