LITERACY AND EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

*Written by **Md. Baharul Islam***

Asst. Professor, Faculty of Law, The ICFAI University, Tripura

Abstract

The globally shared vision for sustainable development has a strong gender dimension that highlights the need to continue identifying gender equality and women's empowerment as a core development goal in itself and as a catalyst for reaching all other goals and objectives. Sustainable development can only be achieved through long-term investments in economic, human and environmental capital. At present, the female half of the world's human capital is undervalued and underutilised the world over. As a group, women – and their potential contributions to economic advances, social progress and environmental protection – have been marginalised. Better use of the world's female population could increase economic growth, reduce poverty, enhance societal well-being, and help ensure sustainable development in all countries. Closing the gender gap depends on enlightened government policies which take gender dimensions into account.

This paper will explores how literacy learning can support women's empowerment and the development of greater equality, benefitting not only individual women, but families, communities and economies too.

Key Words: Women Empowerments, Literacy, Education, Sustainable Development.

"There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing."   -Swami Vivekananda

"Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development"

(Principle 20, Rio Declaration)

"There is a dual rationale for promoting gender equality. Firstly, that equality between women and men - equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities – is a matter of human rights and social justice. And secondly, that greater equality between women and men is also a precondition for (and effective indicator of) sustainable people-centred development. The perceptions, interests, needs and priorities of both women and men must be taken into consideration not only as a matter of social justice but because they are necessary to enrich development processes"

(OSAGI 2001)

I.   INTRODUCTION

For the empowerment of women and girls to be realised through sustainable development, there needs to be more than a commitment to these goals. There must be concerted action across all countries and communities - dedicated resources should be provisioned to empower women of all ages and girls as part of the SDGs. Approaching gender equality as a crosscutting issue in the SDGs requires that gender is included at all stages of policy development, means of implementation, monitoring and accountability.

The need for a cross-cutting, inclusive and gender-sensitive approach is clear: without this approach the global transformation envisaged by the SDGs will not be achieved. Women and

girls are crucial contributors, implementers and beneficiaries of sustainable development. Their empowerment is fundamental to the achievement of the 2030 Development Agenda.

II. WHAT ARE THE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND HOW THEY LINK?

Women empowerment[1]

Empowerment can be defined as a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important".[2]

Women's empowerment means women gaining more power and control over their own lives. This entails the idea of women's continued disadvantage compared to men which is apparent in different economic, socio-cultural and political spheres. Therefore, women's empowerment can also be seen as an important process in reaching gender equality, which is understood to mean

---

[1] Women empowerment and its links to sustainable development: an in depth analysis,2016, pp.10-11. Available at:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/556927/IPOL_IDA(2016)556927_EN.pdf

[2] Page and Czuba, Extension Journal, October 1999. http://www.joe.org/joe/1999october/comm1.php

For a more detailed description of empowerment, please see also "Empowerment of Roma Women within the European Framework of National Roma Inclusion Strategies", European Parliament, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Women's Rights & Gender Equality, authors: Niall Crowley, Angela Genova and Silvia Sansonetti, September 2013.

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/493019/IPOL-FEMM_ET(2013)493019_EN.pdf

that the "rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female".[3]

According to the UN Population Fund, an empowered woman has a sense of self-worth. She can determine her own choices, and has access to opportunities and resources providing her with an array of options she can pursue. She has control over her own life, both within and outside the home and she has the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, both nationally and internationally.

Gender role expectations are institutionalized through legislative, educational, political and economic systems. Women need to be "empowered" in order to narrow the 'gender gap' and to create an equal playing field between women and men before gender equality can be reached and maintained.[4]

Sustainable development[5]

Sustainable development has been defined by World Commission on environment and Development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains two key concepts:

- the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and

---

[3] "Fact sheet on Important Concepts underlying Gender Mainstreaming", OSAGI 2001.

http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/pdf/factsheet2.pdf

[4] "Empowering women for sustainable development", Economic Commission for Europe, March 2011.

http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/commission/2011/Informal%20document%20No.%202.pdf

[5] Women empowerment and its links to sustainable development: an in depth analysis, 2016, pp.13. Available   at:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/556927/IPOL_IDA(2016)556927_EN.pdf

- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.[6]

There are three core elements that need to be harmonised in order to achieve sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. Sustainable development aims at eradicating poverty through, in particular, creating greater opportunities for all, reducing inequalities, raising basic standards of living and fostering equitable social development and inclusion.[7]

III. EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT[8]

Education has long been identified as key to translating the ideals of sustainable development into practice through enhancing people's skills and capacities to respond to change and supporting the transition to a green economy. UNESCO's International Research and Training Centre for Rural Education[9] noted the importance of an integrated approach to education, training and support shaped around the three central elements of sustainable development:

i) Claiming a stake for the marginalized in development;

ii) Responding to the feminisation of poverty; and

iii) Ensuring that sustainable production and consumption involves everyone, not just the poor.

The Decade for Education for Sustainable Development[10] focused attention on the importance of

---

[6] "Our Common Future", Report of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, March 1987.

http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf

[7] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org.

[8] Literacy and Education for Sustainable Development and Women's Empowerment, Available at:

http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002301/230162e.pdf

[9] UNESCO-INRULED, 2012, p. 23

[10] DESD, 2005 - 2014

education in supporting and facilitating the new values and practices required for a sustainable future: 'Sustainable development requires changes in the way we think and act. Education plays a crucial role in bringing about this change'[11]. The proposal for a global action programme to follow the decade emphasises the need to strengthen ESD in formal, non-formal and informal settings, including the private sector, and to enhance e-learning and mobile learning opportunities for young people. The seven ESD principles outlined in the proposal recognise the transformative potential of participatory education, emphasising: 'innovative, participatory teaching and learning methods that empower and motivate learners to take action for sustainable development'[12]. However, the proposal makes no reference to gender equality or women's rights, in contrast to the strong concerns around the feminisation of poverty raised in other policy documents on sustainable development. During the decade, a discussion paper, *The Forgotten Priority[13]* had proposed developing a gendered approach to ESD strategic planning as a key step towards promoting gender equality.

IV.   LITERACY PROGRAMME FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT[14]

Through this discussion of sustainable development and women's empowerment, several key aspects have emerged with regard to the kind of education that could support these two different but interconnected processes of change. The three dimensions of sustainable development – economic growth, social equality and environmental sustainability – are situated within a framework

---

[11] UNESCO, 2013, p. 1

[12] UNESCO, 2013, p. 2

[13] UNESCO, 2009

[14] Literacy and Education for Sustainable Development and Women's Empowerment, Available at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002301/230162e.pdf

of lifelong learning and discussed in terms of the new knowledge, skills, technologies and values required by people. While recognising the need for gender parity in schooling, transformative approaches to women's empowerment move beyond formal educational institutions and programmes to consider how women engage in different kinds of learning through the media, social organisation, migration and work.

Moving from women's literacy to gender empowerment[15]

Adult literacy policy has often adopted what has been termed an 'efficiency' approach[16], aiming to make women more efficient in their roles as wives and mothers through focusing on their reproductive role and informed by an economic rationale. Rather than challenging gender inequalities directly, such programmes frequently promote a functional literacy approach, linking basic literacy learning with knowledge about sanitation, maternal/child health, nutrition and family planning. Women's literacy programmes are often seen as a second-class education, because of their reliance on female volunteer teachers.

Many programmes use the term 'women's empowerment', it is most often associated with acquiring functional rather than challenging gender inequalities and gender-based violence. Focusing on women's empowerment as a process rather than a product implies taking a broader perspective on literacy programmes, rather than simply analysing the curriculum and approaches to learning and teaching in isolation. This might involve investigating informal learning – such as learning through role models or exploring the status of women staff within the programme. As well as recognising that woman's empowerment means different things to

---

[15] *ibid.*
[16] see Moser 1993

different women, literacy policy also needs to reflect that the meaning of empowerment will change for each individual over the course of her lifetime.

Literacy and Environmental Sustainability[17]

Whilst many literacy programmes have incorporated environmental issues into their curriculum (protecting the forest or reducing pollution of water sources, for example), there are few that have made environmental sustainability their core concern. An exception is the *Mayog Family Literacy Programme* in Sabah, Malaysia (Gunigundo, 2012). This programme worked with women from the largest indigenous group, the Kadazandusun, whose land and livelihoods were being immediately threatened by logging and other kinds of exploitation. The project began by exploring indigenous beliefs about the environment – which included the belief that nature has its own spirit – and the need to pass these ideas on to the next generation. By building on indigenous and informal learning, the project recognised women's existing knowledge and helped develop their roles and capacities through writing, editing and publishing books for the children in their community.

The *Functional Literacy Programme of Women of the Argan Cooperative[18]*, run by the national NGO Association Ibn Albaytar in Morocco, had similar origins. The programme aims to respond to current threats of economic exploitation to the environment and to 'promote and demonstrate a balanced relationship between people and nature'. Through this programme, divorced or widowed women were supported to set up their own cooperatives. A new literacy programme was designed in Amazigh, a Berber language spoken by the women, and combined practical skills around running the cooperatives (including knowledge of legislation) with awareness-raising

---

[17] Supra Note 13.
[18] http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=8&programme=148

about the importance of preserving the Argan forest. The project also introduced knowledge about new family laws, especially those concerning the status of divorced women. These two programmes show how women's traditional roles and their knowledge of the environment can be enhanced and disseminated through literacy activities.

Literacy and Economic Empowerment[19]

The vast majority of women's literacy programmes take a functional literacy approach in order to link literacy learning with income-generating activities. These programmes vary in how far they aim to challenge women's existing economic roles and in whether they prioritise non-farm or agricultural activities. In terms of learning and teaching approaches, whilst most programmes take a 'literacy first' approach (literacy programmes followed by skills training), some programmes offer support for literacy embedded in income-generating or livelihood activities.

The Kenya Adult Learners' Association's (KALA) *Economic Empowerment and Functional Adult Literacy Programme[20]* focuses on non-farming activities, in recognition of farmers' increasing vulnerability due to climate change and environmental degradation.

Other examples of literacy being used to support agricultural skills and technology development can be found particularly outside the education sector. For instance, the African Development Bank in Liberia launched the *Agriculture Sector Rehabilitation Project,* which created awareness of new farming technologies among farming communities and introduced functional literacy life skills, numeracy and book keeping to help improve their agribusiness practices (AfDB, 2014).

---

[19] *Ibid.*
[20] http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=4&programme=145

A UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) programme in Western Chad introduced new technologies, such as drip irrigation for vegetable production, and targeted women-headed households. They supported women's groups to negotiate land-loan agreements so that they could use irrigable and fertile ground and farm it in their own names (FAO, 2014)..

The NGO Nirantar's *'Khabar Lahariya'* (New Waves) programme in India trained rural women in news gathering and production by setting up a low-cost weekly rural newspaper to report on issues of concern to these communities in their own language.

The wide range of approaches to facilitating economic empowerment through literacy programmes reviewed above indicates that functional literacy can help to support and generate small-scale income-generating projects to enhance women's livelihoods, particularly if focusing on specific groups of women and building on their existing work.

Literacy and social equality[21]

Literacy programmes which aim to reduce poverty and stimulate economic activity often have a strong social equality dimension. As with the economic dimension, programmes vary greatly in terms of whether they aim to challenge or support women's traditional reproductive and productive roles and gender hierarchies. Social change activity in women's literacy programmes is often focused on health awareness, particularly around reproductive health, or simply on offering an alternative route to education for women.

The Association for the Promotion of Non-Formal Education's (APENF) *'Empowerment of women living in extreme poverty in Burkina Faso[22]'* project is similar in that it offers literacy, income-generating activities and health education (particularly awareness of HIV/AIDS and malaria).

---

[21] *Ibid.*
[22] http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=9&programme=168

Rather than adopting a functional literacy approach, this programme uses Reflect – a combination of PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) visual methods and Freirean methodology - to facilitate discussion on a wide range of topics, such as protection of the environment, soil fertility, citizenship and gender.

V. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A. ECONOMIC & GENDER[23]

Women and Economic Growth

Women, which constitute half of the world's human capital, are one of its most underutilised resources. Sustainable economic growth at national and global levels depends on women joining the labour force and fuller use being made of their skills and qualifications. More working women would also help offset the negative effects of declining fertility rates and

Women and Poverty Reduction

Women represent more than 70% of the world's poor due to unequal access to economic opportunities in both developed and developing countries. In OECD countries, increasing female participation in the workforce would reduce the number of people living in poverty since women and children account for most of the poor even in the richest countries. In developing countries, the failure to value women's work is a significant barrier to reducing poverty and fostering economic growth. Internationally, there is a link between poverty alleviation in countries and the development of their female human capital.

---

[23] Gender and Sustainable Development MAXIMISING THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ROLE OF WOMEN, Available at: https://www.oecd.org/social/40881538.pdf

Women and girls in developing countries and poor environments are often the last to receive health care. They suffer from lack of nutrition, poor sanitation and unsafe drinking water lead to millions of children, particularly girls, being kept off school.

Women and Technology

Women workers with a science and technology (S&T) background are a key resource in today's knowledge-based economies. There is rising demand for S&T workers, and job growth in this area is being driven by increases in female employment. But women remain vastly underrepresented in S&T studies at both secondary and tertiary levels of education and in the overall technical workforce. Greater female participation in computer science, engineering and technology-oriented jobs would spur innovation and economic advances in all countries (OECD, 2007h).

Women and Management

Women's representation in management positions in both the private and public sectors is markedly low and evidences another failure to make full use of available human capital. In OECD countries where women are 40%-50% of the labour force, they account for less than 8% of top managers. Worldwide, this share is even lower and declining. Known as the "glass ceiling" phenomenon, women have a difficult time climbing the leadership ladder. The result of this managerial gender gap is the reduced performance, innovation and effectiveness of firms and governments.

B. SOCIETY & GENDER[24]

Women and Education

Educating men and women is key to economic growth and sustainable development in both OECD and non-OECD countries. Raising the education levels and literacy rates of women is one of the most effective investments for increasing female productivity as well as enhancing the well-being of families and children. In the OECD area, where women are becoming more educated than men, the challenge is making better use of women's qualifications. In developing countries, reducing gender inequality in literacy and in primary and secondary education is essential to reducing poverty and accelerating economic development.

Women and Health

Gender perspectives are important in designing health care policies due to the different health profiles of women and men based on both biological and social factors. Women are more prone than men to self-declared ill-health, reduced work capacity due to illness, and mental disorders related to stress (WHO, 2006). These physical and mental health problems may be due to discriminatory workplaces as well as male violence against women in all countries. Work-related stress is also due to lack of job security, family-adverse working conditions, low social support, limited possibilities for training and career advancement, and inadequate social security coverage or pensions. This is intensified when women are also exposed to physical and mental hazards due to violence and abuse at home and psychological and sexual harassment at work.

Women and Governance

---

[24] *Idib*

Although women make up half of the world's population and despite their achievement of equal citizenship status to men, they remain vastly under-represented in governance forums. In most countries, there is a clear absence of women involved in decision-making processes at local, regional and national levels. The governance gender gap can be found in countries regardless of their economic status, religion or institutions. Factors contributing to the lack of female participation in decision-making processes include their low labour force participation and time poverty in relation to men as well as stereotypical attitudes towards the societal roles of women and men.

Women and men bring different perspectives to decision-making, and a lack of women in government limits the effectiveness of the state and its policies and diminishes its representational quality. Studies show that when women are well-represented in decision-making bodies, the overall quality of governance tends to rise and levels of corruption decrease[25].

C. **ENVIRONMENT & GENDER**[26]

Women and Sustainable Consumption

In terms of resource impacts, women tend to leave a smaller ecological footprint than men due to their more sustainable consumption patterns. Sustainable consumption is using resources in a way that minimises harm to the environment while supporting the well-being of people. Men's lifestyles and consumer patterns, whether they are rich or poor, tend to be more resource-intensive and less sustainable than women's (Johnsson-Latham, 2006).

Women's consumption reflects that they generally earn less than men and have less money at their disposal. They are more likely to buy the cheaper basic essentials such as food, clothing and

---

[25] UNDP, 2007
[26] *Idib.*

household articles. Men both earn and spend more than women and their purchases tend towards more expensive capital goods such as homes, cars and electronics.

Women and Sustainable Production

The sustainability of globalised production has become of increasing concern in terms of the environmental and social practices of multinational enterprises and their supply chains[27]. Trade liberalisation and foreign investment have created jobs and spurred economic growth in both developed and developing countries. This has been accompanied by changes in the international structure of industry and the male-female composition of the workforce in different sectors and regions. In OECD countries, the manufacturing sector has contracted and jobs in service sectors such as sales, finance and communications have expanded. At the same time, mass production of goods including electronics, automobiles, household appliances and toys has shifted to non-OECD countries. The environmental consequences of this shift are a continuing issue and are coupled with the social implications for working men and women.

Women and Climate Change

Gender is a significant aspect to be taken into account when considering actions both to adapt to and mitigate climate change. Climate change impacts are not only physical and economic, but also social and cultural. In poorer countries, climate change can adversely affect crop yields and thus the livelihoods and food security of women who are largely responsible for food production as well as family nutrition. Supplying water and fuel for families, which is typically the responsibility of women, becomes more difficult as environmental changes negatively affect clean

---

[27] OECD, 2008c

water supply, existing infrastructure, and urban and rural settlements. Coping with the damage of extreme weather events such as storms, floods, and cyclones may also fall more on women who hold together families and households. Climate change can lead to shortages of resources and unreliable job markets, causing male emigration in the search for work and increasing the agricultural and household duties of women.

VI.   EMPOWERING WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Empowering women in the context of the 2030 Agenda[28]

Gender equality and women's empowerment figure prominently in the 2030 Agenda. They are reflected in an integrated manner throughout the Agenda, and also considered critical for its achievement: in the Resolution on the Agenda, the General Assembly declares that "realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the goals and targets". The role of women's empowerment in the 2030 Agenda can be further concretised by looking at the SDG 5 "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" and its targets as well as Addis Ababa Action Agenda and Addis Ababa Action Plan on Transformative Financing for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

Empowering women in the context of Addis Ababa Action Agenda[29]

Women's empowerment is very visible also in this agreement: in their resolution, the Heads of State and Government and High Representatives reaffirm that "gender equality, women's empowerment, the full realisation of their human rights and their full and equal participation

---

[28] http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/3/lakshmi-puri-speech-at-empowering-migrants-event

[29] http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AAAA_Outcome.pdf

and leadership in the economy are vital to achieve sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and sustainable development".

Addis Ababa Action Plan on Transformative Financing for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment[30]

The Action Plan calls for accelerating the implementation of existing commitments in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action[31]. It also aims to ensure that the gender commitments that were included in the agreed text on Addis Ababa Action Agenda will be turned into actions. The Action Plan proposes policy and financing actions for five different areas of commitments:[32]

1. Domestic policy actions and public resources for gender equality and women's rights.

2. International policy actions and resources for gender equality and women's rights

3. Enabling environment for women's economic empowerment and sustainable development

4. Multi-stakeholder partnerships for gender equality and women's rights at country, regional and international levels

5. Data, monitoring and follow-up

The EU as an actor in empowering women in the context of sustainable development

---

[30] For more detailed information on transformative Financing, please see "Policy Hub – Transformative financing and goals for gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment – Addis Ababa and New York 2015", European Parliament, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Women's Rights & Gender Equality, July 2015. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/519237/IPOL_IDA(2015)519237_EN.pdf

[31] http://www.unwomen.org/~/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa_e_final_web.pdf

[32] www.un.org

The Lisbon Reform Treaty[33] considers gender equality among its key values and objectives: according to Article 2(3) of the Treaty, the EU "shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child".[34] The EU has also committed to mainstreaming gender considerations into all aspects of its operations and policies, including its external and development policy.

VII. CONCLUSION

Women's contribution to sustainable development must be recognized. Women have a strong role in education and socializing their children, including teaching them care and responsibility with regard to the use and protection of natural resources. More should be done to increase women's voice in environmental decision making and to enable women to seize opportunities in the "green economy". More capacity building programmes and training tailored to the needs of women are needed. In order to build women as catalyst for sustainable development, their role in family, community and society at large has to free from socio-cultural and religious traditions that prevent women participation. Vocational training is equally important to women's economic independence. There is need for change of mindset, especially of the males who dominate the scene.

---

[33] http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/139287.pdf

[34] Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007, Article 2.
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=OJ%3AC%3A2007%3A306%3ATOC

Woman is an incarnation of 'Shakti' – the Goddess of Power. If she is bestowed with education, India's strength will double. Let the campaign of 'Kanya Kelavni' be spread in every home; let the lamp of educating daughters be lit up in every heart.

– Narendra Modi