

Indicators as Substitute for Policy Contestation and Accountability? Some Reflections on the 2030 Agenda from the Perspective of Gender Equality and Women's Rights

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Abstract

Thanks to successful strategizing by women's rights organizations, attention to gender equality and women's rights is remarkably wide-ranging in the 2030 Agenda. But the ambition to have gender equality as a crosscutting issue tends to evaporate at the level of targets and indicators. This speaks to the difficulties of using quantitative indicators to capture the largely context-specific and qualitative dimensions of gender equality. Ultimately, some of the concerns about the huge significance attached to the measurement imperative stems from the inordinate weight that the global indicators framework is carrying, effectively substituting for substantive contestation on key policy issues and meaningful accountability mechanisms.

Much has been said about the comprehensive nature of the 2030 Agenda, and rightly so, given the push for having a parsimonious set of goals to simplify communication and planning. What is equally remarkable is the commitment to gender equality and women's human rights. As Gita Sen rightly points out in her contribution to this special issue, while SDG5 shares one of MDG3's main limitations, namely, the lack of explicit affirmation of women's human rights in the goal itself, unlike MDG3, human rights did find their way into the targets of the new agenda, both explicitly as in the target on sexual and reproductive health and rights (5.6) and implicitly in several other targets, on ending all forms of discrimination (5.1), violence (5.2) and harmful practices (5.3). Furthermore, heeding the call of feminists to address the structural barriers to achieving gender equality, SDG5's targets reflect commitments that seek to transform the underlying norms, structures and practices that hold women and girls back from enjoying their rights. This is evident in the breadth of issues covered in the nine targets under SDG5, from ending violence against women and harmful practices, to sexual and reproductive health and rights, from reducing women's unpaid care work to realizing women's full and effective participation in public life.

The 'agreement to jointly and separately push for a separate SDG for gender equality plus targets across other SDGs', as Sen reminds us, was probably the single most important strategic decision which had strong payoffs in the final decisions on the SDGs. This was not a given, but hard-won through successful strategizing and advocacy by a range of women's rights organizations brought together

through broad-based coalitions such as Women's Major Group and the Post-2015 Women's Coalition on the 'outside', working alongside feminist 'insiders' in Member State and the UN.

The slippage in ambition

These important gains notwithstanding, even a cursory glance at the details of the agenda would confirm that the attention to gender equality is far from crosscutting. The 'slippage in ambition' alluded to by the editors of this special issue certainly applies in the case of women's rights, with the ambition to have gender equality as a crosscutting issue sometimes evaporating as the targets were set and the indicators selected. In the end, while six of the 17 goals include gender-specific indicators, the indicator framework under five of the goals can be described as 'gender-sparse' (Goals 2, 10, 11, 13 and 17) and for the remaining six critical areas it is depressingly 'gender-blind' (Goals 6, 7, 9, 12, 14 and 15) (UN Women, 2018).

How does a goal with clear gender content and implications – such as 'ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all' (Goal 6) – end up being gender-blind? Not only are safe drinking water and sanitation essential for full enjoyment of life and human rights, they are particularly important for women and girls who are most often the primary users, providers and managers of water in their households. When safe drinking water is not available at home, women and girls are the ones who are forced to travel long distances to fetch the water. It would thus have been perfectly sensible to have at

least one indicator to assess the collection burden for households without water on premises, for example by capturing the time spent collecting water along with information on the household member who usually performs the task. Survey data for 61 countries show that in 80 per cent of households without access to water on premises, women and girls are responsible for water collection, and especially so in the poorest households in rural areas (UN Women, 2018).

Given the wealth of feminist thinking and activism on the harmful ecological and human effects of under-regulated corporate power and extractivism, it is equally astonishing that the broad environmental goals (Goals 12, 14, 15) ended up being 'gender-blind'. Perhaps this is partly a reflection of the inherent difficulties of translating gender analysis of systemic issues like climate change into simple quantifiable indicators. The inevitable reductionism is evident in some of the goals which are classified as 'gender-sensitive', for example Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies. The gender-specific indicators under Goal 16 suffer from the limitations that Margaret Satterthwaite and Sukti Dhital examine in their contribution to this special issue, namely the privileging of crime victims and criminal justice. The gender-specific indicators put the spotlight on women as victims of intentional homicide, conflict-related deaths, human trafficking and sexual violence, with close to no attention to the more complex and process-oriented institutional dimensions of women's everyday legal problems whether with respect to their inheritance rights, the rights to divorce and child custody or labor-related claims, which would help capture the gender-responsiveness or otherwise of justice institutions. This speaks to the difficulties of quantifying and using indicators to capture the largely context-specific and qualitative dimensions of gender equality which vary from one jurisdiction to the next, and the need for qualitative interpretation that is sensitive to and aware of contextual specificities.

Feminist methodologies and the interpretation of quantitative indicators

While feminist debates on methodology have at times echoed the quantitative versus qualitative methods divide between economists and anthropologists (Bardhan and Ray, 2006), taken as a whole feminist research has been remarkably multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, within which both quantitative and qualitative methods have had their place (Jackson, 2002).

Feminists, for example, have long defended the use of qualitative methods for their capacity to capture the complexity (or multi-dimensionality) and context-specificity of gender relations, but they have also appreciated the importance of quantitative approaches (Jackson, 2002). For example, without the analysis of sex ratios in census data, one of the major discriminatory forces confronting women in South Asia would not have been adequately captured, since it is only at large scale that the problem of adverse sex ratios can be confidently ascertained (Jackson, 2002). Conversely,

one of the significant shifts is microeconomic thinking – from the unitary household model to binary models where utility is gender-specific, as in Amartya Sen's (1987) 'cooperative conflict' framework – would not have taken place without the rich qualitative research on intra-household gender dynamics produced by anthropologists (Bardhan and Ray, 2006). Another area marked by multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work has been on the economic and social dynamics of care, where findings from sociological and anthropological research have fed into economic analyses of care as a sector, as well as the design of time use surveys.

The increasing recourse to quantitative indicators and composite gender indices for advocacy and policy purposes, which predates, but has been stimulated by the goal-setting exercises of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) eras, provides a good pretext for reminding ourselves of these methodological antecedents. Alicia Yamin's simple but powerful message in this special issue, that quantitative measures need to be complemented with contextual, qualitative information goes a long way in this regard. As she rightly points out, 'measuring progress in rights through these metrics that are abstracted from social context may well obscure more than they reveal about the power dynamics at play'. Her point can be illustrated using two of the other indicators that have found their way into the SDG global indicators framework.

On the economic dimensions of women's rights, attention is being increasingly directed to the gender pay gap (under SDG8), which is seen as a stronger indicator of gender inequality than female labor force participation, for example, which has been widely used in gender indices. The interest in gender pay gaps is warranted given its close association with occupational segregation, which by all accounts is pervasive across the world, regardless of the structure of the economy, and very difficult to dislodge (Rubery and Grimshaw, 2014). Data requirements, however, are not as straightforward as may seem at first sight. For a start, gender pay gaps can only be estimated reliably for workers in waged or salaried employment. In developing countries where self-employment is the norm, such data only cover a relatively small share of the work force, and gender pay gap estimates are likely to understate the real extent of earnings differentials. Another concern is the need for reliable trend data in order to understand why and how gender pay gaps may be narrowing: is pay convergence taking place in a context of overall wage growth, where women's pay is catching up with men's? Or is it in a context of declining wages, through a process of leveling down, as happened in the UK after the 2008 financial crisis? In this case, the gender pay gap has narrowed, but as a result of a decline in men's pay. Hence, a seemingly positive development, such as the reduction in the gender pay gap needs further probing, which underlines the point about the need to scrutinize gender statistics with questions informed by gender analysis.

Voice and decision-making have both intrinsic value as a sign of an individual's, or a group's, ability to exercise their

democratic freedoms and rights, and can be instrumental in ensuring that their group-specific interests are advanced through public policies or seen as legitimate matters for public deliberation. Moving toward numerical parity in political office therefore remains an essential component of deepening democracy and creating a more just society. Women's involvement in politics can also have a positive role-modeling effect by encouraging other women to seek public office.

But meaningful participation is about more than just a numeric presence in high-level decision-making fora such as parliaments – a feminine presence is not necessarily a feminist one (Goetz, 1999). Political effectiveness, the ability to use voice to politicize issues of concern to women, to use electoral leverage to press demands on decision-makers, to trigger better responsiveness from the public sector to women's needs and better enforcement of constitutional commitments for their equal rights, often requires strong links with women's organizations.

The importance of a vibrant civil society presence is confirmed by research that seeks to identify the most critical factors for feminist policy change. We know, for example, from the work of Htun and Weldon (2012) that the best indicator of strong policy responses on a range of gender inequality issues, including violence against women, is the strength of autonomous feminist organizing in civil society – a far stronger predictor of policy responsiveness than women's presence in parliaments. Yet attempts at measuring women's political effectiveness invariably fall back on indicators such as the share of women in parliaments or in high levels of political office, because these are more readily available. To its credit, SDG5 includes a 'Tier III' indicator on women's representation in local governments, which widens the focus by drawing attention to other critical political arenas for feminist incursion.

Indicators as a substitute for policies and accountability?

Ultimately, some of the concerns that are being raised about quantitative indicators, and the huge significance attached to the measurement imperative, stem from the fact that the global indicators framework seems to be carrying far too much weight, effectively substituting for substantive contestation on key policy issues and effective processes for holding governments to account. As Donald and Staab (2018) recently put it, the 'two big barriers' that are stopping us from realizing the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda 'are money and "politics as usual".'

Robust indicators and statistics are indispensable tools for monitoring progress toward the achievement of gender equality, but the 2030 Agenda is not only about enhancing data collection for monitoring purposes, but also about putting effective policies in place that will foster palpable change in women's enjoyment of their rights. This is where the rubber hits the road.

Although the SDGs do include so-called 'means of implementation' targets, these do not provide adequate direction on policy or on how the resources needed to finance them will be

generated (Razavi, 2016). Efforts by developing countries and civil society organizations to give more bite to global coordination efforts on development finance by establishing an inter-governmental body within the United Nations on international cooperation in tax matters did not get very far in the 2015 Financing for Development Conference and the subsequently approved Addis Ababa Action Agenda. Even more worrying are the looming austerity measures which cast a dark shadow over the SDGs and their promise of gender equality, especially in a context where the dominant policy mindset is wedded to an overwhelming reliance on the private sector for financing and delivering the services and provisions needed for women's enjoyment of their rights.

Furthermore, while indicators and data can be very useful for monitoring progress, they can hardly substitute for a robust accountability framework, one that allows independent reviews and supports women's rights organizations and other civil society actors to hold governments and other duty-bearers to account. The High Level Political Forum, which is the key platform for accountability on achieving the SDGs at the global level, has provided stark evidence of the shortcomings of existing arrangements, with very limited space for meaningful participation by civil society organizations, some of which have produced exhaustive 'spotlight' or 'shadow reports'. This is a far cry from the review processes and contextualized dialogues that are commonplace in human rights reporting, for example under the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (UN CEDAW) (Liebowitz and Zwingler, 2014). In the absence of robust accountability and enforcement mechanisms, the risk of dilution and selectivity in the process of implementation looms large, while the onus of fulfilling the promises of Agenda 2030 falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women's rights advocates and their allies.

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