

The Interplay of Gender Issues and Sustainable Development: A Review

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Abstract

Achieving sustainable development requires a deep understanding of the complex relationships between social, economic, and environmental factors. This article explores the key intersections of gender equality, women's empowerment, and sustainable development, emphasizing how gender inequality hinders progress toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By examining the intricate dynamics of the gender-sustainable development nexus, this article provides a deeper understanding of its multifaceted relationships between social, economic, and environmental factors. In doing so, recent literature on the subject, alongside commentaries, repositories, reports, etc., was analyzed. This paper concludes that attaining development among all the pillars of sustainable development is unthinkable without empowering women and achieving gender equality. The comprehensive literature review also underscores the need to integrate gender perspectives into sustainable development policies and practices.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals (SDGs), Gender equality, Empowerment .

Introduction

The pursuit of sustainable development is a global priority, with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) providing a blueprint for a more equitable and environmentally conscious world (United Nations, 2020). However, achieving these goals depends on the realization of gender equality and empowering women and girls (UN Women, 2020). Despite noticeable progress in recent decades, gender inequality persists, affecting sustainable development on multiple levels (World Bank, 2020).

Gender inequality is not only a moral issue; it also has wide-ranging economic, social, and environmental consequences (Kabeer, 2015).. Women and girls play a crucial role in driving change, making their empowerment vital for sustainable development (Grown et al., 2016). However, they continue to face major barriers to fully participating in economic, social, and political life, including discriminatory laws, social norms, and institutional practices (World Bank, 2020).

The connection between gender issues and sustainable development is complex (Hemmati, 2000). Gender inequality slows progress by restricting women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Kabeer, 2015). At the same time, sustainable development policies can worsen existing gender inequalities if they overlook the unique needs and experiences of women and girls (Grown et al., 2016).

Gender-based discrimination and inequalities are very much apparent, and although a lot is being done towards alleviating such problems, low empowerment of women and high gender gap still impede the development process. As a result, the likelihood of sustainability is in question, given such a large gender disparity. Thus, this article examined the connection between gender issues and sustainable development, showing how gender inequality obstructs progress towards the SDGs and emphasizing the need to integrate gender perspectives into sustainable development policies and practices.

This paper will answer the following research questions

1. What is the relationship between gender inequality and progress towards the sustainable development goals (SDGs)?
2. How do social and economic barriers affect women's access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities in the context of Sustainable Development Goals

3. How can gender-sensitive policies and practices mitigate the effects of climate change on women
4. How can gender mainstreaming be integrated into sustainable development policies and practices
5. What are the effects of women empowerment on the sustainable development outcomes

Method

Qualitative methodology was employed, with secondary sources as instruments of data collection. The researcher employed the doctrinal library-based research methodology to examine existing literatures, reports, commentaries on gender equality and sustainable development. The research is restricted to the review of existing literatures as the main source of data collection.

Gender Equality in Sustainable Development

Gender equality is essential for sustainable development, and is explicitly recognized as a standalone goal in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," serves as a cornerstone of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2020).

- **SDG 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls**

SDG 5 aims to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, while ensuring full and effective participation in decision-making processes (United Nations, 2020). Achieving this goal requires removing social, economic, and cultural barriers that prevent women and girls from reaching their full potential.

- **SDG 1: End Poverty in All Its Forms Everywhere**

SDG 1, "End poverty in all its forms everywhere," is strongly connected to SDG 5. Poverty disproportionately impacts women and girls, who

are more likely to experience poverty and encounter significant barriers to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (World Bank, 2020). Reducing poverty requires a gender-sensitive approach that considers the unique needs and experiences of women and girls.

- **SDG 3: Ensure Healthy Lives and Promote Well-being for All at All Ages**

SDG 3, "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages," is also closely tied to SDG 5. Women and girls face major health disparities, including limited healthcare access, high maternal mortality, and insufficient reproductive health services (World Health Organization, 2020). Achieving this goal means addressing these disparities and ensuring that women and girls receive quality healthcare.

- **SDG 13: Take Urgent Action to Combat Climate Change and Its Impacts**

SDG 13, "Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts," is closely tied to SDG 5. Climate change disproportionately impacts women and girls, who face higher risk of poverty, hunger, and displacement due to climate-related disasters (United Nations, 2020). Fighting the climate change requires a gender-sensitive approach that considers the unique needs and experiences of women and girls.

In 2015, world leaders gathered at the United Nations to launch the 2030 Agenda, a comprehensive plan comprising 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. This ambitious agenda recognizes the link of human and environmental prosperity and prioritizes eradicating poverty, inequality, and discrimination in all forms (UN, 2015). As the world strives to achieve the SDGs, countries and stakeholders must work to build a resilient, sustainable future that balances economic, social, and environmental priorities (Leal Filho et al., 2022a).

The 2030 Agenda outlines key priorities for human and planetary well-being, including: (i) ensuring a healthy environment and equal opportunities for all, (ii) protecting the planet through sustainable resource management and climate action, (iii) fostering economic and social prosperity in harmony with nature, (iv) promoting peaceful, inclusive societies, and (v) strengthening global partnerships (UN, 2015). Notably, SDG 5 priorities gender equality and women's empowerment, and building on the UN's long-standing efforts, including the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 (UN Women, 2020a).

Gender equality is essential for socio-economic development. Despite progress, women still encounter major obstacles, including restricted access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, as well as persistent social and economic disparities (Annan, 2000; Brixiová et al., 2020; Tsige et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2020; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020). They also face violence, discrimination, and underrepresentation in politics, economics, and businesses (Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019; European Commission, 2019). The UN recognizes women's critical role in global prosperity in key documents such as *The Future We Want* (UN, 2012) and the Open Working Group Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals (2014).

SDG 5, which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, builds on the UN's long-standing efforts. Key milestones include the creation of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 (UN Women, 2020a), the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979 (OHCHR, 2020), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 (UN, 1995), and the launch of UN Women in 2010 (UN, 2012).

The UN publication "We the Peoples" highlights gender equality as essential for socio-economic development (Annan, 2000). Despite progress, women still face entrenched inequalities, including restricted

access to decent work, education, healthcare, and decision-making opportunities (Brixiová et al., 2020; Tsige et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2020; Maheshwari and Nayak, 2020). They also remain disproportionately by violence, discrimination, and underrepresentation in politics, economics, and business (Milazzo and Goldstein, 2019; European Commission, 2019).

The Role of Women in Sustainable Development

Women play a crucial role in sustainable development, and their contributions are vital to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite facing major challenges, women drive sustainable progress across various sectors.

• Contributions to Economic Growth

Empowering women and ensuring gender equality significantly boost economic development, a key pillar of sustainability. Economic progress is unattainable without women's active participation. (Solomon and Memar, 2014; OECD, 2008).

Attempting to grow an economy while excluding women's contributions is as futile as trying to clap with one hand. Sustained, robust economic growth requires the equal and active participation of both men and women. Research has consistently confirms that unlocking women's skills and qualifications is essential for achieving economic success (OECD, 2008).

Women make up 70% of the world's poor, largely due to limited access to economic opportunities (OECD, 2008). Recognizing and valuing women's work is key to lifting them out of poverty and enabling them to drive economic growth. A major obstacle to reducing poverty and boosting economic growth in developing countries is the persistent undervaluation of women's work (OECD, 2008). Economically empowered women also play advance aspects of sustainable development. Notably, financial stability enables women to participate

in politics, giving them the time and resources to engage in decision-making. (Solomon and Memar, 2014). When women achieve economic security they gain greater political influence, helping shape their country's future. Thus, women's economic empowerment extends beyond financial benefits, driving broader societal progress..

- **Environmental Stewardship**

Women remain significantly underrepresented in government, reinforcing the perception that politics is male-dominated. (Solomon and Memar, 2014). Despite legislative efforts to empower women and promote gender equality, their participation in political decision-making remains limited. To improve governance - a key factor in sustainable development – targeted initiatives must advance women's empowerment and gender equality. Fair representation in decision-making ensures inclusivity, protecting the interests of all stakeholders; regardless of gender. Women's participation in decision-making is vital for several reasons. First, it introduces diverse perspectives, resulting in more effective policies. Second, it promotes equity and justice by addressing historical and systematic inequalities. Finally, it fosters a fairer society where everyone's rights and needs are considered. Yet, women remain underrepresented in politics, often excluded by male-dominated systems. Addressing this requires structural changes that give women a greater voice in both their lives and their country's political system.

Women's participation in decision-making offers numerous benefits, including better governance, improved healthcare, and more effective education. Women's organizations actively promote women's rights and empowerment by supporting development and advocating for policy changes. Economic development also depends on women holding key political positions because politics and economics are deeply intertwined. Government policies directly shape a country's economy (Avellaneda and Dellepiane, 2006). When women participate

fully and equally in politics, economic policies become fairer and beneficial to all.

- **Social and Community Development**

Social development is essential for sustainability, and achieving meaningful transformation requires women's active participation (Solomon and Memar, 2014). Despite progress in Africa's social development, gender equality and women's empowerment have advanced slowly. The continent still faces significant challenges that must be addressed in the post-2015 development agenda (ECA, 2015). Women's empowerment is closely linked to education, a crucial tool for advancing gender equality (OECD, 2012). Ensuring equal educational opportunities for women profoundly impacts on social development.

Health is a key component of social development, influencing education and productivity (ECA, 2015). Health challenges can increase healthcare costs, pushing individuals into poverty (ECA, 2015). Africa continues to face some of the world's most severe public health crises (ECA, 2015).

Women's illiteracy creates a ripple effect, harming their families' overall health. Conversely, educating women improves family and child well-being (OECD, 2008). Education benefits not only women's health but also their families' well-being, driving social development and economic growth. Beyond general health concerns, women face higher risks of gender-specific diseases, reproductive health issues, and socio-economic factors (OECD, 2008). Providing adequate care and support in these areas is essential for maintaining their health, well-being, and workforce productivity.

Gender Inequality and Barriers to Sustainable Development

Gender inequality remains a major obstacle to sustainable development, blocking progress toward the United Nations'

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite decades of progress, disparities persist in education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political representation.

- **Gender-based Violence and Discrimination**

The global community including nations, political groups and humanitarian organization, now recognizes gender-based violence (GBV) as a human rights violation with devastating consequences at individual, family, community and national levels (Michau, 2021). GBV affects physical and psychological health of the individual, and impedes social and economic development (Tol *et al.* 2013; Chatterji *et al.* 2020a). The United Nations 2030 Agenda, a globally negotiated framework for development and environmental issues, acknowledges violence against women. In 2015, delegates from 172 countries signed this agreement, which centers on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 sub-goals set for completion by 2030 (Pufé, 2017). SDG 5 promoted gender equality, and sub-goal 5.2 targets eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls, including sexual exploitation and trafficking. Thus, eliminating GBV remains a global priority, as it hinders gender equality and sustainable development (United Nations 2015). True gender equality means women and men have equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities in education, decision-making, political and economic participation and health. However, no country has fully achieved this goal (Cavalcanti and Tavares 2016).

- **The Gendered Impact of Climate Change**

The urgency for gender-aware sustainable development continues to grow, as evidence highlights the unequal and complex impacts of climate change and natural disasters on women and men (GGEO, 2016). Even in the best-case scenarios, climate-related disasters will intensify (IPCC, 2018), requiring new approach to address the failures of current sustainable development efforts (Bolsø *et al.*, 2018). However,

most leaders in sustainable development ignore gender considerations, with academia being a rare exception.

This heightened vulnerability stems from pre-existing power imbalances, making women more affected by natural disasters than men (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change IPCC 2014; Castañeda Camey et al. 2020; Cappelli et al. 2021). Climate change and environmental catastrophes also contribute GBV (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Committee 2018).

Environmental disasters often lead to increased domestic violence and intimate partner violence, rape, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and forced child marriage (Fisher 2010; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2015). Data from 180 countries show that, environmental shocks worsen livelihood insecurity and drive rise in forced early marriages, as families use them as economic coping strategies (Carrico et al. 2020; Tsaneva 2020; Pasten et al. 2020). Furthermore, food security must be examined through the lens of GBV.

Approaches to Address Gender Issues in Sustainable Development

Addressing gender issues in sustainable development requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates gender-sensitive policies, programs, and practices. The following approaches can help:

- Gender Mainstreaming**

The approach integrates gender perspectives into all aspects of policy and programming, from design to implementation and evaluation (UN Women, 2020). It recognizes that gender inequality as a cross-cutting issue that affects all areas of sustainable development.

- **Gender-Responsive Budgeting**

This approach analyzes and allocates budget resources to meet the different needs of women, men, girls and boys (UN Women, 2020). It ensures that budget allocations are equitable and effective in promoting gender equality.

- **Empowerment of Women and Girls**

Empowering women and girls is essential for addressing gender issues in sustainable development. This requires promoting their education, health, and economic empowerment, and participation in decision-making processes (UN Women, 2020).

- **Addressing Unpaid Care Work**

Unpaid care work, such as childcare and household chores, falls disproportionately on women and girls, limiting their time for education, employment, and other activities (UN Women, 2020). To address this issue, we must recognize its value, redistribute responsibilities more equitably, and providing support services like childcare and healthcare.

- **Engaging Men and Boys**

Involving men and boys is essential for addressing gender issues in sustainable development. This requires promoting positive masculinity, challenging harmful gender stereotypes, and encouraging them to actively support gender equality (UN Women, 2020).

- **Strengthening Institutions and Policies**

Strengthening institutions and policies are key to addressing gender issues in sustainable development. This requires promoting gender-sensitive policies, laws, and institutions, while strengthening the capacity of governments, civil society, and the private sector to tackle gender inequality (UN Women, 2020).

- **Promoting Data-Driven Decision Making**

Effective decision-making relies on collecting, analyzing, and applying sex-disaggregated data to shape policies and programs (UN Women, 2020). This ensures that initiatives effectively promote gender equality and sustainable development.

Achieving social development requires challenging and eliminating deeply ingrained stereotypes about women.. Gender is a social and cultural construct (King and Mason, 2001). These biases harm women's well-being and hinder national progress. Dismantling these norms allows women to be seen as equals, exercise their rights, make independent decisions, and fully contribute to development. Without addressing these perceptions at the grassroots level, efforts to combat gender inequality will fall short.

Recommendations

1. **Increase Women's Representation in Politics:** Governments and organizations should enact policies and programs to boost women's representation in politics, leadership, and decision- roles.
2. **Promote Education and Healthcare for Women:** Governments and organizations must prioritize education and healthcare, ensuring equal and accessible to quality services that addresses their specific needs.
3. **Challenge and Eliminate Stereotypes:** Governments, organizations, and individuals must actively combat cultural and social biases that reinforce gender inequality.
4. **Implement Policies and Programs to Support Women's Empowerment:** Governments and organizations should create policies and expand women's access to credit, training, and employment, enhancing their economic independence.
5. **Encourage Male Engagement and Accountability:** Men should actively promote gender equality and hold themselves and others accountable for their actions.

6. **Support Women's Organizations and Movements:** Governments, organizations, and individuals should provide financial, technical, and moral support to groups advocating for women's empowerment.
7. **Monitor and Evaluate Progress:** Regular assessment of gender equality efforts should drive continuous improvement, ensuring meaningful progress in women's empowerment.

Concluding Remarks

Empowering women and promoting gender equality are essential for achieving sustainable development, social progress and economic growth. Women's participation in leadership, education and healthcare is critical to this empowerment. However, they continue face significant challenges, including stereotypes, limited access to education and healthcare, and political underrepresentation.

To overcome these challenges, society must eliminate deep-rooted biases, expand women's access to education and healthcare, and increase their presence in politics and leadership. Governments, organizations, and individuals must work together to create an environment that actively supports women's empowerment and promotes gender equality.

Struggling to bring about development with the recognition of men's efforts only is like clapping with one hand. For the effective and sustainable growth of any society, the equal participation of both sexes is crucial. It is a well-established fact that the achievement of growth is contingent upon the full use of the skills and qualification of women. Therefore, in this paper, women's empowerment and gender equality are discussed as a means to bring about sustainable development. In his analysis, the researcher goes beyond the three pillars of sustainable development (education, healthcare and economy), due to the conviction that more issues can be considered for the attainment of sustainable development. The argument of Bossel (1999) corroborates the assertion that "sustainable development of human society has

environmental, material, ecological, social, economic, legal, cultural, political and psychological dimensions that require attention". Hence, for greater emphasis and detail, the paper also discusses political development/good governance and human rights protection separately, even if these are, in one way or another, included among the three pillars of sustainable development

Ultimately, empowering women is not only a moral obligation but a key driver of sustainable development, social progress and economic growth. By advancing gender equality and empowering women, we build a more just, equitable, , and prosperous society for all.

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