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From Egalitarianism to Strategies of Mutually Assured Survival: Lessons from a Systems-Level Study of Gender Equality Pursuits under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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* The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

Introduction: Policy recommendations for advancing gender equality beyond 2030

Post-2030 strategies for gender equality must account for the material reality of mutually exacerbating crises of degrading ecosystems, erosion of democratic governance, rising economic dispossession and violence. As global governance pillars collapse, long-standing international commitments to gender equality weaken. Given the asymmetry of economic and political resources at the disposal of gender equality advocates and institutions on the one hand and those working against them on the other, efforts to merely "hold the line" are unlikely to stop further backsliding. Instead, the inevitably limited resources should be invested in existing and emerging coalitions for mutually assured survival, capitalizing on the shared objective of recovering social and ecological relations that reproduce and sustain all life on Earth. Collective, ecologically oriented and anticolonial projects of rethinking social care, re-organizing economies around solidarity instead of growth and reforming international (including environmental) diplomacy warrant greater attention in discussions about what should succeed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030).[1]

Gender equality is incompatible with the status quo. Yet gender mainstreaming, as a twin-track approach of pursuing gender-targeted initiatives alongside efforts to integrate gender equality considerations in all aspects of development policy, too often confines gender equality efforts to the existing mechanisms of international assistance. Donor-driven, underfunded and short-term policy priorities in which gender is mainstreamed have gradually eroded the legitimacy of local gender equality agendas without sufficiently challenging models of economic governance that reproduce geopolitical and social hierarchies and ecological harm.

Agenda 2030's emphasis on participatory, cross-sectoral and nationally led policy planning, often supported by the United Nations, has produced new policy arenas in which gender experts can exchange technical, operational and normative know-how with technical experts from government and non-government bodies. Gender expertise emerging from these exchanges transcends mere integration of gender targets across existing technical priorities; it helps to change the agenda altogether. Merging sector-specific and gender-related knowledge into coherent cross-institutional plans promises to move beyond gender mainstreaming as a "paper exercise", reshaping strategic and operational priorities across diverse development institutions.

The "Leave No One Behind" principle has helped to expand the gender mainstreaming agenda in ways that consider marginalization across the continuum of (dis)ability, race and ethnicity, religion, rural/urban status, education, sexuality and class. These advancements warrant concerted efforts for post-2030 gender equality strategies that transcend mere inclusion and, instead, challenge classist, sexist, ableist, heteronormative and racist biases onto which mainstream frameworks of economic, social and governance policies are predicated. Historically marginalized

[1] United Nations General Assembly 2015.

groups, including Indigenous communities, cannot be merely folded into existing institutional priorities; their worldviews, values and priorities must be treated as epistemically equal.

Agenda 2030 has helped to advance UN Women's long-term investments in national statistical capacity for gender-disaggregated reporting. Cross-sectoral coalitions of gender and statistical experts have helped to highlight the inherent limitations of statistical frameworks, emphasize the importance and complexity of data interpretation and policy learning and valorize unofficial statistics. Post-2030 strategies for gender equality should capitalize on the increased recognition of epistemic biases that characterize statistical and econometric frameworks while ensuring that existing government data account for gender as an active category of social stratification.

Gender equality agendas are inexorably nested in the global architecture of finance and trade. Fiscal constraints resulting from this unjust international architecture foreclose transformative gender equality initiatives. Post-2030 strategies for a more gender equal world must reaffirm the internationalist perspectives that many anticolonial and eco-feminist coalitions have proposed in the post-war era. Ensuring fair global and national taxation, trade and finance mechanisms emerges as a seemingly technical yet deeply political and urgent set of policy targets that feminist and gender equality advocates cannot afford to ignore amidst rising planetary threats.

Study overview

This think piece is grounded in a systems-level interpretive doctoral project,[2] which explored how Agenda 2030 influenced gender mainstreaming at the global and regional levels and across the national contexts of Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda. Study findings draw on policy document analysis, primary data collection and cross-institutional knowledge validation. In 2019, I conducted almost 200 interviews and 11 focus group discussions with policy experts across United Nations agencies,[3] development agencies and high commission offices of Canada, Germany, Norway and Sweden, international and national civil society organizations as well as civil society umbrella organizations and government officials of Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda (including gender machineries, national planning authorities, ministries of finance, national bureaux of statistics and Agenda 2030 coordinating bodies). The three countries were selected given their declared high-level political support for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and shared regional frameworks on development cooperation and gender equality, though they had different degrees of donor dependence. I validated key findings during half-day workshops held in Kampala, Kigali and Nairobi, attended by approximately 20 representatives of the aforementioned institutions. I also attended relevant workshops on SDG localization across the East African region organized by United Nations agencies and civil society groups.

[2] See Novović 2021 for full dissertation.
[3] UN Women, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Resident Coordinator Offices.

My data collection and interpretation also draw on my scholarly training in feminist political thought, critical development studies and global governance and public policy, as well as the theoretical and empirical work I conducted during my doctoral studies at the University of Guelph, postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Ottawa, fellowship at the Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics, and permanent lectureship at the School for Government, King's College London. My work is also informed by practitioner experience within Serbian civil society, the United Nations and Canadian international cooperation, which not only facilitates my access to development practitioners but also informs my understanding of procedural and operational constraints that mediate normative political questions of legitimacy and policy constraints for global feminist policymaking.

I have received financial support and formal recognition in the form of grants and awards from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Alastair Summerlee Fellowship, University of Guelph's College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, Guelph International Development Institute and Canadian Association for the Study of International Development (CASID). Findings outlined in this think piece have been published in leading peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes, including *Global Governance*, *Third World Quarterly* and *Development Policy Review*.

This think piece is organized around analytical-diagnostic analysis of foreclosures of existing strategies for advancing gender equality under Agenda 2030 as well as an anticipatory-utopian approach grounded in forward-oriented policy lessons that call on political alternatives in rejection of the status quo. My overarching onto-epistemology is one grounded in Albert O. Hirschman's "possibilism", which DeMartino and Grabel consider the "ethical imperative (…) in an era of despair"[4] that discounts pessimistic or optimistic predictive models in favour of critical thinking, posing the question of what we can currently change in the existing policy system so that new alternatives eventually emerge as viable.

Systemic foreclosures of gender equality efforts under Agenda 2030

The 2018 UN Women report titled *Turning Promises into Action* warned that the world would not achieve the SDGs without drastically accelerated progress towards gender equality.[5] Less than a decade later, the global progress towards gender equality is not only "unacceptably slow"; it has in many ways been reversed as anti-democratic elites violate human and international law and cut funding for official development assistance (ODA).

More than three decades of gender mainstreaming have left a trail of expensive legislative, budgetary and institutional reforms that have, however, scarcely translated into significant gains in political, social or economic rights of women and girls. Agenda 2030 offered a possible answer

[4] DeMartino and Grabel 2025.
[5] UN Women 2018.

to the policy stalemate of gender mainstreaming. The SDGs made national governments leading actors in translating previously fragmented development initiatives into locally informed, cross-sectoral policy plans, fostering a more integrated policy landscape for this mainstreaming.

However, national development plans (NDPs) exemplify systemic foreclosures of transformative efforts under the current global economic system in which Agenda 2030 is embedded.[6] Many national priorities remain unaddressed due to the fiscal constraints of ODA-receiving countries, which are disadvantaged in the current regime of global trade and finance. As the 2025 United Nations report *World of Debt* highlights, low-and middle-income countries (LMICs) are overburdened by public debt interest (with LMICs paying $921 billion in 2024), which shrinks public spending, exacerbating declining access to social services, depleting social reproduction capacity and locking the poorest communities in cycles of perpetual debt.[7] Unjust global finance leaves LMICs vulnerable to the pressures of international capital to loosen labour protections as well as donors' development priorities. Despite successful efforts to localize SDGs into national development plans across Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, donors resisted shifts to nationally led agenda setting, treating national roadmaps as menu items from which they could select preferred interventions, suggest substitutions and impose conditionalities.[8] The fact that, as the United Nations' *Our Common Agenda: Poliy Brief* 6 suggests,[9] the global governance is not fit to meet the challenges of socio-political, economic and environmental challenges poses a critical question for gender equality advocates: *Into what is gender being mainstreamed?*

Rethinking gender expertise: From policy compliance monitoring to cross-sectoral co-creation and planning

Gender mainstreaming emerges as biased in favour of existing mechanisms of development cooperation: The notion of integrating gender considerations into institutional and operational policy supposes, at the very least, their viability. However, interviewed experts from United Nations agencies, civil society organizations and national governments overwhelmingly challenged this assumption, highlighting a mismatch between policy commitments on the one hand and budgets, institutional rigidity, risk aversion in the face of transformative interventions and systemic prioritization of short-term and measurable progress on the other.[10]

The focus on policy compliance assumes (1) development actors' (national and international institutions') political and financial capacity to implement stated policy commitments to gender equality and (2) a likelihood that, if implemented, gender-specific policies will produce linear and quantifiable real-life shifts in gender relations. Neither of the two assumptions withstand empirical

[6] Novović 2022.
[7] UNCTAD 2025.
[8] Ibid.
[9] United Nations 2023.
[10] Novović 2023.

stress-tests. Development agendas are chronically underfunded, particularly in the areas of social protection, leaving lofty gender equality commitments without appropriate budget codes.[11] Moreover, many theories of change warrant further scrutiny to distinguish between institutional bias towards neoliberal social policies and the target communities' emancipatory goals.[12] What is often lacking is a clear understanding of how to translate gender jargon into practical initiatives across highly technical areas such as forestry, public health or disaster risk reduction in ways that meet existing institutional constraints such as financial and human resources, reporting duties and donor conditionalities.[13] Against this backdrop, gender expertise emerges as a necessarily collective construct, possible only through ongoing exchange of technical know-how and gender perspectives (including the lived experiences of policy target populations).

Through its emphasis on integrated policymaking, Agenda 2030 facilitated cross-sectoral knowledge-generation on gender equality, with gender experts reporting new opportunities to engage in national agenda-setting across not only social policy but also environmental management, agriculture, economic planning and even infrastructure development.[14] In Kenya, for example, gender experts credited Agenda 2030 with incentivizing inclusivity across policy tables such as the Open Governance Platform meetings or meetings with urban planning engineers, who worked with them to consider gender- and class-specific questions of safety and access in designing urban and peri-urban road development.[15]

Moreover, representatives of organizations advancing the rights of traditionally marginalized groups such as LGBTQI2S+ individuals or persons with disabilities noted the usefulness of Agenda 2030 (particularly the "Leave No One Behind" principle) for mobilizing intersectional approaches across increasingly interconnected social, economic and political agendas. Organizations supporting persons with disabilities across all three countries – but especially Rwanda, whose civil society struggles to receive ODA funding due to the country's relatively high ranking across human rights and gender equality indexes – noted easier access to consultative tables and funding from both national and international actors in the aftermath of the Agenda 2030 adoption.[16]

Across all three policy contexts also, integration of SDG targets helped non-government organizations (NGOs) to better articulate their contribution to broader national and international priorities: Heads of smaller NGOs proudly offered organizational plans with clear maps and detailed descriptions about their organization's contribution to national and global targets, which they say had not been possible before due to the fragmentation of development priorities. Lastly, funding for umbrella organizations and government support for civil society engagement in SDG

[11] OECD 2024.
[12] Tsikata and Ossome 2024.
[13] Novović 2023.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Novović 2023.
[16] Ibid.

localization, particularly in Kenya and Uganda, made important, although insufficient, progress towards civil society integration.[17] Leaders of smaller NGOs, in particular, called for greater funding of umbrella organizations, which lowered the costs of participation in national consultations and strengthened their capacity to understand larger trends and funding commitments.

Overall, Agenda 2030 reshuffled traditional development planning mechanisms, creating an enabling environment for organizations to not only integrate gender commitments into pre-existing development targets but also co-create gender transformative agendas across social but also economic and environmental governance. The key lesson is one of departing from compliance-based interventions oriented towards meeting donor targets and embracing a less linear, more time-consuming and intellectually taxing yet more locally accountable and far-reaching process of cross-sectoral co-production of gender expertise.

Acknowledging the politics of policy evidence: Value and limitations of 'gender statistics'

Positioning national governments in the driving seat of SDG implementation, Agenda 2030 emphasized the importance of tracking development progress on a national, instead of institutional, level. National statistics emerged as central vehicles of both domestic and global reporting on Agenda 2030 achievements. By reducing duplication across reporting, Agenda 2030 streamlined the monitoring and evaluation models but also exposed its inherent limitations.

Localizing SDG indicators demanded the integration of globally recognized statistical proxies into existing national statistical frameworks, which proved helpful for the expansion of a long-standing UN Women project of strengthening national statistical capacity to disaggregate key indicators by sex and other relevant categories such as age. In Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, government interlocutors highlighted important recognition for the resources and political urgency dedicated to gender statistics while warning about the challenges of data disaggregation at a national level, complicated by cross-regional heterogeneity and limited budgets for statistical surveys. The point, as a statistical expert in Kenya noted, was not to collect gender-disaggregated data but to disaggregate data to inform better interventions.[18] Data disaggregation, on its own, cannot and should not be a policy objective.

Statisticians with gender equality expertise across all three countries cautioned against an overzealous focus on gender-disaggregated data, pointing at limited capacity for statistical data interpretation, which is inherently political and does not correspond to the mandates of national bureaux of statistics.[19] In Rwanda, the national Gender Monitoring Office (GMO) held the

[17] Ibid.
[18] Novović forthcoming.
[19] Ibid.

mandate of interpreting statistical data and informing future administrative surveys, although civil society reported limited involvement in their processes.[20] Across Kenya and Uganda, expanded gender statistics capacity, however, was not necessarily followed with initiatives to strengthen the interpretation of statistical data that, as statisticians themselves noted, does not fall within the mandate of national bureaux of statistics. While some work is being done by organizations such as the Kenyan Institute of Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPRRA), experts from academia, government and NGOs across all country contexts called for greater support of efforts to consolidate data collection and produce independent and policy-relevant analysis leveraging official and unofficial statistics.[21]

Not all data collection is inherently conducive to social justice. Data on persons with disabilities, sexual orientation and gender identity, abortion rates, etc. all bear political risks of data instrumentalization against gender equality commitments amidst rising backlash against gender equality.[22] Strengthening the capacity of government and non-government actors to both interpret gender-disaggregated data and translate insights into viable policy directions emerges as a critical yet under-appreciated – and therefore under-resourced – element of efforts to strengthen national policy capacity to advance gender equality.

Critical queries into the limitations of gender statistics, which inherit the biases of demographic statistics more broadly, highlighted the need for unofficial gender statistics for better representations of the lived reality of heterogeneous communities. For example, the structural-functionalist bias of statistical frameworks imposes a single-generation nuclear family as an analytical category, which does not correspond to how most communities across East Africa, particularly in post-conflict contexts, are organized: from sharing household labour to financial decision-making or even resource distribution.[23]

Data collected for specific development initiatives, organized to serve NGO donor reporting emerges as under-utilized, fragmented and cost ineffective. The focus on producing evidence across the development institutional complex is mired in biased assumptions that (1) each institution must produce its own original evidence and (2) evidence for gender equality initiatives will necessarily result in policy change. Similarly, broader challenges of the politics of development evidence remain due to the unchanged mechanisms of donor-driven financing for development. Incentives to prioritize easy-to-measure and short-term outcomes bias development planning as well as data monitoring and reporting, with significant risks of self-reporting anything but institutional success.[24] Shifting to shared databases, pooled assessments and cross-institutional data interpretation to reduce duplication and strengthen the epistemic legitimacy of gender

[20] Novović 2021.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Parmanand 2024.
[23] Novović 2021.
[24] Novović forthcoming.

knowledge are examples of urgently needed reforms of knowledge systems for gender-transformative interventions.

Lastly, whole-of-society discussions about policy evidence for Agenda 2030 cast light on insufficiently examined issues of privilege and representation across the opaque processes of consultations with local actors, raising questions about what counts as consultation and whose perspectives count as authentic and legitimate. The importance of considering the lived experience of intersecting mechanisms of oppression, mediated by (dis)ability, employment and level of education, ethnicity and migration status, as well as gender, race and class, emerged as neglected in previous decades of gender mainstreaming.[25]

Rethinking gender relations based on the lived experiences of heteropatriarchy requires us to abandon ahistorical and incrementalist approaches to development reforms. Instead, as Lyn Ossome argues, advancing gender equality across the Global South requires considerations of historical conditions that continue to reproduce socio-political and economic hierarchies.[26] Unless we rethink broader categories of economic organization such as land tenure and the division of productive and care labour, no meaningful change in social (including gender) relations will be possible. How we define, collect and interpret evidence across historical and political categories we ignore or recognize as important ultimately sets the terms for what is considered possible through gender-targeted or gender-responsive interventions. This requires a significant shift in the ostensibly neutral language of development policy, where passive voice often obfuscates the driving mechanisms behind seemingly inevitable problems such as poverty or marginalization.

Gender justice amidst planetary threats: Emerging coalitions for mutually assured survival

Future strategies for advancing gender equality across all policy levels will continue to be pursued in volatile landscapes of global governance, marked by limited development financing, resistance of high-income countries to reform the architecture of international taxation, trade and finance and high exposure to economic and environmental crises. Assuming a global consensus on what development cooperation comprises among actors committed to the post-colonial status quo and those pursuing the unfinished anti-colonial struggle of securing not only political but also economic sovereignty has constrained the past three decades of feminist and gender equality efforts. As the status quo promises ecological, economic and political catastrophes, gender equality advocates are faced with the increasingly urgent task of supplanting efforts to integrate gender into existing systems with those of redesigning economic, social and ecological forms of organization across local, regional and global levels.

[25] Ibid.
[26] Ossome 2024.

However, the materiality of shared struggle, grounded in economic interdependence and the interconnections of the planetary ecosystems we inhabit, can inform critical coalitions for mutually assured survival. Feminist literature has highlighted the epistemic erasure of eco-feminist, Third World and Indigenous worldmaking alternatives proposed since the initial World Conference on Women.[27] Coalitions for transnational tax justice, the overhaul of trade relations (including the suspension of the TRIPS Agreement), reorganization of agricultural and industrial relations, shared and consensual governance of ecosystems and collectivist provision of social reproduction all offer unfinished but evergreen priorities that require organizing across all levels of domestic and transnational politics.[28] As wildfires, floods and avoidable economic and security crises threaten our collective survival on Earth, conditions for coalitional action beyond the previous geopolitical and identarian divisions are creating unprecedented conditions for coordinated action towards not only gender equality but also social and planetary justice.[29] Understanding that gender equality cannot be achieved in an unfair global economy – and even less so on a dead planet – should invite us to radically reconsider the urgency, the scope and the scale of feminist and gender equality interventions.

[27] Kardam 2002.
[28] Gaard 2011.
[29] Novović 2026.

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