

Women and the 'Right to Sustainable Development' in the Age of Globalization

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Abstract

This paper argues for a reconceptualization of women's inclusion and role in sustainable development practice and policy-making. It specifically focuses on 'women' rather than 'gender' as a way of thinking about women's roles, inclusion and participation in sustainable development. This paper stresses that the human rights approach has been a strong theme in the sustainable development discourse in the past three decades, and particularly since the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. It seeks to expand discussion not only on women's right to the environment, but also other areas integral to their leadership and expanded agency in sustainable development, such as rights to safety, health and education and right to mobility. This paper brings a religion and human rights perspective to the discussions on women and their participation in sustainable development, and demonstrates that it is a crucial way of understanding the particular ways in which these connections actively restrict – or alternatively provide the opportunity to enable – women's active leadership and role in sustainable development. This paper is structured as follows: the section after the introduction discusses feminist perspectives on sustainable development. It then provides an overview of the discourse on religion as an obstacle or opportunity to women's fundamental human rights. In the second half of the paper, it discusses the intersections between religion, women's rights and sustainable development by specifically focusing on issues that starkly illustrate the need for a religion-based human rights approach to women's participation in sustainable development: the right to a clean environment and environmental resources; the right to safety and security; and the right to health and education.

Keywords: Women, Sustainable Development, Human Rights, Religion, Environment, Health, Education.

Introduction

This paper argues for a rethinking of women's participation and role in sustainable development practice and policy-making. First, rather than using the term "gender", it focuses on "women" as a means of thinking about women's responsibilities, inclusion, and participation in sustainable development. For a long time, critics of the GAD (gender and development) theory, particularly post-development feminists, have claimed that focusing on "gender" can hide the unique disparities and inequalities that women continue to face, particularly in poor countries. The focus on 'gender' in the discourse on sustainable development may actually serve to prolong the marginalization that women in the South

still endure. In 'Dismantling the master's house with the master's tools', Kathleen Staudt (2014: 61–62) notes:

In the hierarchy among English-speaking critics, most of them excluded from national and international institutions, gender discourse was privileged and pure; the word women was passé. Never mind that gender was obscure terminology from sociology and linguistics, disciplinary narrative and by definition elitist in activist terms. Never mind also that gender did not translate well into many languages . . . Not surprisingly, some of the most virulent bureaucracies, hostile to women and to budgetary redistribution more inclusive of women, adopted the gender terminology.

Second, since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in 1992, the human rights approach has been a significant theme in the sustainable development debate. This has primarily been expressed in terms of the 'right to a healthy environment' (UN-NGLS 2002). This paper aims to broaden the conversation by framing it in terms of 'women's right to sustainable development.' This encompasses not only an examination of women's rights to the environment, but also rights to safety, health, and education, as well as the right to mobility, all of which are critical to their leadership and greater agency in sustainable development.

Third, religion has played a central part in international human rights and liberties debates since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights includes regional representation from all major world religions. According to Witte and Green (2018: 15), religion has become increasingly relevant as a category of analysis in human rights for three reasons: (1) religion continues to play a significant role as a social, cultural, and political force (despite doomsday predictions about religion's disappearance from public spaces due to the combined effects of modernization and urbanization); (2) the discussion of human rights without religion becomes suspect, as religions endorse human rights as a means of carrying out religious obligations; and (3) religion is critical to ensure that the analytical framework remains releasable. 'Without religion, human rights become too tied to Western libertarian ideas,' write Witte and Green (ibid.: 15), rendering them considerably irrelevant to the realities of non-Western countries.

The paper brings a religious and human rights perspective to discussions about women and sustainable development, demonstrating that it is a critical way of understanding the specific ways in which these connections actively restrict – or alternatively, provide the opportunity to enable – women's active leadership and role in sustainable development. Women's liberties, freedom of speech, capabilities, and access to resources have all been harmed by patriarchal and restricted religious practices, according to discourses on religion and human rights, as well as discourses on women and religion. While religion-based analyses must inform the theory, practice, and debates on women's rights, according to Malaysian activist Sharon Bong (2014: 241), it is "a moral and political imperative to

negotiate women's human rights with cultures and religions, in order to complement other strategies for their empowerment."

The following is how the paper is organized: the next section examines feminist viewpoints on sustainable development. It then goes through the debate over religion as a barrier or an opportunity for women's fundamental human rights. The paper's second half examines the intersections between religion, women's rights, and sustainable development, focusing on three issues that clearly demonstrate the need for a religion-based human rights approach to women's participation in sustainable development: (1) the right to a clean environment and natural resources; (2) the right to safety and security; and (3) the right to health and education.

Women and Sustainable Development

Women's perspectives on development are among the weakest links in the debate on sustainable development. Despite the fact that feminist study has critically examined the concept of 'development,' this remains the case. Charlotte Perkins Gilman pioneered the concept of "eco-communities" in her book *Herland* ([1915] 2007), which envisioned a utopian community in a geographical space with few natural resources, but that lived by principles and practices such as equity, recycling, clean technology, cooperation, citizen participation, and community lifestyles. *Women's Role in Economic Development* ([1970] 2007) by Ester Boserup pointed out that development based on the Western model exploited women and that capitalism was essentially patriarchal. This prompted requests that development be planned in a gender-sensitive way, taking into account both women's productive and reproductive roles¹. Following research has emphasized the critical need of putting women's rights at the center of development, both in defining the problem and articulating solutions (Anand 1992; Shiva 1993)².

Despite feminist development planners' long-standing demand that the gender perspective be centrally incorporated into development, the sustainability model continues to neglect this concern in general. The Brundtland Report's notion of sustainable development has been criticized for not paying enough attention to gender issues (Shiva 1993). The two crises of environmental deterioration and population increase, recognized by the Brandt Report (ICIDI 1980) as the largest sustainability difficulties in the next decades, both involve women centrally, according to Braidotti et al. (1994)³. This is of particular significance in the developing world, because, as Shiva (1993) points out, agriculture is perhaps the single most important source of income for the majority of women in these nations, where women make up the majority of the farmers. Even mainstream sustainability arguments, on the other hand, continue to treat women as a 'add-on' to the wider sustainability issue (Braidotti et al. 1994). The International Conference on Population and Development was held in Cairo in 1994. As part of the ongoing focus on demography, health issues, particularly reproduction, were linked to development. More recently, the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 included a plan

to "advance gender equality and women's empowerment" (World Bank 2004). This goal's particular objectives include a pledge to "remove gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education by 2015" (World Bank 2004). Women's inclusion in sustainable development remains a major political challenge. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio+20) in June 2012 was criticized for losing a "historic chance to highlight the vital link between investing in women and attaining sustainable goals," according to critics (Worldwatch Institute 2012). The events of September 11th, 2001, and the accompanying 'War on Terror,' have reintroduced religion into public policy discourse, emphasizing religion as both a 'development' and a 'foreign policy' concern. In development discourses, the relationship between women, (mal-)development, and religion is a particularly prominent story. Gender justice must underpin gender-sensitive sustainable development concepts and initiatives, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE 2012). Uneven access to income, natural resources, good health, and education are among the concerns that threaten gender equity and justice.

There is a growing interest in sponsoring faith-based non-governmental organizations (FBOs), raising fears that they may be given preferential treatment (Tomalin 2018). Worryingly, it is also considered that FBOs that engage with feminist critiques are well-equipped to minimize any sexist development and religious methods, allowing for the most equitable outcomes for women from both conceptions and practices. Tadros (2019: 9) is concerned about the widely held belief that "a feminist re-engagement with religious texts inside a theological context is a panacea for changing gender prejudice in laws, policies, and practices". When considering the views of many Muslim women, who view feminist interpretations of their faith with skepticism and willingly opt to stay with their old rituals, their talents may be exaggerated (Tomalin 2018).

Religion is often perceived in three ways when studying the relationship between women and development (Balchin 2013): first, as a 'obstacle' to gender justice and consequently good development. By viewing religion as a development evil, international development and political policy can pretend that 'local males' and 'local culture' are to blame for local women's subjugation, ignoring the significant role that unfair global restructuring policies may have in local men *and* women's low status (Balchin 2013). The second approach is to treat religion as a 'issue,' which, while distinct from being viewed as a 'problem,' is problematic in its own right since it tends to essentialize or homogenize a view of women's lives based on a universal interpretation of their shared religion. Third, religion may be considered as a 'solution' to identified development difficulties in an instrumentalist fashion. This latter dimension has resulted in the emergence of concepts such as 'Islamic feminism', a sanitized view of Islam as rich in its potential for women's empowerment, which has been criticized by critics such as Mojab (2011) for its potential to divide the global feminist movement on the basis of religion, as well as for ignoring the diversity of realities within the lives of Islamic women.

Concerns about religiously sanctioned violations of human rights, particularly women's rights, are at the heart of the discussion on the relationship between religion, women, and development. In the next section, we will talk about the importance of a critical engagement with religion for sustainable development, which rejects polarized notions of religion as either evil or a source of development.

Women's Human Rights and Religion

In 1993, 45 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna felt compelled to state unequivocally that women's rights were human rights as well. Surprisingly, it appeared that the scope of human rights and equality was naturally interpreted to refer only to men. African feminist theologian Oduyoye observed (1995: 4–5):

The concept of women's rights has been generated by the contemporary articulation of women's experience that suggests that human rights have tended to mean men's rights . . . women in the past decade or so have had to insist that human rights are women's as well.

For its perceived approval of the compromise or even violation of women's fundamental human rights, religion is widely seen as one of the major causes of their inequity (King and Beattie 2005). 'Religious ideas, thoughts, and practices are not only profoundly patriarchal but sometimes totally *androcentric*, that is, largely, if not exclusively, influenced by male viewpoints and experiences,' argues King (2005: 3298).

In many orthodox Hindu, Muslim, and Christian groups, women are still segregated and subjected to physical, psychological, and social repression (Ahmed 2012). The Taliban dictatorship, the growth of Islamic terrorism, and the rise of Hindu nationalism, to name a few contemporary examples, have arguably suppressed women in multiple ways, ignoring the vibrant and complex relationship that women and religion share. Robinson (2009: 197) puts forth some pertinent questions:

Does this imply that religion is inevitably and irredeemably associated with the oppression of women and hence that it is imperative to raise women's consciousness about the evils of religion? Or does this imply that religion has been abused by being implicated in the oppression of women and hence that it is imperative to draw to women's attention the true meaning of religion?

In the words of Ahmed (2012: 8) "to remain convinced of the legitimacy of religion in the face of tremendous subjection is an act of courage." 'Courage is earned through a creative engagement with religion in which faith and other sorts of holy and secular knowledge strengthen each other,' she says (ibid.: 8). Extremist interpretations of religious and secular principles are referred to as a "hyper-masculine approach to the construction of both modern world reject this binary – *religious liberty versus gender equality* – as a false and unacceptable choice in the twenty-first century," according to Ahmed (ibid.: 81). These reformers, or New Enlightenment reformers, as Sunder refers to them, are pursuing a fresh

right to *enjoy* religious freedom as a fundamental liberty in and of itself, as well as from *inside* their religious groups (ibid.). Maloutas (2016) argued in her feminist critique of democracies that women's *hidden* inequalities in democratic societies have cultural and religious roots that cannot be addressed solely through secularist legislation; they must be addressed at a deeper level of societal reform from within those communities' religio-cultural context. Women must thus be "given freedom from discrimination within these communities" in order to enjoy religious freedom (Sunder 2013: 283). This will also enable women's leadership and capabilities to flourish in a moral and ethical framework that meets their needs from 'private' religion and its fulfilments, as well as allow them a meaningful role through religion as 'agents' in development and public policy.

Religion: Informing Women's 'Right to Sustainable Development'

The religious components of women's right to sustainable development are further explored in conversations about a variety of indicators important to sustainable development, including women's rights to a healthy environment, safety and security, health, and education (UN-Habitat 2013).

Right to Environment

The Worldwatch Institute (2012) listed a number of issues that are important in terms of the relationship between women and environmental sustainability, as well as achieving global sustainable development. Each of these concerns is intertwined with religion in some way. The first is women's reproductive health and reproductive rights, which could theoretically reduce carbon emissions by up to 14%. Orthodox religious principles have been blamed for restricting women's access to contraception and autonomy, as well as for establishing a strong culture of son preference. The second is environmental conservation, which is important because approximately 80% of African women and 50% of Asian women rely on natural ecology for their living. Though it would be erroneous to assume that all women care about the environment or use religious resources to do so, the role of poor women's capacity for environmental stewardship through religious environmentalism has been well established (Shiva 1993), as evidenced by movements in India such as the Chipko Movement in Uttar Pradesh and the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Both of these difficulties have an underlying and unspoken concern about patriarchy's dominance over women's lives, which is often perceived as privileged by religion.

As seen through the perspective of ecofeminists, religious analysis should be at the heart of any strategy aimed at completely extending women's rights to the environment, and by extension, their rights to their own bodies. Those trying to examine philosophical, cultural, and theological frameworks to link environmental difficulties to issues of justice, particularly social justice, have turned to feminist inquiry, notably ecofeminism (Jenkins and Chapple 2011). Ecofeminism and ecophilosophy have sought to place women at the centre of these discourses in explaining their vulnerability to environmental and socio-political

problems. Ecofeminists have been particularly instrumental in illustrating how the patriarchal ideology and 'logic of domination' (Warren 2004: 2) and control are responsible for both strands of problems, thus requiring a unified response. In considering nature as a modifiable entity, Reuther (2015) attacks science for its inherent violent, even patriarchal mindset. She points out that religions have a coherent worldview that is not split by diverse and varied reactions to different problems; this allows for a holistic assessment of responses to social, environmental, and gendered developmental issues.

Right to Safety

One of religion's most heinous crimes against women has been its perceived approval to inflict a wide variety of violence against women (VAW), from physical abuse and rape to emotional and psychological assault. The Women's International Network (WIN News 1998) claims that organized religions are complicit in women's abuse by quoting from the Rules of Marriage, a fifteenth-century Catholic text that says, "scold your wife sharply, bully and terrify her," and goes on to describe wife beating as a noble act that will bring spiritual merit to husband and wife. In the Islamic context, Surah 4.34 also explains Allah's will allowing wife beating, which the Taliban used as justification for their heinous mistreatment of women and violations of human rights (WIN News 1998). Statistics forewarn of an escalating trend of VAW; the UN-Habitat (2009: 1) made the grim observation that:

women aged between 15–44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, motor accidents, and war and malaria. It is estimated that one in five women globally will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime.

We have argued that violence against women (VAW), and thus any violations of women's right to safety and good health, must be explicitly framed and treated as a problem of sustainable development because it has the potential to jeopardize intra-generational and inter-generational equity, which is one of the tenets of sustainable development (Narayanan 2012). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDW) acknowledged that "violence against women is a barrier to equality, development, and peace, and that violence limits women's potential to achieve legal, social, economic, and political equality" (UMP 2000). Violence against women (VAW) can jeopardize development in all areas; for example, the UN-HABITAT (2007) observed that if women consider a space safe, it is safe for everyone, because women are the most vulnerable group in urban settings and have the largest fear of violence. According to the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995:

Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace. Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The long-standing failure to protect and promote those rights and

freedoms in the case of violence against women is a matter of concern to all States and should be addressed. (paragraph 112)

VAW is frequently viewed as 'cultural' rather than simply a violent act in cultural analyses, and those seeking a religious explanation may focus on essentialist interpretations of religion (Rew 2011). Others look to religion for answers; for example, Bradley (2010) claims that religious rituals and women-only religious spaces might provide women with the spatial, emotional, and intellectual practice they need to respond to the abuse they may face in a patriarchal family system. She argues that religious organizations, places of worship such as temples and other sacred spaces that are regulated by an institution can offer women the private space for revitalization, or to 'formulate her response to violence', away from the scrutiny and judgement of her male relatives (ibid.: 362). However, "religious institutions as currently structured do not provide a pathway for the amelioration of women's unequal status" (Seguino 2011: 1317); in fact, it is likely that the disadvantages to gender equity and equality are greater through religious organizations' interventions than any benefits to women these interventions provide. While it is necessary for sustainable development policy to engage with religion, it is also necessary to tread carefully when engaging with any of these views because they can, ironically, lead to more restricted and terrorized spaces for women (Rew 2011), as well as a greater violation of their fundamental rights to safety, fearlessness, and vulnerability.

Right to Health and Education

Women's essential human rights include access to good health and education, which are key markers of a high quality of life and overall sustainable development (UN-Habitat 2013). One of the most significant objectives for national development and economic prosperity is to invest in women's education. According to the Worldwatch Institute (2012), the ties between women and sustainable development are particularly strong in the fields of education and economic empowerment, both of which are heavily influenced by NGOs and microfinance groups. Religion has also had a significant role in a variety of women's health-related issues, particularly the lack of contraception, which jeopardizes their reproductive rights and increases their HIV/AIDS risk (Lewis 2016). Gender equality in Mexico, for example, is dependent on the intersection of religion and politics, and "religion and gender equality collide precisely on the topic of women's sexuality and reproductive rights" (Amuchastegui et al. 2010: 990). For some time, studies have looked into women's education, particularly in sectarian and religious institutions, as well as the size of their families and the number of pregnancies they have (Westoff and Potvin 1966). Distinct religions may have different effects on women's health and education, which has piqued researchers' curiosity. Do certain religions empower women more than others? Is it true that some religions are more guilty of violating women's rights than others?

According to Njoh and Akiwumi (2012: 1), Christianity has a positive correlation with each of the four Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) related to women's empowerment,

namely, increasing the percentage of school-aged girls in school; female adult literacy rates; female share of non-agricultural employment; and female representation in government. They point out that higher levels of Christian religious connection can correspond to higher levels of achieving success, whereas Islam, on the other hand, can be said to have an 'inverse relationship' with all four of the targets under Goal³. They argue (2012: 6) that Islam's policy of gender-based social exclusion (even if disguised as "benevolent sexism" by preventing women from joining the military, for example) may result in "gender-based power differentials" with development implications. Kuran (1997) also points out that Muslims make up the biggest part of the population in underdeveloped nations and have one of the worst rates of illiteracy. According to Norton and Tomal (2009), there is a strong negative relationship between women's education and devotees of the Islamic and Hindu faiths, particularly Orthodox denominations.

While this does not fully explain Islam's (or any other religion's) link to women's regressive standing in society, it does highlight the difficulty of attempting to isolate the impact of a single religion on women's growth. Christianity played a role in the notion of Islam's involvement in ostensibly weakening women. Only Africans who have converted to Christianity were accepted into mission schools (Njoh and Akiwumi 2012). As a result, educated Christians had greater rates than educated Muslims, whose instruction conformed to education as conceived by colonialism and then by development indices. Overall, any attempts to implement the MDGs in Africa must include the influence of the three primary religious influences – indigenous African religion, Christianity, and Islam – in shaping the position and status of women in Africa, according to Njoh and Akiwumi. Essentially, this emphasizes the importance of empowering women and providing them with full access to their rights to health and education in order for them to participate in and reap the advantages of sustainable development.

Concluding Remarks

The relationship between religion and progress is no longer a taboo subject. However, the sustainable development meta-narrative, which undoubtedly wields great political clout, must urgently embrace religion as an analytical category, particularly when strategizing for women's inclusion in development. Obstacles to women's full participation in development are both a cause and a result of their human rights violations. Without interacting with religion in reimagining a range of women's rights, including the right to a healthy ecology and environmental resources, safety and security, health and education, and mobility and space, women's full 'right to sustainable development' would not be realized.

Such an approach puts sustainable development practice and policy in a hazardous position of engaging with religion without 'managing' or 'taking over' religion. These techniques will almost certainly result in reactionary or fundamentalist religious consequences, which may ironically exacerbate the very retrogressive qualities of religion for women that sustainable development attempts to address. The challenge for gender-sensitive sustainable

development is to maintain flexibility, a commitment to research, and a genuine understanding of religion, so that productive partnerships between women, religion, and sustainable development can be maintained at all times by planning while being aware of the rituals/practices/values and political context that may enable a mutually autonomous yet working partnership. 'Policymakers need to distinguish between ordinary religious sanctions (termed here religiosity) and the underlying visionary tenets or philosophy of religion', Carroll (2003: 4) advises. In this approach, she believes, religious fundamentals are preserved and actively mainstreamed into society through sustainable development policies, while old interpretations that keep women and other minorities in submissive positions are deconstructed and invalidated. The reform capacity of each religion, rather than its chauvinistic characteristics, would be highlighted in conjunction with sustainable development policies. This would be a big step toward realizing women's 'right to sustainable development'.

Notes

1. The global women's movement, on the other hand, was neither united nor necessarily just in its representation of women's rights around the world. Traditional societies were depicted as authoritarian, conservative, and male-dominated, whereas modern communities were depicted as democratic and egalitarian, according to feminists (Kishwar 1999). Third-world feminists have since pointed out that this distorts and dismisses the realities of their women's lives and accomplishments (ibid.).
2. In the 1960s, however, international development continued to see women as development beneficiaries, focusing primarily on topics such as population policies, family planning, and literacy programs, especially in underdeveloped nations (Anand 2002). Over the next few decades, women increasingly realized that they needed to organize individually - their challenges deserved recognition and attention in and of themselves – and the women's movement began to approach development from their own viewpoints, according to Anand. In this regard, Boserup's work was crucial.
3. Because Northern feminists tend to place the responsibility for population control squarely on the shoulders of women in the South, and see "sufficient justification for stringent population control measures directed primarily at women in the South", bitter debates have erupted between feminists in the South and the North (Braidotti et al. 1994: 89).

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