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“She” and the Road to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

*Banajyotsna Baruah
Lopamudra Baruah*

We need women at all levels, including the top, to change the dynamic, reshape the conversation, to make sure women’s voices are heard and heeded, not overlooked and ignored.

*Sheryl Sandberg
Chief Operating Officer (COO),
Facebook*

Sheryl Sandberg aptly describes the need for women participation in every sphere of life – socially, economically and environmentally. Today, when the world is banking on developing sustainably, the role of women becomes all the more important. In fact, the concept of sustainable development will not achieve its true significance unless women are empowered to be the front runners, along with men.

The contribution of both women and men are equally important for sustainable and inclusive development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 goals adopted by world leaders in 2015, sets out a transformative vision to preserve the planet, promoting peace and prosperity for all. Achieving gender equality and women empowerment is the overarching objective in the vision to become a sustainable world. In it, women’s role is critical for maintaining biodiversity, supporting families through social and financial security as well as preserving the surrounding environment.

It should be noted that improvement in the life of women and girls also benefits the entire society. For example, women’s access to income will not only lessen the extent of poverty but also enhance the health, education and nutrition outcomes of their families in particular and the society in general. Similarly, eliminating atrocities against women and girls is critical to ensure healthy lives of all beings, including their children. The SDGs aim to create a gender-neutral society where women have the much-needed access to social and economic resources.

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Existence of SDGs

In 2012, the member states of the United Nations (UN) came together in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to create a new set of global goals to drive sustainable development. These set of goals were built on the success of Millennium Development Goals, or “MDGs”, which started a new movement in 2000 to battle poverty. The MDGs were a set of eight goals that guided the member states to collectively be responsible to “uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level” from 2000 through 2015.

The MDGs were able to tackle several poverty-related issues across countries. The world was able to make rapid progress in developing solution-oriented approaches that mobilized collective action against poverty-ridden families. Not only this, the MDGs progressed in reducing income poverty, preventing deadly diseases, expanding primary education and providing access to water and sanitation. However, the world was also having other issues that needed collective action; other pressing challenges that needed immediate attention, such as achieving gender equality, ending hunger, improving health services, educating a child beyond primary school and more. The SDGs were developed to broaden the horizon of issues and solution-oriented approaches.

The SDGs are a bold commitment, ensuring that no one is left behind. All the 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 indicators are directed towards making an inclusive and sustainable society that covers the whole sustainability agenda: poverty, human development, the environment and social justice. With the countdown to 2030 is underway, the implementation of the global goals is up against an unprecedented set of economic, environmental, social and political challenges.

The 17 sustainable goals are as follows:

GOAL 1. No Poverty	GOAL 2. Zero Hunger
GOAL 3. Good Health and Well-being	GOAL 4. Quality Education
GOAL 5. Gender Equality	GOAL 6. Clean Water and Sanitation
GOAL 7. Affordable and Clean Energy	GOAL 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth
GOAL 9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	GOAL 10. Reduced Inequality
GOAL 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities	GOAL 12. Responsible Consumption and Production
GOAL 13. Climate Action	GOAL 14. Life Below Water
GOAL 15. Life on Land	GOAL 16. Peace and Justice Strong Institutions
GOAL 17. Partnerships to achieve the Goal.	

Source: United Nations¹



As countries across the world, including India, are working tirelessly to achieve the SDGs by 2030, we will try to underline at least three of the 17 goals that impact women. (Randomly selected SDGs). We will try to highlight the problem with potential solutions and initiatives undertaken to achieve success.

Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG1) aims to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030.

According to the UN, extreme poverty rates have fallen by more than half since 1990. Though this is a remarkable achievement, yet one-in-five people in developing regions still live on less than \$1.90 a day. Millions of people make little more than this daily amount and are at risk of slipping back into extreme poverty.²

Women are the primary victims of extreme poverty. Though they make significant contributions to the household-bringing income as an employed earner, creating jobs as an entrepreneur, supporting the family for financial needs and more, yet they are financially deprived. Women are more likely to be poorer than men due to several reasons – a toddler to look after, gender-bias perception, unequal access to economic resources, gender inequalities in the labour market etc. Globally, women below the age of 40 are more likely to be poor as compared to men. There are 4.4 million more women than men in at least 89 countries, living on less than US\$1.90 a day. The poverty percentage of women is higher than men in areas, such as Central and Southern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and sub-Saharan Africa³

Shahra Razavi, Chief of Research and Data Section at UN Women said, “The greater likelihood of women not having an income of their own and the inequality in the division of unpaid care work, put women at a severe economic disadvantage compared to men, and at a higher risk of poverty. Therefore, policy interventions to fight global poverty must pay attention to the specific barriers that women face.”⁴ There should be specific interventions to train women for augmenting entrepreneurial skills, setting small businesses, increasing awareness of women’s rights and more. Microfinance or providing small loans for poor women can help them set up a business, helping them become income independent. Another extremely important strategy to empower women economically is their access to and control of the land. Women who have land of their own can use it to produce food, lend it to others or put it as collateral for credit.⁵ Extreme poverty can be shown the door only when women are at the centre of development.

In the majority of countries, women’s wages represent between 70% to 90% of men’s, with even lower ratios in some Asian and Latin American countries. Researchers have found that when more women work, economies grow. If women’s paid employment rates were raised to the same level as men’s, the gross domestic product of the United States would be approximately 9% higher, the Euro zone’s would climb by 13% and Japan’s would be boosted by 16%. In 15 major developing economies, per capita income would rise by 14% by 2020 and by 20% by 2030.¹ Evidence from a range of countries shows that increasing the share of household income controlled by women, either through their own earnings or cash transfers, changes spending in ways that benefit children and the entire household.

Given below are some examples that either show:

- a. Impact on women through different interventions on mitigating poverty,
- b. Role of women in strengthening their fellow tribe to be financially independent.

Examples:

1. The Building Bridges Foundation in association with the UN SDG Action Campaign and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands has developed a project that aims to empower young female entrepreneurs economically in eight countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. Many women entrepreneurs were equipped with the necessary skill sets and tools to run a business successfully. Local hubs and a network of entrepreneurs were formed across 45 cities in the countries of South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya.¹

2. Under the multi-country programme *Broadening Economic Opportunities for Rural Women Entrepreneurs in Latin America* (El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and Nicaragua) funded by UN Women and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD),

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projects were implemented to provide access to productive resources, economic opportunities and develop greater leadership among more than 4500 rural women.⁸

3. World's premier international development agency The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) empowered womenfolk in Senegal to facilitate conversations on nutrition and become women entrepreneurs. One such woman is Hapsatou Kah from the village of Sylla Diongo in northeastern Senegal. Empowered with training and support from USAID, Hapsatou, today, plays myriad roles - teacher, adviser, role model and entrepreneur. From a woman downed in poverty, she has become a role model in the entire village.⁹

4. UN Women in Ethiopia is supporting its government to accelerate rural women's economic empowerment. The Rural Women Economic Empowerment program aims to secure rural women's livelihoods and rights in the context of sustainable development and post the MDGs. The programme is being implemented in Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda and Ethiopia.⁴

Only measures outlined above across the world can increase women's access to economic opportunities and augment their income-earning status and meet SDG 1.

Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) on Clean Water and Sanitation aims to improve water quality by reducing pollution, substantially increasing water-use efficiency and strengthening the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management.

Access to clean water and sanitation facilities is still a distant dream for many communities. According to the UN, over 2 billion people do not possess safely managed water services and around 4.5 billion children, women and men live without safely managed sanitation services. In fact, in 80% of households with water shortages, women and girls are responsible for water collection. Sometimes they need to traverse long distances just to collect adequate drinking water. This impacts their daily productivity significantly as they spend long hours of the day either finding a water source or collecting water for their families, when they could be in school receiving education or working as a bread-earner.

Apart from water, access to proper sanitation facilities is a right for all people. Unfortunately, as the World Health Organization says 1.1 billion people (15% of the global population) practice open defecation and 626 million of those live in India. Often, girls drop out of school due to the lack of safe sanitation facilities. Many schools are not equipped with

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proper menstrual facilities, forcing a girl to leave school. Women themselves spend significant amounts of time searching for a place to relieve themselves. There have been multiple instances where women became a victim of physical and sexual violence when they go out to defecate in the open. Many women suffer from poor health due to exposure to pathogens and allied bacteria.

It is critical that while designing water and sanitation facilities, the needs of the females should be kept into consideration. A report by the Statistical Commission of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) revealed that sex-disaggregated water statistics are amongst the least available in the world and nearly half of countries do not produce any gender statistics related to water. The role of women in water management is essential to have positive impacts on health, environment, poverty, etc. The knowledge of women in household water management can be leveraged to shape conservation efforts through awareness-building campaigns around family behaviours. Involving women while designing, implementing and managing water and sanitation facilities can improve the suitability, sustainability and reach of water and sanitation services. Embedding gender equity in policies and programmes at all levels will be crucial to achieving the Goal 6 of the SDG.

Given below are some examples that either show:

- a. Impact on women through several water and sanitation implementation programmes.
- b. Role of women to lead safe, productive and healthy lives through access to water and sanitation.

Examples:

1. A Community-Led Total Sanitation Training (CLTS) supported by UNICEF was conducted in Badhani - a remote and conservative village in Shrawasti district, Uttar Pradesh. Some young girl champions attended this training and understood the importance of toilets for a healthy life. These girl campaigners went door-to-door to talk to the families about the ill effects of open defecation. The girls found an ally in the village head who voiced for the Open Defecation Free (ODF) campaign. There was a significant change in behaviours and more toilets were built in the village. Embracing the Government of India's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) to achieve a "Clean India," various champions across Uttar Pradesh are ensuring the communities continue to build and use toilets.

2. In rural Nepal, as soon as girls start menstruating or are in their periods, they are banished to sheds called "chhaupadi." Restless Development Nepal is working towards generating awareness against this practice in far and mid-western regions of Nepal. The

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programme, which is supported by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund), is working with peer educators to provide education to community leaders, traditional healers, local governments and organizations. Prior to this programme, almost 20% of girls and women used to sleep in a chhapadi during menstruation, but following the intervention, the prevalence is down to 5%.

3. In Harare, Zimbabwe, the involvement of women in solid waste management resulted in proper sanitation behaviour in the community. Women participated in administration and management of solid waste, adapting daily habits of storing these wastes in solid containers, segregating wastes into organic and non-organic, wet and dry and more. They also were actively campaigning for safe sanitation and hygiene habits for their community, becoming a torch-bearer for a healthier tomorrow.

Clean water and sanitation are extremely important to maintain a healthy life. Without involving women in the process of ensuring availability and management of water and sanitation, SDG 6 will not be a success. It is important to implement programmes where women's needs are taken into consideration.

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy

Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG7) aims to ensure universal access to accessible, efficient, clean and reliable energy sources and services.

Access to clean and affordable energy is imperative to reducing climate change and ensuring sustainable growth for both industries as well as day-to-day life. Energy is necessary for sustenance, whether it is jobs, security, food production or increasing incomes. However, more than 50% of global households rely on solid fuels, such as wood, crop wastes, charcoal, coal or dung that put women's health at risk since they spend a lot of time at home. Solid fuels, along with other unclean fuels like kerosene, are used with inefficient technologies, including open fires and leaky stoves, causing household air pollution. Fifty percent of African households in 25 countries rely on highly-polluting kerosene lamps, while about 30% of households surveyed in South-East Asia use kerosene lights. In fact, household combustion is estimated to produce 25% of global emissions of black carbon, the second largest contributor to climate change after carbon dioxide (CO₂).

A reliance on solid fuels in the house means that women and girls need to spend a considerable amount of their time collecting fuel. For example, a research from 13 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa showed that girls spend about 18 hours weekly collecting fuel or water. On the other hand, girls spend only five hours weekly collecting fuel or water in homes that use cleaner stoves and fuels.

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Clean fuels to be used in the household can lead to improving health among women and children as well as save their time from collecting fuel. It will also help them to meet their basic needs of cooking, heating and lighting, thus, creating a safe living environment. An increase in innovative technology solutions in the household energy sector, such as solar lanterns and home lighting systems replacing kerosene can significantly prevent health hazards and slow down climate change. However, providing access to clean solutions only is not the ultimate answer. Women should start making decisions within the household as they are the ones who will benefit most from switching to cleaner cooking, heating and lighting systems. In most countries, men still have control over household budgets and decisions, greatly affecting the adoption of sustained fuels. Policies and programmes should acknowledge this energy access gap and explicitly tackle the gender dynamics, involving both women and men in energy use.

Given below are some examples that either show:

- a. Impact on women through different energy-friendly projects that keep women participation at the forefront,
- b. Role of women in sustainable energy development initiatives across the world.

Examples:

1. The Sustainable Energy South-East Europe (WISE SEE) pilot project in Serbia has promoted productive, equitable and meaningful participation of women in sustainable energy development. Women in Serbia demonstrated a high level of leadership; they have become powerful change agents in transitioning towards sustainable energy solutions, resulting in environmental protection and climate action. Some of the women who actively participated in the development of sustainable and renewable energy sectors are Ana Brnabić, former Project Director at Continental Wind Serbia (CWS) (now serving the first female Prime Minister of Serbia), Zorana Mihajlović, former Minister of Energy (now Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia), and Danijela Božanić, Head of Climate Change Department, Ministry of Environmental Protection.

2. The Government of Mali, with support from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) have implemented a multifunctional platform project to find solutions to the energy-poverty challenge. The project aims to reduce poverty among rural women while creating income-generating opportunities through the provision of generating affordable energy services. The multifunctional platform has a simple diesel engine that can power a variety of tools, generate

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electricity for lighting and refrigeration or to pump water. The engine is installed, maintained and managed by community-based registered women associations. The program started with the installation of 149 units within Mail, which successfully expanded to approximately 2000 villages throughout Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Niger, Senegal and Togo through the intervention of rural women.

3. In India's rural Rajasthan, women are becoming the agents of change, convincing communities to shift to solar rather than using unclean fuels like coal. They are the "Solar Sahelis" or "Solar Friends" who convince their neighbourhood to embrace solar-powered solutions. Jaipur-based Frontier Markets who envisaged this idea said its mission is to provide over 10 million clean energy products to 30 million households in India by 2020. Frontier Markets said that the Solar Sahelis have together collected more than \$2.5 million by lighting over 500,000 homes.

Access to clean alternatives exists, such as electricity, solar and gas. What is needed at this time is to make it mainstream to avert climate chaos and protecting human health, primarily of women and children.

The success of SDGs depends on "Her"

The SDGs will mean little if women are not at the centre of development. The world knows that success will depend on policy choices and implementation of strategic programs that considers women's needs at their very foundation. Women, in fact, are not only affected by the problems outlined in the SDGs but also possess the necessary ideas and leadership skills to solve them. What they need at this point in time is a chance to be a part of the change.

Women are no longer a silent listener of the family. They have got a voice that can be the catalyst for change. Governments, organizations, industries and the society should come together to participate in devising inclusive strategies, implementing gender-friending projects and monitoring the success of the interventions. Only an effective roadmap built on coherence among different sectors and departments can bring about a change for sustainable development. Also, countries must understand that gender-responsive planning is critical to remove gender inequalities, bringing significant improvements in a woman's life. Only by ensuring the rights of the women and girls across all the 17 goals can we achieve inclusion and success.

How far can we go in turning the 2030 Agenda into a success, improving the lives of women and girls, will only be known post 11 years? But if we need to achieve a gender-inclusive society where SDGs can bring about a significant change, interventions across

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nations cannot stop. Women cannot stop; they should continue doing their bit and enlightening others for a better and sustainable future.

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