

**Gender and Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>**  
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**Abstract**

Gender-related constraints have high cost to society in terms of untapped potential in achieving poverty eradication, health, education, food and nutrition security, environmental and energy sustainability, and economic growth. There is strong evidence that closing gender gap accelerates progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Moreover, women have a critical role to play in the achievement of the SDGs – both as a solution and as an objective. Therefore, the 2030 Agenda has set the SDG 5 “Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls” with the aim to support the global development efforts over the next fifteen years.

While there has been some progress towards better gender equality, there is much more to be done in abolishing gender discrimination. Sustainable development can never be attained without the empowerment of women and girls. Urgent actions are needed to empower women and girls, ensuring that they have equal opportunities to benefit from development and removing the barriers that prevent them from being full participants in all spheres of society.

The experience of the SDG Fund as the UN multi-agency development mechanism demonstrates that gender equality is a multi-dimensional issue which needs to be addressed by a range of solutions and actors. The SDG Fund has placed gender equality and women’s empowerment at the heart of its development efforts to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. The SDG Fund adopts a dual strategy based on the previous experience for advancing gender equality to support both gender-targeted joint programmes, while simultaneously mainstreaming gender as a cross-cutting priority. This paper showcase various approaches and interventions to promote gender equality mainly through: capacity development, legislative and policy frameworks, advocacy and communication, establishment of networks and mechanisms, economic and political empowerment of women and access to health. The cases study analyses from countries, representing various geographical regions (Bangladesh, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Bolivia and Nicaragua) confirm the importance of joint efforts to promote and protect the rights of women and girls with the aim to support sustainable development.

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**Key words: Gender, Sustainable Development, Joint Programmes**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Empowering women and promoting gender equality is crucial to accelerate sustainable development. Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human need, but it also has a multiplier effect across all other development areas. It is widely recognized that gender equality is both a development goal and a precondition for the achievement of other development outcomes (African Development Bank, 2014). Moreover, gender-related constraints have high cost to society in terms of untapped potential in achieving poverty eradication, health, education, food and nutrition security, environmental and energy sustainability, and economic growth (FAO, 2014). There are still gross inequalities in access to paid employment in some regions, and significant gaps between men and women in the labour market. They also face persistent occupational segregation and gender discrimination in wages. In Africa and South Asia, large employment differences remain between men and women, with women's employment being largely relegated to unpaid and vulnerable activities (Women Watch, 2011). The denial of common vital resources such as land, assets, credit and time to women because of misplaced beliefs, outdated traditions, misinterpreted culture, patriarchy, power wielding tactics, gender politics and many such factors force them to fall behind and impede their ability to utilize themselves to their maximum capabilities. In addition, sexual violence and exploitation, the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, and discrimination in public decision making, all remain huge barriers. Gender inequalities in employment and earnings mean that women have lower incomes, making them less able to open accounts in formal financial institutions. Moreover, women frequently do not have the collateral necessary to seek out loans from the formal financial sector. (UN Women/UPU, 2015).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was born following the previous the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were set to expire in 2015. The adoption of SDGs was among the primary outcomes of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), where global leaders recognized gender equality, women's empowerment and equal opportunity as an integral part of human rights and essential for sustainable development (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 66/288, 2012). Moreover, there is strong evidence that closing gender gap accelerates progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Duran y Lalaguna, 2017). Increasingly gender equality, rooted in human rights, is recognized both as a key development goal on its own and as a vital means to helping accelerate sustainable development (UNICEF, 2014). Women have a critical role to play in all of the SDGs, with many targets specifically recognizing women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution. SDG 5 is known as the stand-alone gender goal because it is dedicated to achieving these ends (UN Women, 2015). Therefore, the 2030 Agenda has set the SDG 5 "Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls" with the aim to support the global development efforts over the next fifteen years. The SDG 5 calls on governments to achieve, rather than just promote, gender equality. Acknowledging the huge contribution that women make in the field of unpaid work and building institutions and formulating policies to distribute this burden more equally are essential to ensuring that women have equal access to opportunities and resources. For example, FAO (2011) estimates that when women control additional income, they spend more of it than men do on food, health, clothing and education for their children. This has positive implications for immediate well-being, long-run human capital formation and economic growth through improved health, nutrition and education outcomes.

While there has been some progress towards better gender equality, there is much more to be done in abolishing gender discrimination. Urgent actions are needed to empower women and girls, ensuring that they have equal opportunities to benefit from development, and removing the

barriers that prevent them from being full participants in all spheres of society. Supporting national capacity development for advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women is central to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. In fact, all SDGs are intrinsically interrelated and interdependent, where gender is addressed and mainstreamed amongst all goals.

However, a multi-dimensional issue such as gender inequality is deeply rooted in economic, social and cultural structures of society, and it requires comprehensive approaches. Furthermore, the analysis of a specific country context is needed to improve effectively the gender equality. Involvement of new development actors under the concept of universality of the 2030 Agenda and mainstreaming gender as a cross-cutting priority is a new approach to advance gender equality and sustainable development. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda recognizes that the achievement of sustainable development is a shared responsibility among all countries and among all public and private actors (SDG Fund, 2016). The aspect of universality is emphasized by the UN charter which implies that all nations have the duty to bring about changes in obtaining sustainable development, with their respective strategies while putting into consideration the global good. The following chapter describes a dual strategy that was pioneered by the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG Fund) and later adopted by the Sustainable Development Goals Fund (SDG Fund) for the promotion of gender equality in its joint programmes.

## **2. DUAL STRATEGY TO ADDRESS GENDER AND PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Gender mainstreaming was established as a major global strategy for the promotion of gender equality in the Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Platform for Action stated: "Governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively" (Commission on the Status of Women, 1995). While mainstreaming is clearly essential for securing human rights and social justice for women as well as men, it also increasingly recognized that incorporating gender perspectives in different areas of development ensures the effective achievement of other social and economic goals. Gender mainstreaming can reveal a need for changes in goals, strategies and actions to ensure that both women and men can influence, participate in and benefit from development processes (United Nations, Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2002).

An important aspect of achieving gender equality can be done through the empowerment of women such as education, employment, and political representation, as well as by ensuring women's access to health (MDG Fund, 2013). Another fundamental step towards the realization of gender equality is eradication of all forms of violence against women. The dual strategy was designed to strengthen women's rights and promote gender equality that directly bolstered women's representation in decision-making processes, increased women's capabilities, improved their access to resources and opportunities, and reduced their vulnerability to violence and conflict. The dual gender-equality strategy is a gender-mainstreaming effort in line with international commitment to gender equality (UN Women/MDG-F/UNDP, 2013).

The dual strategy is based on approach, working with gender-targeted programmes and also mainstreaming gender into all programmes. The MDG Fund/the SDG Fund joint programme are designed and implemented to address gender-related inequalities by factoring in their fundamental causes and prioritizing concrete interventions to empower the most excluded and vulnerable. These programmes based on dual strategy address gender equality in a broad and holistic manner, thereby contributing to the fulfillment of the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of women and girls, and supporting efforts towards achieving the sustainable

development. As a result, the dual strategy for promoting gender equality adds value to broader development goals.

The experience of the implementation of a dual strategy helps to advance gender equality by changing institutions, legislation, policies, behaviors, attitudes and social norms across all joint programmes. Moreover, integrated and multidimensional joint programmes promote gender equality and support sustainable development activities. Main findings confirm that the joint programmes, implemented in 2007-2013, improved legal systems to respect women's rights, particularly those of marginalized indigenous and ethnic minority groups. Moreover, joint programmes addressed inequalities and discriminatory practices across multiple sectors by ensuring the inclusion of women, particularly those living among the world's most vulnerable groups. The dual strategy to address gender also contributed to raise public awareness on the importance of gender equality as a component of aid and development effectiveness, and to improve institutional structures and resource allocations for gender equality (UN Women/MDG-F/UNDP, 2013). Finally, the dual strategy for advancing gender equality supports both gender-targeted programmes and simultaneously mainstream gender as a cross-cutting priority. The following chapter describes the case studies based on the experience of MDG Fund/SDG Fund to advance gender equality as part of development agenda.

## **2. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS**

To best contribute to the transition process from the MDGs to the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals Fund (SDG Fund) was conceived, based on the experience of the MDG Fund, to support innovative approaches to promote gender equality and advance the 2030 Agenda based on joint efforts and innovative joint programmes. Currently, the SDG Fund supports the SDGs by implementing the joint programmes in more than 20 countries, working with 14 UN agencies and improving the lives of 3.5 million people around the world. The main objective of the SDG Fund is to bring together the UN agencies, national governments, academia, civil society and business to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. In addition, the SDG Fund has placed gender equality and women's empowerment at the heart of its efforts to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. By directly empowering women and by bringing a gender perspective to all development work, the SDG Fund promotes gender equality as a multi-dimensional issue which needs to be addressed by a range of solutions and actors to move forward towards the achievement of the SDGs. All SDG Fund' programmes apply a dual strategy to address gender and promote sustainable development. In fact, the SDG Fund' joint programmes with multidimensional and integrated approaches to mainstream gender as a cross-cutting issue offer innovative solutions that are more effective in tackling complex problems such as poverty, social inclusion, rural development, food security, water and sanitation and many others.

The SDG Fund uses the experience, knowledge, lessons learned and best practices from 130 joint programmes in 50 countries, implemented from 2007 to 2013. The joint programmes used a number of approaches and interventions towards sustainable development by advancing gender through: capacity development, legislative and policy frameworks, advocacy and communication, establishment of networks and mechanisms, economic and political empowerment of women and access to health. The case studies, representing various geographical regions (Bangladesh, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Bolivia and Nicaragua) demonstrate these approaches to promote and protect the rights of women and girls and advance sustainable development.

### **2.1 Capacity Development to Address Gender Based Violence (GBV)**

Capacity development in its diverse forms was the major focus in all joint programmes targeting both rights-holders and duty-bearers at all levels of society. To a large extent capacity building efforts tended to concentrate on the duty-bearers in order to improve their capacity to fulfill their duties and obligations. This called for focusing on a wide range of actors and authorities at all levels from government staff at ministry level, municipal leaders, parliamentarians as well as religious leaders, to members of the media and numerous professionals in health, education, justice and other sectors. The basic objective, therefore, was to build their capacities on an individual level through diverse activities aimed at raising their awareness about GBV and understanding of the need to strengthen the legal and policy framework. Ultimately, these activities would contribute to increase the overall accountability, and thereby create a more enabling environment for ensuring the rights of women and girls and protecting them from GBV. To illustrate this approach the “Programme to Address Violence Against Women in Bangladesh<sup>2</sup>” was designed to address the issues related to violence against women and girls and changing behaviors. Violence against women is a serious social, cultural and economic problem in Bangladesh, where nearly two out of three women have experienced GBV during their lifetime, and domestic violence is a common, though largely underreported. The basic objective of joint programme was to build their capacities on an individual level through diverse activities aimed at raising awareness about gender violence and understanding of the need to strengthen the legal and policy framework. In fact, one of violence root causes were identified as social and individual attitudes and behaviors. Emphasis was placed, therefore, on awareness-raising, sensitization, and capacity building. Some 23,986 people including journalists, employer, managers, trade union leaders, district officials, teachers, judges and prosecutors, members of sex workers network, and many others received awareness training on GBV. These interventions were further supported by encouraging the adoption and implementation of policies for prevention and protecting victims by enhancing the capacities of the government, improving information and providing support to NGOs and civil society, changing attitudes and behavior of men, women, boys and girls to reduce violence and discriminatory practices such as dowry, early marriage and trafficking. In addition, the joint programme also strengthened a culturally sensitive gender approach to healthcare, making it more accessible for women, and supported capacity building for a more adequate treatment for violence against women survivors together with linkages to legal support and counseling services.

## **2.2 Legislative and Policy Frameworks and Gender Responsive Budgeting for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE)**

Improved laws and policies and gender responsive budgeting are fundamental pillars for making further progress towards gender equality and women’s empowerment. A sound legal and policy framework provides a foundation to guarantee gender equality and allows combating discrimination, demanding equal opportunity and holding the relevant authorities accountable. These changes require organizational and institutional capacity, modifying and implementing the laws and policies to safeguard women’s rights and establish protective measures for all forms of violence. This calls for mainstreaming gender in the formulation and implementation of national and local policies, plans and budgets. It also calls for targeting the lawmakers such as parliamentarians and other key actors involved in policy-making as well as those duty-bearers responsible for implementing the pertinent laws and policies. To illustrate this approach the joint programme “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in the Occupied Palestinian Territory<sup>3</sup>” was developed to promote Palestinian women’s social, economic and political empowerment, and it worked to reduce gender-based violence by encouraging women’s political voice, increasing

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<sup>2</sup> Participating UN agencies: ILO, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, IOM, UNESCO, WHO.

<sup>3</sup> Participating UN agencies: ILO, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UN Women, UNRWA.

their opportunities to obtain decent and productive work, and improving their access to protection and justice. In fact, women in the Occupied Palestinian Territory suffer from high levels of poverty and unemployment, where women refugees are, particularly, vulnerable. This joint programme is a good example of capacity development, focusing on achieving results at the highest policy level. The overall aim was to promote GEWE and address specific gender issues through improved policies, frameworks and protection systems. To this end, the programme focused on GBV, the representation of women in decision-making bodies and enhancing economic opportunities for women. It was achieved through the development of laws and policies, new mechanisms, tools and resources. Key results include a National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women, the formation of a Gender Audit Team, and a National Women's Employment Committee, which is expected to lead to the formulation and adoption of policies related to the economic empowerment of women.

### **2.3. Advocacy and Communication**

Advocacy and communication for gender equality is an important component of all joint programmes. Numerous activities were carried out in order to raise awareness about gender equality and women's empowerment, enhance partnerships at all levels of society. To this end, the joint programmes collaborated with media organizations (using for example, newspapers, radio, television, web pages and social networks), civil society organizations, academic institutions and other stakeholders, focusing on gender issues. All joint programmes also concentrated their efforts on increasing awareness and knowledge through the creation, absorption, management and diffusion of information and expertise as means to bring the change with specific results at the policy level. To illustrate this approach the "Vietnam Joint Programme on Gender Equality"<sup>4</sup> was designed to raise awareness and knowledge dissemination on GBV in the country. Despite a sound policy and legal framework supporting gender equality, Vietnam's institutional capacities in the area of reporting, gender analysis, data collection and monitoring remained weak and unsystematic. The joint programme sought to address these weaknesses through strategic, coordinated and multi-sectoral technical assistance. As a result, the programme contributed significantly to raising awareness and disseminating knowledge on GBV. The National Study on Domestic Violence provided for the first-time robust data of the problem and helped to clarify misconceptions about GBV as occurring mainly among the poor and marginalized groups. The study raised the issue to a new level of discussion and the evidence influenced a national policy dialogue on this subject. Consequently, some persistent discriminatory attitudes and behavior against women such as son preference as evidenced by the rising sex ratio at birth can now be more openly addressed in Vietnam. Another notable result is the increased availability of evidence-based gender data and strengthened data systems, where the set of National Statistical Indicator on Gender Development was developed with support from the joint programme. It provides a legal framework for the regular collection of gender data in various sectors including economy, labour, education, culture, family, population and health.

### **2.4 Establishment of Networks and Mechanisms**

The numerous activities generated by the joint programmes with the involvement of a wide range of partners also led to the establishment of new networks and mechanisms that contribute to raising awareness and increasing understanding of GEWE. For instance, in Ethiopia the joint

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<sup>4</sup> Participating UN agencies: FAO, ILO, IOM, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIDO, UN Women, UNODC, WHO.

programme “Leaving No Women Behind<sup>5</sup>” was designed to empower women and girls through health and business education, literacy training and better access to loans and reproductive services. The programme used an integrated approach to empower its beneficiaries, where 100,000 were adolescent girls and women. Interventions included training on health and hygiene, literacy, reproductive health and other life skills. Significant behavioral change was found at individual and community levels, where the impact of the interventions was deemed to be more direct and effective. One of the main achievements was improving livelihood opportunities through capacity building and by providing access to credit. For the first time in two regions, Women’s Savings and Credit cooperatives were formed. Consequently, women’s access and ownership of resources (including food security) improved the status of women in the community and increased their participation in the public sphere. It also increased the participation of women in decision-making related to women’s cooperatives.

## **2.5. Economic and Political Empowerment of Women**

In many parts of the world gender equality is undermined from the lack of women’s access to resources, rights and entitlements. Consequently, many women continue to face social barriers and legal obstacles to own and inherit property, obtain access to credit, obtain decent work and equal pay and be free from discrimination and violence in the workplace. In addition, they are frequently denied equal opportunity to engage in decision-making processes, participate fully in the political processes and hold public office. Therefore, some of the joint programmes focused primarily on addressing this important area. For instance, the joint programme “Productive Patrimonial Assets Building and Citizenship Programme For Women in Extreme Poverty in Bolivia<sup>6</sup>” is a good example of a programme focused on increasing the economic empowerment of the most disadvantaged and excluded women. Bolivia still has high levels of poverty and social inequality, especially in rural areas and among indigenous women, who suffer from isolation and marginalization and a lack of services and job opportunities. This Joint Programme focused on indigenous peasant women living in extreme poverty, helping them to generate sustainable livelihoods and enabling them to fully exercise their citizenship. Significant and visible signs of change were achieved in the empowerment of indigenous women through the support provided for income generating activities. Financial assistance was provided to disadvantaged indigenous women to enable them to engage in income generating activities primarily in agriculture, cattle raising, and raising small animals. These activities improved the lives of women beneficiaries by increasing their incomes and enabling them to support their families and reach a certain level of economic independence. At the same time, the targeted indigenous women were further empowered by the training they received through citizenship education that focused on their human rights, particularly their rights to an identity and to own property. Emphasis was also placed on women’s economic rights, on their right to participate in decision making processes, their right to access information and to public and private spaces for negotiation as small business owners.

## **2.6 Access to Health**

The right to health is one of the major human rights instruments. Ensuring the exercise of this right by all is fundamental for achieving GEWE. The joint programme in Nicaragua “From Rhetoric to Reality”: Promoting Women’s Participation and Gender Responsive Budgeting” was designed to support the government in ensuring the equality of women and men and enforcing non-discrimination on the grounds of gender. Women in Nicaragua face not only limited access to

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<sup>5</sup> Participating UN agencies: UNFPA, WFP.

<sup>6</sup> Participating UN agencies: FAO, UNDP, UNIDO, UNWOMEN.

decent work and credit, but also poor exercise of their rights, including access to health. One of the aims of the joint programme was to incorporate a gender perspective into national budgeting processes, especially with regards to health. At the national level, gender considerations were incorporated into policies and budgets, particularly those of the Ministries of Health and Labour, to ensure the exercise of human rights in these areas and a decrease in violence. Specifically, the programme assisted in 15 municipalities in Nicaragua, where there was an increase in the number of women having access to health services (estimated 8,781 women) and there were improved health services in terms of infrastructure and equipment, all of which were outcomes of the joint programme. The programme also fostered opportunities for participation of women in public policy to give women the opportunity to incorporate their priorities and needs.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Gender equality is vital to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. In particular, the SDG 5 is interlinked with the other goals that require women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution. Sustainable development can never be attained without the empowerment of women and girls. Closing gender gaps accelerates progress towards the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, problems related to poverty, food security, education, health, employment, social inclusion and environment will not be solved without addressing gender inequality.

Specific development programmes are needed to remove the barriers that prevent empowerment of women and girls as a prerequisite for sustainable development. The experience of the SDG Fund confirms that achievement of gender equality requires integrated and multidimensional approach, involving various development actors. Moreover, specific strategies are needed to empower women and girls. The SDG Fund has placed gender equality and women's empowerment at the heart of its efforts to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, based on lessons learnt and previous experiences. Using a gender dual strategy, the SDG Fund implements both gender-targeted programmes, and simultaneously mainstream gender as a cross-cutting priority in all joint programmes. The SDG Fund used the dual strategy to strengthen women's rights and promote gender equality with specific joint programmes that directly bolstered women's representation in decision-making processes, increased women's capabilities, improved their access to resources and opportunities, and reduced their vulnerability to violence and conflict. Analyzed cases studies in Bangladesh, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Bolivia and Nicaragua confirm the importance of joint efforts to promote and protect the rights of women and girls and support sustainable development. These examples clearly highlight that gender equality is a multi-dimensional issue which needs to be addressed by a range of solutions.

Overall, diverse approaches and interventions are needed to be applied at different levels, ranging from strategies to improve and implement national laws and policies to capacity building interventions at the local level, targeting the most vulnerable categories. Experience of the joint programmes in 2007-2013 confirm that the most significant achievement/results were made possible primarily from the collective efforts to foster political will, build capacity at all levels, and raise awareness about significant transformation in the society. The gender equality and women's empowerment joint programmes directly benefitted 766,517 women and girls, where capacity building was a major focus in all programmes, targeting both rights holders and duty bearers. The programmes also strengthened the capacities of 449 private and 1,523 public institutions, providing training on gender related issues to a total of 14,982 civil servants. Joint programmes supported victims of VAW, and it is estimated that 631,033 women and girls (at least 79% rural) gained access to prevention and protection services, including shelter and medical and/or legal support as well as anti-discrimination and health care support. A total of 32,560 women improved their participation in economic life with support provided by the joint programmes (90% of beneficiaries located in rural areas). Moreover, all programmes included a component on

advocacy and communication on gender issues, reaching a total of 2.59 million individuals by awareness raising and sensitization campaigns, including citizens and civil servants. In terms of partners and organizations, the programmes report a total of 2,113 partner organizations, 14,377 civil servants and 2,070 religious leaders that have increased their awareness on gender issues, mainly by radio, newspapers and other written media and television campaigns. Moreover, the programmes provided support for formulation, enforcement or institutionalization of 50 national laws, 23 local laws, 44 national plans and 55 national policies that explicitly address gender based discrimination and promote gender equality and women's empowerment. To conclude, bringing together a wide range of partners to work in a collective manner and using a multi-sector approach, helps to address gender equality in a broad and holistic manner, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

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