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Brief 11: Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals: Moving Beyond Women as a "Quick Fix" for Development

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Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals:
Moving Beyond Women as a "Quick Fix" for Development

by J. Michael Denney

In September 2015, the international community will sign on to a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The SDGs are applicable to all states, developing and developed alike, and are the result of a political process led by an Open Working Group comprising 70 member states in consultation with other stakeholders. This brief concerns MDG 3, Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women, and the corresponding proposed SDG 5, Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls. All information about SDG 5 comes from the Open Working Group Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals.

In the first part, the author presents an analytical framework for evaluating whether the goals for female empowerment and gender equality attain the desired result. Next, the framework is applied to the targets for the proposed SDG 5. Finally, the author argues that the international community should embrace goals, targets, and indicators that advance gender equality for the sake of equality itself, rather than as a quick fix for economic underdevelopment.

Analytical Framework: Resources, Agency, and Achievements

A global goal for gender equality and women's empowerment is undoubtedly necessary given the pervasive gender-based inequality in the world, and the existence of MDG 3 is a success for those who have long advocated for gender equality. However, much of the discourse and the thinking surrounding gender equality stems from the notion articulated by the World Bank that investing in women makes "good economic sense" for international development.[1] Following the failure of Structural Adjustment Programs in the developing world, scholars and researchers have noted that women have prevented households from slipping into poverty through informal household labor.[2]

Scholars have taken issue with the "economic sense" approach for female empowerment. They argue that women face structural impediments to empowerment that cannot be overcome with economic and educational schemes, though both of those remain necessary pieces of empowerment. Empirical research in the Caribbean shows that despite the fact that women have overall higher education rates than men, they do not have better (or even equal) access to good jobs.[3] Data from the United States highlight structural impediments arising from the intersection of gender, class, and race that education and economic opportunities cannot overcome: despite having higher education rates and higher paying jobs than their male counterparts, African American women are habitually politically underrepresented in state and national legislatures.[4] Having educational and economic goals at the center of the female empowerment agenda conflates empowerment with a narrow set of economic returns that do not challenge the structural problems that women face. Moreover, it puts empowerment second to promoting a successful capitalist economic agenda.[5]

In her critique of MDG 3, Naila Kabeer urges the international community to move beyond the idea of empowering women as a means to achieve economic ends.[6] Education, political participation, and access to jobs are important for women's empowerment, but they are not sufficient conditions for overcoming powerful structural impediments that women face in every country. She argues that power is the ability to exercise choice, which can be broken down into resources, agency, and achievements. In this context, resources include material and social means to power (such as land ownership, education, etc.); agency is the ability to determine and pursue goals; and achievement is the ability to attain goals.[7] Among the proposed goals for women's empowerment, Kabeer

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includes ending systemic violence against women and allowing women to control resources. As will become apparent in the following section, a number of the proposed targets for SDG 5 address these criticisms.

Target Analysis

This section examines each of the proposed targets for SDG 5 using the resources, agency, and achievements framework as the basis for evaluation. The analysis does not evaluate each target specifically for its impact on women's resources, agency, and achievement. Rather, the framework is a tool to see whether the SDG targets moved beyond viewing women's empowerment as a solution to other societal ills, like economic underdevelopment or childhood health. As the next section illustrates, the Open Working Group was successful in devising targets that will empower women for the sake of empowerment and promote equality for the sake of equality.

The analysis also pays special attention to how the proposed targets build off of MDG 3 and whether the targets are actually feasible. There is often confusion regarding the differences between goals, targets, and indicators. While there is certainly some degree of semantics involved, in general the Open Working Group defines *goals* as "action oriented, global in nature and universally applicable." *Targets* are designed to be aspirational but malleable when it comes time for governments to set national policy. Targets will change based on national circumstance, but goals will not. *Indicators* are the tangible measures of success set at the national and international levels.[8] All of the targets are covered in the order in which they appear in the final Open Working Group Proposal.

5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

This target is framed more as an aspirational goal than a target. The SDGs seek to be, in one way or another, measurable. "Ending all forms of discrimination" seems, at best, overwhelmingly difficult to quantify. However, there is merit to including this target.

The inclusion of "women and girls" recognizes that women of different ages experience varied forms of discrimination. Age is a large part of how a body is judged and treated within social structures. Power can be tied up with age in a positive sense, such as when age is equated with wisdom. But age can also play a negative role, such as when young women are forced into marriages or genital mutilation, or when a woman's personal value and social worth hinges on youthful appearance and reproductive capacity.[9]

The value of this target lies in its recognition of the intersection of lived experiences. Women are not a unified category of persons. Important distinctions in how different women experience the world, depending on factors such as class, race, and age, should be part of the discussion.[10]

5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

This target is a clear example of progress from MDG 3, in which references to violence were notably absent.[11] Addressing violence against women moves the discussion of aspirational goals away from the "smart economics" perspective discussed earlier in this work. While there are certainly attempts to quantify the socioeconomic costs of violence against women, such as through health care costs associated with the violence or bureaucratic costs related to policing the violence and its aftermath,[12] much of the literature surrounding violence is dedicated to how it affects women and girls directly. Additionally, the conceptual frameworks for dealing with gender-based violence often come from the public health perspectives and gender theory, both of which are usually more nuanced than economics in terms of capturing lived human experiences.[13] In taking the SDGs beyond cold calculations based on economic efficiency, this target shows a deeper respect for the intrinsic rights of women to exist in a world free from structural discrimination and violence.

5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

Forced marriages and female genital mutilation are problems that predominantly affect women in the developing world, although developed countries such as the United Kingdom with large developing-world immigrant populations, are also affected.[14] Despite progress following the 2004 Trial Chamber ruling of the Special Court for Sierra Leone that declared forced marriage a crime against humanity, the practice persists on a wide scale.[15]

Early childhood forced marriages, forced marriages in general, and genital mutilation directly take agency away from women and girls. Often, the practices embedded in important local institutions and can be very difficult to escape. In some societies, women and girls who do flee forced marriages find that they cannot return to their biological families. In a sense they become exiles within their own countries and have difficulty making ends meet without their support networks.[16]

Female genital mutilation has a number of cultural origins and is entangled with religious and cultural interpretations of purity and sexuality. However, the practice is largely a means of controlling female sexuality, thereby removing an important aspect of agency from affected women and girls.[17] In addition to being psychologically injurious, female genital mutilation has a host of damaging physical effects, including increased risk of infections and complications with childbirth, and it is a major contributor to female mortality and morbidity.[18] Including genital mutilation along with forced marriages in the

Female Genital Mutilation by Region
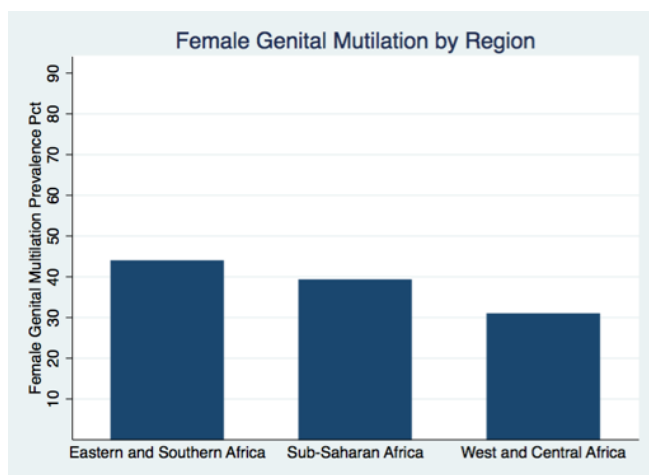
Source: UNICEF global databases 2014, based on the Demographic and Health Survey, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, and other nationally representative surveys.

SDGs is a positive development that accords intrinsic value to the female experience and is also measurable by conventional metrics.

5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate

The world over, women bear the brunt of unpaid domestic work. This holds true across the most prominent sectors: housework, agricultural activities, and care. This target, however, is significantly weaker compared to many of the others listed here because female economic empowerment does not appear to have a significant effect on the gender distribution of unpaid care. This means that costly government policy, or a dramatic cultural shift, is likely necessary to redistribute the burden of unpaid care.

In the developed world, gendered domestic roles have defied traditional metrics of women's empowerment. In a study that covers countries across Europe, it was found that despite large increases in female labor force participation, women continue to do the lion's share of domestic labor (including in areas other than "care"). Also, there is evidence that women who are household breadwinners are inclined to do more domestic labor than their male partners simply to reinforce traditional gender power dynamics.[19]

This evidence indicates that the traditional methods of female empowerment (education, economic resource control, political representation, etc.) more common in the developed countries have had a minimal effect on domestic labor distribution.

Without a clear understanding of what policies can reduce the burden of unpaid care work, it will not make a useful, simple, and measurable goal.

5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life

Equal participation of women in decision-making structures is a fairly straightforward aspect of empowerment. Sharing the means of political power in a society is, perhaps, the most efficient route for effecting change that favors your group. Experience has shown, however, that the mere inclusion of women in politics is not a sufficient condition for empowerment or equality.

In South Africa, women played a very active role in ending apartheid, running the liberation movement, and crafting the new political order that followed. South Africa boasts high percentages of female parliamentarians and appointed officials, but scholars have noted that this progress has weakened the grassroots women's empowerment movement. The women who would have led the grassroots movements were elected into office or coopted into the ruling structure, and their absence as activists and leaders on the ground has resulted in a gap between the experiences of the majority of South Africa's women and the female parliamentarians.[20]

Decision-making positions must go hand in hand with grassroots movements that push the political system in the right direction. In countries with gender quotas, women in politics are often just "vote banks" for the ruling party.[21] However, in Rwanda, where women make up close to 50 percent of elected parliamentarians, female ministers have been able to raise women's issues more openly and more often than ever before.[22]

5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

Sexual and reproductive health were first introduced as a target for MDG 5: *Improve Maternal Health*. The second target of MDG 5 is to "achieve universal access to reproductive health." However, it would also have made sense if the issue were included in *Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality*.

While becoming pregnant and raising children can be a positive life-defining experience, there are serious consequences for women that can impair their agency and ability to share power in society. In high-income countries, child rearing often happens during the same years that people are usually advanc-

Households with Working Mother and Children Under 6 and Mother as Primary Childminder
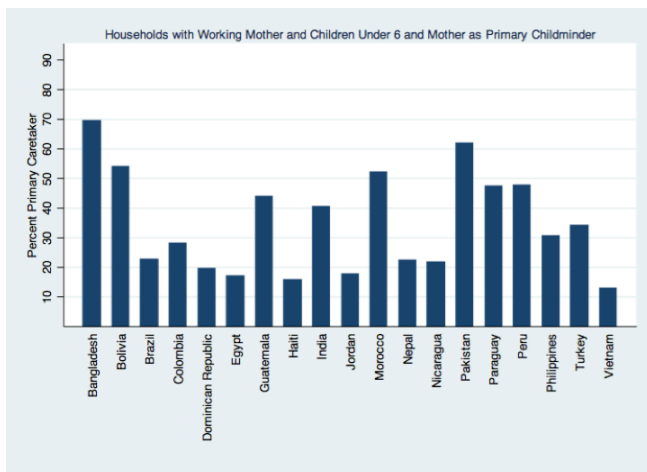
Source: USAID Stat Compiler, Demographic and Health Survey 1990–2002

ing their careers, and pregnancy combined with early childhood care contributes to significant time away from the workplace. In low-income countries, poor access to health care can mean death for a young mother who is malnourished or suffers complications. Additionally, women are still the overwhelming providers of uncompensated domestic labor, including child care. This work requires an enormous amount of time and devotion and takes away from time spent in pursuit of monetary or political gain.[23]

It is essential to include reproductive rights in the SDGs in some form, as they are critical to female empowerment. It could, however, also continue to exist under a public health goal, such as a reiteration of MDG 5.

5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.

The inclusion of natural resources management has both positive and negative dimensions in terms of women's empowerment and gender equality. It is a positive development because natural resources are an important part of wealth and power, especially in the developing world where economic activities are more resource-driven and less capital intensive. Sharing control of natural resources could provide women with enhanced resources and greater agency in terms of wealth generation and management. But, it is important to note that resource management programs tend to reflect existing

patriarchal social and political structures, meaning that women are systematically underrepresented and disadvantaged.[24]

There is also, however, a "smart economics" influence in this discussion. Analysis has indicated that natural resource management programs are more effective when women are well represented in the effort, partly because women are natural collaborators, whereas men are more likely to come to conflict.[25] This argument makes women essential contributors by indicating that something inherent in being a woman leads to more successful outcomes. It also puts gender equality on the agenda in order to make existing natural resource management more effective. Here, it is possible that equal participation of women is desired in order to advance an economic agenda rather than for the sake of empowerment and equality.

5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women

This is a unique target because it has distinctly different applications in developed and developing countries. Overall, information and communications technology like the Internet and cell phones have been wellsprings of entrepreneurial and community-building activities. Making sure that women have equal access to these transformative technologies is undeniably important for empowerment. However, the extent to which women interact with the Internet and other communications technologies varies based on their society's level of economic development.

In developing countries, there are gender gaps in terms of access to and use of information and communications technologies. As these technologies are sources of economic empowerment, the gap threatens to exacerbate existing gender disparities.[26] The conversation in developed countries is much different. Notably, the gender gap in technology use has all but disappeared.[27] The conversation is now focused on the role that gender plays in the creation of new technologies, as men are largely responsible for the design, programming, and manufacturing thereof, and how technology enables new forms of organization in business and government that can perpetuate or break down gender roles.[28]

This is an excellent target to include because it has clear applications for states at different levels of economic development. Ultimately, whether empowering women means getting them access to communications technologies or making sure they have a role to play in the design and manufacturing of those products, the focus is on making sure that women are not discriminated against in one of the most economically and culturally important industries of the 21st century.

Households with Working Mother and Children Under 6 and Husband as Primary Childminder
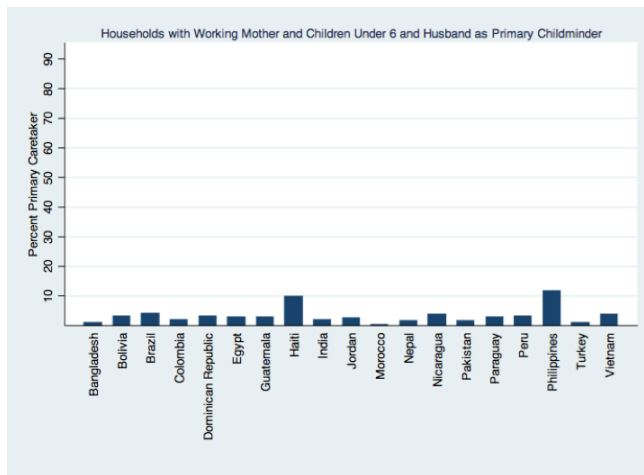
Source: USAID Stat Compiler, Demographic and Health Survey 1990–2002

5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

In the Open Working Group Focus Area documents that precede the final report, this target appeared as promoting disaggregating data to create good policy.[29] The latest version of the target steps away from statistics as a policy prescription and instead adopts the broader, less tangible language of "sound policy" and "enforceable legislation." Broader language makes sense given that the purpose of collecting data in general is to be able to describe the world more accurately and, in the case of governments, create policy that is rooted in empiricism. However, the international community should push for gender-disaggregated data to be included in the indicators for target 5.c.

Disaggregating data has become increasingly popular since the 4th World Conference on Women. Today, gender-disaggregated data can be found in mainstream reports from numerous important international institutions, including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.[30] Disaggregated data are helpful in that they allow development agencies and governments to focus in on specific groups that are affected by whatever they are trying to measure.

This is a highly relevant topic because gender-disaggregated statistics force governments to acknowledge gender inequalities in wealth or education despite overall GDP growth. Training government economists in the developing world to use advanced data-gathering techniques, specifically accounting for different genders (or whatever factor one would want to disaggregate), is more straightforward than "ending violence against

women," but it is still a complex affair. Rather than a goal specific to empowering women, it is a goal to give governments the proper methodological tools with which to craft good policy.

Silences

A final point to make is that there remain two major silences in both the proposed targets above and in the reports coming out of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development: nontraditional genders and masculinities. The proposed SDGs do not hint at, much less deal directly with, a host of issues that could fall under the label of gender issues. LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and intersex) issues are completely missing from the agenda, despite the existence of widespread structural discrimination and violence against persons who identify with these categories.[31] Additionally, there is little mention of men in the Open Working Group literature surveyed for this brief. It appears as if the Open Working Group is using the word "gender" as synonymous with women.

Conclusions

SDG 5 is a substantial improvement over MDG 3. Each of the proposed targets is worthy of full academic investigations, but the purpose of this article was to give a brief overview of how this iteration of SDG 5 compares to MDG 3 and the existing literature on women's empowerment and gender equality. Each of the targets merits inclusion in a global goal for women's empowerment.

The international community should consider two things above all others. First, it should unequivocally adopt "ending violence against girls and women in all its forms" as a primary target. The language should be changed, however, to include the violence experienced by the LGBTQI community: "ending gender-based violence in all its forms."

Second, it should include language on collecting gender-disaggregated data in a variety of topic areas. Gender-based violence, economic gender inequality, access to material, and social sources of wealth are all aspects of gender equality and female empowerment that can be captured using gender-disaggregated data-gathering techniques. Although data can be corrupted and manipulated to tell a specific (and often political) story, institutionalized gender-disaggregated data on the state level would be an important first step in understanding the extent of gender inequality the world over. Perhaps most importantly, it is an achievable step with measurable progress. Achievability is a cornerstone of the SDGs, and the targets should reflect that.

Acknowledgments

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