

The Relevance of Gender Studies in Deconstructing and Reconstructing Sustainable Development

Rashidah Shuib
Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA),
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang

Extended Abstract

We are living in a complex, interconnected and a fast changing world. We have seen vast improvements in our lives. Generally people are living longer and are better educated. In many countries people have access to clean water, health care services, decent homes and food. We are connected by the internet in ways never imagined before. Yet inequity and inequality runs deep between and within countries. According to the United Nations (2016), in certain countries, income inequality has increased by 11 percent between 1990 and 2010. Unequal distribution of income is becoming a feature in many societies affecting more than 75 percent of the population. This situation is worse than in the 1990s. Certain countries and segments of the population are still beset by serious economic, political and social crises such as poverty, limited accessibility to essential medical/health care, high maternal mortality ratio, violence against women and child marriage which are all compounded by the impact of climate change, natural disasters, civil conflicts and wars. Pregnant women in the rural areas are more likely to die at birth compared to those in the urban areas.

The Sustainable Development Goals

These impacts are felt particularly by those in the vulnerable groups; poor women, men and children, the marginalized groups, the disabled, those with different sexual orientation, the indigenous community and the elderly. To face these challenges, the UN system facilitated several negotiation agenda for governments to agree and to take these agenda forward. The latest, post MDGs is the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Agenda 2030, which have been heralded to have all the potentials to succeed as long as governments have the political will and recognize the need for interventions to be holistic, integrative in nature and inclusive. Signed on September 2015 at the UN General Assembly

**3rd KANITA POSTGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
GENDER STUDIES**

16 – 17 November 2016
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang

the SDGs promises to “transform our world”, and heralded as a “Sustainable Gender Just Development”. The SDGs should be seen together with the Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (December 2015), the Third Financing for Development Conference (July 2015), and the SDGs Monitoring Indicators (March 2016).

“The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted unanimously at the United Nations by world Heads of States and governments in September 2015 is highly ambitious. If taken seriously it has the potential to change the prevailing development paradigm by re-emphasizing the multidimensional and interrelated nature of sustainable development and its universal applicability”.

(Social Watch 2016.<www.socialwatch.org/node/17282; accessed 4 Oct 2016)

Indeed the SDGs have 17 ambitious goals and 169 targets. It is supposed to be universal, thus applicable in all country situations, comprehensive and integrates the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The goals are indivisible meaning that the failure of one goal will affect the success of the other goals as well. The symbiotic relationships and the synergy between and among goals must be recognized. Most important is that the SDGs are grounded in the Human Rights principles with the States having the responsibility to “respect”, “protect”, and “fulfil/promote” human rights. The ultimate spice to this SDG cauldron is undoubtedly the political will of governments.

Gender Studies and the Sustainable Development Nexus

It is this nexus of Gender Studies and Sustainable Development that this paper interrogates and argues that deconstructing and reconstructing of sustainable development are essential steps to be taken if the goals are to be achieved. This paper also posits that Gender Studies are crucial in contributing to the deconstructing and reconstructing process; producing new knowledge framed by new perspectives, that could advance gender equality and achieve social justice in the world. Why does Gender Studies matter? How relevant is it to the SDGs?

This paper asserts that though the formulation and the negotiation of the SDGs was a process of deconstructing and reconstructing concepts, goals and indicators, the success of the

SDGs is highly dependent on its implementation, monitoring and evaluation and the political commitment by governments. Gender and Women's Studies emerged out of women's movement that questioned existing definitions and paradigms. The corpus of feminist knowledge in economics and development that grew out of research grounded in women's lived realities has led to a new understanding of economic growth, of the need to redefine work and care. Feminist knowledge actually is a political challenge not only to development but also to knowledge production in the academia. One must note that the world arrived at the SDGs through very much a politically negotiated process involving many stakeholders, one of which was those representing women's voices and interests. In this negotiation women lost certain demands or what was agreed was weak. Hence the implementation process is actually a continuous challenge for those in women's movement and in Women's and Gender Studies to construct and reconstruct.

One of the critiques of the SDGs is that its take on economic growth is still basically traditional (Esquivel 2016). Industrialisation is still seen as the driver of economic growth. It is this income growth that is seen as the way out for poverty. But Gender Studies have long shown that poverty is multidimensional and complex and that income/economic growth does not guarantee that poverty will disappear. Esquivel (2016) argues that this strategy of "grow first and redistribute later" does not address and challenge inequalities not only in income but also that of wealth and power at both the national and the global level. Based on research, Gender Studies can highlight that power relations must be challenged and it takes strategies beyond just economic growth to challenge it. Gender Studies also matters because Goal 5 of the SDGs is "Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women and Girls". Much has been done in women's empowerment but the concept is broad and is still evolving. This is an area that Gender Studies can contribute.

This paper ends with some of the challenges that Gender Studies programmes have to face in tertiary institutions given the current climate of stiff competition for limited funds, and the politics of development priorities within and outside academic institutions. The challenge is also for Gender Studies to establish its footing in the SDGs process so that the programmes will remain relevant.

Keywords: *Women's and Gender Studies, sustainable development, SDGs, MDGs, gender equality, social justice*