

Raising the Needs of Girls

I was excited to hear mention of Autumn Peltier when SDG 6 on Water was being reviewed. Autumn is a 13-year-old girl – an advocate for water, who addressed the General Assembly in March during the opening of the International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development. I find her a great inspiration and pay tribute to her as a girl global leader. Girls are not only raising their own needs, but providing leadership around what is central to the achievement of the lofty ideals and goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Autumn highlighted the needs of the environment, and peoples' interconnectedness with Mother Earth, water, and one another. Girls are shining a light to ensure that there is a sustainable future.

Girls as a specific demographic group are generally not singled out for attention – usually they are grouped together with women or included in children. It was refreshing this year at the Commission on the Status of Women to have the WGG Girl Advocates prepare an outcome document for girls. Some years ago, in the history of WGG, it was an achievement to have 'and girls' tagged on after 'women,' but now is the time for a more substantive analysis of girls' situations and the issues that oppress them. The engagement and active participation of girls themselves to address the issues that girls face is critical. There is a recurrent failure to address the needs of girls – a girl can be a child, a wife, a mother, or a widow, among so many other intersecting characteristics, so neither the term woman nor child addresses her unique experiences.

In fact, the goals under review this year SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17, while gender-blind, are some of the systemic issues that rob girls of their human rights, dignity and voice – the lack of access to water and sanitation and menstrual hygiene, the erosion of health due to being a fuel carrier at a young age coupled with the effects of indoor air pollution, life in slums in poor housing, the bombardment of marketing strategies that promote products and practices that are bad for health and human development. While there are many general references to human rights in the 2030 Agenda, the only reference to a specific human right comes in paragraph 7: "In these Goals and targets, we are setting out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision... A world where we reaffirm our commitments regarding the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation and where there is improved hygiene (SDG 6), and where food is sufficient, safe, affordable and nutritious. A world where human habitats are safe, resilient and sustainable (SDG 11) and where there is universal access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy (SDG 7).

Plan International in their 'Girls' Rights Platform' concluded that girls are the most excluded group in the world. If this is true, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its focus on those 'left behind' and those furthest behind, is surely the platform for girls and girls' rights. In 'Turning Promises into Action,' UN Women states that the 2030 Agenda, focusing on sustainability, equality, peace and human progress, provides a powerful counter-narrative to current practices of extraction, exclusion and division. How can we harness the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and make it work for girls and girls' rights, focusing on its universal application, the pledge to leave no one behind, and its potential to hold governments and other stakeholders accountable?



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Global Call to Action against Poverty presented the ‘Leave No One Behind Toolkit’, that shows the most marginalized groups (experiencing high levels of poverty, discrimination or violence) were ‘children,’ and we know that girls are at least 50% of that group, with unique experiences of being discriminated against and being affected on a daily basis by violations of their human rights. When factors like poverty, ethnicity, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity and migration status intersect with being a girl – and where gender stereotyping and unequal power structures prevail – a girl’s disadvantage is magnified. Girls who are furthest behind often experience multiple inequalities and intersecting forms of discrimination. We see these inequalities compounded in issues such as sexual assaults, FGM, child early and forced marriage and trafficking in girls.

WGG has a number of fact sheets on its website addressing ‘Girls and the Internet,’ ‘Child Marriage,’ ‘FGM,’ ‘Raping of Girls,’ ‘Honour Killing,’ ‘Sexual Harassment of Girls and Young Women,’ ‘Son Preference,’ and ‘Domestic Violence and Girls,’ but we do not see any on Girls and Water, Sanitation and Menstrual Hygiene (SDG 6), Girls and Energy (SDG 7), Girls as City Dwellers (SDG 11), Girls as consumers and producers (SDG 12), Girls and Land (SDG 15), or Girls as Partners (SDG 17). Plan International has a study on Adolescent Girl’s Views on Safety in the Cities - Cairo, Delhi, Hanoi, Kampala and Lima.

The goals under review this year do not easily reveal the gendered impact caused by lack of provision or access, and yet they are all major contributors to discrimination against girls. Think of the impact of the lack of water or sanitation services on health and wellbeing, the hours each day spent carrying water or firewood, the impact on a girl’s education and development when menstrual hygiene is not readily available, the dangers and threats to personal safety that are experienced in the city, in slum areas - vulnerability to sexual assault, to being trafficked - and the exploitative prowess of producers and advertisers on girls, promoting the commodification, instrumentalization and sexualization of girls, and aggressive marketing techniques promoting unsustainable consumption patterns. The 2018 Polaris Report highlights how financial services, social medial, transportation, hospitality, housing and health care industries are being used for recruitment of victims into trafficking situations, as well as a means for continued control.

The SDG’s being reviewed this year are dominated by systems, institutions, technologies and terminologies that frame the discussion and provide or have the potential to provide these services - power grids, geothermal energy, new technologies to mention a few - but there is little reference to the people affected by the absence of services or denial of access due to prohibitive cost. I am conscious of how the Major Groups who are invited to speak keep coming back to people and peoples’ issues. They have also highlighted that water, sanitation and energy are gendered issues that impact girls severely. Steve Lee, the representative of the Major Group on Children and Youth who spoke with regard to SDG 7 and renewable energy, listed firstly in his recommendations ‘to increase the leadership of young women and girls in decision-making processes including in policy making and scientific research.’

The Women’s Major Group Position Paper squarely addresses the gender aspects of the goals under review and emphasizes that achievement of SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17 are as important for gender equality as they are critical for sustainable development.



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While we might be hard-pressed to find girls' place in the HLPF processes, part of the struggle is engaging in advocacy to challenge systems and structures that generate inequality, reinforce exclusion and increase poverty. As abstract as it might seem, it is by challenging current systems and structures that we can achieve transformational change. We have to continually challenge the ideology of patriarchy, power, violence, fear, extractives, exploitation, increased militarization, and the obsession with increased economic growth, and replace these with partnerships founded on interconnectedness, relatedness, solidarity, justice, human rights, equality and responsibility for each other and Mother Earth. Jolly Amatya, a young woman from the Major Group on Children and Youth highlighted the same points I have outlined above and made the following recommendation: "Re-orient the current 'growth for the same of growth' economic paradigm to one that internalizes social and environmental externalities."

This means challenging the systems and institutions which operate from this premise. People and Mother Earth are interconnected and have priority over profit. The economy must be at the service of people - a solidarity economy. Girls are central to the future we want. This bring us full circle and back to my opening and Autumn's address to the General Assembly. Quoting Autumn, she says "My experience as a water keeper is more of an honour to the water and Mother Earth. Doing this work is very spiritual, and I feel connected to the water in spirit." This is an example of the type of partnerships we need to cultivate.

Thank you!

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