

Feminist Comments on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
as resolved by the UN General Assembly in September 2015
by Ilse Hanak

In the seventeen SDGs Goal 5 is devoted entirely to the needs of women. However this is certainly not enough, because in many other areas covered by the remaining goals women are affected differently from men. We therefore strongly ask for special attention to the challenges women face especially in the developing countries, which we feel are neglected in the document.

Goal 1 calls for an end of poverty. While poverty has been reduced a bit after the year 2000, it increased again with the financial and economic crises in 2008. Women still constitute the majority of the poor, the vulnerable and the extremely poor.

Goal 2 wishes to end hunger, achieve food security and promote sustainable agriculture. No mention is made here that women are the main producers of food, they are the ones that keep and take care of seeds, genetic diversity, traditional knowledge and the preservation of the ecosystem. Still they often suffer from malnutrition in poorer countries.

Goal 3 hopes to ensure healthy lives and well-being at all ages. Regarding women it plans to reduce mortality of mothers, new-borns and infants and asks for universal access to health care including sexual and reproductive health care, family planning and relevant information and education. The fact is that women, in addition to producing new life, often work more hours and do harder work than men with harmful effects on their health.

Goal 4 stands for inclusive and equitable quality education and life-long learning for all. Even when education is free the cost of study material and school uniforms often rests with the parents, and more important, girls more often than boys are obliged to stay at home for care work and family chores, are forced into early marriages or banned from school on account of pregnancies. Only a change in the patriarchal order and in economic conditions can really ensure equal access. Not all countries provide school and universities free.

Goal 5 wishes to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. It strives to avert discrimination, violence against women, exploitation and all enforced practices, and to promote shared responsibility in household and family "as nationally appropriate". Regarding violence a deeper investigation is needed: In various countries women are murdered without any consequences to the perpetrators. It so happened in Ciudad Juárez in Mexico since the 1990 to hundreds of women, usually from members of drug rings, simply because they were women. Men of a fundamentalistic background often feel free to rape women because they show their hair, their arms or legs – the result of a wrong and narrow-minded interpretation of religious rules and/or social habits that force women to completely cover their bodies. Men are aroused sexually by the unusual sight and thus justify their violence. Women for such men obviously exist only to serve their needs. Similar incidents occur in towns and other settlements in India, because "woman should not walk alone at

night". In this country many girls are not even born or brought up because many parents try to avoid the absurd social coercion to pay a man for marrying their daughter. Married women are in danger of falling victim to a "dowry murder". The resulting lack of women in India could be one of the reasons for the many brutal rapes in India. Even the so-called "Untouchables" are not safe from being touched and raped by higher cast men. In South Africa some men are irritated by Lesbians, their magic ideas make them believe that rape will "cure" the women; however they often kill them. Perpetrators here are not prosecuted either. The recent study of the South African Academy of Science saying that homosexuality exists in all societies and cannot be corrected is of no avail to superstition.

To bring change to such a situation it is necessary to increase public understanding, education and information on these topics including expressly emphasizing the indisputable existence of human rights including women's rights. This education needs to comprise the judiciary and the police, to teach officers to treat women respectfully and according to the law, to incorporate women judges and police women with gender sensitivity. Regarding the provision of appropriate public services, infrastructure and social protection – it depends also on the economic resources of a country. Therefore it is the responsibility of the richer part of the world to allocate technical and financial assistance. The clause "as nationally appropriate" opens the door for any denial of women's empowerment.

Goal 6 asks for water and sanitation for all, Goal 7 for reliable and renewable energy for all. In the developing world women are seen as traditional providers for both these goods. Women and girls carry water from far, often new industrial plants pollute nearby sources. The same applies to firewood. More emphasis should be put on helping women to use renewable energy sources like biogas, solar cookers, lamps, radios and so on.

Goal 8 wants to promote sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all. Women are globally hit by higher unemployment, less pay for equal work and lower-grade job opportunities than men, but do much more care work. In the global South they work more in informal trade and agriculture. However to "decouple economic growth from environmental degradation" will hardly be possible within the profit orientated neo-liberal system. To offer small loans to informal female street vendors would be a help to them.

Goal 9 tries to build resilient infrastructure and promote sustainable industrialization and innovation, especially in LDCs (least developed countries). Multilateral corporations have often moved their production into poorer countries to gain from low wages and few labour rights, thereby increasing unemployment in their home countries. It is usually women that work in these factories for the global market. They often suffer exploitation, health hazards and even death. To effect a change here within the race for ever lower production costs of global industry would need a re-orientation which seems unrealistic under the prevailing system. But also in affluent countries buyers should ask for the origin of products and not accumulate masses of cheap imported goods produced under questionable conditions. Preference should be given to developing sustainable local industries for local consumption.

Goal 10 advises to reduce inequality within and among countries and recommends particular income growth of the 40% poorest people. How this disparity will diminish without reduction or taxation of high incomes is not disclosed. Migration policy today is rather a poor example of help. Nor has the WTO been exemplary in dealing with developing countries, rather have the rich tried to gain advantage for their economies.

Goal 11: cities and human settlements should be made inclusive, safe and sustainable. The safety of women in cities and settlements is by no means guaranteed as commented on under goal 5. Government must upgrade their police and judiciary as suggested there, if necessary with assistance from outside.

Goal 12 wants to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. Women suffer severely from negative excesses of this goal. Where owners of industrial or mining plants recklessly practice extractivism and land grabbing women often are robbed of their base of subsistence and existence. Customary land rights are ignored, yet women are responsible for feeding their families including their husbands who may work in the plant. Women often have to take refuge to prostitution to survive.

Goal 13 hopes to combat climate change and its impacts. Whereas developing countries hardly contribute to climate change they will suffer the most as many of their people live in low coast areas or small islands. They are also harder hit by unpredictable weather irregularities like floods and droughts. Industrial countries have the duty to support poor countries against these negative impacts. At the same time they have to do everything to stop the ever rising CO₂-emissions and to use renewable energy.

Goal 14 refers to the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources, Goal 15 similarly to just use of land ecosystems and forests, and to combating desertification, land degradation and loss of biodiversity. Alongside the West African coast huge international trawlers unsustainably and often illegally rob these waters of their fish that for ages have fed African fishermen and their families. Women lose their jobs of preparing and selling fish. EU trawlers have even been subsidized. It is however mostly women who prevent the deterioration of rural areas and preserve ecosystems by their agriculture, irrigation and wells. They also keep genetic resources while Western multinationals try to get hold of special varieties and have them patented like Basmati rice.

Goal 16 wishes to promote peaceful and inclusive societies and provide access to justice and accountable institutions for all. In many countries women still have fewer rights than men, for instance under shariah, and less access to their national or international law. They are more subject to violence as mentioned before, also to domestic violence and that of terroristic organisations. Women therefore must be granted more and better protection and access to justice.

Goal 17 hopes to strengthen the means of implementation and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. It is clear that official development assistance has to be increased

not shortened, for instance the 0,7% of GDP committed by the EU. For sustained development – it is not clearly defined – it needs capacity building, transfer of knowledge and technology and more trade. More trade, however, is critical for women, because more cheap imports from overseas destroy their small informal productions, more exports grab their land for cash crops; they have to work more and earn less. The future of global sustained development will - contrary to what WTO stands for - rather be a locally centred and regionally organized economy with a view of reducing as well fuel production - be it even of renewable sources that misuse more and more land – as well as fuel consumption that pollutes the environment, worsening weather conditions and ruining the climate. Policy coherence requires a coordination of strategies between economy including trade on one side and environment, human rights including women's right on the other side. As long as a patriarchal social order in connection with profit orientation and competitiveness based on the idea of unlimited growth prevail it will be hard to reach this goal. Real partnership must be based on unselfishness und equal rights.

Finally we have a few suggestions on the further process: We ask for more disaggregated data according to gender, and for additional indicators for development of women and men:

- How much food is produced by women / by men?
- Which community has a judiciary and police with gender education?
- What percentage of women has water source within 50 yards of their home?

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WIDE (Austria) is a network for women's rights and feminist perspectives in development cooperation, and forms part of the European WIDE+ network.

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