

The UN Sustainable Development Goals & Women: New Questions for Social Change and Research

Lynn Wilson, PhD and Janet Salmons, PhD

Abstract

Escalating economic and social disruption from interwoven environmental and societal pressures disproportionately affects women. Our analysis of the U.N. sponsored Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) generated questions researchers need to explore to improve understanding of the impacts particular to women and girls in three priority categories: education and training, jobs, and inclusive societies.

Problem

The problem central to this analysis was the need for an understanding of the role of gender reflected in the SDGs and related policy documents, and attention to the integration of gender equality in the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.



Purpose

To identify research needs that address gaps in understanding of women and girls influenced by social, cultural, and economic upheaval as articulated in the SDGs.



Relevant Literature

The Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2016) and related policy briefs such as “Gender and climate change: Evidence and experience” (Blomstrom & Burns, 2015), “Changing the climate: Why gender matters to achieving equitable sustainable development” (Ward, 2015), were central to the content analysis.

Peer reviewed research such as “Politics of poverty: The post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and the business of agriculture” (Annan-Diab & Molinari, 2017), and “Interdisciplinarity: Practical approach to advancing education for sustainability and for the Sustainable Development Goals” (Spann, 2017) provided valuable context for the questions under investigation.



Research Questions

What needs and concerns for women and girls are identified in the SDGs and related documents?

What are societal and cultural factors specific to gender within the SDGs?

Which of these needs and concerns are currently under-researched?

Procedures

The researchers conducted a content analysis of the 17 Goals and 169 targets within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), together with related policy documents, to investigate to women’s and girls’ issues in the SDGs.



Data Analysis

This study involved three levels of coding and inductive analysis.

- 1) we identified ways women, girls or gender were mentioned,
- 2) we analyzed those statements to find key concepts, and
- 3) we looked for relationships between concepts.

Findings

Crosscutting research is needed that links three intersecting themes related to women and girls:

- Active participation by girls and women is central to successful economic sustainability.
- Girls and women need more access to learning to fully participate in changed societies.
- Persistent gender inequality obstructs progress; inclusive social systems and gender-neutral policies are needed.

Limitations

The SDGs, and related policy documents and literature, cover an extensive set of environmental, economic, and social problems. The researchers limited this study to an exploration of three themes relevant to women and girls that emerged through qualitative content analysis:

1. Accessing education and training;
2. Preparing for sustainable jobs; and
3. Building inclusive societies.

Conclusions

Further research is needed to address these inter-related questions:

- How can women and girls gain access to life-long education and training for sustainable societies?
- What characteristics of inclusive societies enable full participation of women and girls?
- How can women and girls take leadership roles and foster positive economic change?

Social Change Implications

With increased understanding of ways to overcome educational, economic and societal barriers, women and girls will have the potential to lead policy changes that can have local ripple effects.



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