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The Frederick S. Pardee Center  
for the Study of the Longer-Range Future

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INSIGHTS

# Are Women the Key to Sustainable Development?

## Candice Stevens

We all agree that progress in achieving sustainable development goals has been abysmally slow. In the 21st century, we are confronted with economic, environmental and social crises on a global scale. Advances in attaining

capital needed to pay for progress. Building up the economic and social pillars of sustainability while neglecting the environment degrades the natural capital needed for growth. Focusing on economics and the environment without

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gender equality have been equally sluggish. Is there a link between these two trends?

The three pillars of sustainable development — economic, environment and social — are also relevant to discussions of gender equality. These dimensions have equal and interrelated importance as illustrated in some simple equations. Stressing the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development in the absence of economics neglects the financial

attention to social factors can lead to green growth for a few. Given gender gaps worldwide, these few tend to be mostly men.

An increasing number of studies indicate that gender inequalities are extracting high economic costs and leading to social inequities and environmental degradation around the world. The findings of the existing body of gender research are briefly reviewed here. Much more in the way of statistics, facts and analysis is needed to investigate whether

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gender equity is the “missing link” of sustainable development.

### **First Pillar: The Economics of Gender**

The economic crisis has led to heightened criticisms of the capitalist model, where growth is fueled by competition and the quest for profits. A lack of corporate responsibility among financial institutions — in the United States and banks worldwide — brought economic collapse and a recession that has touched almost all countries. It may not be a coincidence that this economic model has been built largely on the ambitions and perspectives of men. As one female leader hypothesized, “If Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, we would not be in this economic mess.”

The management and boards of all the failed banks and financial institutions are nearly 100 percent male leading some to blame our current economic problems on the

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gender gap. Even in 2010, highly-paid men are to receive large bank bonuses while lower-paid women continue to suffer the consequences of the crisis. Why is it that women do not participate in the labor force to the same extent as men and, when they do, earn 18 percent less? About 60 percent of eligible women work in the richer nations and 40 percent in the poorer, but this work — whether formal or informal — is undervalued

in all countries. And very few women reach the top ranks of business and management. This is variously ascribed to traditional attitudes, the glass ceiling or the old boys’ network.

It may be due more to an institutionalized form of gender discrimination embedded in the failure to adjust the male work model to fit the needs of women. All over the world, women bear most of the responsibility for children and households and thus suffer from time poverty and lack of mobility. They tend to drop out of the labor force to have children at the same time men are climbing to the top. They then return at an older age and often peak later than men owing to greater family responsibilities. Women have a different career trajectory than men and also need to work flexible hours and schedules to accommodate the heavy demands on their time.

The biggest problem for working women is lack of adequate childcare. For women who work and have

children, appropriate and affordable childcare options need to be in place. Countries with government-funded childcare and mandated family-oriented practices such as the Nordics (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) and France have both more working women and higher birth rates than those without enlightened gender policies such as Japan and Korea. It is the latter countries which most need

women workers to boost growth and productivity as well as more babies to counter their ageing populations and provide a future labor force and financial security. Helping women achieve more work/life balance is the answer to both their economic slump and their skewed demographics.

Although the female presence in the workplace is growing, women do not yet share in economic and political leadership. Among Fortune 500 companies, women are only three percent of CEOs, six percent of top managers and 15 percent of board members. Studies by Catalyst, McKinsey and other groups indicate that firms with more women in leadership positions tend to have better performance and higher profits. But women remain on the sidelines even though their “risk-smart” approaches, people skills and leadership strengths are sorely needed in business and government.

The corporate world is slowly awakening to the economic benefits of more gender equity. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) now includes a guide for gender reporting by firms with the aim of improving corporate management and creating new business opportunities. Both the UN Global Compact and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises are exploring the addition of guiding principles on gender for the corporate sector. Such prescriptions would go beyond equal employment opportunity and human rights to recommend specific corporate practices targeted to women including flexible work arrangements, child care, career development, equal pay, and employment in non-traditional jobs.

The private sector may need not only a set of tools for assessing their behavior and progress on gender equity but also a compelling driver for change. Because there are signs

assuring the welfare of households. The World Bank publishes regular assessments and a newsletter under the banner “Gender Equality as Smart Economics” to underline that

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that gender trends may not change unassisted, more governments are proposing quantitative targets and quotas for corporations with regard to hiring and promoting women. Since 2003, Norway has required corporate boards to be at least 40 percent women and the country now leads the world in the number of female directors. Norway also has quotas for the number of women managers in government at all levels. The French government has recently proposed that at least half of all company board members must be female within five years.

The economic situation of women in developing countries is far worse, but the solution is not that different: let women manage the money.

Seventy percent of the world’s 1.3 billion people living on less than US\$ 1 a day are women or girls. United Nations and World Bank studies show that focusing on women in development assistance and poverty reduction strategies leads to faster economic growth than “gender neutral” approaches. Financial aid put in the hands of men tends to lead to a higher share wasted on personal use. Women are essential to poverty reduction because of their role in

increasing economic opportunities for women is the cornerstone of development.

Investing in women and girls — in their education, health and gainful activities — can have a multiplier effect on poor economies. However, the share of bilateral and multilateral aid focused on gender-specific projects remains insufficient, about 30 percent. Banks and donors need to see women as active players in economic development. More aid should be focused on increasing income-generating initiatives based on women’s traditional roles in the home, health services, nutrition, and agriculture. Gender-sensitive development assistance can be a

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## **Second Pillar: Society and Gender**

Although economists are now going beyond GDP to more inclusive measures of well-being, money is essential to both ecological and social progress. It is how that money is distributed and used that determines sustainability. The sustainable development vision of Gro Harlem Brundtland, the female former Norwegian Prime Minister who headed the Commission that prepared the first sustainable development report *Our Common Future* in 1987, can be interpreted as “Don’t take more than your share!” This equity tenet applies to money, natural resources and welfare, whether now or in the future.

The social pillar of sustainable development — and its emphasis on equity and equality — is the most politically-sensitive of the three dimensions and thus the hardest to address. It involves confronting negative social trends such as growing income disparities, rising unemployment, and a persistent gender gap. In response to the economic crisis, many countries are

implementing strategies for green growth, green economies and green jobs to put them on a lower-carbon trajectory. But if they ignore basic social requirements such as income



equity, job quality and gender equality, these initiatives will fail to be fully sustainable. Unless they are addressed head-on, social concerns will continue to block progress on economic and ecological aims and the overall achievement of sustainable development.

The most dire trend of the current era is the widening gap between rich and poor both within and across countries. The 2008 Sustainable Society Index, which combines economic, environmental and social indicators to compare country performance, puts the United Kingdom at 50th and the United States at 66th place. Their low standing is due largely to rising poverty levels. The two countries have among the fastest growing divides between rich and poor in the OECD area. Unfortunately, it is single mothers who are the poorest members of these rich societies and many have lost their jobs and homes in the economic crisis. Green growth does not compensate for income disparities in the sustainable development equation.

A similar story is told by the Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum, which compares how countries divide their resources and opportunities among their male and female populations. This Index shows

## Women Workers in the Green Economy

Governments in Europe, North America and Asia kick-started the green economy through the environmental components of their 2009 stimulus packages. They pledged US\$ 2 trillion in spending to prevent a full-fledged depression, and 24 percent or about US\$ 500 billion is to go to green projects. Renewable energy, transport infrastructure, auto companies, and green buildings and factories are receiving an infusion of public money. But this green growth may exacerbate social sustainability in ignoring widening income and gender gaps.

It is expected that 50 million green jobs will be created worldwide in the next 20 years. About 75 percent of these jobs will be related to renewable energy and green buildings. Women have long been marginalized in the energy sector where they are less than six percent of technical staff and below one percent of top managers. Women hold less than nine percent of construction jobs. In March 2010, US Labor Secretary Hilda Solis characterized all green jobs as “non-traditional” for females, thereby qualifying women for green training through the 1992 Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) Act.

It is the responsibility of governments to make the green economy sustainable by giving preference to women and other disadvantaged groups. Otherwise, going green will perpetuate the dominance and perspectives of wealthier males in major economic sectors. Green stimulus spending and green public procurement should include quotas requiring employers to hire and train women. Funding for non-traditional training and apprenticeships should include targets for female participation. To allow women to join the green economy, governments should mandate industry to adopt family-friendly practices including child care, flexible work and extended leave. And they should strengthen enforcement of the anti-discrimination laws already in place.

Source: *Green Jobs and Women Workers: Employment, Equity, Equality*, Draft Report by Candice Stevens for SustainLabour, 2009.

can improve the status of women, a country cannot advance if its women are left behind. As might be expected,

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a correlation between gender equality and wealth per capita which cuts two ways: while economic progress

the highest gender scores are in Iceland and Finland and the lowest in Chad and Yemen. But there are some

unexpected findings. Several rich countries lag behind poorer countries when the gender markers are economic participation, education, health and political empowerment. For example, the United States trails at 31st place (out of 128 countries) behind South Africa (6) and the Philippines (9). Japan and Korea, champions of green growth, seriously lag in the gender stakes at places 75 and 115, respectively.

Another composite measure tracking gender discrimination seeks to uncover why women in poorer countries fail to make economic and social progress. The OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) evaluates variables

educational outcomes. According to OECD studies, poor children born in Europe, particularly in Scandinavia, have the best chance of advancing beyond the status of their parents. In Europe, this is least true in the United Kingdom and Italy. Intergenerational

into more sustainable consumer choices. Unfortunately, sustainable production is not following directly from higher levels of sustainable consumption by women.

A number of Swedish studies highlight that women spend more time than men seeking information on sustainable consumption and lifestyle alternatives. Females in Sweden recycle more and eat organic foods and purchase green goods at higher rates. Men, on the other hand, make fewer but more expensive purchases of electronics and automobiles. In Sweden, when it comes to cars, women far outnumber men in supporting reductions in vehicle use and increased options for sustainable

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such as family codes, violence against women, civil liberties, and ownership rights in 102 developing countries. Gender scores, which are not directly correlated with income, are lowest in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa. Here, anti-poverty strategies need to consider the role of social institutions and culture in limiting the access of women to employment, inheritance and finance. Difficult and wide-ranging reforms are needed to address the underlying causes of discrimination, including changes to laws governing property rights, marriage and divorce, and inheritance.

mobility is also unlikely at present in the United States. Long-term sustainable development depends to a large degree on good governance practices that give equal weight to social factors.

Reforms are also needed to assure sustainability in the long-term. The well-being of both girls and boys can be transmitted from one generation to the next depending largely on government measures to redistribute income through taxes, education, health care, and social safety nets. Investments in welfare programs help children to do better than their parents. Government benefits are shown to mitigate the influence of family background on

### **Third Pillar: Environment and Gender**

Last but certainly not least, surveys in a range of countries are revealing a difference between men and women in the environmental sphere. OECD studies of household behavior show that women are more likely than men to buy recyclable, eco-labeled and energy-efficient products. Women now account for some 80 percent of household purchases in developed countries, so the question is why this eco-consciousness hasn't translated

transportation. Another recent study found that Japanese women are also more concerned than men about the environment and are willing to pay more for sustainable products.

In North America, a 2009 Earthsense poll revealed that 80 percent of adult women believe strongly that individuals can affect the environment but that they personally are not doing enough. Other US polls show that over 60 percent of women consumers consider clean energy and recycling important to



their purchasing decisions. Recently Kimberly Clark, the world's largest producer of tissue products, was compelled to stop cutting down ancient forests by the wrath of female consumers in league with Greenpeace in the "Kleercut" campaign. More and more, consumer giants such as Unilever and Johnson & Johnson are stressing eco-efficiency in manufacturing and eco-innovation in their product lines to their mostly female clientele.

Women in developing countries are starting to realize the financial advantages of eco-markets. According to the Fair Trade Federation, women are increasingly behind the organization of cooperatives producing artisanal goods as well as agricultural products from coffee to chocolate in the quest to enhance their livelihoods,

It is far from proven that women are more environmentally conscientious than men as a rule. But women are more likely than men to be affected by environmental problems because of their social roles and more impoverished status in all countries. Coping with the effects of climate change and damage from extreme weather events such as storms, floods, and cyclones

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tends to fall on women who hold together families and households. Women in developing countries who supply water and fuel for

to adapt to climate change impacts. After Hurricane Katrina, those with the least ability to recover were women who are still the majority of the poor in the United States. In the 1991 cyclone disasters in Bangladesh, 90 percent of the victims were women. In the 2004 Asian tsunami, more than 70 percent of all deaths were women. But in many cases, women are also the key to managing

the aftermath of disaster. In India in the wake of the tsunami, a network of women's self-help groups provided for the practical needs of the local population including water and sanitation, health care and credit.

A few polls show that these varied gender sensibilities and responsibilities lead to different opinions among men and women on how to deal with climate change. Surveys by GenaNet in Germany found that more men than women favored technical solutions such as greater research on bio-fuels, clean coal and carbon storage. The women surveyed leaned more towards changes in consumption patterns and tougher carbon reduction targets. Polls by the UK Women's Environmental Network found that most women do not think the government is doing enough to combat climate change and fault the lack of female involvement in environmental policy-making.

their communities and local eco-systems. Women now account for 76 percent of the workers engaged in non-agricultural Fair Trade production, many fabricating crafts from local natural resources. In Colombia, women coffee growers increased profits while enhancing the environmental sustainability of production and community living standards by marketing female-produced Fair Trade coffee.

families find this increasingly difficult as environmental changes negatively affect resource supply and infrastructure. Increased costs for energy, health-care and food caused by the disrupting effects of climate change disproportionately affect women, especially single mothers. Even in richer countries, women are vulnerable because of their lesser access to finance and reduced ability



Because women are still rare in leadership positions, they have little power and influence to affect environmental policy. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), about 18 percent of legislative seats worldwide are held by women and in many countries there are no female representatives at all. IPU studies also show that women in government give greater emphasis than men to social welfare and ecological issues. According to the UN, when women are well-represented on governing bodies, the overall quality of governance tends to rise and levels of corruption sink. The equal participation of women and men in public life is one of the cornerstones of the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Similarly, because women are under-represented in many industry sectors, they are unlikely to get the green jobs increasingly on offer. The irony is that women are being educated at a higher rate than men

There are now sufficient numbers of qualified women in every specialization and area of expertise – from engineers to architects to scientists – to compete with men in the market for green jobs. But the majority of green positions are expected to be in the construction, energy and engineering fields where women are minority workers.



Similarly, thousands of green jobs are being created in agriculture, forestry, eco-tourism, and other resource-based sectors in poorer countries, but here women are a marginalized group. According to SustainLabour, women are being excluded from the green economy owing to gender-segregated employment patterns and

## Conclusion: Gender and Sustainable Development

As indicated by both theory and evidence, the lack of progress on gender equality may be at the heart of the failure to advance on sustainable development. If women were in more productive and

decision-making roles, we could be moving faster and more assuredly towards sustainability in the economic, social and environmental sense. Sustainable development is a political concept because it is about good governance, which will be hard to achieve until we get closer to gender parity. Research is needed to test the hypothesis that women are more risk-averse than men and that women leaders would be more apt to follow sustainable development pathways. Given the importance of gender to sustainability, these issues should feature more prominently in sustainable development discussions and be highlighted in a 2012 UN Conference on Sustainability Development. ●

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in many countries and more females than males are obtaining advanced degrees. In richer countries, the gender concern in education is the poor performance of boys and men.

discrimination. Schemes are needed to recruit women for non-traditional jobs, train them in green job skills, and ensure equal pay and high labor standards.

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