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**The Power of Advocacy and Women’s Participation: A look back at the SDG process**

**Introduction**

Women’s organizations, feminists, women and gender advocates, and the women’s movement participated actively in the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), from their earliest stages. Without women’s unfailing leadership and participation, particularly the advocacy of the [Women’s Major Group](http://www.womenmajorgroup.org/), the SDGs would have far less transformative potential than they do.

The process of developing the SDGs was inspiring, challenging and at times frustrating as well as transformative. Now, as 2016 is almost here, the world is presented with the dual challenge of beginning implementation that fully respects all human rights of all persons and of ensuring a process of follow up and review that holds all duty bearers - governments, private sector and international financial institutions - to account for their role in meeting the goals and targets of the SDGs.

At the same time, the culmination of the sometimes arduous process opens space to jointly explore the opportunities of women’s activism in the coming years. The Women’s Major Group took a first step to do that at its September Feminist Forum, on the occasion of the High Level Summit to adopt the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E). The Forum was a time to be free to think creatively, to have a meeting of the minds with thought leaders and activists, to spark creativity and explore ideas we could only acknowledge previously, given the pace of work.

This article will provide highlights and insights on the WMG process to get to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the results and the possible next steps.

**The Women’s Major Group**

The Women’s Major Group is one of the nine major groups recognized in 1992’s Agenda 21 from the United Nations Rio Earth Summit, with a facilitating role in UN processes on Sustainable Development (along with trade unions, children & youth, NGOs, Indigenous peoples, local authorities, business, science & technology, farmers). The WMG is made up of over 600 member organizations, networks and individuals that self-organize to promote human rights based sustainable development, with a focus on women’s human rights, women’s empowerment and gender equality, through engagement with intergovernmental negotiations on sustainable development and environment.

The WMG influences policy by ensuring and facilitating meaningful participation of women's groups and other organizations and social movements striving for gender equality, gender justice and sustainable development in UN policy spaces. The WMG advocates with decision-makers and through media on a wide range of policy issues, based on its extensive set of positions[[1]](#footnote-1), to raise awareness of women’s demands and hold governments accountable, as well as to guarantee a formal/institutional role for civil society to engage in UN discussions. The positions are developed with broad input from the WMG’s credible and diverse global membership.

**Transformative change**

The goal of the WMG is to provoke systemic change – to move beyond meeting basic needs or creating band-aid solutions. The goal was – and continues to be - transformation to a world with justice, equality, a healthy environment and human rights for all – which means gender justice, gender equality and women’s human rights at its core. Thus, underlining the WMG’s efforts was a call for:

* a post-2015 agenda firmly rooted in human rights obligations, including CEDAW, and building especially on Rio, Vienna, Beijing and Cairo conferences and their follow-ups
* principles of universality and indivisibility of rights, non-retrogression and progressive realization, the minimum obligations of states to ensure equality and address the needs of the most marginalized, to underlie the agenda
* accountability mechanisms that build on existing human rights mechanisms, at all levels, for governments, corporations and international financial institutions
* fair redistribution of wealth, resources, and power to achieve social, economic, ecological and redistributive justice
* recognition of the central role of climate change and its effect on every aspect of sustainable development and human rights
* environmental sustainability, ensuring clear definitions of forests and of safe, sustainable and renewable energy and technology
* robust means of implementation, both financial and non-financial
* a framework to tackle intersecting inequalities and multiple forms of discrimination based on gender, age, class, caste, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, abilities, and more
* a gender equality and women’s human rights goal, together with integration of gender equality and women’s human rights across the goals and agenda as an undeniable cross-cutting issue

The WMG advocated for a gender goal that would end all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence, guarantee women's and girls' sexual and reproductive rights, ensure their rights to and control over land, property and productive resources and their economic independence, recognizing women's role in the care economy and ensuring their rights to social protection, decent work and living wage and the equal distribution of paid and unpaid work, and their rights to participation in leadership and decision-making at all levels.

**The hard work**

The Women’s Major Group collectively put in hours, weeks, months and years of blood, sweat and tears to influence the outcome. Women worked tirelessly – writing position papers and statements; reviewing and marking up documents; lobbying governments; discussing among ourselves; reaching out to media and our fellow non-governmental colleagues; not to mention the ongoing active project work of many members. Travel grants supported members, particularly from the Global South, to bring their expertise and experience to the intergovernmental meetings and to build their own and one another’s’ capacity in advocacy and content. Other women joined the sessions as well, with usually 20-50 attending the pre-session strategy meetings.

Collaboration and consensus, along with continuity and critical analysis, are all fundamental to the work of the WMG. The starting point for WMG recommendations and outputs is always the agreed positions up to that point, which is a critical baseline because it recognizes and amplifies the consistent engagement and facilitating space of the WMG, as well as the wide expertise within the women’s human rights and feminist community. As it grew in size from 2011 to 2015, the WMG continued to build on the expertise of its members. Early position papers questioning the term and definition of ‘green economy’ formed the basis of WMG inputs to Rio+20; these were built on for the advocacy at each of the 13 Open Working Group sessions throughout 2013-2014; and that library/basis of positions and analysis lived on, with alterations and adaptations, into the post-2015 intergovernmental negotiations. Reviewing previous documents helps both new and continuing members to understand the context and key conceptual issues. It also highlights the WMG emphasis on a holistic, balanced and integrated agenda where issue areas are not traded off.

In the early sessions of the OWG and post-2015 negotiations, the WMG shared general recommendations. When the draft outcome documents were released, the WMG provided specific language recommendations including rationales that were responsive to the latest drafts. Meetings with Member States throughout also served to inform the WMG of emerging trends, issues and political stances, useful in the analysis and refinement of positions.

Throughout the processes, the WMG positions on gender and all the goals were welcomed by numerous Member States (though not aligned with some others), which led to public acknowledgment and adoption of WMG text recommendations.

*Examples of advocacy actions and statements:*

Campaign for #WhatWomenWant in June 2015[[2]](#footnote-2) based on the 10 Red Flags from the WMG[[3]](#footnote-3): “Let’s raise our voices together at this crucial time and tell our governments [#WhatWomenWant](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/whatwomenwant) in a truly transformative agenda that puts people, particularly women, at its center and leaves no one behind.” The campaign continued in July, when the WMG implemented a ‘colors’ campaign, linking colored scarves to specific themes and demands.

"But walk with me through the slums of Manila and I will show you that poverty, no matter how it’s measured, is deeply felt by millions. Come to our rural communities and see how resource grabs, the privatization of water, energy, education and health are greater indicators of misery. Statistics are political acts. They matter for those we choose to count. They matter even more for those we don’t count." - Tetet Lauron, WMG member speaking at the Post-2015 SDG March Intergovernmental Negotiations on Goals, Targets and Indicators

“Is this the meaningful trade liberalisation that supports sustainable development referred to in the FfD zero draft? Will trade provide financing for development when Ecudaor is asked to pay more than $2 billion dollars—half of its public health budget—to a mining company? Is trade liberalisation meaningful when social inequalities like the gender pay gap are treated as a source of competitive advantage within global value chains? When multinational companies displace and receive more favourable tax treatment than women engaged in small-scale cross-border trade? Or when it entrenches commodity-based export patterns that destroy the environment, displace communities and undermine sustainable industrial policy?” -Tessa Khan, WMG OP speaking at Post-2015 Development Agenda April Intergovernmental Negotiations on Means of Implementation

"I am here to say that [#WhatWomenWant](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/whatwomenwant) is political will and financing to ensure that gender equality is reflected as a cross-cutting theme throughout this agenda; we want strong commitment to the human-rights based approach to sustainable development; and an agenda that puts people and the planet before profit." -Marisa Viana, WMG member speaking at the Post-2015 SDG June Intergovernmental Negotiations on the Outcome Document

**The results**

The final agenda is universal. It contains a set of sustainable development goals reflecting many of the issues that the WMG had been advocating for, including a standalone gender equality goal; specific targets on ending discrimination, violence against women, and harmful practices; ensuring women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights; recognizing the unpaid care burden women face; ensuring women’s rights to decent work; and to some extent, women’s role in sustainable development. They also include a climate change goal; resilience; inclusive cities and settlements; mention of participatory planning in human settlements and participatory decision-making in peace and accountability; and a goal on inequality. A key success is that many ‘environmental’ Goals also incorporate a gender dimension.

Yet, in many cases, the final goals and targets fell short of expectations, in particular in regard to ensuring human rights, means of implementation, finance, accountability (especially for private sector), systemic change, and substantive integration of ideas in multiple goals. Missing are sexual rights and comprehensive sexuality education; rights to land unqualified by ‘national law’; inspirational aspirational targets; ambitious climate change action; and a focus on sustainable development over sustained economic growth.

The Agenda 2030 addresses the symptoms of extreme poverty, but does not address its true causes, including the concentration of wealth. It also does not incorporate a progressive redistribution approach, and thus reinforces that 60% of the value that circulates in the world is generated by women’s unpaid work. Additionally, financing is not sufficient to support implementation of the goals and targets. Additionally, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda from the Financing for Development Conference is weak and fails to address global inequities in trade, finance and taxation.

And, while not a direct result of women’s advocacy, it is important to note that great strides were made in terms of institutionalizing transparent, inclusive participation of civil society. From Rio+20, with the resultant Open Working Group process as well as the High Level Political Forum resolution on modalities, open, transparent and inclusive participation of civil society (in this case Major Groups and other stakeholders) became the norm and has begun to influence other processes. It is a transformative step, but it is also an area requiring constant vigilance.

N**ext steps**

The WMG is always looking forward and will remain active because there is plenty of work still to do. While it is far from perfect, the 2030 agenda and its SDGs could bring us closer to the world we want. It is time to work together to hold governments accountable to the commitments they have made.

The participation of the WMG and its diverse members will be essential to ensure the 2030 sustainable development agenda responds holistically to women’s needs when implemented. Women’s participation and leadership may be in projects on the ground, or in planning, policy-making and accountability at all levels. Regardless of where, it is the key to making the 2030 agenda a transformative one.

As of the writing of this article, Member States, UN Agencies and Major Groups and constituencies are enmeshed in the indicators process and the plans for the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2016. The timing is awkward: the SDGs were agreed as a package in the 2030 agenda document, and they should be implemented as of January 2016. But the global indicators to support and track progress of the agenda will not be finalized before March of 2016. And yet, the HLPF will already be reviewing implementation in its meeting of June 2016. The WMG has smaller working groups that are tracking and inputting to the indicators and HLPF preparations. Both are critical to success of the 2030 agenda, but the HLPF is the ongoing process for long-term engagement.

**Engaging in the process**

Engagement can and should take place at every level. Identify your own sphere of influence. Ways to engage include:

* Get involved in national planning processes – national action plans or national sustainable development plans
* Participate in shadow reporting for the national-level reviews
* Contribute to the consultation processes on indicators, national reviews, national planning, civil society participation, etc.
* Link with the regional commission and/or national processes for coordination with the High Level Political Forum
* Join the Women’s Major Group! The WMG wants to reach out and engage with as many women and women’s organization as possible who are also invested in this agenda. There are regional organizing partners. WMG is consistently making efforts to become even stronger, more diverse and transformative – with ongoing dialogue and building new connections in all ways that support effective implementation and monitoring of progress of the agenda. This work cannot be done without the expertise, efforts, research, innovation and activism of women worldwide. Join us at <http://www.womenmajorgroup.org>.
1. ##  See [www.womenmajorgroup.org](http://www.womenmajorgroup.org). Documents from the WMG include its “Green Economy” paper of 2011; “8 Red Flags” following the conclusion of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2014; [the WMG Response to the SG’s Synthesis Report: “The Road to Dignity by 2030”](http://www.womenmajorgroup.org/women-major-group-response-to-the-sgs-synthesis-report-the-road-to-dignity-by-2030/); the “Red Flags” during the June 2015 intergovernmental negotiations; and the press release following the final post-2015 negotiations.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Women’s Major Group on Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.861808157233171.1073741831.162318623848798&type=3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1. Gender equality and the human rights of women and girls must be recognized as a crosscutting issue critical for the success of the post-2015 development agenda

2. Commitments to human rights and inclusivity must be strengthened

3. Commitments to civil society and major group participation must be strengthened

4. The role of feminist and women’s organisations must be recognized and supported

5. The role of the private sector must be regulated and its social, economic and environmental impacts assessed and remedied where appropriate

6. The Political Declaration must emphasise commitments to the wellbeing of people and the planet

7. The Vision and the Call for Action need to acknowledge the way in which the current economic model has contributed to inequalities and environmental degradation

8. The goals and targets proposed by the Open Working Group should be fully endorsed, and there should be a clear path to devise ambitious indicators for the SDGs

9. Means of Implementation must be prioritised for the Post-2015 agenda

10. The commitments to monitoring, review and accountability must outline comprehensive processes for national, regional and global reviews [↑](#footnote-ref-3)