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## Gender Equality as an Entitlement: An Assessment of the UN Woemn's Report on Gender Equality and Sustainable Development 2014

Kiran Asher

University of Massachusetts Amherst, kasher@umass.edu

Bimbika Sijapati Basnett

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**Gender Equality as an Entitlement: An Assessment of the UN Women's Report on Gender Equality and Sustainable Development 2014**

**Kiran Asher and Bimbika Sijapati Basnett**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Concerns about gender equality and women's empowerment are re-emerging as part of the post-2015 global development agenda, and addressing them is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Every five years, the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (known since 2010 as UN Women), publishes a 'World Survey on the Role of Women in Development'. These Surveys are presented to the Second Committee of the General Assembly and focus on specific development themes. The 2014 Survey focuses on gender equality and sustainable development and was commissioned to inform the SDG process. It makes a case for linking gender equality and sustainable development on the grounds that 'causes and underlying

drivers of unsustainability and of gender inequality are deeply interlocked’ (p. 11). Furthermore, it notes that: ‘women’s knowledge, agency and collective action are central to finding, demonstrating and building more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable pathways to manage local landscapes; adapt to climate change; produce and access food; and secure sustainable water, sanitation and water services’ (p. 13).

These arguments are not new and are echoes from previous global reports. But the 2014 Survey is a clear departure from earlier reports in its normative commitment to promoting gender equality on the basis of rights, its focus on the structural factors that drive existing inequalities and unsustainability, and its commitment to public action for promoting gender equality and social justice. It draws on lessons from the long history of critical and committed feminist scholarship on women, gender, development and the environment to promote such a commitment and help assess initiatives for ‘sustainable development’. While the Survey is not devoid of pitfalls and contradictions, it does provide a critical resource for both scholars and practitioners concerned with better conceptualizing the linkage between gender equality and sustainable development.

In this Assessment, we highlight some the Survey’s key messages and approaches. We compare and contrast these with another key global report on gender and development, viz. the World Development Report 2012 (World Bank, 2012), highlight how the Survey engages with feminist and gender scholarship, and reflect on inconsistencies and contradictions within it. We conclude with the recommendation that the Survey should be read widely and critically.

## **GENDER EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: SYNERGIES AND TENSIONS**

The UN World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014 unequivocally notes that gender equality, women’s empowerment and human welfare should be at the core of the emerging global agenda on sustainable development and climate change. It acknowledges at the outset that there are both synergies and tensions between gender equality and sustainable

development. The latter observation is in sharp contrast to the usual pieties about win-win solutions and instrumental approaches, which call for gender equality and women's empowerment because it is 'smart economics', and will lead to better economic, environmental or social outcomes. While highlighting women's key contributions to promoting development and conservation, the Survey does not make the granting of rights contingent on the effectiveness of these contributions.

The Survey's three thematic chapters (on green economy, food security, and population) outline the approaches and shortcomings of current efforts to achieve sustainable development and respond to climate change. Chapter 5 notes that narratives linking population, poverty and environmental degradation are framed in ways that unduly burden the poor and women with addressing sustainability: 'By avoiding the political negotiation of resource use and control, competition and conflict, these paradigms can shift responsibilities away from powerful elites and vested interests onto the shoulders of the poor' (p. 83). Chapter 3 makes a similar argument that policies and programmes aiming to enhance environmental sustainability inadvertently increase women's unpaid care work. Neither of these can be acceptable sustainable pathways. Chapter 4 emphasizes that sustainability efforts need to be participative and democratic: 'policy efforts aimed at national and local food sufficiency and low-chemical and environmentally sustainable agriculture, which are desirable objectives from the perspective of ecological sustainability, need to consult smallholder farmers, particularly women, about their priorities and constraints rather than assume, that their interests are already assigned with preconceived policy aims and visions' (p. 37).

Indeed the Survey is fundamentally critical of standard models of economic development that support under-regulated market-led growth and result in or perpetuate social inequalities and environmental risks. Such models assess development on income, efficiency and emission-centric grounds, and do not take account of how their ostensible benefits are distributed. Attention to issues of power imbalances, structural inequalities and exclusions are markedly absent from current development efforts, including from the calls to 'empower women and girls'. In keeping with much of the extensive scholarship and research on international development (e.g., Edelman and Haugerud, 2005; Sparr, 1994), the Survey repeatedly foregrounds the

structural inequities of neoliberal economic globalization, which characterizes the current phase of global capitalism (a term not used in either the Survey or mainstream policy, but the model of development which de facto prevails). It brings four decades of gender and feminist work — including work by many of the Survey’s contributing authors — to bear on examining the fundamentally gendered impacts of development interventions. Departing from technical fixes of mainstream approaches to sustainability and gender equality, the Survey tacitly acknowledges that working towards these two goals is not power neutral.

The Survey emphasizes that just and sustainable development are moral and ethical imperatives now as they have been in the past. It critically assesses how past efforts to meet these imperatives have failed and examines what lessons history can offer for future endeavours. Among these failures is the tendency of official policy responses since the time of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) — known as the Rio Summit — to be overly optimistic about ‘economic efficiency, technology and markets’ (p. 28). This tendency overshadows concerns about social justice, including gender equity, which form the core of the proposals drafted by social movements, civil society groups and women’s organizations. The proposals of the latter groups are important because they refocus attention onto alternative views about just and sustainable development, and open debates on key issues such as planetary boundaries, green economy and climate change from gendered dimensions.

The Survey’s proposals include applying ‘three criteria for assessing if policies, programmes and actions taken in the name of sustainability are likely to achieve gender equality and women’s rights, especially the rights of marginalized groups, who are likely to bear a disproportionate share of the costs of economic, social and environmental unsustainability’ (p. 16). These three criteria are: human rights and respect for the capabilities of women and the poorest and most marginalized groups; the impact of sustainable development policies and actions on the unpaid work done by women and men; and the full and meaningful participation of women in sustainable development. In the subsequent thematic chapters of the Survey, the authors strive to be attentive to these criteria. Some may find the three criteria limiting and fault the Survey for not offering more concrete suggestions on how to achieve gender equity. However, this Assessment contends that the Survey’s foregrounding of the structural constraints to gender

equity and human development is far more valuable than yet another set of unenforceable and naïve prescriptions.

## **EQUALITY AND WELFARE: A CALL TO THE STATE FOR PUBLIC ACTION**

One of the Survey's central premises is that assuring the well-being of humanity is a moral and ethical imperative. At a time when it is fashionable to denounce the state, and de rigueur to turn to the private sector to promote efficient and 'green' growth, the Survey argues that promoting gender equality and sustainable development requires a strong role for the state and cannot be left to the market. Chapter 3 ('Green Economy, Gender Equality and Care') tempers the enthusiasm around market-based approaches to the transition to low-carbon economies, pointing out that variants of the green economy remain focused on economic efficiency and environmental sustainability. Gender-related issues tend to be relegated to the periphery. The policy discourses surrounding corporate pledges for 'zero deforestation' at the UN Climate Summit in New York in September 2014, and the gender-related track record of these corporations, are two cases in point.

Much of the current discussion on zero-deforestation pledges centres on whether corporations will adhere to them and/or the extent to which smallholders would also benefit from such pledges (Carrington, 2014; CIFOR, 2015; Ottay, 2015). Concerns around rights and equality are on the sidelines of these discussions, despite the fact that corporate practices and pressures have acutely gender-differentiated and socially unequal impacts (Behrman et al., 2012; Daley and Pallas, 2014; Elmhirst et al., 2015; Julia and White, 2012; McCarthy, 2010). For instance, in her ethnographic study on the gendered political economy of oil palm expansion in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, Tania Li (2015) finds that women have lost out both as migrants tied to smallholder schemes and as labourers employed directly by the plantations. Oil palm plots are registered under men's names, thereby effectively excluding the majority of women from ownership. The gendered division of labour instituted by the plantations relegates indigenous Dayak women to low-paid and casual work. Not only are women's wages below the provincial minimum, women are compelled to absorb all health and psychological risks associated with

work. At the same time, the expansion of oil palm in these localities has meant that there are few employment prospects outside of the sector, especially for women whose movements are constrained by domestic responsibilities. This is concerning given that Indonesia is the largest supplier of oil palm globally (*The Guardian*, 2014).

The authors of the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014 see a strong role for the state in monitoring the private sector and in negotiating for gender equitable outcomes. As one of its central recommendations, Chapter 3 maintains that ‘progressive taxation on corporate profits is central to any new social contract that is pro-poor and gender responsive’ (p. 115). Nevertheless, the Survey is neither unduly optimistic nor naive about the role of the state in promoting gender equality and sustainable development. It acknowledges that greater state involvement does not in and of itself resolve problems related to gender inequalities in access to social services, and that the state can further exacerbate inequalities in different ways. Moving towards sustainable development and gender equality will require concerted efforts at many levels. Indeed, there is a role for donors and the private sector to conceive, inspire and experiment with initiatives to promote gender equality and sustainable development — but civil society and social movements must hold decision makers to account. That is, the global community’s role is critical in ensuring that the actions of corporations are aligned with any effort of governments to facilitate the realization of rights, enhancement of capabilities and initiatives to achieve sustainable development. Warning that policies and actions in the name of sustainable development may have uneven or negative implications for gender equality, the Survey’s authors advocate the active participation of women and civil society organizations in negotiating tensions, trade-offs and policy dilemmas.

Notwithstanding this, the Survey is clear that the state represents the ‘duty bearer in delivering on commitments to gender equality, providing policy contexts, setting standards and regulating resource use, holding private actors to account and, crucially, providing public services and investments for social and ecological sustainability’ (p. 15). Furthermore, ‘from a human rights perspective, the state is the duty bearer that must guarantee the enjoyment of human rights. The human rights system underscores the positive duties of the state to respect, protect and fulfill rights’ (p. 52). Such a strong stance on the role of the state is a welcome change from previous

reports, such as the World Development Report 2012 (World Bank, 2012), in which the role of the state is limited to enhancing economic opportunities and providing an enabling environment for gender equality.

## **DEPARTURES FROM THE WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT**

Very briefly, the World Development Report 2012 (WDR 2012) starts from the premise that gender equality is a core development objective in its own right, but: ‘Gender equality is also smart economics enhancing productivity and improving other development outcomes, including the prospects for the next generations and for the quality of societal policies and institutions’ (World Bank, 2012: xiii). Greater gender equality can enhance productivity by using women’s skills and talents more fully; improve outcomes for the next generation because of women’s propensity to invest in children; and make decision making more representative of diverse voices. The WDR 2012 report points out that significant progress has been made in certain parameters of gender equality such as in education enrolment, life expectancy and labour force participation. But considerable ‘stickiness’ still exists in the form of excess deaths of girls and women, disparities in schooling, unequal access to economic opportunities and differences in voice in the household and society. The conceptual framework underpinning the WDR 2012 is that households, markets and institutions (both formal and informal) interact and influence gender-related outcomes.

As Shahra Razavi’s powerful assessment points out, the WDR 2012 signalled the growing importance accorded to gender equality within the World Bank, but:

by refusing to engage seriously with gender biases of macroeconomic policy agendas that have defined contemporary globalization, and the adverse outcomes of biases for women’s work, both paid and unpaid, within the context of rising inequalities and extensive labour market informalization, WDR 2012 fails to provide credible and even-handed analysis of the challenges that confront gender equality in the twenty-first century. (Razavi, 2012: 435).

Razavi’s criticisms are borne out by considerable research on the gender-differentiated



implications of macroeconomic policies carried out by feminist economists (Elson, 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2014) and by her own work on the politics of the care economy that she led whilst at UNRISD (Razavi, 2007; Razavi et al., 2012).

Razavi is one of the core authors of the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014. It appears that she, and like-minded feminist scholars who contributed to the Survey, have taken great pains to avoid the criticisms levelled against the WDR 2012. This is particularly evident in attempts to rectify the commonly held assumption that macroeconomic policies are gender neutral, and to underscore the significance of gender-differentiated implications of fiscal and monetary policies in Chapter 3. This Chapter justifiably points out that the ‘core triad’ that underpin contemporary fiscal and monetary policies — economic liberalization, macro stability and privatization — ‘create a deflectionary economic environment characterized by reduced capacity to generate employment, fiscal squeeze and limited public policy space, with implications for the achievement of social and environmental sustainability’ (pp. 42).

Furthermore, the fiscal constraints that are imposed on the state as a result of such policies limit the state’s capacity to provide social services. This disproportionately affects women because of the status of women in societies and the concentration of women in specific types of employment such as care services.

Chapter 4 offers yet another illustration of how the 2014 UN Survey is borne out of an implicit criticism of WDR2012 and the discussions of global policies that have thwarted the realization of gender equitable rights to food. The chapter notes that along with gender inequalities in intra-household consumption of food and distribution of work in food preparation and processing, a wide range of macroeconomic factors have played a critical role in sustaining the current agrarian crisis in developing countries and exacerbating gender asymmetries in the process. These factors include volatile world markets, a reduction in the flow of development aid to the agriculture sector, and trade openness. The pressures from international financial institutions to reduce the role of the state in supporting smallholders, investing in the agricultural sector and agricultural research have had particularly severe consequences for women smallholders who already lacked command over land and capital (Agarwal, 2014).

Unlike the WDR 2012, which only paid lip service to unpaid care, the Survey is strongly informed by extensive feminist research demonstrating that unpaid care work is disproportionately undertaken by women the world over. Such work remains invisibilized and under-appreciated, and thus constrains women and girls from realizing their full range of capabilities. The Survey argues that unsustainable development patterns intensify and exploit women's unpaid care work. Thus, potential links and tensions between gender equality and sustainable development need to be considered from a 'care perspective'. Indeed, the Survey highlights the need to assess the potential and performance of sustainable development investments in terms of whether and to what extent they reduce the unpaid care work burden of women and girls. In order to monitor such performance, Chapter 7 recommends improved collection, dissemination and analysis of sex and age disaggregated data on time use and unpaid work, coupled with the development of international standards and methodologies to improve data on unpaid care work.

In these ways, the Survey's authors draw on the long history of critical gender and feminist scholarship on women, gender, development and the environment. They urge the need for policy makers to avoid stereotypical assumptions about women's and men's relationship to the environment, and the need to remember the differences in the way diverse communities engage with natural resources. However, they also heed the lessons that they themselves recommend. For instance, the Survey acknowledges that the world's poor are especially vulnerable to climate-induced changes such as rising sea levels, coastal erosion, storms and desertification. But nowhere in the Survey is it claimed that women are particularly vulnerable to climate change. This is a welcome change from previous statements made by UN Women (2009) that claim: 'in many contexts, women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men — primarily as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent for livelihoods on natural resources that are threatened by climate change'. This representation of women as 'victims of climate change' reflects commonly held views propagated by most international agencies working on gender and climate change. Such representations continue to be deployed to draw attention to persistent gender inequalities from apathetic policy makers, the public and funders, even as feminist scholars question the empirical and conceptual foundations underpinning such claims (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Carr and Thompson, 2014; Okali and Naess,

2013; Sultana, 2013).

With regard to the claim that women are the poorest of the poor, as Cecile Jackson reminded us in the mid-1990s, gender and poverty are two separate issues that cannot be conflated.

Discrimination against women on the basis of their gender is also pervasive among affluent communities and households (Jackson, 1996). The argument that women are the poorest of the poor is based on differences in relative levels of poverty between female and male-headed households. Such comparisons often conflate ‘de jure’ and ‘de facto’ female-headed households (Chant, 1998). The latter term describes households in which the principal male is temporarily away, and is a noted phenomenon in many parts of the world. For example, in Nepal, the number of de facto female-headed households has risen dramatically since the early 2000s due to significant increases in circular migration of men for employment purposes in the Gulf countries and Southeast Asia (Sharma et al., 2014). Because of regular flows of remittances, these female-headed households are likely to be in a better economic position than their male-headed counterparts without a household member working overseas. Furthermore, an analysis of nationally representative household surveys (such as the Living Standards Measurement Survey) in 26 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean concluded that comparing levels of poverty between male and female-headed households ‘exaggerates the asset poverty of women’ (Deere et al., 2012). This is because analysis of household headship does not take into account that women in male-headed households can be owners or co-owners of assets (such as homes, lands or businesses) with their husbands or partners.

Arora-Jonsson (2011) argues that a priori assumptions about ‘women’s vulnerability’ to climate change may be counterproductive to the very women that development agencies are trying to safeguard and empower. Such assumptions homogenize and essentialize women in third world countries. They can deflect attention from unequal decision-making structures, draw upon and reinforce stereotypes about women’s roles in the family, community and environment, and add to women’s unpaid work burden without corresponding rewards. At the same time, the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014 builds on the feminist critique to justify bolder calls for moving away from certain policies and interventions on the grounds that they are inherently flawed from a gender and social equity perspective. The small section that has been

devoted to REDD+ in Chapter 2 serves as an illustration. A growing body of research, from global comparative studies to NGO policy positions, points to the gendered exclusions emanating from the REDD+ process (Gurung and Setyowati, 2012; Khadka et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2015; Peach Brown, 2011; UN-REDD, 2011). However, the majority of these studies focus on the design flaws of REDD+ and provide recommendations for making ‘a business case for gender in REDD’. In other words, they look at ‘why the unique role of women in providing and managing forests and ensuring their equal access to resources ... is an important component of equitable, effective and efficient REDD+’ (UN-REDD, 2011: 3). The Survey cautions that as REDD+ starts being implemented, global level concerns and inequalities will inevitably trump local-level issues and rights, thereby leading to exclusions, dispossessions and further marginalizations. This is because the fundamental premise of REDD is to ‘re-value forests as a source of carbon commodity to be exchanged in emerging markets’ and to serve as ‘a means of offsetting emissions produced in industrialized settings’ (p. 53). These fundamentals will remain intact even as REDD morphs into REDD+. Concerns over commercialization of land and peoples have sparked global debates about safeguards and safeguard information systems; volumes are being written about how the 3Es of REDD+ can be reconciled; and multiple actors (from the state to private sector) are involved in orchestrating REDD+ design and implementation.

## **THE CHALLENGES OF LINKING CRITIQUE AND PRAXIS**

The World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014 attempts to link critique and praxis — a linkage which is at the heart of feminist gender scholarship. This is a challenging task and the Survey stumbles in its attempts to be attentive to critical insights. These difficulties are particularly visible in the discussion on gender and food security in Chapter 4. It draws on critical feminist research to dispel stylized facts such as women produce 60–80 per cent of the world’s food, on the basis that such numbers are empirically unverifiable (Doss, 2011). But gender is treated as shorthand for women, and women in developing countries are viewed as marginalized in similar ways by structures spanning local to global levels. There is only a brief mention of the multiple ways in which gender intersects and interacts with wider social relations.

In the majority of the chapter, women in developing countries are portrayed as comprising a growing proportion of the agricultural labour force; as opting to stay in rural areas even as men migrate for employment elsewhere to escape the vagaries of climate change; and as trapped in ‘low productivity’ cycles. Moving beyond Chapter 4, examples and analyses across the Survey focus on differences in context, nations, regions and time (such as periods of food scarcity). Yet, oddly enough, this is not extended to differences among women, the relations between gender inequality and other kinds of social inequalities, and the corresponding implications for nuancing policy and practice aimed at achieving gender equity. The advancement that gender and feminist scholars have made in theorizing intersectionality and heterogeneity could be reflected more consistently and coherently throughout the Survey.

The conflicting discussions on care also point to contradictions and inconsistencies in the Survey. The section on ‘Alternative Responses to Unsustainability’ in Chapter 3 makes a compelling case for visibilizing, valuing and redistributing unpaid care work in the current discourses over sustainable development. Nevertheless, the lengthy discussion in this chapter on broadening the green economy agenda by inserting care appears to sit uneasily with the rest of the Survey. The argument that shifting towards more care-intensive or social services-intensive activities also has environmental benefits, since care does not generally involve intensive use of environmental resources, seems to be forced and tangential to the discussion on green economy. But more importantly, by focusing so heavily on inserting ‘care’ in the green economy agenda, it can be argued that the Survey risks reinforcing the concentration of women in the care sector and further exacerbating occupational segregation between women and men.

Chapter 6 (‘Investments for Gender Responsive Sustainable Development’) devotes considerable space to discussing how and why investing in fuel-efficient cooking technologies and energy is good for gender equality and sustainable development. The chapter rightly points out that in most developing countries, women are responsible for collecting fuelwood and charcoal for domestic consumption; the physical burden of such collection affects women’s health and reduces the time that they are able to devote to other tasks of their choice. Investments in cooking technologies are therefore likely to reduce women’s work burden and enhance their capabilities. But the chapter adds that these investments remain under-prioritized. Because

the main benefits of such technology are social (in terms of its impact on gender equality at a societal level) rather than private (in terms of what individual women or their households are willing to pay), market-driven investments are either unlikely to flow or have limited reach. The policy recommendations section therefore calls for developing ‘public–private–civil sector alliances that enable investments at scale to guarantee universal access ... while ensuring compliance with human rights standards’ (p. 115). However, the chapter fails to mention that improved cooking stoves have been promoted since the 1970s on the grounds of reducing women’s drudgery and lowering dependence on fuelwood. In spite of their alleged health benefits and successive attempts to promote varieties of the technology, women have been reluctant to use them if the stoves required the additional labour of having to cut wood into very small pieces. As Marilyn Hoskins recalls through her experience of having led early efforts to introduce fuel-efficient technology in West Africa, women did not use fuelwood, but sold it as their major source of cash. They used left over sticks and leaves for their own consumption. The improved cooking stove project threatened to undercut the local economy and had to be changed (Hoskins, forthcoming). Singling out certain investments (such as improved cooking stoves) and advocating that they will help reconcile the goals of gender equality and sustainable development seems to be too prescriptive and to go against the broader spirit of the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014.

In conclusion, the Survey brings together two key terms in the development lexicon. It is refreshing in a number of ways. It unequivocally critiques current development models, and shows that they are often the sources of the problems they aim to address. That is, it dares to take a critical view of market-driven approaches to the green economy in terms of how inequalities may be silently or inadvertently perpetuated by commodification of resources for green growth. It flags tensions and trade-offs and goes beyond the usual pieties of win-win proposals. It makes a clear, rights-based argument for gender equality, and calls for public investment to address gender and social equities rather than assuming that profit and growth will trickle down. This is congruent with putting human welfare at the forefront of sustainable development and underscores the importance of public engagement in both determining and safeguarding gender equality. Inconsistencies and contradictions are perhaps inevitable in a publication with multiple authors coming from diverse perspectives, disciplinary backgrounds and normative

commitments. Nevertheless, this Survey should be widely read not only for its critical discussion of the links between gender equality and sustainable development, but also for what it contributes to broader debates about sustainable development. Prior to the September 2015 meeting in New York to discuss the SDGs, the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014 was missing from the list of resources and featured publications of the UN's Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>). We are glad to see that it now appears there.

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### **Bio sketches**

Kiran Asher ([kasher@umass.edu](mailto:kasher@umass.edu)) is Associate Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her work including her monograph, *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands* (Duke University Press, 2009) focuses on the raced and gendered dimensions of environmental change in the global south.

Bimbika Sijapati Basnett researches on forest governance in the context of migration and multi-local livelihoods in Nepal; and social and gender differentiated implications of oil palm expansion in Indonesia. She is a Social Scientist at the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), based in Bogor, Indonesia.