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Riccardo Viviani

“Goal no. 5: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”: how sustainable development goals measure gender equality

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Abstract

IT *L'Agenda 2030 per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile è un programma d'azione volto ad ottenere essenziali cambiamenti in diverse aree di grande importanza per l'umanità ed il pianeta. Questa nuova Agenda universale presenta 17 Obiettivi per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile (SDGs), i quali avranno un significativo impatto sulla vita di ragazze e donne nel mondo.*

Lo scopo di questo breve saggio consiste nell'esaminare il contenuto degli SDGs da una prospettiva di genere e nel comprendere quale impatto questi obiettivi ed indicatori potranno avere sull'emancipazione femminile. In particolare, l'articolo valuterà se gli SDGs presentino le caratteristiche necessarie per il raggiungimento di una reale trasformazione nelle dinamiche di sviluppo mondiali e per la realizzazione dell'uguaglianza di genere.

Keywords: Obiettivi per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile, Nazioni Unite, Indicatori, Uguaglianza di Genere, Emancipazione Femminile.

EN *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a plan of action, which seeks to achieve transformative change in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet. This new and universal Agenda presents 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will have significant repercussions on the lives of women and girls around the world.*

The aim of this essay is to examine the content of the SDGs from a gender perspective and to comprehend which impact these statistical instruments might have on women's empowerment. In particular, the paper will attempt to understand whether these development goals, targets and indicators have the right characteristics to achieve a real transformation in global development dynamics and to realise gender equality.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations, Indicators, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment.

“GOAL No. 5: ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS”: HOW SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS MEASURE GENDER EQUALITY

RICCARDO VIVIANI*

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1. Introduction

On 25 September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in what the Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, described as “*a defining moment in human history*”¹. The final resolution included a list of 17 development goals (SDGs) and 169 targets², which will guide the action of policymakers and activists over the next 15 years³.

* Cultore della materia di sistemi giuridici comparati presso l'Università degli Studi di Torino.

¹ Ban Ki Moon, “Secretary-General's remarks at Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda” (25 September 2015) <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=9015>, accessed 17 April 2016

² In the 2030 Agenda, every development goal presents a set of development targets and the progress towards the realisation of these targets is monitored by different indicators. For instance, SDG No 5 “*Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls*” contains six different targets such as Target 5.1 “*End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere*” or Target 5.3 “*Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation*”. Target 5.1 is measured by Indicator 5.1.1 “*Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex*”, while Target 5.3 is measured by Indicator 5.3.1 “*Percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18*” and Indicator 5.3.2 “*Percentage of girls and women aged 15-49 who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), by age group*”.

³ See UNGA, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (21 October 2015) UN Doc. A/RES/70/1, Preamble

Since the 2030 Agenda will have a significant impact on the lives of women and girls around the world, the aim of this research essay is to analyse the SDGs from a gender perspective and to critically understand which effects these targets and indicators might have on gender equality and women's empowerment. In particular, the essay will try to comprehend whether these goals, targets and indicators possess the necessary characteristics to truly attain a transformation in global development dynamics and to realise gender equality.

The first and the second part of the paper consider which consequences the transition from Millennium Development Goals to SDGs has had for women and girls. The third part critically examines the characteristics of global goals and indicators, revealing the power that statistics have in global governance. The fourth and the fifth part draw on the previous paragraphs to evaluate the transformative potential of the SDGs.

2. MDGs and Women: an Unsatisfactory Relationship

The SDGs build on a previous set of development goals called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which constituted one of the most relevant global efforts to advance human development⁴, and seek to attain what they did not manage to achieve. In order to fully understand the significance of the 2030 Agenda, it is necessary to analyse the fundamental characteristics of the MDGs and to understand the reason why they have been criticised.

In September 2000, the General Assembly unanimously adopted the Millennium Declaration, a resolution expressing the will of Member States to commit for the achievement of various objectives: development, poverty eradication, protection of the environment, democracy and human rights. One year after the adoption of the declaration, the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, published a road map of implementation containing a list of 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators: the MDGs⁵.

According to Philip Alston, the MDGs were different from other global promises for poverty reduction for various reasons. First, they were limited and prioritised certain objectives over many others. Second, they were designed to be measured and provided a basis for accountability. Third, they were time-bound and brought greater precision to objectives which might have been otherwise considered to be subject only to progressive realisation.

⁴ Philip Alston, "Ships Passing in the Night: The Current State of the Human Rights and Development Debate seen through the Lens of the MDGs" (2005) 27(3) *Human Rights Quarterly* 755, 756

⁵ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, "Should Global Goal Setting Continue, and How, in the Post-2015 Era" (2012) 117 *United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs Working Paper*, Luglio 2012, 1

Fourth, a considerable institutional apparatus had been set up to promote them⁶.

The MDGs have become the consensus framework of international development cooperation in the last 15 years⁷ and the official claim is that they combined in a single package most of the achievements attained at the international conferences and summits of the 1990s⁸. However, this is a sanitised version of their history, as they actually represented a very selective understanding of the international commitments of the previous decade⁹.

This selectivity appears to be evident in relation to gender equality. In fact, before the Millennium Declaration, women and girls had been included in development dynamics through the 1994 Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which recognized gender equality as a fundamental element of development¹⁰. Yet, in their formulation, the MDGs left out much of the Beijing and Cairo agendas and sharply narrowed their understanding of gender equality, including it in only one of the eight goals and undercutting policy debates with under-ambitious targets¹¹. For this reason, Peggy Antrobus famously dismissed the MDGs as a “Major Distraction Gimmick”, a distraction from the more meaningful programmes of action agreed at the UN conferences in the 1990s¹².

The formulation of a goal dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women constituted an important acknowledgement of the centrality of women and girls in the development agenda. However, gender equality was only feebly tackled by MDG 3, as the Goal had been disappointingly translated into a single target, focusing on the

⁶ Philip Alston, cit., 756

⁷ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Alicia Yamin, Joshua Greenstein, “The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of MDG Targets for Human Development and Human Rights” (2014) 15 *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 105, 106

⁸ Selim Jahan, “Achieving the Millennium Development Goals” (2003) 2, http://www.undp.org/content/dam/aplaws/publication/en/publications/poverty-reduction/poverty-website/achieving-millennium-development-goals-partnership-and-participation/Achieving%20the%20MDGs_Partnership%20and%20Participation_Jahan_June2003.pdf, accessed 17 April 2016

⁹ Kerry Rittich, “Governing by Measuring: the MDGs in Global Governance”, in Ruiz *et al.* (eds.) *Select Proceedings of the European Society of International Law* (2010 Hart Publishing), 466

¹⁰ Sophie Harman, “Women and the MDGs: Too Little Too Late Too Gendered”, in Wilkinson, Hulme (eds.) *The Millennium Development Goals and Beyond* (2012 Routledge), 85

¹¹ Carol Barton, “Women’s Movements and Gender Perspectives on the MDGs” (2004) 3, <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/mdg/civil-society-perspectives-on-the-mdgs1.html>, accessed 17 April 2016

¹² Peggy Antrobus, “Critiquing the MDGs from a Caribbean Perspective”, in Sweetman (ed.) *Gender and the Millennium Development Goals* (2005 Oxfam Publications), 94

elimination of gender disparity in all levels of education¹³. Even though the indicators of the goal were more wide ranging and kept track also of employment and political participation issues, it was apparent that the MDGs would not have challenged relations of power to promote women's equality¹⁴.

The list of goals included also the reduction of maternal mortality, which represents a critical issue for women and girls, especially in developing countries. In this respect, it must be recalled that the wording of MDG 5 essentially sidelined the wider sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda enunciated at the Cairo Conference on Population and Development and narrowed it down to maternal mortality¹⁵.

The MDGs have been criticised by women's rights organisations not only because they neglected hard-won gains obtained in Beijing and Cairo and because covered too few areas within the gender goal, but also because they set a minimalist agenda, reflected a top-down formulation process and failed to mainstream gender across the framework¹⁶. Most importantly, the MDGs tried to tackle gender inequality without addressing its underlying causes, including issues of power, distribution of resources and dominant economic model¹⁷.

3. The 2030 Agenda, SDG 5 and Gender Equality

The SDGs, which came into effect on 1 January 2016 following the expiration of the MDGs, constitute a major departure from the previous development agenda.

In the attempt to respond to the critiques that had targeted the MDGs, the negotiation process of the SDGs has been fairly inclusive and open to the participation of civil society and the goals themselves address a far more varied set of issues ranging from inequality, climate change and decent work to agricultural subsidies, social protection, and inclusive decision-making¹⁸. Consequently, compared to the MDGs, the new agenda is more far-reaching – with respect to gender as well as overall – and potentially more transformative.

The specific goal focusing on women and girls, SDG 5, considers gender equality and women's empowerment as a multi-dimensional concept

¹³ Naila Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment", in Sweetman (ed.) *Gender and the Millennium Development Goals* (2005 Oxfam Publications), 13

¹⁴ Alicia Yamin, "Sexual and Reproductive Health, Rights and MDG 5", in Langford *et al.* (eds.) *The Millennium Development Goals and Human Rights: Past, Present and Future* (2013 CUP), 236

¹⁵ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, "MDG strengths as weaknesses" (2013) 2(3) *GREAT Insights*, 1

¹⁶ Elizabeth Stuart, Jessica Woodroffe, "Leaving No-One Behind: Can the SDGs Succeed Where the MDGs Lacked?" (2016) 24(1) *Gender and Development* 69, 71

¹⁷ Carol Barton, *cit.*, 1

¹⁸ Shahra Razavi, "The 2030 Agenda: Challenges of Implementation to Attain Gender Equality and Women's Rights the 2030 Agenda", (2016) 24(1) *Gender and Development* 25, 26

and includes targets related to gender-based violence, child marriage and FGM/C, unpaid care work, participation in decision making, sexual and reproductive health, economic resources, technology, and legislative change. However, the new agenda does not confine gender issues to SDG 5 but addresses them also in many other goals. In total twenty-four targets relate explicitly to gender issues¹⁹.

For these reasons, most women's rights advocates hold that the 2030 Agenda represents a substantive progress since the MDGs²⁰.

One of the most relevant characteristics of the new agenda is the specific focus on inequalities embodied in the concept of "leaving no-one behind", which means that no target can be met, if it is not met for any marginalised group, including women and girls²¹.

From a gender perspective, this commitment requires particular consideration of the specific barriers faced by women and girls in meeting every target of the SDGs²². Moreover, as far as the implementation of the targets under SDG 5 is concerned, leaving no-one behind stresses the need to acknowledge that many women face intersecting disadvantages, which cannot be considered a simple sum of the negative experiences faced by being part of each discriminated group²³. An example of intersectional discrimination is given by the experience suffered by Dalit women. In this case, the traditional assignment of degrading tasks to Dalits is worsened by the gendered division of labour, so that it is Dalit women who are left manually removing human excreta from dry latrines²⁴.

The indicators monitoring the achievement of the SDGs have not yet been adopted. The 2030 Agenda has entrusted the UN Statistical Commission with the development of the global indicator framework and, in March 2016, the Commission has agreed on the indicator framework proposed by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), a group made up of country representatives from national statistical offices and expert observers. However, the indicators still need to be

¹⁹ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, "From the MDGs to the SDGs: Shifts in Purpose, Concept, and Politics of Global Goal Setting for Development" (2016) 24(1) *Gender and Development* 43, 47-48

²⁰ See, among others, Nicole Bidegain Ponte, Corina Rodriguez Enriquez, "Agenda 2030: A Bold Enough Framework Towards Sustainable, Gender-Just Development?" (2016) 24(1) *Gender and Development* 83, 84

²¹ Elizabeth Stuart, Jessica Woodroffe, cit., 73-74

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See Naila Kabeer, "Can the MDGs Provide a Pathway to Social Justice? The Challenges of Intersecting Inequalities" (15 September 2010) <http://www.ids.ac.uk/idspublication/can-the-mdgs-provide-a-pathway-to-social-justice-the-challenges-of-intersecting-inequalities>, accessed 17 April 2016

²⁴ Jayshree Mangubhai, Chiara Capraro, "Leave No-One Behind and the Challenge of Intersectionality" (2005) 23(2) *Gender and Development* 261, 264

discussed by all Member States in the General Assembly and the UN Economic and Social Council²⁵.

Indicators will constitute the backbone of monitoring progress towards the SDGs. They will make the new goals operational and it must be recalled that if they don't measure the right social phenomena, it will be impossible to know whether development policies are having any effect²⁶.

Officially, the process of indicator development has been described as a merely technical exercise that could be left to global experts²⁷. However, this assumption is misleading. The following paragraph will show that global indicators are powerful political tools and will explain how numbers are used “*to control without giving the impression of control [...] to rule, without coercion*”²⁸.

4. Governance, Goals and Indicators: Political Choices Behind Numbers

MDGs and SDGs are two of the most renowned set of global goals but they are not the only ones. In the last decades, the number of goals, targets and indicators has been rapidly increasing both at a national and global level²⁹. Since all these quantitative instruments present common characteristics, this paragraph will give a general overview of how goals and indicators are used by global actors to mobilise action and achieve social change.

Merry defines indicators as “*statistical measures that are used to consolidate complex data into a simple number or rank that is meaningful to policy makers and the public*”³⁰. These instruments are characterised by specific features: the importance of the name of the indicator and the assertion of its power to represent a phenomenon; the ordinal structure that facilitates comparison and ranking, thus, exerting pressure for “improvement” as measured by the indicator; the simplification of complex social phenomena; the potential to be used for evaluative purposes³¹.

²⁵ UNGA, cit., para 75

²⁶ Eve de la Mothe Karoubi, Jessica Espey, Guido Schmidt-Traub, “Developing Indicators for the SDGs: Reflections on the Work of the IAEG-SDGs” (23 June 2015) <http://deliver2030.org/?p=6094>, accessed 17 April 2016

²⁷ Jenna Slotin, Jenni Lee, “SDGs Indicators: What Are They and Why Do They Matter?” (16 March 2016) <http://deliver2030.org/?p=6830>, accessed 17 April 2016

²⁸ Lorenzo Fioramonti, “How Numbers Rule the World: The Use and Abuse of Statistics in Global Politics” (Zed Books 2014), 20

²⁹ Helena Alviar Garcia, “What Indexes Leave Behind: Measuring Law in Colombia”, in Graziadei (ed.) *Annuario di Diritto Comparato e Studi Legislativi* (2012 ESI), 177

³⁰ Sally Engle Merry, “Measuring the World: Indicators, Human Rights and Global Governance”, (2011) 52 *Current Anthropology* 83, 86

³¹ Kevin Davis, Benedict Kingsbury, Sally Engle Merry, “Indicators as a Technology of Global Governance” (2012) 46(1) *Law & Society Review* 71, 75

The production and use of these instruments have both a knowledge and a governance effect.

As forms of knowledge, quantitative indicators rely on the magic of numbers and on the appearance of impartiality and certainty that they communicate. A key aspect of their power consists in the capacity to transform complexity into clear numerical measures, thus, managing to submerge local idiosyncrasies in universal categories and to generate standardised and comparable knowledge³².

At the same time, indicators can be considered as an effective technology of governance, as they are increasingly used by decision-makers to reach crucial resolutions such as where to provide humanitarian aid or how to tackle gender equality. By replacing judgments based on politics or values with allegedly more rational decisions based on numbers and rankings, the use of statistical information and indicators provokes a significant shift in the power dynamics of the decisional process³³.

Thanks to their characteristics, indicators result to be particularly effective in mobilising action and promoting social change but it must be recalled that the formulation of global goals and the development of indicators tend to standardise problems and to sideline other understandings of the same issues. Targets and indicators may also be ideological and be formulated to support prior political assumptions about social change. In this case they will be poor or simply contestable proxies for the underlying objectives they assert to advance³⁴.

There are other important reasons why indicators and global goals should not be used uncritically: first, problems are not self-evident and goals may be arbitrarily or questionably selected; second, targets and indicators are sometimes identified because of their susceptibility to quantitative measurement rather than because they best embody the goal to which they are linked; third, indicators may be misleading especially when they are used to compare countries with different institutions and contexts; fourth, global goals may force local communities to allocate resources on the basis of criteria imposed by foreign actors³⁵.

Despite the existence of all these critical issues, quantitative targets are increasingly used at both local and international level by a broad number of institutions, including national governments, private businesses and international organisations, which use them to set priorities, monitor performances and assess progress³⁶.

³² Sally Engle Merry, cit., 84

³³ *Ibid.*, 85

³⁴ Kerry Rittich, cit., 466-467

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 475-476

³⁶ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, "Global Development Goal Setting as a Policy Tool for Global Governance", (April 2013) 108 *International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth Working Paper*, 3

The expansion of the use of targets and indicators in global governance has created a situation in which political discussions are substituted by technical debates among global experts on what should be measured and what the measurement represents. The outcomes of these discussions are presented as forms of knowledge but it would be more appropriate to consider them as political choices³⁷.

5. SDGs and Gender Equality: Is the 2030 Agenda Truly Transformative?

Having examined the characteristics of global goals and indicators and having understood the role they play in dynamics of global governance, the next paragraphs will focus on a critical evaluation of the SDGs from a gender perspective. More specifically, they will attempt to comprehend whether the SDGs exhibit some of the problems discussed above and whether this may affect the achievement of gender equality.

It has been mentioned that most authors acknowledge that the SDGs managed to overcome many of the shortcomings that affected the MDGs. The previous goals were criticised because they reflected a top-down process of elaboration and were deemed to be excessively narrow³⁸. On the contrary, the SDGs constitute the outcome of a three-year open consultation process, which involved the active engagement of governments, civil society, academics, business groups and UN agencies. As a result, they embody a broad and quite transformative development agenda, incorporating different dimensions of sustainable development³⁹.

However, it must be recalled that both the comprehensiveness of the 2030 Agenda and the role played by different stakeholders in the negotiation process have received significant critiques.

On the one hand, Charles Kenny argues that the new goals present an over-wrought and obese content, which will probably ensure a limited impact to the 2030 Agenda⁴⁰. This is because the sheer number of commitments contained in the SDGs risks to create a set of development goals and targets that are more decorative than communicative and operational⁴¹. Similar views are shared by eminent practitioners, such as William Easterly⁴².

³⁷ Sally Engle Merry, cit., 88

³⁸ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, "From the MDGs to the SDGs", cit., 46

³⁹ Nicole Bidegain Ponte, Corina Rodriguez Enriquez, cit., 85

⁴⁰ Charles Kenny, "MDGs to SDGs: Have We Lost the Plot?" (27 May 2015) <http://www.cgdev.org/publication/mdgs-sdgs-have-we-lost-plot>, accessed 17 April 2016

⁴¹ Malcom Langford, "Lost in Transformation? The Politics of the SDGs", (forthcoming) *Ethics and International Affairs*, 2

⁴² William Easterly, "The SDGs Should Stand for Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled" (28 September 2015) <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/28/the-sdgs-are-utopian-and-worthless-mdgs-development-rise-of-the-rest/>, accessed 17 April

On the other hand, serious doubts have been casted on the real inclusiveness of the negotiation process. In particular, it has been noticed that civil society consultations have taken place in a context marked by significant power imbalances and that the corporate sector has been in a far more privileged position to influence the new agenda through the Business and Industry Major Group, the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Agenda and the Global Compact⁴³. For this reason, labelling all participants as “stakeholders”, as if all were equal and had identical interests, is misleading and conceals the power dynamics between various actors and their agendas⁴⁴.

Given the existence of these power imbalances in the negotiation process, it must be questioned whether the 2030 Agenda can be actually considered a transformative agenda or whether behind the facade of proclamations hide political compromises aimed at preserving the status quo in international economic governance⁴⁵.

On this point, Esquivel observes that, although the 2030 Agenda considers power as a given and not as dynamic social relations privileging a specific rationality in global governance, these relations of power have been at work while the SDGs were formulated and agreed and will be in place also in the implementation process⁴⁶.

A clear example of the influence of power dynamics on the SDGs is represented by the fact that, in contrast to the broad vision of sustainable development, the agenda maintains a traditional take on GDP growth and fails to challenge the systemic drivers of current patterns of growth⁴⁷. Despite the progressive rhetoric of transformation, the SDGs appear to take for granted substantial elements of the currently dominant economic model focused on continued economic growth, trade liberalisation and public-private partnership⁴⁸. These elements configure what Peter Utting called “embedded liberalism”, i.e. a softer version of market neoliberalism, which leans towards strong institutions of democratic governance to shape the development process but does not challenge the ways inequalities are produced⁴⁹.

In this context, it will be very difficult to realise the hard-won gains and vision of the SDGs, unless the dominant economic agenda is substantially

⁴³ Shahra Razavi, cit., 29

⁴⁴ Lou Pinget, “Corporate Influence in the Post-2015 Process” (2014) *Global Policy Forum Working Paper*, 27

⁴⁵ Malcom Langford, cit., 2

⁴⁶ Valeria Esquivel, “Power and the SDGs: a Feminist Analysis” (2016) 24(1) *Gender and Development* 9, 12

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12

⁴⁸ Shahra Razavi, cit., 27

⁴⁹ Peter Utting, “Pathways to Sustainability in a Crisis-Ridden World”, in Rémi Genevey *et al.* (eds.) *Reducing Inequalities: A Sustainable Development Challenge* (TERI 2013), 176

revised⁵⁰. In the words of the Women's Major Group “*for the SDGs to be transformative, they must radically change the global political economy system through a redistributive framework that aims to reduce inequalities of wealth, power and resources between countries, within countries, between rich and poor, and between men and women*”⁵¹.

There is a gender dimension to this problem. Past experience indicates that it is very unlikely that the dominant neoliberal economic model will provide an enabling environment for the realisation of women's rights⁵². In fact, economic growth does not automatically contribute to gender equality. Whether or not economic growth enables gender equality is determined by growth patterns. In this regard, it is important to point out that it matters not only which sector drives economic growth and whether it creates decent employment for women, but also the existence of a variety of patriarchal structures and the presence of redistributive policies⁵³. It must also be highlighted that the fact that in embedded liberalism economic growth takes pre-eminence over redistribution is relevant for the lives of women and girls, because redistributive programs - including gender equality ones - are the first policies to be abandoned in times of economic crisis⁵⁴.

The acquiescence of the 2030 Agenda in the current economic orthodoxy is confirmed by Target 17.11, which advises developing countries to significantly increase their exports. This trade strategy has been highly contested in the past because, when a large number of national economies adopt export-oriented policies for their manufactured products, the risk is a deterioration in the prices of the products that gives rise to “immiserizing” rather than inclusive growth⁵⁵. Interestingly, even in the rare cases where this strategy has been successful in triggering economic growth and employment, the competitiveness of exports has been predicated on gender inequality. In fact, women's low salaries make them the most convenient workforce in production processes geared to export markets⁵⁶.

As far as power dynamics are concerned, it has to be noticed that SDG 5 explicitly refers to women's empowerment and that a genuine definition of this notion should always involve a transformation of unequal power relations. However, the concept of empowerment has been used “*generously but loosely in*

⁵⁰ Shahra Razavi, cit., 27

⁵¹ Women's Major Group, “Women's 8 Red Flags Following the Conclusion of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals” (21 July 2014) 2-3, http://www.wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/Womens-Major-Group_OWG_FINALSTATEMENT_21July.pdf, accessed 17 April 2016

⁵² Shahra Razavi, cit., 27

⁵³ Naila Kabeer, “Gender Equality, Economic Growth, and Women's Agency”, (2016) 22(1) *Feminist Economics* 295, 316

⁵⁴ Valeria Esquivel, cit., 17

⁵⁵ Shahra Razavi, cit., 33-34

⁵⁶ Nicole Bidegain Ponte, Corina Rodriguez Enriquez, cit., 89-90

*the international development and humans rights communities*⁵⁷ and donors and investors seem to favour an apolitical definition of the notion, thus, leaving power relations wholly untouched. It is apparent that, when used in this way, empowerment loses its most vital feature and risk to become part of a process of mystification carried out by powerful group interests⁵⁸. In other words, it becomes empowerment without power⁵⁹.

Women's political empowerment is addressed in Target 5.5, which seems to be built on the belief that by sitting at the table and giving voice to their concerns, women might overcome structural power imbalances. However, the effective political empowerment of women depends not only on women's own efforts to sit at national and international negotiating tables or equal opportunities to participate but also on access to the resources which constitute the preconditions for participation (money, time and education, etc.), as well as on the existence of concrete mechanisms for promoting women's participation⁶⁰.

Finally, it has also to be reminded that political concerns and power dynamics have prevented the acknowledgement of the existence of a relationship between sexuality, gender identity and multi-dimensional poverty⁶¹. This omission appears to be particularly disappointing for lesbian, bi and trans women who experience multiple discrimination and violence as a consequence of their intersecting LGBT status and gender. However, even though the 2030 Agenda does not recognise LGBT rights, LGBT advocates intend using the "leave no-one behind" principle to achieve LGBT equality⁶².

6. Indicators, Reductionism and Transformation

In order for the 2030 Agenda to be truly transformative, it is not only necessary to challenge and alter current power dynamics, but it is also crucial to adopt indicators that translate the vision of sustainable development and gender equality in reliable and scrupulous measurements.

⁵⁷ Expert Group Meeting, "Report of the Expert Group Meeting for CSW60 on Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development" (2016) 3, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw60-2016/preparations/expert-group-meeting>, accessed 17 April 2016

⁵⁸ Sarah Mosedale, "Women's Empowerment as a Development Goal" (2014) 26(8) *Journal of International Development* 1115, 1124

⁵⁹ See Rosalind Eyben, "Power in Empowerment: A Case Study of Constructing a Text against the Mainstream", (2015) 27(5) *European Journal of Development Research* 811

⁶⁰ Valeria Esquivel, cit., 15

⁶¹ Elizabeth Mills, "Leave No-One Behind: Gender, Sexuality and the SDGs" (October 2015) 154 *IDS Evidence Report*, 9

⁶² See Stonewall International, "The SDGs and LGBT Inclusion" (28 January 2016) <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/our-work/blog/un-sustainable-development-goals-and-lgbt-inclusion-new-stonewall-paper>, accessed 17 April 2016

For this reason, there has been much attention on the work of the IAEG-SDGs and international NGOs have expressed their concerns about the little transparency of the formulation process. In fact, even though the President of the General Assembly has stated the need for participatory consultations, this has not been fully realised. In contrast with the level of participation that characterised the development of the 2030 Agenda, the inputs provided by civil society organisations to the IAEG-SDGs were rarely reflected in the outcomes without any process for feedback or explanation⁶³. The official excuse for this lack of inclusiveness is that the formulation of indicators is a technical process that should be left to global experts.

However, it has been previously illustrated how the development of an indicator framework is characterised by political choices and cannot be dismissed as a mere technical exercise. Consequently, an open consultation process with civil society on the new indicators is much needed in order to make these political decisions as democratic as possible.

The risk here is that the limited openness and transparency of the process compromise the final outcome and create a serious danger of reduction of the SDG targets⁶⁴.

This is problematic because, as it has been mentioned before, quantitative indicators constitute not only measures, by which progress and change can be assessed, but they also manage to focus attention on specific issues, creating incentives for political action and mobilisation. Therefore, if an indicator is reductive or of questionable relevance, it implicitly allows governments to get away with doing little to achieve carefully negotiated goals, thus undermining accountability.⁶⁵

Unfortunately, the current proposal of the SDG indicators is not immune from those risks and the following examples will illustrate how, in different cases, the multidimensional character of some targets has been lost in attempts to capture them in a limited number of indicators.

The first example concerns the proposed indicators for Target 5.5, a target that has already been criticised for its limited approach to women's empowerment. This target has been translated in even more restrictive indicators. In fact, indicators 5.5.1 and 5.5.2 are supposed to monitor "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public

⁶³ Amnesty International *et al.*, "Joint Open Letter to the Chair of the United Nations Statistical Commission and Co-Chairs of the Inter-Agency Expert Group on the SDGs" (16 February 2016) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior51/3450/2016/en/>, accessed 17 April 2016

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Center for Economic Social and Cultural Rights, "Indicators of Success: How Best to Measure Agenda 2030" (18 February 2016) <http://www.cesr.org/article.php?id=1808>, accessed 17 April 2016

life” but they limit themselves to the measurement of the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments (5.5.1) and of the proportion of women in managerial positions (5.5.2).

These indicators are poor proxies for the content of Target 5.5: by persisting in focusing only on the number of women represented in parliaments and in managerial positions, they oversimplify the definition of women’s participation and measure what is convenient and easily verifiable rather than what actually matters⁶⁶. On the contrary, they should have focused on concrete progress towards full and effective participation by looking also at the number of seats women have at all the highest levels of decision-making, including ministerial and cabinet positions⁶⁷. Moreover, two arenas of decision-making that are crucial for women’s empowerment are missing here: intra-household decision-making and women’s collective action⁶⁸.

Women’s advocates have also suggested to add a qualitative indicator addressing changes in influence, perception and attitudes, as well as a self-reported indicator recording data on women’s understanding of their impact on decision-making⁶⁹. Finally, the indicators could be usefully disaggregated, tracking whether disabled or ethnic minority women are excluded from decision-making more than other women⁷⁰.

Another contestable measurement proposed by the IAEG-SDGs is Indicator 10.1.1. SDG 10 purports to tackle inequalities but it has been noticed that both Target 10.1 and Indicator 10.1.1 are formulated in such a way as to circumvent the issue of equality allowing governments to claim to have attained Target 10.1 even if inequality has actually risen⁷¹. The problem is that this indicator considers only the growth rates of household expenditures or incomes per capita among the bottom 40% of the population and does not monitor high earners and the top wealth brackets. On this point, it must be recalled that, since inequality is relative, the inclusion of the top end of the economic spectrum in the indicator is crucial when evaluating overall economic inequality⁷². An effective way to measure this target would have been to adopt an indicator based on the Palma ratio, which measures the post-

⁶⁶ Gender and Development Network, “Post-2015 Working Group Propose Indicators for SDG Goal 5” (15 July 2015) 4, <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2015/7/15/post-2015-working-group-propose-indicators-for-sdg-goal-5>, accessed 17 April 2016

⁶⁷ BOND, “Reducing Inequality: Indicators to Match the Ambition of the 2030 Development Agenda” (1 October 2015) 5, <https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/reducing-inequality>, accessed 17 April 2016

⁶⁸ Shahra Razavi, *cit.*, 32

⁶⁹ BOND, *cit.*, 5

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 7

⁷¹ Jan Vandemoortele, “SDGs Indicators: More About Politics than Statistics”, (5 February 2016) <http://deliver2030.org/?p=6738>, accessed 17 April 2016

⁷² Kate Donald, “SDG Targets Risk Missing the Mark on Inequality” (8 March 2016) <http://www.cesr.org/article.php?id=1822>, accessed 17 April 2016

tax income of the top 10%, top 1% and top 0.1% as well as the post-transfer income of the bottom 40%⁷³.

Finally, a careful analysis of SDG 5 indicators shows that there is a concrete risk that the hard-won gains obtained by women's rights organisations in the negotiation process of the SDGs might be watered down by the adoption of the IAEG-SDGs indicators proposal.

For instance, Target 5.1, "End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere", has been translated into a single indicator focusing on whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex (5.1.1). In this respect, it has to be reminded that, while laws on the books are certainly important, measuring statutes and policies is not enough to monitor how governments tackle gender discrimination, because such measurement does not show what impact do these legal rules have on the lives of women and girls in reality⁷⁴. The indicator elaborated for Target 5.2. on the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls appears to be also problematic, as it monitors gender-based violence suffered only by girls aged 15 years and older. On this point, it must be acknowledged that, for methodological and ethical reasons, it is not appropriate to collect data on gender-based violence against girls who are younger than 15 years-old using the same quantitative instrument adopted for older women⁷⁵. However, monitoring sexual and/or physical violence targeting young girls is of the utmost importance and an indicator focusing on this age group should be added⁷⁶. Similarly, Indicator 5.3.2 addresses female genital mutilation taking into consideration only women and girls aged 15-49 who have undergone FGM/C. In relation to this measurement, the Women's Major Group has suggested to adopt a more comprehensive indicator including the monitoring of girls belonging to the age group 10-14, but such advice has not been taken on-board by the IAEG-SDGs⁷⁷.

7. Conclusion

"Women in much of the world lack support for fundamental functions of a human life. They are less well-nourished than men, less healthy, more vulnerable to physical violence and sexual abuse. They are much less likely than men to be literate, and still less likely to

⁷³ BOND, cit., 11

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ UN Women, "Monitoring Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in the 2030 Agenda" (September 2015) 15, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/9/indicators-position-paper>, accessed 17 April 2016

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Women's Major Group, "Women's Major Group Indicator Proposals" (31 July 2015) 11, <http://www.eldis.org/go/home&id=73616&type=Document#.VwqRwUce4Xg>, accessed 17 April 2016

*have pre-professional or technical education. Should they attempt to enter the workplace, they face greater obstacles, including intimidation from family or spouse, sex discrimination in hiring, and sexual harassment in the workplace. Similar obstacles often impede their effective participation in political life*⁷⁸.

Martha Nussbaum's description of gender inequality includes many of the issues addressed by different SDGs target, such as Target 2.2 on malnutrition, Targets 4.5 on gender equality in education or Target 5.3 on gender-based violence. This shows that the SDGs address issues that appear to be central to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment and that the 2030 Agenda has been rightly celebrated by women's rights organisations as an important departure from the previous development goals.

The formulation of a stand-alone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment, precise gender targets on various goals and concrete means of implementation should all be considered as important step forwards⁷⁹.

However, this is not enough. As it has been described in the present essay, the SDGs do not manage to challenge the imbalances of power that operates in development dynamics and this seriously risks to undermine the transformative ambitions of the 2030 Agenda. In addition, the proposed indicator framework appears to further water down important successes obtained in the SDGs negotiation process by oversimplifying the content of the targets they are supposed to monitor.

For this reason, it has been argued that, from a feminist perspective, the 2030 Agenda 2030 has an ambivalent nature⁸⁰.

In order to make the SDGs work for women, it will be necessary to overcome the intrinsic flaws of the new development goals by bridging the fissures between and among advocates of economic justice and gender justice, forging stronger and broader alliances and common agendas⁸¹. In addition, it is crucial that women's rights organisations actively try to influence and monitor the indicator development process preventing the risks of reductionism. In fact, it is only with reliable and meaningful indicators, tracking real changes in men and women's lives, that governments can be held to account for progress on gender equality⁸².

⁷⁸ Martha Nussbaum, "Women and Human Development. The Capabilities approach" (CUP 2000), 1

⁷⁹ Nicole Bidegain Ponte, Corina Rodriguez Enriquez, cit., 84

⁸⁰ Valeria Esquivel, cit., 19

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Alice Evans, "Does More Mean Better?" (22 September 2015) <http://www.theigc.org/blog/does-more-mean-better-sdgs-and-the-unmet-need-for-measurable-indicators-of-egalitarian-social-change/>, accessed 17 April 2016