

DISCUSSION PAPER

# THE SDGs AND FEMINIST MOVEMENT BUILDING



No. 27, December 2018

**GITA SEN**

The UN Women discussion paper series is a new initiative led by the Research and Data section. The series features research commissioned as background papers for publications by leading researchers from different national and regional contexts. Each paper benefits from an anonymous external peer review process before being published in this series.

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The paper draws on written documents, as well as my knowledge and experience derived from direct and intensive involvement in the processes over the critical period from before 2012 until now. I have benefited from comments from Shahra Razavi, Silke Staab, members of the Expert Advisory Group for the report and anonymous reviewers. Any errors or misinterpretations of events are mine alone. A shorter version of the paper is forthcoming in a Special Issue of *Global Policy*.

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# SUMMARY

The contours and effectiveness of all social organizing, including feminist mobilization, at any level—local, national, regional or global—depend on three key drivers: (i) issues and environment; (ii) institutions; and (iii) the processes of movement building. These drivers often have very different antecedents in a particular context. Hence, their effects may be synergistic, working to amplify the impact of each, or they may be at odds with each other and work at cross-purposes. Their interaction governs how issues are perceived, how opportunities and challenges are defined, how interests are framed and how they guide the shaping and building of alliances as well as their ruptures. The paper applies this analytical framework to examine how feminists have engaged with the negotiation and formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) over the last few years.

The paper views the whys and hows of feminist engagement with the SDGs in a broader context: the key UN-related processes from the time women began getting involved with them in the 1970s. This contextual analysis for the period from the 1970s up to 2010 illuminates a central argument of the paper, namely that feminist movement building is not a simple volitional act but is enmeshed in the fluxes and changes of its external environment and institutions. This historical background sets the stage for a more in-depth discussion of the recent period of the

SDGs. Such a historical analysis not only provides a sense of perspective but also locates recent advances and setbacks within a longer timeframe. Given the long history and persistence of gender inequality and violations of girls' and women's human rights, such a perspective is essential for a more balanced understanding of where we need to go and how to advance more sustainable transformations.

The feminist movement is no stranger to adverse economic, social and political environments. Many of the current cohorts of feminists came of age in the mid-1980s and 1990s when neoliberal economic and social policies and ideologies were gaining ground. Since then, the world has grown increasingly difficult, with many opponents and structures inimical to advancing women's human rights. While playing a watchdog role for the implementation of the SDGs, feminist mobilizing must keep its attention on the bigger picture.

The paper argues that the ability of feminist organizations to hold their own in this fierce world, to defend human rights and to advance economic, ecological and gender justice requires not only clarity of vision and a track record of analysis and advocacy but also stronger communications skills, greater organizational resilience and effectiveness, and the ability to build and nurture effective alliances in which younger people play strong roles.

# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CPD	Commission on Population and Development
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
CSO	civil society organization
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
FDI	foreign direct investment
FfD	Financing for Development
GEAR	Gender Equality Architecture Reform
HLP	High-Level Panel
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	non-governmental organization
ODA	overseas development assistance
OWG	Open Working Group
PPP	public-private partnership
SC 1325	Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
TNC	transnational corporation
UN	United Nations
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNCTC	United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
WEDO	Women’s Environment and Development Organization
WHO	World Health Organization
WID)	women in development
WMG	Women’s Major Group
WSSD	World Summit for Social Development
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWG/FfD	Women’s Working Group on Financing for Development

1.

# INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on experiences of feminist engagement with United Nations (UN) processes to make the argument that there are three fundamental drivers of whether and how women's organizations can participate effectively in shaping policies and monitoring their implementation. These drivers are (i) issues and environment, (ii) institutions and (iii) processes. The paper applies this analytical framework to examine how feminists have engaged with the negotiation and formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) over the last few years.

It is useful to view the whys and hows of feminist engagement with the SDGs in a broader context: the key UN-related processes from the time women began getting involved with them in the 1970s. This contextual analysis for the period from the 1970s up to 2010 illuminates a central argument of the paper, namely that feminist movement building is not a simple volitional act but is enmeshed in the fluxes and changes of its external environment and institutions. A brief look at this historical background sets the stage for a more in-depth discussion of the recent period of the SDGs. Such an approach will, we hope, lend needed perspective and balance over-enthusiasm about the past or excessive pessimism about the present and future.

The formal basis for the SDGs was laid at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, which was the occasion of the 20-year review (Rio +20) of the original UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also held in Rio. The paper focuses on feminist engagement beginning with the preparations before 2012 for this 20-year review until the formal approval of the SDGs at the UN General Assembly in September 2015. Although feminist engagement continued after September 2015, and women's rights organizations are committed to monitoring SGD implementation in the next phase, the scope of this paper is the period that covers the main processes underpinning SDG formulation.

From the perspective of gender equality and women's human rights, the period included two other related processes: the 20-year reviews of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) (Cairo +20) in 2014 and of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing +20) in 2015. The paper explores the challenges and opportunities posed by this coincidence of different processes, given that feminist organizations were engaged in all of them. Based on this analysis, it identifies the institutional mechanisms and types of movement building that hopefully can advance the agenda towards realizing gender equality and women's human rights in the years ahead.

Two more 20th anniversaries that ought to have received greater mainstream attention were those marking the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna +20) in 2013 and the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) (Copenhagen +20) in 2015. As discussed later, the relative silence surrounding these highlights significant South versus North tensions on the perceived selective application of human rights frameworks and the continued dominance of failing neoliberal economic agendas, respectively.

The period also ends just before the 15-year review in October 2015 of Security Council Resolution 1325 (SC 1325) on women, peace and security, which saw mobilization by women's organizations and activists. There was a strong push by feminist activists during



the SDGs processes to ensure that the SDG for peace would not be dropped.<sup>1</sup> In her global review of the implementation of SC 1325, Radhika Coomaraswamy pointed out that, “In consultations for the Global Study, participants echoed this understanding that peace will be neither achievable nor sustainable without equitable and inclusive development, and

the recognition of the full range of human rights”<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, as she noted, “In spite of the repeated call to bridge the distance between development and humanitarian actors, none of the 169 individual targets contained in the 17 sustainable development goals addresses the specific needs of women and girls—or civilians generally—in conflict zones”<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Goetz and Jenkins 2016.

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2 Coomaraswamy 2015: 205.

3 Ibid.: 88.

2.

## THREE KEY DRIVERS OF FEMINIST MOBILIZATION

The contours and effectiveness of all social organizing, including feminist mobilization, at any level—local, national, regional or global—depend on three key drivers: (i) issues and environment; (ii) institutions; and (iii) the processes of movement building. These drivers often have very different antecedents in a particular context. Hence, their effects may be synergistic, working to amplify the impact of each, or they may be at odds with each other and work at cross-purposes. Their interaction governs how issues are perceived, how opportunities and challenges are defined, how interests are framed and how they guide the shaping and building of alliances as well as their ruptures.

Why the focus on these drivers? Feminist mobilizing does not happen in a socio-economic or political vacuum, as we know. Nor can it be effective simply through the volition or intent of women's organizations if the environment and institutions are not supportive. This does not mean that advances towards women's human rights cannot be made in difficult environments. But in such circumstances, they are likely to be limited, call for far greater effort and resources and may require defensive and protective strategies. Alliances with other like-minded, even if not congruent, organizations are likely to be especially necessary in difficult times. Conversely, even in good times, if mobilizing is to have lasting impact, it has to be strategic and must aim to make advances firmly grounded in larger belief systems and norms and in institutional frameworks.

The first driver, issues and environment, includes both the core issues that engage feminists at a given time (e.g., equality, development, human rights, violence against women, sexual and reproductive health and rights, financing, loss of livelihoods, informal work, the 'care' economy), as well as the larger economic, political and social environment of the time (e.g., structural adjustment, neoliberalism, South–North tensions, conflict, global warming). As we will see, the issues

that constitute the content of feminist mobilizing are, at least in part, thrown up by the larger social and economic environment and in part by the successes and failures of mobilization itself. The contextual period of 1970 to 2010 was a roller coaster in terms of the socio-economic environment, from the highs of concerns over 'basic needs' and 'redistribution with growth' to the lows of hard structural adjustment policies as part of the neoliberal agenda, growing clout of the private corporate sector, financial crisis and shifting balances in economic power consequent on the rapid growth of the Chinese and other economies. It would be surprising if these did not affect the ability and content of feminist mobilizing, and the paper will argue that indeed they did.

The second driver refers to the main institutions on which this paper will focus, viz., the institutions of multilateral governance—especially the broad ambit of the UN itself, including the Bretton Woods institutions—and their shifting roles and ability to shape the development agenda. Within this context, we will examine the emergence of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and whether and how this facilitated the role that civil society, and especially women's organizations, could play in key negotiations.

Analysis of the third driver, the processes of movement building, will address who came together, how and for what purposes; how they dealt with the shifting environment and institutional frames; how they generated commonalities and worked through differences; and whether and how they addressed other social movements. This driver is somewhat more dependent on the particularities of who was present in which spaces and how. Individuals are imbricated in the details of variations among key women's groups: their viewpoints and evolutions, the division of labour among them or relative emphasis given by each to certain issues at a particular juncture, access to resources, knowledge, expertise and skills and key questions of leadership. Such details are the raw material for a potentially fascinating study of specificities that would be more central to a fuller history of the five decades of feminist mobilizing since 1970. This paper does not, however, claim to be a historical rendering but is a reflection on key elements of the

period using a particular analytical framework. It therefore focuses on key structural aspects of mobilizing identified above.

When all three drivers are working in synergy, significant advances in feminist organizing for women's rights can be made. The reality, however, is that they rarely progress in harmony or at the same pace, and this in turn can create tensions, challenges and ruptures in movement building. Looking at the entire period from 1970 to 2015, the period of the 1970s was possibly one such synergistic phase, but it may have been the only one we have experienced in recent decades. In the phases succeeding the 1970s, at least one and often more of the drivers have been unfavourable. Making advances under such conditions is challenging. But important strategic thinking is essential so that hard-won gains can be defended and preparations can be made for further downhill runs in the roller coaster.

### 3.

# BACKGROUND AND CONTOURS OF WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION IN UN SPACES, 1970s TO 1990s

## 3.1

### The 1970s

The explosion of women's mobilization for the first and second world conferences on women—held in Mexico City (1975) and Copenhagen (1980), respectively—occurred in a period of global ferment and optimism.<sup>4</sup> The backdrop was provided by widespread belief in the possibility of a fairer 'new international economic order', the UN's focus on basic needs (championed by the International Labour Organization) and the World Bank's 'redistribution with growth'.<sup>5</sup> This was combined with the easing of political tensions following the end of the Vietnam War and continuing pressure for civil rights and social justice led by new social movements, including—importantly—women's movements in South and North.

It is remarkable how central the word 'redistribution' was to the World Bank's publications, speeches and programme directions during the 1970s, given that it practically disappeared from mainstream policy discourse in the period after 1980. This was no accident. New social movements, as well as the governments of the South (or the Third World, as it was then known), some of which had only recently emerged from colonial rule, made common cause by putting local and

global economic inequality front and centre in policy debates and advocacy. Theories of 'dependencia' originated in Latin America and spread rapidly to other parts of the South, arguing that primary producers were unfairly disadvantaged in international trade, keeping them perpetually dependent and underdeveloped. The World Bank, with its policy arm led by economists concerned about poverty and inequality, absorbed and reflected these concerns.

Interestingly, the 1970s witnessed significant differences between the positions taken by the World Bank and those of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Nowhere was this more obvious than when South governments such as Jamaica and the United Republic of Tanzania attempted to exercise greater policy autonomy or claim a larger (and fairer) share of the rent from primary product exports such as bauxite. The IMF, at the instance of its major shareholders, exerted considerable pressure against these and other South governments in order to prevent other primary commodity exporters from following the example of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cartelization, which had shown the potential results of such actions. Under McNamara's presidency,

4 Jain 2015; Olcott 2015, 2017.

5 Chenery et al. 1979.

the World Bank's focus on 'redistribution with growth' took a different and softer tack than the IMF.

The reputation of the private corporate sector became quite controversial in this period not only due to its opposition to renegotiating unfair primary product contracts but also because of several corruption scandals and the dubious role played by ITT Inc. in support of the Chilean coup in 1973.<sup>6</sup> At the recommendation of the Group of Eminent Persons appointed by the UN, a Commission on Transnational Corporations and the United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations (UNCTC) were set up in 1974. An important element of the mandate of the UNCTC was to devise a binding Code of Conduct for transnational corporations (TNCs). Though abolished in 1992, the UNCTC provided publicly available analysis, data and information for nearly two decades about the operations of TNCs in different parts of the world. This was useful to governments that had to negotiate with them as well as to civil society actors attempting to hold them accountable for their actions.

Economic issues were not the only locus of ferment. Opposition to 'population bomb' theories, popularized in the North,<sup>7</sup> came to a head during the World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974, where the slogan "development is the best contraceptive" became popular among South governments. Population bomb theories had blamed the birth rates of non-white peoples for their poverty and slow economic growth, side-stepping thereby the role of colonial histories, neo-colonial relationships and continuing inequalities in income and wealth. South government-led opposition to them in Bucharest laid the ground for the paradigm change that the population field was to undergo 20 years later at the ICPD.

Thus, the UN women's conferences in Mexico City and Copenhagen were held in an environment in which shifts towards greater economic and social

justice were viewed by many to be both necessary and possible. Feminist mobilization for both conferences included Northern activists invigorated by their own women's movements and the broader civil rights movements as well as Southern feminists working to foreground women's perspectives on the larger development agenda. Given different histories, backgrounds and experiences, there were many differences and considerable tensions among them, especially about the meanings and relative importance of equality versus development. But there were also important commonalities and agreements, supported by the emergence of new spaces for dialogue and mutual learning. The Mexico City conference was one of the earliest UN conferences to have an NGO (non-governmental organization) Tribune, which was clearly the site of greatest interest and innovation and had over 6,000 participants. The UN Decade for Women (for "Equality, Development and Peace") was announced, its themes clearly influenced by the public discourse of the time. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was set up in 1976, initially as a voluntary fund, as well as the UN Institute for Research and Training for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). In 1979, after two decades of deliberation, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly and went on to be instituted in 1981.

In sum, the 1970s environment validated a focus on socio-economic justice and public accountability. It affirmed the power of the UN to create new bodies that would institutionalize those concerns. Fuelled by ongoing social—including civil rights—movements and rapidly growing evidence about women's subordination within development paradigms, feminist mobilizing crossed South versus North boundaries, flourished and generated optimism. Change was in the air.

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6 Emmerij and Jolly 2009.

7 Ehrlich 1968.

## 3.2

### The 1980s

By the time the Third World Conference on Women was held in Nairobi in 1985, the optimism of the 1970s was considerably tempered by a changed global and national environment. The rapid rise to dominance of finance capital and its demands for free flows of money became enshrined in the ideologies of neoliberalism and the so-called Washington Consensus. While the neoliberal agenda has been evolving over time and has its own internal tensions (which there is no space to discuss here), its broad features as an overarching agenda for financialized capitalism include open borders for trade and investment/financial flows, fiscal suppression and inflation-targeting as central to monetary policy, privatization and public-private partnerships (PPPs), market fundamentalism, description of the state as corrupt, and managerialism. This agenda was the hallmark of the rise to power of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the United States and United Kingdom, respectively. Keynesian macroeconomics, with its potential for combining redistributive policies with government activism to protect employment, began to decline in prestige and clout.

The consequent erosion of national policy space, buttressed by a sustained attack on governments as intrinsically corrupt and 'rent seeking', framed the imposition of structural adjustment programmes with cuts in government expenditure and programmes in many countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, along with successive waves of privatization and PPPs. These ideological shifts were matched by institutional battles that resulted in a blood-letting of progressive economists from the World Bank and the appointment of a succession of presidents whose antecedents were in Wall Street and who had little empathy for development concerns. The Bank-IMF divergence of the 1970s became history, with the Bank beginning now to take the lead public position in promoting a neoliberal agenda as the only way forward for development policy. 'There is no alternative' (TINA) became the watchword of neoliberalism.

These rapid shifts in ideological climate and policy actions did not go unchallenged. Deeply concerned by growing evidence of the impact of budget cuts on infant health and school enrolment and retention, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) led the call for structural adjustment programmes to have a human face.<sup>8</sup> As the UN fought back, feminists were drawn to this critique and began a new phase of mobilization.<sup>9</sup> The Nairobi conference in 1985 saw the beginnings of the shift from women in development (WID) to gender and development (GAD) as feminists began to critique the development paradigm itself, not just women's unequal positions within it.<sup>10</sup> The conference, and especially its NGO Forum, was alive with new ideas and fierce critiques of WID policies, with women from the South playing a powerful role. It would probably be fair to say that Nairobi was the space where the critique of neoliberal approaches to development as such became a central focus of feminist mobilizing.

The next five years saw considerable national and global mobilization. This period was a critical one for global organizing as women learned to reach across the continents even though it was still the pre-Internet communications era, and to understand their diversity as a source of both strength and creativity. However, continuing crises shaped policies even as feminists began making links and connections among issues such as macroeconomics, ecology and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as a substitute for traditional population control policies. The ability of the developmental state to respond to feminist demands at the national level was eroding, as its institutions fragmented under the neoliberal onslaught.

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<sup>8</sup> Jolly 2012.

<sup>9</sup> The South-led organization DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) was born in 1984 through a gathering of feminist activists, advocates and policy makers whose aim was to critique the emerging neoliberal paradigm for development.

<sup>10</sup> Sen and Grown 1987.

### 3.3

## The 1990s

During the 1990s the UN continued fighting to retain influence, if not control, over the development agenda. Its agencies began to face growing financial constraints as major donors in the North started to squeeze out core funding.<sup>11</sup> The UN's role in development was increasingly under attack, with the Bretton Woods institutions claiming greater technical expertise and relegating the UN's core competence to peace and security. On the other side, the neoliberal agenda and its policy prescriptions became more nuanced during this period, shifting focus somewhat away from an emphasis on crude budget cuts and towards privatization. The World Bank itself began providing more support for the social sectors—health and education—but pushed for a greater role for the private sector in the provision of services. Representative of the institutional politics of the time, the UNCTC, which had managed to survive and continue to play a key role in forcing transparency on TNCs during the 1980s, was dismantled in 1992 and folded into the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

However, UNCTAD was itself under increasing pressure from the North as being overly concerned with the fairness of international trade processes and outcomes. It began seeing its importance superseded by the World Trade Organization (WTO), which came into existence in 1995 following the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations (1986-1994) culminating in the Marrakesh Agreement of 1994. The WTO replaced the old General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), became the principal multilateral site for trade regulation among participating countries and the negotiation of trade agreements and instituted an enforceable dispute resolution process. It has been criticized for becoming the third leg of the global neoliberal framework (along with the IMF and the World Bank), for being less than transparent and for serving the North's interests. These critiques have been bypassed by the rise of bilateral and regional

trade agreements that are often worse in their terms and conditions for countries of the South, even as the WTO's Doha Round has remained stalemated.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these growing challenges, as women began preparing for the conferences of the 1990s, the UN still provided an open and welcoming space for civil society. The 1990s conferences catalysed the ability of women's organizations to provide critiques of paradigms and policies and to propose alternatives, e.g., for the recognition of women's rights as human rights and violence against women as a violation of those human rights in Vienna; against population control and in support of SRHR in Cairo; and against structural adjustment policies and the neoliberal agenda in Copenhagen and Beijing.

Like other civil society organizations (CSOs), women's organizations believed strongly in the importance of the UN and its role in global development and in setting the economic agenda.<sup>13</sup> Feminists may (and often do) critique the state, but they are also among its strongest defenders, recognizing that a functioning state is essential to the achievement of gender equality and to the protection and fulfilment of women's human rights. At the global level, the UN is the only plausible quasi-state body, essential to the setting of global norms and standards for, inter alia, gender equality, ensuring accountability for human rights and moving the development agenda towards achieving them.

The conferences of the 1990s—the main ones, for our purposes, being Rio (1992), Vienna (1993), Cairo (1994), Beijing (1995) and Copenhagen (1995)—saw feminist mobilization graduate from NGO forums to intergovernmental negotiating spaces. Women's organizations brought their national and regional experiences of issues, of programmes and policies

<sup>11</sup> Adams and Martens 2015.

<sup>12</sup> The publications of the South Centre provide ample evidence in this regard.

<sup>13</sup> Chesler and McGovern 2015.

and of organizing across multiple boundaries to these spaces. Through such mobilization, organizations with little experience or prior knowledge could take a great leap forward into the world of formal inter-governmental negotiations, with considerable success.<sup>14</sup> Feminists learned formal negotiation methods and language and became creative in mixing effective advocacy with technical sophistication, using insider–outsider methods and strategic and tactical lessons that they learned on the job.

Feminist movement building was able to grow and mature into a powerful global force through the strength of its commitment to the cause of gender equality and women’s human rights. Equally, it could creatively address new issues and learn from its own diversity despite an increasingly difficult policy environment. In fact, the need to challenge those policies provided grist to the mill of women’s organizations during this period. The ability to do so effectively was enabled by the welcoming environment that the UN provided to civil society at a time when its own role was under attack.

Major advances were made at the Rio, Vienna, Cairo and Beijing conferences, as is widely known and will not be detailed here. They included the official recognition in Vienna of women’s rights as human rights and of violence against women as a violation of those rights; the paradigm change of Cairo that shifted population-related policy away from an overweening emphasis on population growth rates and towards fulfilling SRHR; and a broad consensus in Beijing on advancing gender equality, women’s empowerment and human rights across 12 encompassing areas.

Significant numbers of women had participated in the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio, 1992), mainly through its NGO Forum. At Planeta Femea (the Women’s Tent), feminists successfully joined issue with a number of large Northern environmental organizations over their support for population control policies regardless of health and human rights consequences.<sup>15</sup> Women’s role

in environmental management and development was recognized in Agenda 21, the official outcome document. But Rio was also important for everyone because, among other important measures towards ecological sustainability, it agreed to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, highlighted the positive potential of the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion (which had come into effect in 1989 despite severe opposition from TNCs such as DuPont) and saw the birth of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The last of these was followed by the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, creating binding commitments on North governments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on the principle of common but differentiated responsibility.

Despite these advances at the height of the neoliberal economic paradigm, there were also setbacks. The outcome document of the World Summit on Social Development held in Copenhagen was inadequate. Feminists—along with others from civil society, the UN System and some South and North governments—had hoped to limit if not reverse the juggernaut of financial globalization and its policy arm, neoliberalism. But the forces arrayed on the other side, including major North governments, were too strong and ensured that the outcome document would be relatively weak.

The challenge of growing global inequality and the deepening chasm between South and North on development, the continuing weakness of eroded and fragmented national institutions and diminished national policy space meant that the implementation of the agreements reached in the 1990s conferences was always going to be a challenge.<sup>16</sup> The diminishing of the developmental state meant that, for many countries, systematic planning was replaced by ad hoc mixtures of bilateral projects, multilateral programmes and implementation by international NGOs, working in silos, competing or at cross-purposes. This was far from being a salubrious environment for national implementation of the agreements reached in the conferences.

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14 Correa et al. 2015.

15 Sen 1994.

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16 Sen and Correa 2000; Petchesky 2003; Moghadam 2012.



## 4.

# GROWING BACKLASH AND REACTION: THE GRITTY 2000s

The next phase was marked by the growing strength of conservative forces in UN spaces that opposed gender equality and women's human rights in the name of culture, tradition and religion. These forces had been growing in national and regional contexts and spreading into the global arena during previous decades.<sup>17</sup> Although conservative religious forces that had traditionally opposed each other began making cause during the UN conferences of the 1990s, their spread and reach grew much greater and more obdurate in the subsequent decade.<sup>18</sup> The difference this made to UN negotiations was striking. Indeed, the religious conservative government of the Islamic Republic of Iran had been one of the most helpful in negotiating key elements of the ICPD Programme of Action.

However, honest brokers became more and more rare in the subsequent period. To some extent, the growing vigour of the opposition can be seen as a testimonial to the gains made by feminist movement building. But there were also the spillover effects of a rising tide of global conservatism and religious fundamentalism in many parts of the world.<sup>19</sup> While religious extremists from different groupings were often at odds with each other, they tended to converge in their opposition to gender equality and women's human rights. Many UN spaces witnessed this, not least the 5-, 10- and 15-year reviews of the Cairo and Beijing conferences. There was increasing and bitter contestation between feminists and forces attempting to turn back the clock on the achievements of the conferences of the 1990s in terms of gender equality and women's human rights.<sup>20</sup>

The UN itself was seeing even greater erosion in its economic and development mandates. It began moving closer to TNCs through the Global Compact that began in mid-2000, a replacement of the idea of a binding Code of Conduct by the voluntary adoption of 10 principles. TNCs may have gained cachet and access to governments through this, but what the UN got in return is not very clear.<sup>21</sup> Core funding for UN agencies continued to fall, while the world's richest economy was going through significant increases in funding by fossil-fuel billionaires and others promoting TNC bottom-lines through climate change 'denialism' and support for conservative forces such as the Tea Party. Their agenda included opposition to the UN and pressure for US government action against UN agencies and multilateral agreements. UNCTAD, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and even the World Health Organization (WHO) experienced the impact

17 Moghadam 1994.

18 Sen and Correa 2000.

19 Chhachhi 2014; Sow and Pazello 2014.

20 Sen 2005.

21 Adams and Martens 2015.

of such pressure. Arguably the most damaging from a planetary perspective was the United States pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol,<sup>22</sup> resulting over time in its replacement by the Paris Agenda with its voluntary and non-binding commitments.

South versus North economic battles in UN spaces became increasingly polarized in this period. The feminist movement—which had managed in the previous period to consolidate support for its agenda across a wide spectrum of countries from both South and North—found itself increasingly caught in the fault-lines between global economic justice and gender justice. The UN's own ability to broker negotiations across these fault-lines was weakened.

Progressive governments and the UN itself countered this through the sweeping vision towards a more just future world contained in the Millennium Declaration of 2000. However, the manner in which the broad mandate of the Declaration was translated into the limited and technocratic scope of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was evidence of the weakness of the UN and the harshness of the multilateral environment.<sup>23</sup> Civil society played little role in the formulation of the MDGs, but neither did many Member States from the South. Feminist critiques of the MDGs have been intense, especially because they drastically limited and narrowed the scope and content of the outcomes of the conferences of the 1990s, particularly in relation to women's human rights.<sup>24</sup>

But, whatever the pros and cons of the MDGs, how were they to be funded?

By the first decade of the 21st century, financial globalization with its recurrent crashes and crises was in full swing. The agreed overseas development assistance (ODA) commitment of 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) went largely unmet by North governments, making their call for 'aid effectiveness' somewhat ironic. Meanwhile, tax havens and illicit

financial flows were increasing in both numbers and volume.<sup>25</sup> By 2009, quarterly statistics from the Bank of International Settlements suggested that "... since the early 1980s about half of all international banking assets and liabilities were routed through offshore financial centres (OFCs). About a third of all multinational corporations' Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) go through tax havens. Estimates of gross tax avoidance perpetrated through tax havens are difficult to ascertain. There are no reliable figures on corporate tax avoidance, which is presumably the principal reason why so much FDI is routed through tax havens. Individual tax avoidance and evasion is estimated conservatively to be somewhere between \$US 800 billion to a trillion a year. Tax havens are also used as the principal route through which laundered money escapes developing countries..."<sup>26</sup>

Feminists have been concerned about the links between illicit flows, tax havens and violence, including violence against women.<sup>27</sup> This is especially problematic in the context of the post 9/11 'war on terror' as tax havens, illicit flows, drugs, arms flows and trafficking have become entangled.

The first UN International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD) was held against this backdrop in Monterrey in March 2002. The five-year review of WSSD (Copenhagen +5), held in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, pushed for better coordination between the UN and world trade and finance institutions so as to finance the agreements reached at the conferences of the 1990s. The focus of the conference was to be on mobilizing domestic resources, mobilizing international resources, ODA, debt, trade and investment and systemic issues.

This was supported by civil society and feminist organizations that also argued later for linking these issues. The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) facilitated the Women's Caucus at Monterrey. By the time of the follow-up conference in Doha in 2008, the Women's Working Group on

22 Canada, under the right-wing Harper Government, was the first to pull out of the Kyoto Protocol in 2011.

23 Fukuda-Parr et al. 2014.

24 Sen and Mukherjee 2014.

25 Mbeki 2015; Spanjers and Salomon 2017.

26 Palan 2009.

27 Ugarteche 2014; Grondona et al. 2016.

FfD (WWG/FfD) had been formed at the initiative of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and others, with the objective of pushing for more progressive economic outcomes in Doha in alliance with other key civil society actors.

During this period, women's organizations were also learning and growing through their presence in other spaces. The World Social Forum (WSF) was one such space, where women's organizations faced complex challenges in spaces dominated by male-led civil society. Initiated in 2001 in Porto Alegre as a civil society alternative to the World Economic Forum (WEF), the WSF has provided a global space for civil society to gather in solidarity and to debate, critique, challenge and learn. Such spaces are important in showing a new generation of feminists that the battle for gender equality has to be fought over and over again, not only against conservative social forces but also in the heart of progressive mobilizations. They also learned the need to make alliances, build bridges, negotiate and also stand firm.

An important element of feminist mobilization from around 2008 to 2010 was the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign, through which over 300 CSOs from South and North came together to ask the UN Secretariat and Member States to create

a new UN agency dedicated to gender equality, and to do so with transparency. The Campaign argued that a new, unified and well-funded agency was essential if the UN were to meet its mandate of promoting gender equality as essential to development, human rights, peace and security.<sup>28</sup>

The Campaign was partly preceded by an unsuccessful attempt by feminist organizations to influence the choice of a new director for UNIFEM, the most important of the four fragmented pieces of the UN's gender architecture at the time. This failure may have been important in steeling the resolve of the GEAR activists. In any event, the Campaign was successful in seeing the creation of UN Women in 2010 with a seasoned politician as its first Executive Director. It was probably the first time that the UN created a major new body in response to civil society activism.

Understandably, the Campaign was less able to stay on top of the nitty-gritty of the institutionalization of UN Women. Many activists, however, tended to be impatient with the vagaries of this phase and were concerned whether UN Women would be able to get up to speed fast enough for the rapid changes in the environment following on the global financial crisis of 2008 and with the preparations for the Rio +20 processes beginning to take shape.

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28 See: [www.gearcampaign.org](http://www.gearcampaign.org).

## 5.

# MOBILIZING AROUND THE SDGs

While feminist organizing entered the SDGs period with a big bang through its effectiveness in creating UN Women, harsh realities soon came to the fore. Nowhere was this so clear as in the difficulties that UN Women had in getting donor governments to keep the funding promises they had made. As the post-2008 recession tightened its grip, it was short of funds (and therefore of staff capacity and other essentials) for an effective quick start-up, let alone for being a serious part of the emerging Rio +20 processes.

This section of the paper focuses on the following:

- The socio-economic, ecological and political environment at the start of the Rio +20 processes
- How feminists mobilized at Rio +20 and the effects; the role of the Women’s Major Group (WMG)
- Post-2015 processes including the UN Secretary-General-appointed High-Level Panel (HLP) and the Open Working Group (OWG); and how feminists engaged with them through the WMG to advocate for the SDGs and their targets
- Feminist mobilizing through the WWG/FfD on the Means of Implementation of the SDGs
- Parallel and intersecting mobilization through the Women’s Rights Caucuses for Cairo +20 and Beijing +20; consequences in terms of issues, strategies and inclusiveness
- UN agencies’ role in relation to feminist mobilizing at Rio +20 during the following period of SDG formulation and in relation to Cairo +20 and Beijing +20
- Summing up through an analysis of the effectiveness and inclusiveness of feminist mobilizing.

## 5.1

### The socio-economic, ecological and political environment

The recessionary aftermath of the US housing crisis and financial crash of 2008 was the preeminent global economic concern as Rio +20 processes began circa 2010. Greece’s sovereign debt crisis of 2009 and thereafter and the weakening of a number of other European economies pointed to the fact that financial globalization’s impacts were not only felt in poorer South countries. The UN’s funding shortages were becoming ever more severe. Combined with spreading conflict in the Middle East<sup>29</sup>—with its human cost in deaths, illness, wounding and maiming, disability, refugees and displaced persons—the environment for taking on new global agreements and their related economic costs was far from ideal.

<sup>29</sup> The total number of asylum-seekers, a sub-set of all refugees, in the European Union/European Free Trade Association (EU/EFTA) region grew from 256,155 in 2008 (Iraq as the single largest source) to 373,545 in 2012 (Afghanistan and Syria at the top) to 1,393,285 in 2015 (Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria together accounting for half the total number) (Migration Policy Institute 2017).

South versus North mistrust and disagreements were not allayed by the weakening of the Kyoto Protocol as the United States and other rich countries demanded that its underlying principle of common but differentiated responsibility be dropped. Despite this, a sense of crisis on multiple ecological fronts lent urgency and momentum to the preparations for Rio +20.

At the same time, however, after a brief period of opening epitomized by the Arab Spring,<sup>30</sup> the space for civil society had begun closing in many countries. Instead of the military coups that had marked the 1960s and 1970s, a new phenomenon appeared of illiberal democracies<sup>31</sup>—autocratic leaders coming to power through democratic elections and then proceeding to undermine if not destroy key pillars of democracy such as open media and rights to free speech, assembly, mobilization and protest. Hostility to human rights defenders was growing. This climate spread into UN negotiations, making it ever harder for CSOs to be present in negotiation rooms or to be heard in the way they had been during the 1990s.

## 5.2

### Feminist mobilizing for Rio +20: The role of the WMG

Except for feminist environmentalists and the few groups that worked with broad interlinked agendas anchored in a critique of neoliberal globalization, the majority of feminist activists working on human rights generally or on SRHR tended to ignore Rio +20.<sup>32</sup> Of the various upcoming 20-year reviews of Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Beijing and Copenhagen, they prioritized Cairo

+20 and Beijing +20. However, Rio +20 soon evolved through its preparatory processes to have a much larger focus on “the future we want” and combining economic, social and environmental pillars through a “universal, integrated and transformative” agenda.

Those feminist organizations that were present at Rio +20<sup>33</sup> in 2012 began using the umbrella of the Women’s Major Group (WMG) for advocacy. This was an important move, strategically and tactically, as the different Major Groups had established a place in official meetings and negotiations ever since UNCED. In the growing illiberal climate, inside and outside the UN, laying claim to the institutional space of the WMG was critical to feminist ability to participate effectively in Rio +20 and in the SDGs processes that followed. It also made it possible to interact with other Major Groups, including potential CSO allies, on an equal footing. Feminists have long complained that, while they often lend support to other CSOs on ‘their’ issues, the reverse does not always happen. It can be argued plausibly that the institution of Major Groups made alliances possible on a more level playing field, even if pre-existing connections among individuals also had a role.<sup>34</sup>

Feminists from women’s organizations and within environmental and other organizations mobilized and advocated on a broad range of the issues that became part of the SDGs and their targets. They focused on gender equality and women’s human rights but also addressed the connections to broader systemic issues such as the weakening of agreed UNCED language, the excessive push to favour the private corporate sector, weaknesses in addressing the harmful ecological and human effects of ‘extractivism’ and the

30 The Arab Spring movement originated in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen.

31 Rodrik 2018.

32 For this section of the paper, I benefited from being able to read the draft version of Wood and Austin-Evelyn (2017) through the generous collegial support of the International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC). The IWHC report focuses mainly on the work of the WMG in mobilizing for the SDGs, and there are some resulting differences of interpretation between the report and this paper.

33 Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF) and DAWN, the Operating Partners of the WMG, joined with feminist colleagues from WEDO, the Global Forest Coalition, RESURJ (Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice), Energia, ICADE, the Feminist Task Force, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) and around 200 other women’s organizations (national, regional and global) in making common cause. See Women in Europe for a Common Future 2012.

34 Outside the WMG, some feminists also formed a Post-2015 Women’s Coalition for advocacy on the post-2015 development agenda.

importance of financing.<sup>35</sup> They were able to gain support from and interact with some of the other Major Groups, such as those for Children and Youth, Indigenous People, Farmers, Workers and Trade Unions, and NGOs. When it was clear that reproductive rights had been dropped from the final outcome document as a result of the very strong presence and pressure from the Holy See (an observer state at the UN) allied with a small number of ultraconservative governments,<sup>36</sup> feminists protested through the media and there was widespread consternation<sup>37</sup>

### 5.3

## Mobilizing after Rio +20: 'Post-2015' processes and mandates

The period following Rio +20 was a confusing one in terms of processes and mandates. Rio +20 had mandated the establishment of an Open Working Group (OWG) of 30 UN Member States to negotiate specific goals, targets and indicators. The OWG set up its procedures and began meeting in January 2013, continuing until July 2014. But the UN Secretary-General also appointed an HLP with 27 members drawn from governments, civil society and the private sector to

provide advice on the post-2015 agenda. The HLP was faster off the ground, holding multiple meetings in different parts of the world and submitting its report in May 2013, less than a year after Rio +20. This was despite the fact that at Rio +20, Member States, especially from the South, had been very wary of a UN Secretariat-driven process similar to what had happened for the MDGs. They had made it clear that they wanted a more transparent process, fully controlled by themselves. The call by the HLP in its final report ("A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development") for five transformative shifts, including a stand-alone gender equality goal and a target on universal SRHR under the health goal, was met with scepticism by some Member States and approbation by others.

CSOs could not afford to ignore either the OWG or the HLP. Feminist organizations spent the period from July 2012 to May 2013 reviewing the wins and losses of Rio +20, strategizing, and attending both the public and closed thematic and regional meetings of the HLP and other ad hoc meetings organized jointly by Member States and UN agencies. Overlapping this, they were also attending the meetings of the OWG in New York.

The OWG held 13 sessions from January 2013 until submitting its report to the UN General Assembly in September 2014, the first 8 being on the 26 thematic clusters that had been identified and the remainder on identifying priorities for the SDGs themselves. After this, there was a year of intense intergovernmental negotiations until adoption of the 2030 Agenda in the UN General Assembly of September 2015. Work to define indicators to measure the emerging goals and targets was tasked to an Inter-Agency Expert Group (IAEG), whose work continued *pari passu*, intensifying as expected in the final year. CSOs could not ignore the indicators discussions either.

From Rio +20 in 2012 through all of 2013, the WMG was intensively engaged in multiple ways at both global and regional levels in the parallel and extremely busy HLP and OWG processes. More and more women's organizations began to join in these processes at both regional and global levels as their importance became

35 WMG focal points for the Rio +20 negotiations focused on different parts of the draft text such as forests and biodiversity, food security, energy, trade technology, chemicals, mining, water, SRHR and systemic issues. Also, see DAWN 2012.

36 Although reproductive rights language was lost, the importance of having control over one's sexuality was asserted: "We reaffirm our commitment to gender equality and to protect the rights of women, men and youth to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including access to sexual and reproductive health, free from coercion, discrimination and violence" (United Nations 2012: para 146). Importantly, this extends the agreement contained in para 96 of the Beijing Platform for Action to men and youth (United Nations 1995).

37 It would probably also be fair to say that some of the tried and tested strategies feminists have used to secure SRHR through different UN negotiations over the years, e.g., 'insider-outsider' strategies, could not be used at Rio +20 for a variety of reasons. It was also true that a number of government delegations, even from SRHR-friendly countries, were technical environmentalists with limited knowledge of women's human rights concerns.

clear. Because the HLP held its meetings in the regions, this made it possible for local and regional groups to take part more easily than in the OWG, which was slanted toward presence in New York. Feminists could thus be participants and advocates in key regional meetings, e.g., the Leadership Meeting on Addressing Inequalities in the Post-2015 Development Agenda in Copenhagen in February 2013, the High-Level Dialogue on Health in the Post-2015 Development Agenda in Botswana in March 2013,<sup>38</sup> the Monrovia and Bali meetings of the HLP, and others. Feminist advocacy influenced the positions hammered out at these regional meetings. Although these meetings were not within the scope of the OWG itself, the positions taken by feminists and by key actors from governments and agencies were then brought into OWG processes. Despite the expense and distance, the WMG brought many people from national and regional levels to the New York meetings of the OWG as well, and there was intensive advocacy at each of these.

In March 2013, WMG members attended a civil society meeting of over 300 participants in Bonn and then went on to the HLP meeting in Bali. They issued a statement in Bonn titled “We will not be mainstreamed into a polluted stream: Feminist visions of structural transformations for achieving women’s human rights and gender equality in the 2015 development agenda”. The statement cautioned “...against developing another set of reductive goals, targets and indicators that ignore the transformational changes required to address the failure of the current development model rooted in unsustainable production and consumption patterns exacerbating gender, race and class inequities. We do not want to be mainstreamed into a polluted stream. We call for deep and structural changes to existing global systems of power, decision-making and resource sharing. This includes enacting policies that recognize and redistribute the unequal and unfair burdens of women and girls in sustaining societal wellbeing and economies, intensified in times of economic and ecological crises...”<sup>39</sup>

38 United Nations 2013.

39 Women’s Major Group 2013.

## 5.4

### Means of implementation of the SDGs: Mobilizing through the WWG/FfD

Although the SDGs articulated means of implementation to include not only finance but also technology and institutions, it has been clear to all parties that financial resources are the most crucial. The WMG had articulated an early critique of the excessive slant towards the private sector in the Rio +20 outcome and the challenge of securing the means of implementation for the SDGs, especially financing. As preparations gathered steam for the 3rd International Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Addis Ababa in July 2015, the WWG/FfD that had been formed back in 2008 for specific advocacy on FfD came back into the picture, supporting feminist mobilization and advocacy.<sup>40</sup> The outcomes of the FfD negotiations would have important implications for how governments, agencies, the private sector and civil society would implement and monitor development policies, especially the SDGs. They were taking place in a context of weakening multilateralism as well as attempts by some governments to roll back women’s human rights and gender equality in the discussions of the SDGs and their targets and indicators. Focused advocacy built on expertise and targeted networks was therefore essential.

But the terrain was extremely difficult. The FfD conference was beset with South versus North battles and was criticized by many in both civil society and governments as not having fulfilled its promise. Addis saw the use of ‘WTO Green Room’-type negotiation tactics,<sup>41</sup> and there was pressure on many developing countries to accept the draft document as it was. The extra pressure from the host country to come up with an outcome—as well as the lack of

40 See the Special Issue on FfD of the DAWN newsletter (DAWN 2015).

41 WTO Green Room meetings—where decisions are made by a small groups of delegates, usually from larger and more powerful countries—became notorious during WTO negotiations for being non-transparent and highly exclusionary of especially the smaller and poorer countries and regions of the South.

high-level delegations, especially from progressive countries—made it difficult to change the course of the negotiations. After months of heated debates and complicated negotiations, governments at the Third International Financing for Development Conference approved the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.

The WWG/FfD produced the Women’s Working Group’s reaction to the Outcome Document and contributed to the CSO Response.<sup>42</sup> Both documents reflect a critical analysis of the FfD outcome, especially its death knell for the long unfulfilled 0.7 per cent ODA commitment and its endorsement of the private corporate sector as a privileged development actor. Greater acknowledgement of gender equality and women’s human rights in this context appeared instrumental and seemed precisely to be the “polluted stream” into which feminists did not want to be mainstreamed. A major loss at Addis, due to the North’s intransigence, was the possibility of an independent global tax body that could regulate tax systems, close loopholes and begin to address the problems of tax avoidance and illicit financial flows. A fairer tax system would garner more than adequate resources to fund the SDGs, but this was vehemently opposed by the powerful countries that promote and/or serve as tax havens.

Given the limited capacity among many feminist organizations to address economic issues generally, and financing in particular, feminist advocates held a capacity-building workshop for African feminists in May 2015 and allied with other like-minded groups outside. Feminist groups present at the preparatory meetings for Addis and at Addis itself worked closely with other organizations. For instance, there was considerable effort to develop common positions between DAWN and a number of such organizations: Righting Finance,<sup>43</sup> which works on a “bottom-up approach to financial regulation”; LATIN-DADD (Red Latinoamericana sobre Deuda, Desarrollo, y Derechos),<sup>44</sup> which works on debt, development and

human rights; Third World Network,<sup>45</sup> which works especially on international trade, finance and climate change; Regions Refocus,<sup>46</sup> which “fosters regional and feminist solidarities for justice through policy dialogue”; and the Reflection Group,<sup>47</sup> which focuses on debates around the global development agenda with particular emphasis on the role of the private corporate sector.

The lessons from Addis were brought back through newsletters and discussions during strategy meetings to those in the WMG who were not engaged in the financing/private sector issues. The trial by fire at Addis highlighted the fact that good and effective advocacy does not automatically advance the feminist agenda in the short term. But it is essential to be resilient for the longer haul and to continually learn from difficult experiences.

## 5.5

### Women’s Rights Caucuses for Cairo +20 and Beijing +20

Preparation for the 20-year reviews of the ICPD and the Beijing conference held at the UN Commission on Population and Development (CPD) and the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2014 and 2015, respectively, came right in the middle of the SDG negotiations. The right-wing opposition at these conferences was more difficult than at any of the previous five-yearly reviews. Opposition at Cairo +20 focused on the range of SRHR issues that had been agreed multiple times by UN consensus in earlier negotiations. Opposition at Beijing +20 was especially harsh on the broad range of women’s human rights including on sexuality and reproduction, equal inheritance, unpaid care work and early marriage, to name a few.

The consequences of the coincidence in timing of these reviews with the SDGs processes were many. Feminist organizations, but also the permanent

42 Both documents can be found at: <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/271-general/52795-reactions-to-the-addis-ababa-outcome-document.html>.

43 See: <http://www.rightingfinance.org/>.

44 See: <http://www.latindadd.org/>.

45 See: <http://www.twinside.org.sg/>.

46 See: <http://www.daghammarskjold.se/regions-refocus/>.

47 See: <https://www.reflectiongroup.org/>.



missions of numerous Member States (especially the smaller ones) found themselves stretched to cover all three sets of processes. Since much of the action was in New York, there was considerable cross-flow of ideas, issues, strategies and information across the processes, with both good and harmful effects. For feminists, it meant that lessons learned in one venue could be transferred to the others, along with networks and personal contacts. But the minus was that the opposition to women's human rights could become even more obdurate and difficult to tackle. Thus a few key opponents could show up repeatedly in all negotiations, ensuring that progress would be difficult in any.

On the positive side, again, the Women's Rights Caucuses for Cairo +20 and Beijing +20 could link more effectively with the WMG, with many common participants in both. Furthermore, the traditional regional processes of Cairo +20 and Beijing +20, especially the former, allowed very strong regional documents to emerge, such as the Montevideo Consensus, which could raise the bar for negotiators. Although the SDGs processes had involved many regional meetings, there was no formal process through which regional agreements were to be brought to the global negotiations. A feminist strategy meeting held in February 2014 brought together representatives from organizations working on many different issues to discuss their synergy and to develop common approaches.

However, one of the most difficult challenges was a result of the acute South versus North divide on economic issues, including on means of implementation of the SDGs. Women's human rights and especially SRHR became pawns in this battle, and it was extremely difficult in such a toxic environment to advance the feminist agenda on bodily autonomy and integrity. With great difficulty, and strong effort from feminist advocates and friends, SRHR were retained in the targets for SDG 3 (the health goal) and SDG 5 (the women's empowerment and gender equality goal), but the CPD negotiations to integrate SRHR into the post-2015 agenda ended without an outcome. Observing this, UN Women drastically reduced the ambition for the corresponding CSW negotiations the following year.

## 5.6

### UN agencies' role in relation to feminist mobilizing on the SDGs

As is well known, several UN agencies<sup>48</sup>—the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UNICEF, UN Women, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), WHO and others—played important technical and support roles for the SDGs processes. This section only considers two of them—UNFPA and UN Women—as the ones that engaged specifically with feminist organizations. We look at UNFPA to provide a comparator for UN Women.

Over the years, since the time of the Cairo conference in 1994, UNFPA had a long history of engaging with feminist advocates, with ups and downs. Coming into the SDGs processes, UNFPA could draw on these connections to bring progressive civil society advocates to the SDGs preparatory processes and worked with them during Cairo +20 as well. The congruence of interests between feminists and UNFPA in protecting and promoting SRHR, and especially the rights of adolescents and young people, helped shape SDG 3 on health to include “health and well-being at all ages”,<sup>49</sup> even though the objective of obtaining a specific SDG on adolescent health was not successful. There was no general agreement between UNFPA and feminist advocates on strategies and tactics, however, and many negotiations were fraught with tensions and complexities.

For UN Women, created in 2010 with limited funding and no history of sustained long-term linkages,<sup>50</sup> the picture was somewhat different. The civil society liaison office within UN Women worked hard to overcome this, but it had to cope with the fact of new leadership and multiple organizational concerns even as Rio

48 Although UN Women is an 'entity', not an 'agency', I use the term agencies in this paper for the sake of simplicity.

49 An important moment in this was the Botswana High Level Dialogue on Health, mentioned previously (see United Nations 2013).

50 UNIFEM's links had largely been at local and national levels.

+20 was being negotiated. This led to a sometimes bumpy process of mutual learning between feminist advocates and the agency, but some strong positives resulted. These included the important agreement to jointly and separately push for a separate SDG for gender equality plus targets across other SDGs. UN Women leadership and staff were generally open and available for meetings and discussion with feminist advocates, especially as they got to know them over these years of complex negotiations. In particular, both sides learned that trust has to be built through presence, expertise and reliability when all parties are in the throes of difficult negotiations.

But there were also limitations. The negotiations were taking place during UN Women's early years, when both funding and technical capacity were limited. It was often the case that feminist experts outside the agency were more knowledgeable on issues. A major weakness was UN Women's lack of effective presence during the FfD negotiations, letting slip a key space for discussing the essential means of implementation: financing. Many feminists have felt that it gave up too easily on getting women's human rights explicitly recognized together with women's empowerment and gender equality in SDG 5. There was also dissatisfaction with the change in meeting schedules for the CSW meetings, such that most of the actual negotiations would be finished before South feminists could arrive from their countries.

Despite this, much was learned on both sides that can hopefully be put to use in the next phase.

## 5.7 Summing up: Effectiveness and inclusiveness of feminist mobilizing for the SDGs

The broad argument of this paper is that the larger environment and the strength and nature of institutions matter when assessing the effectiveness of social mobilizing. During the SDGs processes, as we have seen, the less than salubrious 'South versus

North' environment on key economic issues—financing, trade, investment, tax havens and illicit financial flows—undercut the ground for feminist advocacy. This was compounded by the weakening of the UN and the rise of ultra-conservatism in major regions of the South as a result of the spread of religious evangelism.

The negotiations processes were long drawn out and heavily New York-centric, meaning high costs in terms of time and money, especially for advocates from the South. They were also complex and interwoven, making it very hard for smaller and newer organizations to engage effectively. Despite this, feminists were remarkably effective, using techniques learned from the 1990s conferences and their five-yearly regional and global reviews. These included:

- Early recognition of the value of the official status provided by being part of the Major Groups and using the Women's Major Group to strong effect at Rio +20 and thereafter
- Engaging on critical means of implementation issues, viz. financing, through the WWG/FfD
- Networking with other like-minded actors to augment capacity to advocate on financing and other economic issues
- Mobilizing flexibly and strategically through multiple forums—WMG, WWG/FfD, Women's Rights Caucuses—with relatively little disharmony or conflicts
- Ensuring strong technical capacity and expertise about language and processes, so that they could be trusted by official negotiators
- Strengthening the negotiations capacity of newer and younger feminists
- Using tested 'insider-outsider' strategies whenever possible.

Inclusiveness was also a characteristic from the early days of mobilization. At Rio +20, the WMG included feminists from South and North and from national, regional and global organizations. The WMG was also able at Rio to reach out to and begin engaging with

other Major Groups and with other organizations. Feminist advocates worked closely with youth-led organizations, especially for Cairo +20 and Beijing +20 but also for the SDGs. Different organizations provided capacity building for younger feminists on complex financing and related issues as well as SRHR and women's human rights agendas. Joint strategizing provided collective strength through difficult processes.

Although feminists can justly be proud of having survived the most complex negotiations processes of recent times, there were also weaknesses that must be corrected if we are to be effective in the next phase of SDG implementation. Two bear special

mention. First, feminist capacity to handle economic issues—especially macroeconomics, financing and details of taxation, trade and investment—is woefully inadequate, at least partly due to a lack of interest. As a result, only a relatively small group could participate effectively in the financing and related discussions. Second, based on past experience with the MDGs, feminist engagement with keeping implementation accountable tends to be limited. For the SDGs, the fact that they are supposed to be universal means that groups in the North can hold their own governments accountable. There is much to be done here, and it remains to be seen whether feminist mobilizing will rise to the occasion.

## 6.

# ISSUES FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

This paper argues for the need to locate feminist movement building on the SDGs in the historical context of how women’s organizations have mobilized since the 1970s in UN spaces. Such a historical analysis not only provides a sense of perspective but also locates recent advances and setbacks within a longer timeframe. Given the long history and persistence of gender inequality and violations of girls’ and women’s human rights, such a perspective is essential for a more balanced understanding of where we need to go and how to advance more sustainable transformations.

The feminist movement is no stranger to adverse economic, social and political environments. Many of the current cohorts of feminists came of age in the mid-1980s and 1990s when neoliberal economic and social policies and ideologies were gaining ground. Since then, the world has grown increasingly fierce<sup>51</sup> and difficult, with many opponents and structures inimical to advancing women’s human rights.

To name a few: a limping global economy with unprecedented levels of national and global inequality; a deeply pessimistic scenario on global warming, climate change and a growing number of climate refugees; the proliferation of ‘illiberal’ democracies in both high- and low-income countries and shrinking spaces for progressive civil society; vicious unresolved conflicts and displacement; and a growing backlash to bodily autonomy, integrity and sexual and reproductive rights, as well as to refugees and migrants in receiving countries. As if this were not enough, the communications revolution has led us into a ‘post-truth’ world in which social media are complicit in the spread of fake news, hate messages and distortions of reality.

Much of the public debate around the SDGs has taken place in a context of weakening multilateralism, as

well as attempts by some governments to roll back women’s human rights and gender equality. As we have argued above, not only SRHR but other core elements of the gender equality agenda—such as the recognition and policy implications of unpaid ‘care work’ and women’s rights to property and decent work—have been heavily contested, as have tax justice and the importance of an enabling macro-economic environment at global and national levels. The exclusion of the reference to human rights and gender equality from the operative part (article 2) of the agreement on climate change from the UN Conference of Parties (COP 21) adds further to the challenges to women’s livelihoods and survival in the face of the erosion of sea, land and water resources, extreme weather events and their consequences for health and conflict.

The ability of feminist organizations to hold their own in this fierce world, to defend human rights and to advance economic, ecological and gender justice will require not only clarity of vision and a track record of analysis and advocacy but also stronger communications skills, greater organizational resilience and effectiveness, and the ability to build and nurture effective alliances in which younger people play strong roles.

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51 Sen and Durano 2014.

While playing a watchdog role for the implementation of the SDGs, feminist mobilizing must keep its attention on the bigger picture. Some of the issues to consider include the transformations occurring in the world of work, the seemingly limitless expansion of the power of the private corporate sector (including through public-private partnerships), the shrinking policy space of the state and the increasing extra-territorial influences on nation States, the weakening of the UN and the shifting terrain of bodily autonomy.

Advocacy spaces for feminist engagement have to be continuously negotiated and re-negotiated. Feminists must become equal and valued partners with organizations that, while sympathetic to feminist agendas, work on broad development agendas such as trade, investment, financing or climate change, to name a few. By working with these groups, feminists can seed their perspective and attention to economic justice for women into larger political economy debates, in addition to being present in major advocacy spaces where

feminists are not often found. One such ongoing collaboration<sup>52</sup> produces the annual Spotlight Report, which was launched during the UN High Level Political Forum in July 2016 and has received considerable coverage among both UN Member States and civil society. The Report is the first major critical assessment of the SDGs from progressive CSOs, including feminists.

With the endorsement of the SDGs by UN Member States in September 2015, a critical phase of decision-making for global and national development agendas over the next 15 years has almost ended (except for the finalization of the SDG indicators), and a new one has begun. This next phase of implementation will be largely, though not exclusively, played out at national and regional levels. It will require considerable preparation as well as focused and agile advocacy by feminist organizations if we are to learn from the gains and limitations of the MDGs processes of the last 15 years.

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52 The core group for the Spotlight Report consists of the Global Policy Forum, Social Watch, Third World Network, Arab Network for National Development and DAWN. See: <https://www.2030spotlight.org/en>.

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