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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Wong, Oi Mei (王愛媚)</td>
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Sustainable Development – Why Gender Matters

Wong Oi Mei

Submitted on 20th Nov 2013
Introduction

Fundamentally, Our Common Future provided a bio-centric stance of sustainability: “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” (WCED, 1987) Later at the World Summit 2002, the three pillars of sustainability was defined by the U.N, also known as the “Three Es” of sustainability: environmental protection, economic development, and social equity. (WSSD, 2002)

To promote sustainable development in the third world, gender and the environment is one of the key themes promoted by Susan Baker. (Baker, 2006) Continue building momentum for not only acknowledging women’s ability to, and a must to play a vital role in achieving a sustainable future, but also for the actions needed to unlock the their untapped potentials in advancing the role of women.

Yet, how the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of gender-roles have impeded the achievement of sustainable development in the third world? A substantial number of women still belong to the marginalized group with subjugated rights and responsibilities. To successfully address the complex challenges underpinning requirement of sustainable development, the correlation between gender equality and sustainable development across “Three Es” pillars must be internationally-recognized.

International Recognition

Sha Zukang, the UN Under-Secretary-General spoke at the women and sustainable development conference hosted by the All-China Women’s Federation in Beijing “Sustainability is about women. Society flourishes when women’s leadership, creativity, and initiative are recognized, embraced, and harnessed. In many countries, women are the champions of green economy, practicing sustainable agriculture, nurturing our natural resources, and promoting renewable energy.” (Williams, 2012)
The correlation of women and environmental protection is fully recognized by internationals. Twenty years ago, the 1992 Rio Earth Summit Declaration stated that, “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.” (UN General Assembly, 1992)

Besides, the Millennium Summit of the UN in 2000 established the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), while Goal 7 focuses on environmental sustainability and reversing the damages caused to environmental resources. Goal 3 places the emphasis on promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment as our shared global commitment. (Buvini, 2008)

At the UN 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, the former First Lady Hillary Clinton’s declaration that “Women’s rights are human rights, once and for all” gave the push for gender equality world widely. A visionary plan was endorsed by the delegates from 180 nations to integrate the gender concern in policies and programmes for sustainable development which still serves as an ambitious blueprint to chart the progress of women’s rights in today’s world. (Tyler, 1995)

Two months ago, Hillary Clinton revealed a plan at the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) in New York to launch a global view of women’s rights and unveil the unfinished business in the 21st century, unanimously declared that more needs to be done in advancing rights and opportunities for women. (Watson, 2013)

The Rio Declaration, the MDGs, the platform in Beijing and the CGI altogether pinpoint the fundamental value of women’s critical roles regarding global environmental issues. According to Melanne Verveer (2012), U.S. Department of State ambassador-at-large for global women's issues, “No effort to advance sustainable development will succeed that does not take into account half the world’s population.” Women has often work on the frontlines in respect to the environmental challenges. Changes in environment directly impede women’s access to land and resources. Melanne
also said “Women have long been promoting solutions to sustainable development challenges. They've been promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation, protecting biodiversity and vital ecosystems, securing water access, and combating indoor air pollution.” (Verveer, 2012)

During my 3 weeks trip to Indonesia, I have seen some local women farmers and the NGOs cooperated in advancing the sustainable rice cultivation for local consumptions. Could you imagine if more women’s potential is unlocked, how much more will be achieved? Various examples around the world will be given to reveal the women’s essential roles in achieving sustainable development for all.

**Women’s Vital Role**

Firstly, international development reports have shown the vital roles that women play in addressing sustainable agriculture, food security and biodiversity preservation. The majority of small farmers around the globe are women, also known as the main staple crops producers. Women often undertake the significant role of adaptation efforts and food security challenges, particularly in developing countries and regions that are vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change. Deprived women in developing countries bear the heaviest consequences of environmental degradation. (Dankelman & Davidson, 1988). It is imperative for women to be involved in decision-making and measures implementation. The 2011 report written by The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN. specifies that women represent 43% of the global agriculture workforce. Compared with men, women are noticeably less likely in accessing to training, they rarely own and administer land, and lack the opportunities for obtaining credits due to the gender constraint. These restraint women’s potential in agricultural productivity. Through sustainable agricultural practices, to further enhance their productivity which maximize women’s contribution to both to future economic growth and benefit for families. (FAO, 2011)
Eliminating the gender gap would generate and expand food and nutrition security thus benefit the entire society. It is suggested that if women had the equal access to agriculture resources, such as seeds, fertilizers and tools as men, they could expected a soaring 20–30% in yields on their farmland, and a total agricultural output expansion in developing countries by 2.5–4%. Such productivity and yields improvements could globally lift 12-17% people out of hunger. By accessing to education and training, as well as a productive investment on their acquired land, women are found more likely to seek advice and utilize new technologies, for instance, adopting “climate-smart” agricultural to succeed in the long run. (FAO, 2011)

Additionally, the FAO Forestry has shown women’s involvement accounts for strong positive influence on the forest management planning and implementation in decision making and legislation. (FAO, 2013) Women, particularly within indigenous communities and rural areas, are experienced and knowledgeable in working with the land and indigenous ecology. They are at the heart of their communities. As a major holder, women’s inputs are invaluable to any resource management strategy. Without the input of women, ecosystem-based management in rural area would likely be an impossible mission. Women’s role as in provision of food, water and traditional medicine provide invaluable insights in developing appropriate biodiversity preservation practices. (Baker, 2006)

Surely, gender issue faces struggles in development programs especially in the developing countries with widespread corruption. The Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia, to name a few. President Barack Obama upholds the belief that a greater recognition of women’s role matters. His establishment of the Obama Administration’s Feed the Future initiative not only to advance food security worldwide, but also to promote gender equality and empower women. (Melissa D. Ho & Charles E. Hanrahan, 2011)

Secondly, there are enormous untapped potentials of women in assessing energy. According to WHO (2011), around 3 billion people, nearly half of the world populations globally, rely on open fires and
traditional stoves to generate heat and cook. Women and children are often in charge of collecting fuels for cook fires. Such heating methods with biomass fuels are of low efficient, the demand for fuel wood constitute to deforestation and ultimately, climate change. Without chimney or hood, a substantial amount of smoke exposure from traditional cook fires and stoves has come with respirational health consequences to those who tend to hearth, mostly women and young children. WHO (2011) implicates an estimated two million annual premature deaths, making these cooking methods as the fifth most serious risk factor for illness among developing countries.

To fully engage women with environmentally sound technologies by a multidisciplinary approach to growth, dissemination and maintenance of clean technologies, for instance, fuel-efficient stoves and solar lights that can dramatically reduce the amount of stoves usage. The transition to solar means a safer, less time-consuming and cheaper source of heat and energy.

Likewise, women make more contributions to the workforce when they are fully engaged. Specifically integrate women into the greener cook stoves supply chain contributes to an impact on acceptability and adoption rates, as well as economic benefits. Women’s potentials are to be unveiled, they make good use the business opportunities in selling, distributing and repairing of the environmentally-sound cook stoves and solar lights.

In India, the establishment of Self-Employed Women’s Association enabled women to learn about the greener cook stove and how their quality of life can be significantly improved by substituting the traditional stoves with the greener stoves. These women have been selling the energy efficient cook stove to generate an economic well-being to households and growth of national economies. (Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, 2013)

**Thirdly**, women entrepreneurship is particularly critical to the economy growth in developing countries. A research revealed in the World Development Report that women entrepreneurship in
developing countries comes largely as necessity. Without other feasible alternatives to provide for or as supplement of household incomes, women entrepreneurship or self-employment becomes the only viable option. Women-owned small and growing businesses will continue to be a driving force of both inclusive and broad economic well-beings. (World Bank, 2012)

However, women-owned business is limited by the gender-specific constraints. Women entrepreneurs often operate in the informal sector and usually a home-based business on the grounds of both informational, capital and particularly educational limits. According to the World Bank (2013), among 30% of global women and 64% of African women in the non-agricultural labor force are self-employed in the informal sector. In Bangladesh, 70% of the female entrepreneurs reported being self-taught in skills to run businesses compared with a 44% of male business owners. (World Bank, 2008). Their limited access to information and communications technology (ICT) impose constraint in expanding market opportunities. Women in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia are 23 percent, 24 percent and 37 percent, respectively, less likely to own a mobile phone. (World Bank, 2013)

**Actions**

Actions speak louder than words. To unlock women’s potentials and overcome the gender specific constraints, actions must be taken in advancing women’s role towards a sustainable development of all.

**First,** women leadership and participation should be strengthened at all levels in key policy bodies. According to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, “*There's no doubt that any society that does not bring into the centre the full participation of women, is a loser.*” (Minu Hemmati and Rosalie Gardiner, 2002) If you ask me what does a female farmer from a small village in Sudan want, it is not surprised to hear that she wants a table. Yet, it could be more than that. She could have given a choice in choosing the shape of that table, or the colour of it.
Indeed, very few women participate in high-level decision-making of environmental issues. Women should be given an equal seat as men throughout the policy cycle. The processes of decision-making and policy implementation regarding environmental policies and natural resource investment decisions should be instilled with an equal innovation and participation of women. Their voice should be heard at all government level, from local rural communities to village councils, to districts and cities, to sub-national and national level, and even international and multilateral development institutions and funds.

**At Local and National Levels**

Regarding freshwater management, about 120 ministers The Ministerial Declaration of The Hague on Water Security in 21st Century emphasized the needs to empower women and respond to their basic clean water needs through a participatory process of water resources management. (UNEP, 2000) At the Gender and Water Workshop hosted by the Second World Water Forum in The Hague, a total of 500 people agreed to establish a Gender and Water Alliance, which comprises of memberships from NGOs, international women's groups, governments at different levels, intergovernmental bodies.

Thilmeeza Hussain, the Founder of Voice of Women, is also the Representative to the Permanent Mission of Maldives to the UN. As the only NGO in Maldives, Hussain and her team have contributed by involving more Maldives indigenous women into decision-making processes regarding women and climate change issue. Her representation of the local women as the Minister of State for Home Affairs in the North Province of the Maldives was one of the remarkable showcase that women’s voices matter. (Climate Wise Women, 2011)

**At International Level**

Lorena Aguilar, the Senior Gender Advisor of IUCN has done tremendous work in bringing the role of indigenous women to the climate change negotiation table and most importantly, to showcase women’s
capability of making decisions for a better future. Aguilar emphasizes “The capacity of women, particularly of indigenous women, to participate in biodiversity and climate change decision-making must be increased as well as valued.” An examples of ICUN initiative is the specific capacity building workshop for women participating in negotiations of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Afterward, an official gender action plan with indigenous women being key actors was launched. (ICUN, 2009)

Secondly, gender must be included as part of the mainstream policies at all policy levels, along with the establishment of effective monitoring mechanisms. Gender mainstreaming is a globally accepted. It should include the use of assessment, training, as well as gender-targeted strategies and actions. (Minu Hemmati and Rosalie Gardiner, 2002)

In the foreseeable future, there are several gender mainstreaming international platforms in advancing women role on the international agenda. The Women’s Action Agenda for a Healthy and Peaceful Planet 2015 facilitated by WEDO (2002) will articulate a vision for women in building our sustainable future. In the coming 58th UN Commission on the Status of Women meeting in 2014, the priority theme has set as “Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls”. (UN Women, 2013). Where gender issues remain as the mainstream in achieving sustainable development.

Adequate and effective monitoring mechanisms, for example, “A Three-Year Road Map for Gender Mainstreaming” by The World Bank reported the effectiveness of the Gender Action Plan proposed in 2011-2013. The road map aims to evaluate whether the programs and policies implemented by The World Bank has stressed on the gender mainstream strategies in project design and supervision.

Thirdly, an investment in education of women is one of the most effective way towards a sustainable development. More educational opportunities should be given especially in supporting STEM women
students. STEM refers to science, technology, engineering, and math, including environmental sciences. Solutions to 21st environmental challenges often require STEM students. Currently, men outnumber women in most STEM professions. (Forbes, 2012) Increasing women’s leadership in STEM jobs support economic and sustainable development. After outlining the barriers to women’s advance in STEM fields, professional mentoring could offer advice and to support women academically. Efforts can be made to transform institutions and increase the participations of STEM women.

Fourthly, gender-targeted innovative approaches and international partnerships facilitate practical actions. In 2012, the newly launched International Visitors Leadership Program “Women Climate Leaders” provide opportunities for women worldwide to participate in a three-week practical workshop in the United States. Participants will be able to learn the policies of sustainable development in issues like climate change mitigation and adaptation, small-scale green technologies and women entrepreneurship promotions.

**Conclusion**

Today, we can all see the remarkable progress of the advancing women role worldwide. Women and girls are at heart of the community, the nation, as well as the globe. “No society can achieve its full potential when half the population is denied the opportunity to achieve theirs.” (Verveer, 2012) In achieving a sustainable development, it requires an international recognition and participation of women role, as well as concrete actions to unlock women’s potentials in advancing their role.

Much remains to be done, but we have the right momentum. Wangari Maathai, the renowned environmentalist and the Nobel Peace Prize winner who upholds the women’s vital role towards a sustainable development, urged: “We must find opportunities to make change happen – we must not tire, we must not give up, we must persist.”
References


