Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Feminist Mobilization for the SDGs

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Abstract

This paper analyses the role of feminist mobilizing in formulating the gender equality agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): the goal (5) to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' and gender-related targets across other SDGs. It explores how three key drivers shaped its contours and the effectiveness: (1) context of socioeconomic and political environment; (2) institutions; and (3) the processes of movement building. While feminist mobilizing led to significant advances in the SDGs relative to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), important unresolved barriers of financing and political opposition to women's human rights and gender equality remain and will require continued feminist mobilizing. This paper argues for the need to locate feminist mobilizing for the SDGs in the context of the history and persistence of gender inequality and violations of girls' and women's human rights, and the struggle against these violations. This history is located within economic, social and political environments that are sometimes more open to progressive social change but often, as in the current global conjuncture, may not be.

The role of civil society in mobilizing and advocating for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been far greater than for the preceding Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as many papers in this Special Issue attest. This paper analyzes what women's organizations were able to accomplish with a particular focus on SDG 5 to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' and gender-related targets across other SDGs. The paper develops an analytical approach towards such an understanding, positing three critical drivers affecting feminist mobilization. It draws on the available literature, including the grey literature of civil society statements during various SDG processes, and the author's own personal experience and engagement in the mobilization.

In order to understand both successes and limitations, the paper argues for the need to locate feminist mobilizing for the SDGs in the context of the history and persistence of gender inequality and violations of girls' and women's human rights, and the struggle against these violations. This history is located within economic, social and political environments that are sometimes more open to progressive social change but often, as in the current global conjuncture, may not be. Such a perspective is essential for a more balanced understanding of where we need to go and how to advance towards more sustainable transformations.

The feminist movement is no stranger to adverse economic, social and political environments. Many of the current cohorts of feminists came of age during the rising years of neoliberal economic and social policies and ideologies in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Since then, the world has grown increasingly fierce and difficult, with many opponents and structures inimical to advancing women's human rights

(Sen and Durano, 2014). To name a few: a limping global economy with unprecedented levels of national and global inequality; a deeply pessimistic scenario on global warming and climate change with a growing number of climate refugees; the proliferation of 'illiberal' democracies in both high and low income countries, and shrinking spaces for progressive civil society; vicious unresolved conflicts and displacement; and a growing backlash to bodily autonomy, integrity, and sexual and reproductive rights, as well as to refugees and migrants in receiving countries. As if this were not enough, the communications revolution has led us into a 'post-truth' world in which social media are sometimes complicit in the spread of falsehood, hate messages and distortions of reality.

Growing structural challenges, such as those above, have been matched by sobering evidence on the continued persistence of gender inequality. A recent version of the Global Gender Gap Index ranking 144 countries by economic opportunities, education, political participation and health, published by the World Economic Forum (2017), shows that some aspects of the gap appear to have worsened in recent years. The gap in estimated earned income (US$, PPP) increased considerably after the global financial crash of 2008. The report estimates that, projecting from 2017, it will take 217 years to close the gender gap in workplace equality, and 100 years to close the gap overall. While gender inequality in health and education appears more likely to narrow, the economic and political inequalities between women and men seem to be hardy perennials that are getting worse.

The evidence from reports such as this one and others presents a major stumbling block to the brave vision and the goals, targets and indicators (GTI) laid out by the United

Nations' post-2015 agenda through the SDGs. It points to the difficulties besetting the path towards greater equality. At the same time, the depth of the gender inequality problem suggests that treating the achievement of the gender equality GTI as a largely technical exercise will be entirely inadequate. To achieve momentum and to overcome the existing tendencies towards retrogression and backlash will need political mobilization on a significant scale. But the attempt to protect, promote and advance gender equality and women's human rights through global norms and quantitative measures raises a quintessential challenge: can deeply embedded social inequality be overcome through a focus on quantifiable measures and related policies? Will quantity become quality?

The ongoing multilateral attempt to achieve such a transformation, first through the MDGs and now through the SDGs, has come under intense scrutiny from feminist analysts. In the previous round of the Power of Numbers project, which had focused on a critical assessment of the MDGs, we had made the argument that where gender justice is concerned, there can be 'no empowerment without rights, no rights without politics' (Sen and Mukherjee, 2014). The main argument of that paper was that progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment in the development agenda requires, first, a human rights-based approach consonant with the principles of indivisibility, interdependence and universality of rights, and second, support for the women's organizations and movements that can activate and energize such an agenda.

Both requisites were missing from MDG3, which only focused explicitly on gender equality and women's empowerment. Our critique of MDG3 for the first Power of Numbers project argued that its targets and indicators fell short for three main reasons: (1) they were largely unfit for the purpose of the goal, without clear rationales for choosing particular ones, and insufficient links between indicators and the single target; (2) their framing and design were ineffective because they had little by way of a policy backbone; and, perhaps most importantly; and (3) they excluded human rights and the role of feminist politics, thereby sanitizing not only the language but the very essence of MDG3.

By not recognizing the multiple, interdependent and indivisible human rights of women, the goal of empowerment was distorted, and policy and programme silos were created. Women's organizations can sometimes be key actors in pushing past such distortions and silos and can, therefore, be crucial to pushing the gender equality agenda forward. However, during the MDGs period, the larger global politics of agenda-setting by the so-called 'international community' influenced funding priorities, such that financial support for women's organizations and for substantive women's empowerment policies, programmes and projects remained limited (Sen and Mukherjee, 2014).

This paper examines the processes towards the framing of the SDGs, and specifically SDG5 to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. Its principal concern is whether the processes and the content of the SDGs were able to overcome the limitations and weaknesses of the MDGs in relation to gender equality, women's empowerment and women's human rights.

The next section of the paper lays out a framework for this analysis. The following sections focus on how feminists mobilized for the SDGs. The subsequent section contains a discussion on what resulted from that mobilization.

Three key drivers

Experiences of feminist engagement with United Nations (UN) processes point to fundamental drivers of whether and how women's organizations can participate effectively in shaping policies, and monitoring their implementation. The contours and effectiveness of feminist mobilization, at any level–local, national, regional or global–depend on three key drivers: (1) issues and environment; (2) institutions; and (3) the processes of movement building. These drivers often have very different antecedents in a particular context. Hence, their effects may be synergistic, working to amplify the impact of each, or they may be at odds with each other, and work at cross-purposes. Their interaction governs how issues are perceived, how opportunities and challenges are defined, how interests are framed, and how they guide the shaping and building of alliances as well as their ruptures.

Why the focus on these drivers? Feminist mobilizing does not happen in a socioeconomic or political vacuum as we know. Nor can it be effective simply through the volition or intent of women's organizations if the environment and institutions are not supportive. This does not mean that advances towards women's human rights cannot be made in difficult environments. But in such circumstances, they are likely to be limited, require far greater effort and resources, and strategies may have to be defensive and protective. Alliances with other like-minded, even if not congruent, organizations are likely to be especially necessary in difficult times. Conversely, even in good times, if mobilizing is to have lasting impact, it has to be strategic and must aim to make advances more firmly grounded in larger belief systems and norms, and in institutional frameworks.

The first driver, the *issues and environment,* includes both the core issues that engage feminists (e.g. equality, development, human rights, violence against women (VAW), sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), financing, loss of livelihoods, informal work, 'care' economy), as well as the larger economic, political and social environment (e.g. structural adjustment, neoliberalism, South–North tensions, conflict, global warming) of the time. The issues that constitute the content of feminist mobilizing are, at least in part, thrown up by the larger social and economic environment, and in part by the successes and failures of mobilization itself.

The struggle to expand the ambit of feminism beyond a narrow focus on inequality within the household, to include the larger macroeconomic, environmental, and political structures and processes that affect women's lives, livelihoods, work and survival, inter alia, as well as public policies shaping gender equality and women's rights, is not new. It can be traced back to at least the UN Third World

Conference on Women (Nairobi in 1984) and in some forms, even earlier. Currently, although the struggle has not ended, the greater presence and voice of women from the global South (and from the South within the North) and the evidence they have brought to global arenas, has worked to increase recognition that larger structural issues, for example, tax policies or the Law of the Sea, are as central to feminist concerns as violence against women or inequality within households.

While feminists, especially from the South, have been working to broaden the ambit of the feminist agenda, much of the public debate around the SDGs has taken place in a context of weakening multilateralism, as well as attempts by some governments to roll back women's human rights and gender equality. Not only sexual and reproductive rights but other core elements of the gender equality agenda, such as the recognition and policy implications of unpaid 'care work', have been heavily contested, as have women's rights to property, tax justice and decent work, and the importance of an enabling macroeconomic environment at global and national levels. Outright exclusion is a continuing challenge, for example, the absence of any reference to human rights or gender equality in the operative part (Article 2) of the agreement on climate change at the recent UN Conference of Parties (COP 21) (https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf). This adds to the challenges to women's livelihoods and survival in the face of the erosion of sea, land and water resources, extreme weather events and their consequences for health and conflict.

The second driver refers to the main *institutions* that we will be focusing on in this paper, namely, the institutions of multilateral governance, especially the broad ambit of the UN itself, including the Bretton Woods institutions; and their shifting roles and ability to shape the development agenda. Within this context, we will examine the emergence of UN Women, and whether and how this facilitated the role that civil society, and especially women's organizations, could play in key negotiations.

Analysis of the third driver, the process of *movement building,* will address who came together, how, and for what purposes during the SDGs processes; how they dealt with the shifting environment and institutional frames; how they generated commonalities, and worked through differences; and whether and how they addressed other social movements.

When all three drivers are working with synergy, significant advances in feminist organizing for women's rights can be made. The reality, however, is that they rarely progress in tandem or at the same pace, and this in turn can create tensions, challenges and ruptures in movement building. Often, one or more of the drivers has been unfavorable. Making advances under such conditions is challenging. But important strategic thinking is essential so that hard-won gains can be defended, and preparations can be made for further swings in the rollercoaster.

The first decade of the new millennium saw important changes in both global institutions and environment that significantly affected feminist mobilizing for the SDGs in the following decade. We discuss this in the next section.

Background and backlash for feminist agendas in the new millennium

The UN Conferences of the 1990s have been seen by many to have been the halcyon period for the advance of women's human rights and gender equality in the global agenda. In contrast, the new millennium has been marked by the growing strength of conservative forces in UN spaces, opposing the feminist agenda in the name of culture, tradition and religion.

This section of the paper applies our framework of three drivers by beginning with a discussion of the environment and institutional background during this period as a setting for feminist agendas, and for understanding how women had to mobilize to overcome major obstacles.

A harsh global environment, a weakening UN in the 2000s

To some extent, the vigor of the opposition to women's human rights in this period may be a testimonial to the gains made by feminist movement-building in the previous years. But there were also spill-over effects from a rising tide of global conservatism and religious fundamentalism in many parts of the world (Chhachhi, 2014; Sow and Pazello, 2014). While religious extremists from different groupings were often at odds with each other, their views tended to converge in their opposition to gender equality and women's human rights. Many UN spaces witnessed this, not least of all the five, ten and fifteen-year reviews of the Cairo (UN International Conference on Population and Development, 1994) and Beijing (UN Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995) conferences. They became increasingly and bitterly contested between feminists and forces attempting to turn back the clock on the achievements of the conferences of the 1990s in terms of gender equality and women's human rights (Petchesky, 2003; Sen, 2005).

The UN itself, which had been a welcoming space for civil society, including women's rights organizations and agendas during the 1980s and 1990s, was seeing considerable erosion in its economic and development mandates. Core funding for UN agencies had begun falling in the 1990s and continued to fall, pushing the UN ever closer to transnational corporations (TNCs) through the Global Compact that began in mid-2000 (Adams and Martens, 2015). The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and even the World Health Organization (WHO) experienced the impact of such pressure through shrinking and narrowing of budgets and policy space. Arguably, the most damaging reversal from a planetary perspective was the US pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, resulting over time in its replacement by the Paris Agenda with its voluntary and non-binding commitments regarding climate change which the US also pulled out of sixteen years later in 2017.

South vs North economic disagreements in UN spaces became increasingly polarized in this period. The feminist

movement that had managed in the previous years to consolidate support for its agenda across a wide spectrum of countries from both South and North, found itself increasingly caught in the fault-lines between global economic justice and gender justice (Sen and Correa, 2000; Petchesky, 2003). The UN's own ability to play the role of honest broker across these fault-lines was weakened.

Progressive governments and the UN itself had countered these trends through the sweeping vision towards a more just future world contained in the Millennium Declaration of 2000. But the manner in which the broad and sweeping mandate of the Millennium Declaration was translated into the limited and technocratic scope of the MDGs was evidence of the weakness of the UN, and the harshness of the multilateral environment (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014). Civil society played little role in the formulation of the MDGs, but neither did many member states from the South. The MDGs seemed to drop like manna from heaven on these member states and on civil society including women's organizations.

The climate for funding

It is important to understand the funding climate for the MDGs because this previews what has happened with the means of implementation for the SDGs, and hence also the funding for the feminist agenda contained therein. By the first decade of the 21st century, financial globalization with its recurrent bubbles, crashes and crises was in full swing. The agreed ODA commitment of 0.7 per cent of GDP was largely unmet by Northern governments, making their call for 'aid effectiveness' somewhat ironic. Meanwhile, tax havens and illicit financial flows were increasing in both numbers and volume. This is especially problematic in the context of the post 9/11 War on Terror, as tax havens, illicit flows, drugs, arms flows and trafficking have become enmeshed. Feminists have become concerned about the links between illicit flows, tax havens and violence, including violence against women (Ugarteche, 2014; Grondona et al., 2016).

The first UN International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD) was held against this backdrop in Monterrey in March 2002. The 5-year review of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD; Copenhagen +5, 2000), held in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, had pushed for better coordination between the UN and world trade and finance institutions, in order to finance the agreements reached at the UN conferences of the 1990s. The focus of the FfD was to be on mobilizing domestic resources; mobilizing international resources; official development assistance (ODA); debt; trade and investment; and systemic issues. As we see later in the paper, FfD negotiations have been among the most contentious in the context of the SDGs.

Feminist mobilizing in the decade prior to the SDGs

Although they were not present during the framing of the MDGs, civil society and feminist organizations supported the FfD process as an outcome of the 5-yearly review of the

World Summit on Social Development. The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) facilitated the Women's Caucus at Monterrey. By the time of the follow-up conference in Doha in 2008, the Women's Working Group on FfD (WWG/FfD) had been formed at the initiative of the Southern feminist network, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and others. Their aim was to push for more progressive economic outcomes in Doha, in alliance with other civil society actors.

A second important arena of engagement for feminists was the fifteen-year reviews of the UN conferences on Population and Development, and on Women held in Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995) respectively. Held in 2009 and 2010 during the early years of the Obama presidency in the United States, the reviews found more consistent support for SRHR from the North than had been the case during the preceding Bush presidency. However, there had been considerable erosion of support by other countries, in part due to shifting geopolitics (e.g. the Russian government's political embrace of the Russian Orthodox Church) and in part due to the flood of well-funded evangelical Christians who had spread out from the US, especially to countries in Africa and Latin America. Combined with the ripple effects and after-shocks of the 2008 global financial meltdown, there was growing South vs North tension over economic issues that spilled over into difficult negotiations and intransigence over women's human rights. Yet, feminists across South and North were able to come together to prevent significant retrogression from gains previously made, even though they could make few new advances.

Another important element of feminist mobilization from around 2008 to 2010 was the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign (www.gearcampaign.org). Over 300 civil society organizations from South and North came together under the GEAR umbrella, to advocate with the UN Secretariat and member states for the creation of a new UN agency dedicated to gender equality, and to do so with transparency. The GEAR Campaign argued that a new, unified and well-funded agency was essential if the UN was to be able to meet its mandate of promoting gender equality as essential to development, human rights, peace, and security. The Campaign was successful, resulting in the creation of UN Women (UNW) in 2010, with a seasoned politician as its first executive director. It was probably the first time that the UN created a major new body in response to civil society activism.

One can see the three drivers working at cross-purposes during this decade. Until the financial crisis of 2008, the economic environment still held some promise especially through the FfD negotiations, although it had begun to deteriorate resulting in growing South-North tension. For feminists, however, the global political environment was distinctively worse when compared to the 1990s. The institutional driver was decidedly mixed; even as a new UN body for women was created through women's activism, the UN itself was weakening. Civil society's exuberance during the 1990s carried on, buoyed by the optimism of the Millennium Declaration.

Thus, feminists entered the SDGs processes with some gains and some losses from this formative period. First, like the rest of civil society (and most South governments), feminist groups had not been able to influence the MDGs, although they were more active in producing shadow reports and assessments of MDG implementation and impacts. Second, they had been more active in a relatively new arena – financing for development – but their numbers were few and expertise was limited. Still, the groups that participated in FfD advocacy built up important networks and connections to other members of civil society – this became important during the SDGs period that followed. Third, they were able to prevent retrogression on SRHR despite growing pressure. Fourth, feminists had been successful in the creation of a new institution, UN Women.

Drivers of mobilizing for the SDGs

Feminist organizing entered the SDGs period with a bang, through its effectiveness in creating UN Women. But harsh realities soon came to the fore. Nowhere was this so clear as in the difficulties that UN Women had in getting donor governments to keep the funding promises they had made. As the post-2008 recession tightened its grip, UN Women was short of funds (and therefore of staff capacity and other essentials) for an effective, quick start-up, let alone becoming a serious part of the emerging Rio +20 and SDGs processes.

This section of the paper focuses on the following:

- the socioeconomic, ecological and political environment at the start of the Rio +20 processes;
- UN Women's role in relation to feminist mobilizing how feminists mobilized at Rio +20 and the effects; the role of the Women's Major Group (WMG);
- post-2015 processes including the UN SG-appointed High-Level Panel (HLP) and the Rio +20-mandated Open Working Group (OWG); and how feminists engaged with them through the WMG to advocate for the SDGs and their targets;
- feminist mobilizing on the Means of Implementation of the SDGs, through the WWG/FfD;
- parallel and intersecting mobilization through the Women's Rights Caucuses for Cairo +20 and Beijing +20; consequences in terms of issues, strategies and inclusiveness;

The socioeconomic, ecological and political environment

The recessionary aftermath of the global financial crash of 2008 was the pre-eminent global economic concern as Rio +20 processes began circa 2010. Greece's sovereign debt crisis of 2009 and thereafter, and the weakening of several other European economies pointed to the fact that financial globalization's impacts were not only felt in poorer Southern countries. The UN's funding shortages, as a result, were becoming ever more severe. Combined with spreading conflict in the Middle East with its human cost in deaths, illness, wounding and maiming, disability, refugees and displaced

persons, the environment and appetite for taking on new global agreements and their related economic costs was far from ideal. South vs North mistrust and disagreements were not allayed by the weakening of the Kyoto Protocol as the US and other rich countries demanded that the Protocol's underlying principle of common but differentiated responsibility be dropped. Despite this, a sense of crisis on multiple ecological fronts lent urgency and momentum to the preparations for Rio +20.

However, after a brief period of political and cultural opening epitomized by the Arab Spring of 2010–2011, the space for civil society had begun closing in many countries. Instead of the military coups that had marked the 1960s and 1970s, a new phenomenon appeared of illiberal democracies (Rodrik, 2018) – autocratic leaders coming to power through democratic elections, and then proceeding to undermine if not destroy key pillars of democracy such as open media, and rights to free speech, assembly, mobilization and protest. Hostility to human rights defenders was growing. This climate spread into UN negotiations, making it ever harder for civil society organizations to be present in negotiation rooms or to be heard in the way they had been during the 1990s.

UN Women's institutional role

For UNW, created in 2010 with limited funding, and therefore no history of sustained long-term linkages with member states or civil society, Rio+20 presented a very steep learning curve. The civil society liaison office within UNW worked hard to overcome this but had to cope with the fact of new leadership and multiple organizational concerns even as Rio +20 was being negotiated. This led to a sometimes bumpy process of mutual learning between feminist advocates and UNW, but some strong positives resulted. These included the important agreement to jointly and separately push for a separate SDG for gender equality plus targets across other SDGs. This was probably the single most important strategic decision and had strong pay-offs in the final decisions on the SDGs.

Partly as a result of the key role that women's organizations had played through the GEAR Campaign in the establishment of UNW, its leadership and staff were generally open and available for meetings and discussion with feminist advocates, especially as they got to know them over these years of complex negotiations. In particular, both sides learned that trust has to be built through presence, expertise and reliability when all parties are in the throes of difficult negotiations. Rio+20 negotiations were taking place during UNW's early years, when both funding and technical capacity were limited. It was often the case that feminist experts outside UNW were more knowledgeable on issues. A major weakness was UNW's lack of effective presence during the FfD negotiations, letting slip a key space for discussing the essential means of implementation – financing. Many feminists have felt that UNW gave up too easily on getting women's human rights explicitly recognized together with women's empowerment and gender equality in SDG 5.

Feminist mobilizing for Rio +20: the role of the Women's Major Group (WMG)

Barring feminist environmentalists and the few groups that worked with broad interlinked agendas anchored in a critique of neoliberal globalization, most feminist activists working on human rights generally or on SRHR specifically, tended to ignore Rio +20 in the early years circa 2010. Among the upcoming twentieth-year reviews of Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Beijing and Copenhagen, they prioritized Cairo +20 and Beijing +20. However, Rio +20 soon evolved through its official preparatory processes to have a large focus spanning 'the future we want', combining economic, social and environmental pillars through a 'universal, integrated and transformative' agenda.

Those feminist organizations that were present at Rio +20 in 2012 began using the umbrella of the Women's Major Group for advocacy. This was an important move, strategically and tactically, as the different Major Groups had had an established place in official meetings and negotiations ever since UNCED in 2002. Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF) and DAWN, the two Operating Partners of the WMG, joined with feminist colleagues from WEDO, the Global Forest Coalition, RESURJ, Energia, ICADE, the Feminist Task Force, APWLD and around 200 women's organizations (national, regional and global) in making common cause (www.wecf.eu/download/2012/August/ReportGIZgeneralRio24July.pdf; accessed 10 January 2017). In the growing illiberal climate, inside and outside the UN, laying claim to the institutional space of the WMG was critical to feminist ability to participate effectively in Rio +20, and in the SDGs processes that followed. It also made it possible to interact with other Major Groups, including potential CSO allies, on an equal footing. Feminists have long complained that, while they often lend support to other CSOs on 'their' issues, the reverse doesn't always happen. It can be argued plausibly that the institution of Major Groups made alliances possible on a more level playing field, even if pre-existing connections among individuals also had a role. Outside the WMG, feminists also formed a coalition (www.post2015women.com/mission/) for advocacy on the post-2015 development agenda.

Feminists from women's organizations and within environmental and other organizations mobilized and advocated on a broad range of the issues that became part of the SDGs and their targets. They focused on gender equality and women's human rights including SRHR, but also addressed the connections to broader systemic issues such as the weakening of agreed environmental language, the excessive push to favor the private corporate sector, weaknesses in addressing the harmful ecological and human effects of 'extractivism', and the importance of financing. They were able to gain support from and interact with some of the other Major Groups, such as those for Children and Youth, Indigenous People, Farmers, Workers and Trade Unions, and NGOs.

For instance, when it was clear that reproductive rights had been dropped from the final outcome document at Rio+20 because of the very strong presence of and pressure from the Holy See (an observer state at the UN) allied with a small number of ultraconservative governments, feminists protested through the media and there was widespread consternation in civil society generally. It would probably also be fair to say that some of the tried and tested strategies feminists have used to secure SRHR through different UN negotiations over the years, for example, 'insider-outsider' strategies could not be strong at Rio +20 for a variety of reasons. It was also true that many government delegations, even from SRHR-friendly countries, were technical environmentalists with limited knowledge of women's human rights concerns.

The consequence of this mobilization, combined with support from several member states, resulted in mention of women's empowerment and gender equality in key thematic sections of the Rio +20 Outcome document that would have an impact on the SDGs themselves. These included, inter alia, poverty, food security, WASH, housing, income and employment, informal sector, decent work, migration and education. Interestingly, the health section saw a real advance beyond the language of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) through explicit recognition of the sexual rights of women, men and youth. However, there was less or no presence in some of the core environmental themes such as desertification, mountains or pollution.

Mobilizing after Rio +20: 'post-2015' processes, the UN SG's High-Level Panel (HLP), and the Open Working Group (OWG)

The period following the Rio +20 conference in mid-2012 was a confusing one, in terms of processes and mandates. Rio +20 had mandated setting up an OWG of 30 UN Member States to negotiate specific GTI. The OWG set up its procedures and began meeting in January 2013, continuing for around 18 months until July 2014.

But the UN SG also appointed an HLP with 27 members drawn from governments, civil society and the private sector to provide advice on the post-2015 agenda. This was despite the fact that at Rio +20, Member States, especially from the South, had been very wary of a UN Secretariat-driven process similar to what had happened for the MDGs. They had made it clear that they wanted a more transparent process, fully controlled by themselves. Nonetheless, the HLP was faster off the ground than the OWG, holding multiple meetings in different parts of the world, and submitting its report in May 2013, less than a year after Rio +20. The call by the HLP in its final report ('A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development'.) for five transformative shifts, including a stand-alone gender equality goal and a target on universal SRHR under the health goal was met with skepticism by some Member States, and approbation by others.

Civil society organizations, however, could ill afford to ignore either the OWG or the HLP. Feminist organizations spent the period from July 2012 to May 2013 reviewing the wins and losses of Rio +20, strategizing, and attending both

the public and closed thematic and regional meetings of the HLP, and other ad hoc meetings organized jointly by Member States and UN agencies. Through the Women's Major Group, they also began preparing for and attending the meetings of the OWG in New York, which continued for a number of months after the HLP finished its work. The documents and statements made by representatives of the WMG are available on its website (www.womenmajorgroup.org) attesting to its presence and activism.

The OWG held 13 sessions, the first eight being on the 26 thematic clusters that had been identified, and the remainder on identifying priorities for the SDGs themselves, beginning in March 2013 until submitting its report to the UN GA in September 2014. After this, there was a period of intense intergovernmental negotiations until adoption of the 2030 Agenda in the UN GA of September 2015. Work to define indicators to measure the emerging goals and targets was tasked to an Inter-Agency Expert Group (IAEG) whose work continued *pari passu*, intensifying as expected in the final year. CSOs could not ignore the indicators discussions either.

From Rio+20 in 2012 through all of 2013, the WMG was thus intensively engaged in multiple ways at both global and regional levels in the parallel and extremely busy processes of the HLP and the OWG. As compared to the thin presence during Rio +20 itself, more and more women's organizations began to join in these processes at both regional and global levels, as their importance became clear. Because the HLP held its meetings in the regions, this made it possible for local and regional groups to take part more easily than in the OWG meetings, which required presence in New York. Feminists could thus be participants and advocates in key regional meetings, for example, the Leadership Meeting on Addressing Inequalities in the Post-2015 Development Agenda in Copenhagen in February 2013, the High-Level Dialogue on Health in the Post-2015 Development Agenda in Botswana in March 2013 (www.worldwewant2030.org/health), the Monrovia and Bali meetings of the HLP, and others. Feminist advocacy influenced the positions hammered out at these regional meetings. Although these meetings were not within the scope of the OWG itself, those positions taken by feminists and by key actors from governments and agencies, were then brought into OWG processes. Despite the expense and distance, the WMG brought many people from national and regional levels to the New York meetings of the OWG as well. There was intensive feminist and civil society advocacy at each of these meetings.

There was also mobilization within civil society itself. In March 2013, WMG members attended a civil society meeting of over 300 participants in Bonn, and then went on to the HLP meeting in Bali. They issued a statement in Bonn titled 'We will not be mainstreamed into a polluted stream: feminist visions of structural transformations for achieving women's human rights and gender equality in the 2015 development agenda.' The statement cautioned 'against developing another set of reductive GTI that ignore the transformational changes required to address the failure of the current development model rooted in unsustainable production and consumption patterns exacerbating gender, race and class inequities. We do not want to be mainstreamed into a polluted stream. We call for deep and structural changes to existing global systems of power, decision-making and resource sharing. This includes enacting policies that recognize and redistribute the unequal and unfair burdens of women and girls in sustaining societal wellbeing and economies, intensified in times of economic and ecological crises' (www.wecf.eu/download/2013/March/final_WomenStatements_Endorsements-2-4.pdf; accessed 10 January 2017).

Means of Implementation of the SDGs: mobilizing through the WWG/FfD

Although the SDGs articulated means of implementation to include not only finance but also technology and institutions, it has been clear to all parties that financial resources are the most crucial. The WMG had articulated an early critique of the excessive slant towards the private sector in the Rio +20 outcome, and the challenge of securing the means of implementation for the SDGs, especially financing.

As preparations for the 3rd International Conference on Financing for Development to be held in Addis Ababa in July 2015 gathered steam, the WWG/FfD that had been formed back in 2008 for specific advocacy on FfD, came back into the picture, to support feminist mobilization and advocacy. (See the Special Issue on FfD of the DAWN newsletter www.dawnnet.org/feminist-resources/sites/default/files/articles/dawn_informs_20150903.pdf). The WWG/FfD realized that the outcomes of the FfD negotiations would have important implications for how governments, agencies, the private sector and civil society would implement and monitor development policies, especially the SDGs. Of note was the fact that negotiations were taking place in a context of weakening multilateralism, and attempts by some governments to roll back women's human rights and gender equality in the discussions of the SDGs, their targets and indicators. Focused advocacy built on expertise and targeted networks was therefore essential.

But the terrain was extremely difficult. The FfD conference was beset with South vs North battles and was criticized by many in both civil society and governments as not having fulfilled its promise. Addis saw the use of so-called 'WTO Green Room' type negotiation tactics, and there was pressure on many developing countries to accept the draft document as it was. The extra pressure from the host country to come up with an outcome, as well as the lack of high level delegations, made it difficult to change the course of the negotiations in Addis. After months of heated debates and complicated negotiations, governments at the Third International Financing for Development Conference approved the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA).

The WWG/FfD produced the Women's Working Group's reaction to the Outcome Document and contributed to the CSO Response to the AAAA. Both documents provide a critical analysis of the FfD outcome, especially its death-knell for

the long unfulfilled 0.7 per cent ODA commitment, and its endorsement of the private corporate sector as a privileged development actor. Greater acknowledgement of gender equality and women's human rights in this context appeared instrumental, and seemed precisely to be the 'polluted stream' into which feminists did not want to be mainstreamed. A major loss at Addis, due to the North's intransigence, was the possibility of an independent global tax body that could regulate tax systems, close loopholes and begin to address the problems of tax avoidance and of illicit financial flows. A fairer tax system could garner more than adequate resources to fund the SDGs, but this was vehemently opposed by the powerful countries that promote and serve as tax havens.

Given the limited capacity among many feminist organizations to address economic issues generally, and financing in particular, feminist advocates held a capacity-building workshop for African feminists in May 2015, and allied with other like-minded groups outside. Feminist groups present at the preparatory meetings for Addis and at Addis itself worked closely with other organizations such as Righting Finance (www.rightingfinance.org) that works on a 'bottom-up approach to financial regulation'; LATINDADD or Red Latinoamericana sobre Deuda, Desarrollo, y Derechos (www.latindadd.org) that works on debt, development and human rights; Third World Network (www.twnside.org.sg) that works especially on international trade, finance and climate change; and the Reflection Group (www.reflectiongroup.org) that focuses on debates around the global development agenda with particular emphasis on the role of the private corporate sector.

The lessons from Addis were brought back to those in the WMG who were not engaged in the financing/private sector issues through newsletters and discussions during strategy meetings. The trial by fire at Addis highlighted the fact that good and effective advocacy may not be enough to advance feminist agendas in the short term. But it is essentialif feminists are to be resilient for the longer haul, and to continually learn from such difficult experiences.

How much of an impact did all of this dense mobilization, vocal presence and alliance building have on the actual SDG targets and indicators? To what extent did they become more gendered, inclusive and expansive?

Impact on SDG Targets and Indicators

At first glance, it appears that SDG5 (*Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*) shares one of MDG3's main limitations, namely, the lack of explicit affirmation of women's human rights in the goal itself. Differently from MDG3, however, human rights did find their way into SDG5's targets, both explicitly as in target 5.6 and 5.a, and implicitly in several other targets such as 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 on eliminating and ending discrimination, violence and harmful practices. SDG5's targets are more fulsome and robust, addressing different aspects of gender equality – economic, political and social (Table 1).

The fulsomeness of SDG5's targets and indicators, as compared to MDG3, was due in no small measure to both the sustained pressure of women's organizations in the more open negotiating spaces of the OWG, and to consistent advocacy by UN Women among key governments from all regions.

Furthermore, their collective push for a stand-alone goal on gender equality together with targets across other goals netted a substantially wider recognition of gender equality across the SDGs overall. Detailed analysis of the SDG's indicators by UN Women in its recent flagship report (UN Women, 2018) affirms that there are 53 gender-related indicators out of a total of 232 across all the SDGs, roughly a little under a quarter.

While this is considerably better than the MDGs, many concerns remain. As UN Women's report notes, there are major gaps in gender data, a problem of poor quality and non-comparability of data over time and across countries, and uneven coverage of gender-specific indicators. Furthermore, there is considerable asymmetry in the presence of gender-related indicators across the different SDGs. The Report notes that six SDGs (SDGs 1,3,4,5,8, 16) are gender-sensitive, five are gender-sparse (SDGs 2,10,11,13 and 17), and six are gender-blind (SDGs 6,7,9,12,14,15).

The gender-blind SDGs, in terms of indicators, are on water and sanitation, energy, infrastructure, sustainable consumption and production, oceans, forests, deserts, land degradation and biodiversity and global partnership. Some of these are surprising, since considerable gendered research exists in areas such as water and sanitation, clean energy, infrastructure and fisheries. In one case, the absence of a gender indicator belies the presence of a gender-aware target, namely, target 6.2 on sanitation and hygiene which calls for paying special attention to the needs of women and girls has no corresponding indicator. A plausible hypothesis is that the gender-blindness of many of these environmental SDGs mirrors the weakness on these themes in the Outcome document of Rio +20, as noted earlier. Both problems may also reflect relative weakness in women's mobilizing and advocacy on core environmental themes, a question for further exploration.

Summing up: effectiveness and inclusiveness of feminist mobilizing for the SDGs

The broad argument of this paper is that the larger environment, and the strength and nature of institutions matter when assessing the effectiveness of social mobilizing. During the SDGs processes, as we have seen, the less than salubrious South vs North environment on key economic issues – financing, trade, investment, tax havens and illicit financial flows – undercut the ground for feminist advocacy. This was compounded by the weakening of the UN, and the rise of ultra-conservatism in major regions of the South as a result of the spread of religious evangelism.

The negotiations processes were long-drawn out and heavily New York-centric, meaning high costs in terms of time and money, especially for advocates from the South. They were

Table 1. SDG 5, Targets and Indicators

SDG5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

	Targets	Indicators	Tier[a,b]
5.1	End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere	5.1.1 Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex	III
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	5.2.1 Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age	II
		5.2.2 Proportion of women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to sexual violence by persons other than an intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by age and place of occurrence	II
5.3	Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation	5.3.1 Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18	II
		5.3.2 Proportion of girls and women aged 15-49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting, by age	II
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	5.4.1 Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location	II
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	5.5.1 Proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliaments and (b) local governments	I (a) III (b)
		5.5.2 Proportion of women in managerial positions	I
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	5.6.1 Proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care	II
		5.6.2 Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to women and men aged 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education	III
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	5.a.1 (a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure	IIIII
		5.a.2 Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control	
5.b	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women	5.b.1 Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex	I
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	5.c.1 Proportion of countries with systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment	III

Source: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification/ (accessed 18 November 2017)

[a] Tier classification for Global SDG indicators (20 April 2017). Updated tier classification, based on changes made by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) following its 3rd (March 2016), 4th (Nov. 2016) and 5th (March 2017) meetings. The tier classification of many indicators is expected to change as methodologies are developed and data availability increases. Therefore, the IAEGSDGs has developed a mechanism to annually review the tier classification at its Fall (or 4th quarter) meetings. The updated tier classification is expected to be released following those meetings unless otherwise noted.

[b] Tier Classification Criteria/Definitions: Tier 1: Indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, and data are regularly produced by countries for at least 50 per cent of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant. Tier 2: Indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, but data are not regularly produced by countries. Tier 3: No internationally established methodology or standards are yet available for the indicator, but methodology/standards are being (or will be) developed or tested.

also complex and interwoven, making it very hard for smaller and newer organizations to engage effectively. Despite this, feminists were remarkably effective, using techniques learned from the time of the 1990s conferences and their 5-yearly regional and global reviews. These included:

- early recognition of the value of the official status provided by being part of the Major Groups; and using the Women's Major Group to strong effect at Rio +20 and thereafter, particularly given the context of closing spaces for civil society;
- engaging on critical means of implementation issues, viz., financing, through the WWG/FfD;
- networking with like-minded other actors to augment capacity to advocate on financing and other economic issues;
- mobilizing flexibly and strategically through multiple forums–the WMG, WWG/FfD, and others – with relatively little (albeit some) disharmony or conflicts;
- ensuring strong technical capacity and expertise about language and processes, so that they could be trusted by official negotiators;
- strengthening the negotiations capacity of newer and younger feminists; and
- using tested 'insider–outsider' strategies whenever possible.

Inclusiveness was also a characteristic from the early days of mobilization. At Rio +20, the WMG included feminists from South and North, and from national, regional and global organizations. The WMG was also able at Rio to reach out to and begin engaging with other Major Groups and with other organizations. Feminist advocates worked closely with youth-led organizations for the SDGs. Different organizations provided capacity building for younger feminists on complex financing and related issues, as well as SRHR and women's human rights agendas. Joint strategizing provided collective strength through difficult processes.

With the high-level endorsement of the SDGs in September 2015 by UN member states, a critical phase of decision-making for global and national development agendas over the next fifteen years has almost ended (except for the finalization of the SDG indicators), and a new one has begun. This next phase of implementation will be largely, though not exclusively, played out at national and regional levels. It will require considerable preparation as well as focused and agile advocacy by feminist organizations.

Advocacy spaces for feminist engagement have to be continuously negotiated and re-negotiated. Feminists must become equal and valued partners with organizations that, while sympathetic to feminist agendas, work on broad development agendas such as trade, investment, financing or climate change, to name a few. By working with these groups, feminists can seed their perspective and attention to economic justice for women into larger political economy debates, in addition to being present in major advocacy spaces where feminists are not often found. One such ongoing collaboration produces the annual Spotlight Report (www.2030spotlight.org), the first of which was launched during the UN High Level Political Forum in July 2016 and received considerable coverage among both UN member states and civil society. The Report was the first major critical assessment of the SDGs from progressive CSOs, including feminists.

The ability of feminist organizations to hold their own, to defend human rights, and to advance economic, ecological and gender justice will require not only clarity of vision and a track record of analysis and advocacy, but also stronger communications skills, greater organizational resilience and effectiveness, and the ability to build and nurture effective alliances in which younger people play strong roles.

Notes

This paper draws extensively from a more detailed and historically grounded background paper (Sen, 2018) titled 'The SDGs and Feminist Movement Building' for UN Women's flagship report, *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2018). The paper draws on written documents, as well as my knowledge and experience derived from direct and intensive involvement in the processes over the critical period from before 2012 until now. I have benefited from comments from Shahra Razavi, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Desmond McNeill and anonymous reviewers.
I have also benefited from being able to read the draft version of Wood and Austin-Evelyn (2017) through IWHC's generous collegial support. The IWHC report focuses mainly on the work of the Women's Major Group (WMG) in mobilizing for the SDGs, and there are some resulting differences of interpretation between the report and this paper. Since IWHC had already done a set of key informant interviews with members of the WMG and others, I did not feel it would be appropriate for me to do another such round.

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