Gender equality as a means to women empowerment? Consensus, challenges and prospects for post-2015 development agenda in Africa

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In this paper, we have examined gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) as reflected in the millennium development goals (MDGs) as well as the conceptualization and localization of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). The paper adopts Amartya Sen's women agency conceptual framework to advance the thesis of this article that while there is general consensus on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, the MDGs adopted in 2001 fell far short of fulfilling this consensus and that the incoming SDGs must respond to fundamental issues of GEWE from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. This paper addresses the issues of conceptualization, context, and design of MDGs and how lessons learnt in its implementation inform SDGs. The question is, will GEWE maintain any pride of place? Analysis in the paper reveals that qualitative indicators such as human rights, equity, and capabilities were silent in the MDG design, constructs, and implementation. The paper suggests that the understanding and putting in place of mechanisms for continuous assessment of the human-centered indicators, such as quality of life, as part of the SDGs' localization efforts portend increasing effectiveness of SDGs toward addressing gender-sensitive issues of social exclusion, inequality, and resource distribution, which have a great bearing on sustainable development.

Keywords: GEWE; MDG; SDG; women empowerment; women agency

Introduction

The global consensus of 2000 defined by the Millennium Declaration set afoot a new means of international development cooperation by distinguishing development targets with clear goals and indicators. Set over a 15-year period which ended in 2015, the core development areas were identified by 8 goals with a total of 48 indicators (Sanga, 2011, p. 106). The third goal, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) had three indicators: school enrollment, representation in parliament, and participation in the labor force (Porio, 2015, p. 255; Unterhalter, 2014, p. 177). It is noted that there was progress at all these levels, with gender parity being achieved at primary school enrollment. The inability to liberate and harness the energy and skills of women aggravates developmental challenges and restricts progress toward attainment of millennium development goals (MDGs) (Ogujiuba & Jumare, 2012). Only one in three paid jobs outside of agriculture is occupied by women in the Sub-Saharan African region (African Development Bank, 2015a). By 2011, the regions' ranking for women's representation in parliaments increased to 20% from 18% in the previous years (Fehling, Nelson, &

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Venkatapuram, 2013). This means that the region experienced only small gains despite sustained economic growth from 3.9% in 2014 to 4.5% in 2015 (African Development Bank, 2015a). The limits for women's socioeconomic progress have been rightly attributed to lopsided legislation, stereotyping, cultural, and religious structures blighting women's liberation and full access to opportunities such as education (Ogujiuba & Jumare, 2012).

History is replete with examples of women rising up to advocate for their rights. The annual celebration of the International Women's Day is the result of one of the earlier challenges to discrimination against women and their exclusion especially in the labor market. The World Conferences on Women, coming much later have continued to emphasize inclusion, gender equality, and women's empowerment. In 1994 at the International Conference on Population held in Cairo, one of the major achievements of the women's movement then was obtaining consensus on reproductive and sexual rights as a key issue for health and development with a particular focus on girls, youth, and women. At the 2014 session of the Commission on Population and Development, the review of progress made since the 1994 adoption of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, the verdict was similar to that of the review of progress since the adoption of the Beijing Platform of Action and the report on the MDGs: many challenges remain, including persistent gender inequalities. More often inequalities are perpetuated by lack of effective mechanisms for measuring or tracking change. It is on the basis of these structural weaknesses that evaluation of the ICPD recommended efforts to improve measurement and accountability. For example, evidence on reproductive health should focus on tracking resource flows, creating, and renewing alliances to strengthen advocacy and employing new resource mobilization strategies (Roseman & Reichenbach, 2010, p. 404).

Despite the noted progress in sexual and reproductive health, sexual rights remain one of the most contested issues at the Commission on the Status of Women today. This single issue so divided parties at the 56th and 57th sessions of the Commission almost threatening agreement defined by the traditional 'Agreed Conclusions'. The centrality of the theme on ending violence against women and girls despite having featured as a key issue for women and girls in numerous debates and policies, still did not find a place in the MDGs. The absence of an indicator on violence against women was thus a glaring omission. The SDGs have however shown promise to address this key issue by including it as a target under Goal 5. Harman (cited in Hulme & Wilkinson, 2012; pp. 84–101) makes the compelling argument that issue framing in the MDGs has instrumentalized women for betterment of the lives of others and broader development goals and reinforced women's roles as mothers, caregivers, and unpaid workers, rather than responded to their specific needs and aspirations. Harman further argues that even on issues of health, the MDG focus is on maternity and child survival! In a sense, Harman's arguments reinforce the empowerment concept and the fundamental notions of power, control, opportunities, and choice (Buvinic, Morrison, Ofosu-Amaah, & Sjoblom, 2008).

At the end of the MDG period, the verdict on Gender equality and women's empowerment was:

> … inequalities persist and that women continue to face discrimination in access to work, economic assets and participation in private and public decision-making. Women are also more likely to live in poverty than men. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the ratio of women to men in poor households increased from 108 women for every 100 men in 1997 to 117 women for every 100 men in 2012, despite declining poverty rates for the whole region. Women remain at a disadvantage in the labour market. Globally, about three

quarters of working-age men participate in the labour force, compared to only half of working-age women. Women earn 24 per cent less than men globally. In 85 per cent of the 92 countries with data on unemployment rates by level of education for the years 2012–2013, women with advanced education have higher rates of unemployment than men with similar levels of education. (United Nations, 2015, p. 8)

The dilemma evident in the above conclusion is that while economic prospects appear to have risen, gender disparities have persisted and in some instances, widened, yet closing the gap portends even greater economic growth (African Development Bank, 2015b). In that regard, the SDGs as the new global development framework represent significant progress from MDGs. For example, other than stand-alone Goal 5 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,' more than half of the 17 other goals have integrated gender dimensions with measurable indicators (Unterhalter, 2014). There is a strong realization this time around that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls can attain maximum progress when anchored across the spectrum of development objectives (UN Women, 2015a).

The centrality of education as a gateway to economic and political empowerment among women has attracted both applause and criticism in equal measure. In the same vein, Ogujiuba and Jumare (2012) observe that the emphasis of MDG on the gross domestic product (GDP) was faulty because it does not necessarily lead to improved quality of life for worse-off communities. Even with a constituent level of GDP, some scholars have argued that the problem of poverty and underdevelopment is becoming more intractable in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Fehling et al., 2013). No wonder, after more than 15 years of implementing MDGs, SSA still experiences gaps between states and regions, and worse still between men and women. Indeed, policy analysts have faulted several other targets within the MDGs. For example, Bolaji-Adio (2015, p. 3) observes that emphasis on quantitative indicators has proved inadequate in providing information on salient issues such as governance and political participation. This is more profound for groups such as women in highly patriachal societies (Alahira, 2014, p. 72). There is evidence that when institutions are designed in such a way as to accommodate marginalized, excluded or vulnerable groups, the likelihood of achieving sustainable development is high (UNDP, 2011).

Scholars and practitioners alike, consent that gender equality is attained when both men and women enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights, and obligations in all spheres of life (Juru, 2002; UN Women, 2015c). The World Bank (2012) identifies gender equality as a core development objective in its own right and asserts that greater gender equality is equivalent to 'smart economics' because of its potential to enhance productivity and improve other development outcomes, including prospects for future generations and for the quality of societal policies and institutions.

Similarly, promotion of gender equality is fundamental to the empowerment of women. The focus however has to be on identifying and redressing power relations and imbalances (Wadesango, 2011). Experience has shown that addressing gender equality and women's empowerment requires strategic interventions at all levels of decision-making, planning and programming, and implementation. It is for these reasons that advocates of human-centered development have argued that promotion of women agency at the center of development has the potential of alleviating some of the traditional socio-cultural disadvantages that deny women their basic rights (Elson, 2002). Thus, the notion of gender equality and women's empowerment avoids the narrow view of only focusing on parity of numbers between men and women but goes further to emphasize

structural and policy reforms for gender responsive development frameworks because these have the potential to address deep-rooted discrimination and to increase voice, choice, and access to opportunities, thereby raising standards of living regardless of location or social status (UN Women, 2015). Fundamentally, the concept of gender equality is rights based and it evolves from the reality that women and girls have borne the brunt of gender-based discrimination.

In equal measure, Article 5 (a) of the Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), calls on state parties to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women and to eliminate prejudices and practices which perpetuate discrimination on the basis of sex (Wadesango, 2011, p. 164). Implicitly, governments that ratified this Convention undertook to act against practices that promote discrimination in their countries (African Child Policy Forum, 2007). However, some human right scholars observe that the discourse on democracy and human rights in African countries is laden with self-interest and power games that do not always respond to the needs and aspirations of groups and communities, more so to women who suffer most from inequality and oppression (Alahira, 2014; Baderage, 1984; Saddique, 1998). The localization of SDGs presents a huge opportunity for local governments and advocates of decentralization and local development to undertake actions that sustainably integrate gender equality and women's empowerment across the goals (Slack, 2014). The consultation processes piloted in 14 countries (Armenia, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ghana, Jamaica, Malawi, Philippines, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Uruguay, and Yemen) has already demonstrated the value of a strong local government role in the implementation framework for the SDGs (Slack, 2014) to be secured.

Already research and analysis on MDGs has mainly focused on household economics and social justice (Kabeer, 2010, p. 16), but works that have analyzed important processes such as participation, transparency, and accountability (Sen, 2013, p. 47), have broadly examined issues from a political economy lens, and have in the process neglected the implications of MDGs on salient aspects such as gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) (Seguino, 2007). It is, therefore, imperative to view the implementation and evaluation of the new global development framework, the SDGs, with a human rights lens in order to fully appreciate the gendered dimensions and impact for development outcomes as a whole. The African Development Bank report on 'The State of Gender Equality in Africa' underscores the fact that opening up economic opportunities for women would not only improve their earnings, assist families to move out of poverty but also benefit economies as a whole (African Development Bank, 2015b). It has been predicted that if women are substantially involved in the formal economy, there will be a rise in a country's GDP as high as 34% for Egypt compared to United States' 5% (African Development Bank, 2015a).

Gender equality and women empowerment: the means and the end?

In most parts of Africa, women are economically, culturally, socially, and politically disadvantaged (Alahira, 2014; Baderage, 1984). Due to institutional weaknesses, exclusion, and other barriers, women cannot enjoy their rights in accessing opportunities, decision-making processes, and basic services (African Development Bank, 2015b).

In fact, addressing discrimination and empowering women was the *leitmotif* of the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975. A similar conference in Beijing in 1995 raised the stakes by identifying 12 critical areas for women's

empowerment, all encapsulated in the Beijing Platform for Action. The same movement successfully lobbied for and supported calls for a stronger UN agency focusing on gender equality and women's empowerment and the Member States obliged by creating UN Women in 2011. The mandate of UN Women is to promote gender equality and women's empowerment (UN Women, 2015a). The assumption again that the two issues are naturally aligned is further promoted by MDG 3 and now SDG 5 which view gender equality and women's empowerment as fundamentally and structurally aligned. While there are valid arguments for gender equality being an end in itself (Ogato, 2013, p. 359), this paper adopts the view that gender equality and women's empowerment are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing and are both the ultimate objective and the desired end! The distinction of which is the means or the end therefore fades away as the roles interchange in the course of any process!

At a practical level, it is important to comprehend inherent gender dimensions or discrimination that exclude or put women at a disadvantage even in policies. Such analysis and comprehension permits the adoption of measures that bring out potential and actual discrimination or exclusion, thus unmasking what could be deep rooted inequalities. Data disaggregation on the basis of gender is crucial to inform and reform policy and action (UN Women, 2015). Gender responsive policy reforms have the potential of transforming the impact of global development frameworks, such as the SDGs, and delivering development outcomes that are more equitable and sustainable. The cumulative impact of policy reform and the subsequent institutional realignment leads to increased access to productive resources, land, fair tax regimes, information, education, and gainful employment (Ogato, 2013, p. 359). Strengthening the SDG implementation architecture in response to these needs is central to a rights-based approach to development, which focuses on 'the attainment of minimum conditions for living with dignity' (UN Women, 2015).

In their article *No Empowerment without Rights, No Rights without Politics: Gender-equality, MDGs and the post-2015 Development Agenda* (Sen & Mukherjee, 2014, p. 189), correctly observe that MDG three (3) lacks both a human rights approach and support for the women's movement, which they see as essential to energizing the agenda. In hindsight, it may be stated that the human rights perspective was taken as a given and this fundamental flaw gave rise to a process that inadvertently or otherwise ignored the location of women in the discourse. Even in circumstances where women are engaged in institutional processes such as politics, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, and rules, particularly blight women's opportunities to access certain leadership positions, because such institutions are embedded in what Devika and Mukherjee (2007, pp. 102–130) – refer to as 'male biased' institutions.

Global statistics on critical development indicators depict a grim picture about women's literacy levels. With an average of 20% of women being illiterate globally and 25% in Africa (UNESCO, 2013), a criterion that focuses on representation in parliament, especially where literacy is a criterion, will speak to a rather small elite. The reason behind this is that political access and representation has become more sophisticated, requiring a certain degree of education *and sophistication* to be admitted even as a candidate! This is not the place to judge the usefulness of literacy in political representation but simply to argue that already a significant share of women are left out of this MDG that is supposed to address inequality. In terms of education, enrollment for girls has definitely improved but the biggest challenge, if the glass ceiling is to be addressed, is to facilitate their transition to higher levels of education. For instance, of the 167 countries with data on the gender parity index (GPI) in primary enrollment in 1999 and 2010, 33 had a GPI of below 0.901 in 1999, and by 2010 this group

numbered 17; in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 21 countries in 1999 had had a primary GPI below 0.90, only 12 remained at this level in 2010 (UNESCO, 2012, p. 6).

Access to education and enrollment has been reported as one of the most successful MDG. For example, the number of children left out of primary school fell from 108 million in 1999 to 61 million in 2011 (UNESCO, 2012, p. 3). In 1999, 71% of children in low-income countries enrolled in primary school were retained in schools to the last grade of the cycle, increasing to 78% in 2009 (UNESCO, 2012, p. 363). The observed educational progress however, did not favor children in less-developed economies, where gains are more modest. For instance, of the 167 countries with data on the gender parity index (GPI) in primary enrollments in 1999 and 2010, 33 had a GPI of below 0.901 in 1999, and by 2010 this group numbered 17; in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 21 countries in 1999 had had a primary GPI below 0.90, only 12 remained at this level in 2010 (UNESCO, 2012, p. 6). In Sub-Saharan Africa, problems of data access and accuracy affected the general outlook of progress in most target areas. Recent evaluation of MDG has indicated that several countries lacked coordination among national data producers leading to reporting of inconsistent or contradictory information to international statistical agencies (Sanga, 2011, p. 107). Consequently, when examining data for tracking SDG progress, it will be important to assess the set of specific goal indicators and their ability to comprehensively capture gender equality and women's empowerment within the contextual realities of Africa

As the SDGs are rolled out, it will be critical, to focus on the areas and structures that perpetuate gender inequalities and to articulate core principles underlying implementation and monitoring and evaluation strategies if we are to successfully deliver on the SDGs relative to gender equality and women's empowerment. The targets in the other goals cover a comprehensive set of issues, including the gender dimensions of poverty, hunger, health, education, water and sanitation, employment, safe cities, and peace and security. SDGs, therefore present not only a comprehensive framework toward realizing gender equality but also recognize that gender issues are inseparable with other aspects of human life.

Inevitably, for some indicators, particularly those in the Tier II and III categories, additional efforts will be needed, including the collection and analysis of new and existing data and/or the development of new standards and methodologies. Hence, to be successful, the 2030 Agenda must emphasize the need for enhanced technical capacities and increased investments in statistical capacity at the national, regional, and international levels (UN Women, 2015). The successful delivery on gender equality and women's empowerment within the SDG framework will require focused monitoring and coordination throughout the entire framework to ensure that GEWE implementation concerns are not confined to SDG 5 alone due to competing priorities but are consistently addressed in other goals (UN Women, 2015b).

The SDG framework and GEWE

In September, 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals were adopted with a promise to build on the MDG achievements and complete the unfinished agenda especially on poverty (United Nations, 2015). The Synthesis document declared that:

> In the decade between 2000 and 2010, an estimated 3.3 million deaths from malaria were averted and 22 million lives were saved in the fight against tuberculosis. Access to antiretroviral therapy for HIV-infected people has saved 6.6 million lives since 1995. At the

same time, gender parity in primary school enrolment, access to child and maternal health care and in women's political participation has improved steadily.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets address development across the full spectrum, ranging from economic, social, and environmental, and therefore represent a significant step forward from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In addition to the targets in Goal 5 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,' the targets in the other goals have been carefully articulated to further address gender equality.

As stressed by all actors, the choice of indicators and monitoring their implementation will be an important determinant of the success of the current framework. This is of critical importance and can to a large extent determine whether policy efforts are channeled adequately and the goals and targets are achieved or missed. Appropriate monitoring of indicators and thorough and effective monitoring of progress on gender equality across all goals will be important to ensure that women and men and girls and boys are benefiting from implementation efforts.

The ecstasy displayed at the adoption of the new international development pact that is the SDG agenda would almost suggest that much of what was sought for GEWE in the MDGs had been achieved to a significant degree. Yet the conclusions on gender equality and women's empowerment leave no doubt as to the missed mark. Additionally, the 2015 review of the Beijing Platform of Action, 20 years on, affirms this when noting that while there has been progress at the normative level, *overall progress, however, has been unacceptably slow, with stagnation and even regression in some contexts.*[1] *Change towards gender equality has not been deep enough, nor has it been irreversible* (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs promise to make change irreversible. However, for this to be realized, and as gender inequality is experienced differently by women and girls across the lifecycle, monitoring and evaluation of progress will require Concerted data collection, including by age and by other salient socioeconomic characteristics, such as income/wealth, taxation, unpaid work, and time use among others (Lahey, 2015).

GEWE, conflict and insecurity

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges to the achievement of the MDGs for Africa can be stated as that of conflict and security-related challenges. The MDGs however opted out on specific attention to the nexus between development and conflict despite the re-emergence of terrorist threats at the dawn of the millennium. Some sources indicate that there has been a tenfold increase in deaths from conflict. For GEWE, conflict and security challenges have increasingly threatened gains and have placed women and girls in particularly vulnerable situations. In Mali, for example, the temporary take over by the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) in the North of the country in 2012–2013 (Chivvis, 2016), not only rolled back the progress in women's ability to participate in public projects but also re-instituted conditions that women and gender equality advocates had for long sought to change. Women were for example, no longer permitted to appear in public or to lay any claim to leadership. In fact, in the period of the MDGs and at the start of the SDGs, countering the impact of conflict and violent extremism remains an enduring and daunting concern. The UN report on the MDGs states:

By the end of 2014, conflicts had forced almost 60 million people to abandon their homes – the highest level recorded since the Second World War. If these people were a nation, they would make up the twenty-fourth largest country in the world. Every day, 42,000 people on average are forcibly displaced and compelled to seek protection due to conflicts, almost four times the 2010 number of 11,000. Fragile and conflict-affected countries typically have the highest poverty rates. (United Nations, 2015, p. 8).[2]

While women and girls are not exclusive victims of conflict, they face particular risks such as sexual violence, trafficking, and deepening existing gender inequalities. Attempts to tackle such threats and vulnerabilities are bound to be self-limiting if gender dimensions are not integrated in both conflict and peace building (Byanyima, 2015). Chandran et al. (2016) further assert that conflict-affected countries lag their peers in development outcomes: for example, 'the 10 worst-performing countries for maternal mortality globally are all conflict-affected or post-conflict states. More generally, gender-based exclusion and violence are persistent characteristics of conflict' (Chandran, Cooper, & Ivanovic, 2016).

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the extent of rape and sexual and gender-based violence has been greatly documented, and reports continue of atrocities in other parts like the most recent reports of UN peacekeepers in the Central Africa Republic. It is a glaring omission therefore when violence against women is omitted from any framework intending to deliver development outcomes. It is in fact an indictment on international processes that years after the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) there is still a marked absence of women at the negotiation table; for example, out of 61 peace agreements concluded between August 2008 and March of 2012, women were signatories to a meager two. Women's structural exclusion from peace talks has significant consequences for the extent to which issues of concern to them – such as violence against women or women's citizenship rights are addressed (UN Women, 2012)

On the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment, the MDGs were short-sighted in approach pegging this issue to three indicators that did not sufficiently address concerns affecting the vast majority of women and girls in terms of breaking through the glass ceiling and practices that consistently keep women at the periphery of development. Violence against women and girls was a glaring omission! It may be argued that the assumption of the MDGs that the universality of human rights is a constant and not a variable in the development discourse might have been largely responsible for the omission of important indicators such as violence against women and girls, representation at the table of negotiations be it for peace, trade or business, or even decision-making at board levels or leadership in public and private sector enterprises. It is no wonder then that resourcing for action on gender equality and women's empowerment has been demonstrably low and inadequate with comparably less commitment to accountability for results.

Ultimately, the overall goal of reducing gender inequalities and contributing to substantive empowerment of women remains largely unmet. This will be the case as long as the institutions for gender equality and women's empowerment remain weak and under resourced whether at the national or international level (Hulme & Wilkinson, 2012). A second element that will need to be addressed is the hitherto unclear strategy of how to address patriarchy and gender stereotyping both from within the women's movement and outside. Male voices have significantly contributed to addressing these two issues but it has not been without echo. An inherent conflictual and contentious reaction has been occasionally witnessed because of varying interpretations of intentions

and fears from some of a male takeover through the backdoor! In view of these mixed perceptions, gender advocates have initiated projects to promote positive masculinity. For example, Hoang, Quach, and Tran (2013) established that as a result of initiating men's club in Vietnam hegemonic masculinity among men has been mitigated by introducing relevant knowledge, skills, mentoring, and peer support targeting women as source of change. In contrary, Lwambo (2013) found out that in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), there is high level of men's resistance to single-gendered initiatives promoting positive masculinity and gender equality pointing out the need for holistic approaches that empower women and men to make non-violent life choices.

The human-centered-based approach to the design and implementation of global frameworks such as SDGs provides a clear framework for assessing policy choices that focus specifically on addressing structural inequalities. Amartya Sen's 1999 concept of women's agency seems to provide an effective framework of analysis for understanding how women's contribution could be captured within the global development frameworks such as SDGs.

Indeed the more comprehensive SDG framework, assuming a human-centered approach to implementation of SDGs has the potential of increasing not only recognition of women's labor but also employing appropriate tools for quantifying unpaid care and domestic work, as well as incorporating reproductive work within social and economic policies. Integrating a gender perspective into the national budget process significantly contributes to effective policy design because it has both equality and efficiency dimensions (AfDB, 2015b).

Conceptual framework: women's agency and its application to the SDG

The World Development Report (WDR) of 2012, dubbed 'gender equality and development' identified women's voice, agency, and participation as a key dimension of gender equality and policy priority. Agency, as defined in the WDR 2012, is the ability to use endowments to take advantage of opportunities to achieve desired outcomes. In particular, the report focused on five 'expressions' of agency: women's access to and control over resources; freedom of movement; freedom from the risk of violence; decision-making over family formation; and having voice in society and influencing policy. An important expression of women's agency is women's political participation and their ability to fully engage in public life, which also includes women's ability to play a public role in politics and to influence policy-making processes (Markman, 2014). It is plausible to argue that for women to make meaningful contribution to policy-making processes, deliberate efforts must be done to institutionalize the ethos of human entitlement as well as enhance women's capabilities.

The notion of Women Agency and Social Change (WASC) implies that for women to be able to compete, structural changes must be made to provide new opportunities to attain positions of political power. When properly implemented, WASC could create opportunities for women's entry into decision-making spaces, which means that political and social systems permit participation of both men and women to economic and political governance. The reverse is also true that the largely exclusive economic and political systems, particularly in Africa can raise accountability and transparency concerns. In regard to localization of SDGs in Africa, policy analysts have hinted several ways of mitigating the unforeseen challenges, including collecting more local data to effectively measure progress at the local level. Communities will also need to be sensitized to the SDGs and how they affect them locally, while in some countries there is a lack of

political will to decentralize, and there remain many capacity gaps at the local level (Slack, 2014). However, the principle of focusing on a bottom-up approach will ensure that the delivery of the SDGs is grounded in local realities, which will make a significant contribution to enabling the global community to meet the new targets.

There exist various conceptual and theoretical frameworks that could guide the formulation of development targets and indicators. Amartya Sen's thinking of *Development As Freedom* is one of these conceptual frameworks (Sen, 1999, p. 78). Sen's emphasis on strengthening the linkages between the 'hard' economics and institutions argues that political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency, and protective security are indeed opportunities and rights that help the most disadvantaged members of society such as women and children advance their capability (Sen, 1999, p. 78). Indeed, Sen's human entitlement approach to human development has been endorsed by critiques of the so called 'hard' economics. While reinforcing Sen's perspective on what 'real' development is, an Indonesian intellectual Soedjatmoko, noted, '… looking back over these years, it is now clear that in their preoccupation with growth and its stages and with the provision of capital and skills, development theorists have paid insufficient attention to institutional and structural problems and to the power of historical, cultural and religious forces in the development process.' In Sub-Saharan Africa, large proportions of population residing in rural and unplanned settlements in Africa continue to suffer chronic poverty (Turner, Cilliers, & Hughes, 2015, p. 5), images of malnourished children continue to dominate media and levels of illiteracy continue to worsen.

Sen's WASC approach goes beyond quantitative measurement of economic development by putting some value on among other things, the social and institutional processes through which the well-being of women and children is upheld. It is within this rubric that Sen emphasizes relationship between politics and measurement of progress, with special focus on the role of power in socioeconomic decision-making. Therefore, WASC approach specifies that economic systems that are sensitive to women's well-being must be viewed in a broader perspective than that postulated by traditional economics (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2014). Furthermore, contrary to the traditional view of development as measurement of material wealth, people's progress must be analyzed within the context of the overall social system of a country, including assessment of macro-economic frameworks from a human right perspective. Sen, within this human-centered development approach, defines social systems as interdependent relationships between material resources (means of production) and qualitative factors that impact on human progress, such as equity, inclusiveness, and elimination of any forms of discrimination based on gender, race, ethnic grouping, or political affiliation.

An interesting and important implication of the WASC approach is that participation of women in development decision-making, rather than pushing for centralized administrative structures and political patronages, might actually further reinforce social transformation that could alter positively the lives of both women and men, hence promoting gender equity. Failure of these frameworks to promote gender and women empowerment (GEWE) has raised fundamental questions, for example: how are the global development frameworks formulated? Who controls them, and who benefits most from them? The major concern has been, while the MDG framework was formulated to address some of these disparities, more than a decade since its inception 'several people are left behind;' hence, attention has now turned to redefining suitable targets to be achieved by 2030, including an overall goal of 'leaving no-one behind'(UN Women, 2015). It must be noted that the except for vast majority of research and analysis carried out on Sen's human entitlement and capability (from which WASC is coined) approach, existing

reports have generalized without categorizing the various segments of the society. However, policy analysts have attempted to apply this framework to specific groups such as vulnerable populations (International Movement ATD Fourth World, 2014, p. 15).

Shortcomings associated with measurement of development on the basis of gross domestic product (GDP) alone have been the reason one of the why most recent evaluative analyses of the MDG recommends that post-2015 should go beyond numbers. For instance, in measuring access to education, the SDG framework should develop comprehensive strategies that include individual's rights to basic services (Unterhalter, 2014, p. 180). But then, this approach will require a paradigm shift in planning, implementation of projects thereof, and monitoring of such programs. A human-centered conceptual framework is, therefore, required. Several conceptual and theoretical underpinnings make the characterization of WASC compelling as a central pillar in ensuring that global development frameworks are not only promoting principles of GEWE, but also creating pathways for people to escape chronic poverty.

First, by empowering women (through economic resources or inclusive leadership), the ultimate outcome leads to correction of the inequities that blight the lives and well-being of women vis-à-vis men. For instance, there exists a body of evidence that when women are educated and accorded dignified employment, their contribution to national dialog and debate can in turn influence the nature of decisions and legislation on a variety of social issues, including acceptable fertility rates, children's nutrition and education access to the girl child. A good case in point is the female education in intra-family divisions. Vaughan (1987) argues that sharing wealth at family level is to a greater extent influenced by the economic role and empowerment of women and the value systems of the community. This is more prevalent in traditional societies, mainly in the global south. The implication is that female education and employment is precursor for ownership rights including land, these put together are known to drive families out of chronic poverty (Awumbila, 2006).

Conversely, if entitlements of women are lost or not recognized by existing development frameworks and models, there is a high likelihood of erosion in the substantive capability of households to buy food and invest for income generation. Moreover, shortage of food for families leads to undernourishment of children. Worse still, there exist bodies of evidence that point to the fact that when women's opportunities are curtailed, gender inequality in distribution of poverty or malnutrition manifests itself most blatantly and persistently, particularly, in poor societies with strong anti-female tendencies (Awumbila, 2006; Kehler, 2001; McFerson, 2010; Olatunji, 2013). The fact that sustained gender disparity has spill-over effects on national economies, raises concerns that although the MDG target on education had the potential of addressing some of these anomalies, the narrow framing of the targets and indicators in the MDGs automatically disfigured important aspects of human-centered development, such as the quality of life and equity. It is more promising that the SDG framework combines both indicator-tight targets as well as qualitative approaches to measuring human development progress.

Second, women's agency plays a very special role in the survival rate of children and the family as a whole. Moreover, women's empowerment appears to have a strong influence in reducing the gender bias in survival. In other words, educated women's capability to provide the necessary conditions for the family in general and children in particular, greatly reduces mortality rates among children (Dreze & Murthi, 1999). The challenges of creating conditions suitable for child survival are often driven by lack of an array of capabilities including inability to afford medical facilities. It is unfortunate that many of these barriers and poverty traps against women are perpetuated by the

existing global development frameworks. Yet, growing evidence indicates that without promoting gender equality and women's empowerment as a means to sustainable development, it is hardly possible for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), to achieve the MDGs (AfDB, 2015b; Wadesango, 2011, p. 168).

A study by the African Development Bank reveals that only 12.7% of women hold positions on board directorships (364 out of 2865) in 307 listed companies based in 12 African countries. (AfDB, 2015a). This is 4.6% lower than the 17.3% women's representation on the boards of the 200 largest companies globally (AfDB, 2015a). Factors perpetuating lack of women's ascension to these positions include: low education and training, traditional attitudes; lack of role models; the non-assertive nature of women and lack of access to labor-market information (Ogato, 2013). The constricted focus on economic growth and earnest mobilization of resources just qualifies MDGs as another shadow of pure neoclassical macro-economic framework. Considering the centrality of gender equality to national development, creating institutional structures that ensure ease of access to basic needs and other means of production, such as land, by all sections of society, is key to the advancement of the 25% poorest (Nayyar, 2012).

The third and final proposition of WASC is that women's participation in politics and access to socioeconomic opportunities has the potential of availing opportunities and resources that men have claimed to be their own over a long period of time. Indeed, empirical evidence from Asian countries (Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Burma/Indonesia) reveal that women have played greater roles not only in providing top leadership, but also creating political and social initiatives toward lasting peace. Women are also scarce in peacemaking processes. Although it may prove methodologically problematic to attribute the relative peace in Central Africa Republic (CAR) to the appointment of Madam Catherine Samba-Panza as the transitional leader in January 2014, the intrinsic value system around the roles of women at both family and community level, coupled with social innovations common with women bolsters the proposition that women's participation in electoral politics and mediation whenever conflict occurs is long overdue in Africa. Inversely, both academic and policy communities agree that low participation of women in political and socioeconomic affairs in many Sub-Saharan countries is not just the relative lack of access to economic resources, but also institutions that are designed by the political class to promote limited citizenship, spatial exclusion, and social discrimination (Sen, 1999, p. 78; Shepher, 2011).

Empirical evidence from Africa has revealed that while economic growth is shown to help in poverty reduction, the impact of this relationship varies across countries. For example, Botswana has very high growth rates but relatively modest levels of poverty reduction, while Ghana with modest economic growth records relatively higher levels of poverty reduction (Awumbila, 2006). These differences are essentially attributed to the high vulnerability driven by the exclusion of the poor or disadvantaged groups of populations such as women from the political, social, and economic systems that would have allowed them an opportunity to begin to acquire assets that make them less vulnerable to political, environmental, and economic shocks (Fosu, 2009). Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the approach to understanding women's agenda for sustainable development developed for the purpose of this article as a synthesis and construct based on Bhatt's (2001) women agenda for sustainable human development (Ravallion & Chen, 2007).

In order to tackle the overlapping challenges presented by each of these freedoms in Figure 1, the post-2015 development agenda will have to integrate qualitative aspects of
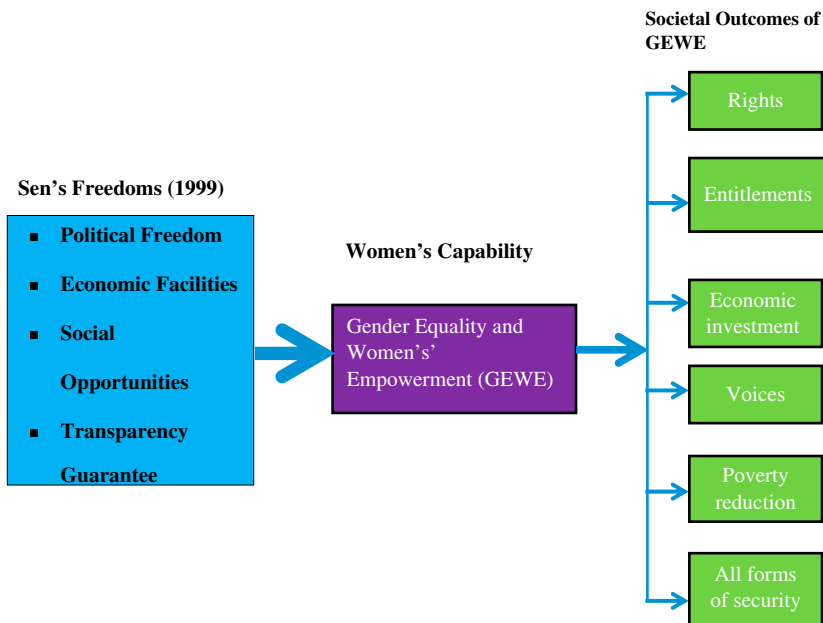
Figure 1.   Schematic Diagram of Relationships among types of Freedoms, Women Empowerment and Societal Development.
Source: Authors synthesis and construct based on Bhatt's (2001) eight agenda of women in sustainable development and Sen's (1999) five types of freedoms.

development into the conventional model of development that informed the MDGs. Some of the considerations will include: providing social protection to the most disadvantaged; drive inclusive economic growth; improve levels of human development and support progressive social change (Hulme & Shepherd, 2003). The next section builds on the discussed conceptual framework by assessing strengths and weaknesses demonstrated by MDGS. Using the concept of women agency as outlined within the WASC, the subsection explores opportunities for improving tools for designing, measuring, and evaluating development initiatives post-2015 from a sustainable human development perspective.

Can the WASC explain the discrepancies in the global development frameworks?

One of the key lessons drawn from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as their era came to a close was whether the framework had the structural and institutional capacity to unravel salient qualitative human development factors, such as inequalities, thus, ensuring succinct progressive improvement of quality of life of people across socioeconomic and political divides. Hence, critiques of this framework have argued that for there to be meaningful development in future beyond the MDGs toward sustainability, a new and more representative set of indicators is necessary to bridge not only societal gaps, such as that of gender, but also individual empowerment and socioeconomic opportunities for groups that have lagged behind, such as women (Unterhalter, 2014). While emphasizing the patchy progress made in mainstreaming gender, the Special Envoy on Gender from the African Development Bank, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi,

noted that 'creating the conditions to unlock the full potential of women and achieve their economic goals is complex and difficult challenge (AfDB, 2015b, p 3).' Nevertheless, where women exist in key positions, the opportunity is to enhance women's skills and talents in leadership through strategic empowerment programs.

Some scholars have defined women's empowerment as 'a bottom-up process of transforming gender power relations, through individuals or groups developing awareness of women's subordination and building their capacity to challenge it' (Bhatt, 2001, p. 18). It is with the backdrop of this definition that lessons from targeted development initiatives globally are increasingly mounting evidence indicating that women and men, boys, and girls do not experience impacts of development in the same way and have different needs and priorities from the outset. While men tend to control factors of production, women and girls typically play the role of caregivers and unpaid workers who in some situations are exposed to a greater risk of human rights violations such as rape, sex slavery, abduction, trafficking, and forced prostitution (Theidon & Phenicie, 2011). Further studies by UN Women in extractive industries (EI) confirms that gender biases in the distribution of the risks, costs, and benefits within the EI sector continues to widen the gender gap and that such disparities thwart women's capabilities to access resources and other progressive opportunities (UN Women, 2015). In view of these gendered roles and socialization processes that have informed mindsets on GEWE, it is imperative that specific development initiatives are designed with a gender-sensitive lens.

Women have been presented in the literature of development as vulnerable groups or as victims of the development process (Pankhurst, 2000). Such a conceptualization has led to the continued domination of notions of masculinity and the ultimate designation of who can or cannot perform certain roles. This has led to exclusion of women from leadership or positions of power. Gender-based discrimination against women and girls has thus reproduced itself through culture, institutions, and processes. Unfortunately, the masculine narrative has been reinforced by development frameworks that inadvertently or otherwise fail to give value to capabilities of women whether at the household level or at the national one.

While women work long hours, their work is both unpaid and unaccounted for even in measurements of the respective contributions of women and men in the family's joint prosperity (Sen, 1999), let alone in national statistics. The irony of women's unpaid work is that, when similar work is done outside family boundaries by men, value is attached and wage is measured and distributed to the workers. Indeed while women play a central role in sustaining families and national economies, they are still largely under-represented in decision-making positions. Moreover, development measurement approaches applied by existing frameworks are less effective in accounting for the wealth contribution by women. Despite the salient contribution of women to the household economy, attribution to individuals has proved methodologically challenging due to the insufficiency of sex-disaggregated data. Within the SDGs, the suggested indicators for monitoring poverty are the proportion of the population living below $1.25 (PPP) per day disaggregated by sex and age group and employment status (or proportion of employed people living on less than $1.25 PPP per day), and the proportion of the population living below the national poverty line, by sex, age, and employment status (UN Women, 2015a). Even though this measure does not address women's control over or the intra-household distribution of resources – which may disadvantage women – it can shed important light on the demographic composition of poor households and the gender determinants of poverty.

Furthermore, the challenges posed by cultures such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and development policies and practices that exclude women in macro-level development engagement, not only push women away from the center of development, but also erode overall economic gains. This underscores the need for gender mainstreaming in development processes as has been recognized at a number of international declarations and resolutions. These include the UN's Second World Conference on Women, popularly known as the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies of 1985, which made the themes of *Peace, Equality,* and *Development* the three main areas of concern. It also emphasized that both men and women must play central roles as intellectuals, policy-makers, decision-makers, planners, contributors, and beneficiaries of development; the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference (The Beijing Declaration & Platform for Action, 1995), which highlights the need for equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all aspects of development. The transformation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the SDGs presents opportunities in ensuring effective gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) (Turner et al., 2015).

Delivering on GEWE in the post 2015 agenda

After briefly analyzing the societal framing of gender and the role of international development framework, the challenges and prospects emerging from the progress made by the MDG and their potential contribution toward SDG content will be examined. To this end, this section will make an attempt toward exploring the existing opportunities for SDG localization and implementation. We focus the analysis on GEWE using the human-centered development framework by Amartya Sen. In his seminal publication, *Development as Freedom*, Sen (1999) convincingly argues for development that recognizes women's and girls' capability as a means to development.

Analyses of the MDGs on the integration of and delivery on gender dimensions has varied, but perhaps more in form than in substance. In examining the challenges to growth in Africa and the MDGs, Ogujiuba and Jumare argue that women's contributions have neither featured as a substantive contribution to society nor expanded opportunities for women's individual development, leading to even a wider gap between men and women and girls and boys (Ogujiuba & Jumare, 2012, p. 52). Indeed the report on the MDGs confirms the progress made toward women's and girls' equality in education, employment, and political representation over the last two decades but also recognizes that many gaps remain, particularly in areas that were not addressed in the MDGs. These include gender-based discrimination in law and in practice; violence against women and girls; women's and men's unequal opportunities in the labor market; the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work; women's limited control over assets and property; and women's unequal participation in private and public decision-making. The integration of gender perspectives into 8 out of the 17 SDG goals is either a response to the missed mark in the MDGs or a result of better engagement and negotiation due to the presence of institutional leadership capacity provided by UN Women!

It is now clear that the conceptualization and construction of the MDGs were inherently problematic in their approach to measurement. Effective monitoring of targets for women and girls goes beyond identifying indicators for the targets in SDG5: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. As pointed out in this article, several targets in the other SDGs address gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Therefore, it is important to take a holistic view of gender equality throughout the

entire framework and ensure that concerns that are not addressed in SDG5 are addressed in other goals. Besides including additional gender indicators for the relevant targets, a systematic disaggregation by sex of all relevant indicators is needed. Some evaluation reports have attributed this weakness to the minimalist approach adopted by under the MDGs in achieving its outcomes. For example, Deepark Nayyar's evaluation points out that the most irritating weakness in the conceptualization of MDGs was the fact that they were set out to achieve outcomes and not processes which would make it possible to realize qualitative goals such as women empowerment and equality (Nayyar, 2012). Yet many United Nations (UN) conferences have advocated that women's empowerment is central to sustainable development. For example, the Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) emphasized that strengthening women's capabilities is the main objective of development.

In other words there should be plans to encourage different sections of the society to participate in formulation, implementation, and evaluation of decisions (Baden & Oxaal, 1997). Indeed, sustainable development, which is intertwined with the concept of human development, must put much more emphasis on issues of basic needs and equity. Advocates of human-centered development such as Sudhir Andand and Amartya Sen, raise concerns that the preoccupation with commodity production, opulence, and financial success can perpetuate inequalities, and that such approaches are neither sustainable nor worth sustaining (Sudhir & Sen, 1996).

One of the most interesting predictions of a human-centered approach to development is that women's education and literacy tend to reduce the mortality rates of children. Women's influence on making lives of children better is derived through many channels, but perhaps the most exciting one is suggested by Amartya Sen. Sen asserts that this promotion of children's well-being works through the importance that mothers typically attach to the welfare of the child, and the opportunity the mothers have, when their agency is respected and empowered, to influence family decisions in that direction. Similarly, women's empowerment appears to have a strong influence in reducing the much observed gender bias in survival, particularly against young girls. Countries with basic gender inequality – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, West Asia and North Africa – often tend to have higher female mortality of infants and children (Sen, 1999). But, some of the weaknesses that eroded possibilities of focusing on real aspects that affect women can be located in the design. For example, the MDGs focused on a comparison between the undesirable state and desirable state, but did not recognize the importance of the process of change or the transition path. As a result, 'soft' contributions by women were glossed over by complexes of aggregation and averages, which means that qualitative indicators such as equity and women agency were not adequately tracked.

Another concern is that lack of ownership of the development process by the affected communities tends to do more developmental harm to those already exposed to higher risks, such as women and children. Like any other process, if extreme poverty is to be eradicated moving beyond 2015, the agenda needs to be built on core values that are widely shared and acknowledged within not only the international conventions such as the human rights, but aligned with the realities of the most poverty affected societies. However, the 2008 Reality of Aid Report contended that 'less than 30% of all new aid money disbursed since 2000 was actually available to poverty reduction priorities.' Almost two-thirds of new aid disbursed since 2000 have gone to donor foreign policy interests in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Reality of Aid Report, 2008). In order to align resources with local realities, gender scholars have identified four alternatives

toward sustainable development: (a) promoting economic growth with social equity; (b) creating conditions for sustainable livelihoods including encouraging communities to develop income generating projects; (c) ensuring social justice and political participation; (d) ecological sustainability and attaching responsibility to environmental destruction (Markham, 2013; Unterhalter, 2014).

Another hypothesis in the human entitlement approach in terms of women's empowerment is that raising the status of women increases chances of emancipation and fertility reduction. The inverse is also true. For instance, the adverse effects of high birth rates powerfully include the denial of substantial freedoms through persistent childbearing and child rearing, particularly among African women. There is, as a result, a close connection between women's well-being and women's agency in bringing about a change in the fertility pattern. Thus, it is not surprising that reductions in birth rates have often followed the enhancement of women's status and power. The development goals beyond 2015 will therefore need modification focusing less on economic opulence, particularly in view of the limitations of market mechanisms. While markets are considered as excellent modes of achieving economic efficiency, they are often counterproductive in terms of sustainability (Durning, 1992). The design weaknesses within the MDG framework can be corrected within SDGs by integrating various interrelated elements. For instance, tracking aspects of human development collectively: improving health, fighting diseases, reducing poverty, reducing hunger; expanding education opportunities, particularly for the girl child; and increasing access to safe water and ensuring environmental sustainability (UN Women, 2015).

Another postulation regarding women agency in development is that when women get the opportunities that are typically the preserve of men, they are no less successful than men. Efforts by development actors have accentuated the need to remove barriers to women's participation in politics, leadership, and other influential positions in the society. Several international development frameworks have laid down strategies and policies for guiding development initiatives. However, valuation of women's contribution to national economies remained a major obstacle to achievement of MDGs (Cherinet & Mulugeta, 2003). Barriers to this achievement have been attributed to cultural intricacies, political manipulation and exclusion of women from critical institutional processes, such as budgeting. Negative attitudes toward women are particularly singled out as a major obstacle to achieving MDGs (Kabeer, 2005), mainly by men chauvinists in agrarian societies. As Yassine Fall, the former Executive Secretary of Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) emphasizes, that elevating women's intellectual capability from various perspectives (history, economics, and politics) is key in addressing women's marginalization.

Moreover, the intellectual capability of women to challenge conventional approaches to development by questioning all their underlying assumptions and the respective roles assigned to men and women in the development process cannot be underrated. Indeed, gender analysts have stressed the need to rethink transforming the concepts of woman and gender beyond the grammatical and biological connotations (Alahira, 2014). In view of this nuanced approach to analysis of gender, it is critical that the post-2015 development framework takes cognizance of issues that affect women directly in their daily chores, such as human rights, good governance, and gender equality. Although the SDGs are more comprehensive on methodological approach, robust tools are required to ensure that integration of gender equality in several other targets is tracked and lessons developed for further development (UN Women, 2015). Moreover, the message on gender equality must thus be expressed even more poignantly than at the debut of the SDG

agenda. Considering the fact that implementation of SDGs is both a technical and political undertaking, it is imperative that adequate human, financial, and technical resources be devoted to enhancing statistical capacity in developing countries.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to identify gaps within the MDGs and its sequel, the SDGs in relation to gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE). The paper observes that as far as GEWE is concerned the MDGs were reductionist in approach and minimalist in results. The GEWE goal was pegged to three indicators that spoke little to the vast and pressing concerns of the majority of women and girls in an evolving development context. In that respect, they fell short of a substantive response to lived realities of women and girls in terms of breaking through the glass ceiling and socialization practices that consistently keep women at the periphery. In addition, the assumption of the MDGs that the universality of human rights is a constant and not a variable in the development discourse led to glaring omissions of targets and indicators and possibly contributing to under-resourcing for action that would reduce inequalities and substantively empower women. The SDG message on GEWE must emphasize its centrality as an imperative for inclusive, equitable and sustainable development and demonstrate the cost of the gender gap exist because women often have unequal access to key drivers of production, particularly land (UN Women, UNDP, UNEP and the World Bank Group, 2015).

The roll-out of the SGDs must place a huge premium on data collection and then disaggregating that data on several parameters, including age, gender, geographical distribution, and labor participation to avoid downplaying and misrepresenting the economic and development value of gender equality and women's empowerment. This responsibility must not be a burden for under-resourced agencies and actors but resources must be made available for the relevant leaders of this agenda to carry it out. Gender equality and women's empowerment is at the hub of sustainable development efforts, mainly in developing countries for without a deliberate focus on GEWE, achieving the SDGs will be evasive for not only for women and girls but for whole societies that would benefit from more equal and just policies

The history and the ownership of the agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment has traversed a long and strenuous path but with evident progress, albeit below expectations. It is unlikely that all expectations will be met in a single time-bound international framework. The SDG framework, being more comprehensive, will hopefully better address the challenges that GEWE under the MDGs encountered. However, a more dynamic and revitalized constituency for gender equality and women's empowerment equipped to track the agenda for implementation and to demand accountability, will be a necessary ingredient for a markedly different verdict in the SDGs' lifetime.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. (European Parliament, 2015). Evaluation of the Beijing Platform for action +20 and the opportunities for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda. Committee on the Women's Rights and Gender Equality.

2. http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202,015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf

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