

## **Rethinking gender: feminist perspectives on Sustainable Development Goals in the light of (re)productivity**

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# Rethinking gender: feminist perspectives on *Sustainable Development Goals* in the light of (re)productivity

*Gender equality is a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and at the same time is recognised as a cross-sectional perspective for all SDGs. Despite this commitment, the SDGs risk reinforcing a women-oriented sustainability discourse. First, there is a danger of feminising environmental responsibility, which at the same time strengthens the assumption of a heteronormative normality. Second, feminist critiques of growth-oriented economic rationalities are categorically ignored.*

Tanja Mölders

## Rethinking gender: feminist perspectives on *Sustainable Development Goals* in the light of (re)productivity

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How can (theory-based) feminist concepts broaden the debate on sustainable development, and what challenges does this pose for sustainability policy and research? This article explores these questions in three steps: first, a review of the history of the gender and sustainability nexus considers gender issues within international sustainability policies from the early 1990s until today. Second, the concept of (re)productivity is introduced as a social-ecological feminist approach that opens both critical perspectives and visions for sustainable development. The third step combines political and theoretical perspectives by analysing selected *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) from a (re)productive perspective. In conclusion, three challenges for “(re)thinking” gender are formulated. It will become clear that a women-centred perspective on gender equality does by no means do justice to the findings of feminist sustainability research, which substantially question heteronormative assignments and economic certainties. Thus, the article shows how research for SDGs can still learn from feminist perspectives, and how these perspectives can contribute to a critical emancipatory understanding of sustainable development.

## Gender and sustainable development – a historical review

The substantive and structural links between gender and sustainable development have often been described in detail (for an overview see Braidotti et al. 1994, Harcourt 1994, Katz 2006, Hofmei-

ster et al. 2013). Looking at the three world conferences that took place in 1992, 2002 and 2012 it is apparent that these findings have become an integral part of international sustainability policy. All three conferences were accompanied by women’s policy activities in a process that helped feminist activists and scholars establish their own positions on the interrelationships between gender relations, the environment and (economic) development. Moreover, they developed feminist readings of the mainstream topics and official strategies in which the critique of an economy that ignores the realities of people’s everyday lives is of central importance. In what follows, it will become obvious that women’s issues and critical feminist (economic) perspectives were still booming in the 1990s, but that a mainstreaming fatigue set in the 2000s.

### **United Nations Conference on Environment and Development**

In 1992, *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro, a conference which is considered even among critical observers a milestone in the discussion of social-ecological problems. As it was generally recognised that the global ecological crisis and the social situation of people are two sides of the same coin, the issue of gender equality was also anchored in the debates from the outset.

An essential precondition for this success was the *Women’s Action Agenda 21*, which was adopted at the *World Women’s Conference* in Miami in 1991 and formulated an independent feminist position on sustainable social development. In this way the sustainable livelihoods concept became exemplary of (feminist) scepticism towards growth-oriented economic development (Wiltshire 1992).

In Rio, women managed to be recognised as one of nine major groups within the official United Nations (UN) negotiations. As a result, *Agenda 21*, the final UNCED document, contains a chapter on *Global action for women towards sustainable and equitable development* (UN 1992). In this chapter 24, gender equality

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and the active participation of women are argued to be indispensable prerequisites for achieving sustainable development.

These successes have, however, not gone unchallenged by critical feminists. Christa Wichterich, a feminist scientist and activist in (inter)national sustainability processes of long standing, observes a prioritising of integration and participation over the objectives of transformation, that means, changed natural and gender relations as well as economic understanding (Wichterich 1992, 2001, 2012). Furthermore, she problematises the fine line between women's participation on the one hand and their instrumentalisation on the other: recognising women's important role for the realisation of sustainable development presents the danger of feminising environmental responsibility.

### **World Summit on Sustainable Development**

Ten years later, 2002, the *World Summit on Sustainable Development* (WSSD) took place in Johannesburg. The conference was planned as an "implementation summit" with the aim of adopting concrete measures and goals for the realisation of sustainable development. Critical voices were raised that noted that the discourse on sustainable development had taken an increasingly technocratic and efficiency-oriented direction, which affected in particular the reception of feminist positions (Wichterich 2002, pp. 81 ff., Lachkovics 2002).

As with *UNCED*, women prepared their own positions for the WSSD. At the international level, the *Women's Action Agenda for a Healthy and Peaceful Planet 2015* was formulated (WEDO 2002). This agenda is a follow-up document on the livelihoods concept and also addresses such topics as peace, human rights, globalisation, access to and control over resources, environmental safety and health, participation and governance.

Nevertheless, the international women's movement did not succeed in introducing feminist perspectives and demands in the sense of gender mainstreaming of all subject areas within the *Plan of Implementation*, the final document of the conference. Due to the mainstreaming approach adopted, the document does not, as does *Agenda 21*, contain a separate women's chapter. Accordingly, gender experts took a critical view of the WSSD. Eva Lachkovics, a NGO representative of the European network *Women in Development Europe*, spoke of a generally gruelling negotiating atmosphere (Lachkovics 2002, p. 2). Regarding the *Plan of Implementation*, Gottschlich (2017, pp. 163 ff.) commented that formulations remained largely vague and that the actual scope of feminist approaches, for example with regard to alternative economies, were not represented.

### **United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development**

Following the *Rio Summit* in 1992, the *United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development* (UNCSD, Rio+20 for short) took place again in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. Rio+20 was oriented towards the model of a green economy, which model was concerned with finding a way out of the financial, climate and energy crisis and, in doing so, linking up with the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) and poverty reduction (Wichterich 2012, p. 9).

Gottschlich (2017, pp. 435 f.) notes that the final document of *Rio+20 The Future we want* – despite all the criticism levelled against it – generally acknowledges the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment for sustainable development, emphasising for example the aspect of political participation, and access to resources and education in particular. Wichterich (2012), on the other hand, critically notes that little or no consideration was given to feminist perspectives on the idea of a green economy, although feminist economics would have offered numerous starting points for that purpose.

One result of *Rio+20* was that decision-makers initiated the development of a set of *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) that build on the MDGs and also converge with the UN's *Post-2015 Development Agenda*. In a comprehensive report, the *Women's Major Group* (WMG) has drawn up recommendations from a gender perspective, highlighting gender equality, women's rights and women's priorities both as part and a criticism of the developments discussed (WMG 2013). The report's core vision is a transformation towards a sustainable, equitable and inclusive economy – and not moving towards a green economy. Whether and to what extent this demand is reflected in the SDGs will be discussed below.

## **The concept of (re)productivity**

As stated above, economic criticism is central to the formulation of feminist perspectives on sustainable development. In the process, different (inter-)national approaches and concepts can be distinguished (for an overview see Biesecker and Gottschlich 2013). What they all have in common, however, is the criticism of the gendered division of labour as well as the exclusion and devaluation of the socially female domestic and care work as "reproductive". Some of these approaches see a connection between this social dimension and the exploitation of nature.

This is where the concept of (re)productivity of Biesecker and Hofmeister (2010) comes in. What the concept addresses is the sustainable relations both between society and nature and between the genders. The starting point is the critique of the separation and hierarchisation of a (male connoted) productive sphere (in particular paid work) and a (female connoted) reproductive sphere (in particular care work, subsistence work, volunteer engagement). This critique goes back to the feminist debates on housework in the 1970s but is broadened by Biesecker and Hofmeister (2010) who combine questions of social reproduction with those of natural reproduction (such as natural regeneration and renewal). Thus, their core assumption is that the contemporary crisis of nature, in the form of an ecological crisis, and the social crisis, in terms of the crisis of reproductive work, have the same origin. Their particular criticism is directed against economic rationality, which is neither able nor willing to acknowledge the productivity of the reproductive functions mentioned above. But, at the same time, capitalist production necessarily also presupposes the reproductive activities or inputs provided by nature no less than by (female) reproductive work. Therefore, the critique of the separation and



hierarchisation of production and reproduction becomes an economic critique – a critique of the capitalist economy of industrial modernity.

The vision of the concept of (re)productivity proclaims a new economic rationality. It is not about “money for housework” or the “commodification of ecosystem services”, rather it is concerned with social-ecological conditions that are not monetised and capitalistically oriented. Within this rationality, productivity and reproduction are collapsed and become one, signalled by the single label attached to the new concept: (re)productivity. Biesecker and Hofmeister regard the (re)productive economy as one that will be sustainable, describing it as a “multiplicity of balanced and coordinated productive processes whose qualitative-material and value dimensions are determined on the basis of negotiating processes at all levels of social (re)production” (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010, p. 1709).

As Nelson and Power (2018, p. 82) point out, Biesecker and Hofmeister have made an essential contribution to a feminist critique of the economy with their concept of (re)productivity. A major point of criticism of the concept is its high degree of abstraction, which makes it particularly difficult to connect it to (political) practice. Nevertheless, the concept can fulfil a heuristic function for critical analysis as well as for giving an orientation for sustainable futures. Applied to the analysis of SDGs, the concept can be operationalised as follows:

Above all, the category *gender* can function as an eye opener for the production-reproduction dichotomy. This analytic perspective becomes visible when gender is addressed as a social category that tries to overcome biologically determined attributions and focuses on the configurations and conditions leading to the marginalisation and devaluation of gendered fields of work, social positions, etc. as “reproductive”.

Secondly, the categories of *nature* and *work* reflect the production-reproduction dichotomy with regard to the ecological and social spheres. Thus, an understanding of nature as an object to be used is connected to the productive sphere, whereas an understanding of nature as an object to be protected is connected to the reproductive sphere (Burandt and Mölders 2017). Accordingly, paid work is assigned to the productive sphere and distinguished from reproductive work.

Finally, and with regard to the category of *economy*, various economic rationalities can be distinguished, which either stabilise the production-reproduction dichotomy or overcome this separation in favour of a (re)productive understanding.

## Focussing SDGs in the light of (re)productivity

The 17 SDGs guide the current discourse on sustainable development at the national and international levels. The following analysis will look from a theoretical (re)productive perspective at fundamental assumptions and normative implications of three selected SDGs, namely the categories of gender, nature, work, and economy as introduced above. *SDG 5 Gender equality* explicitly ad-

dresses the gender dimension of sustainable development. *SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth* combines sustainable development with the understandings of work and economy. Finally, *SDG 15 Life on land* offers an understanding of nature as well as societal relations to nature. The critical reading is based on the short descriptions of the SDGs as they are presented in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN 2015) as well as on the UN websites<sup>1</sup>. In order to throw into relief the importance of gender equality as a cross-cutting perspective, some statements by the *UN Women*<sup>2</sup> on the SDGs are also taken into account (UN Women 2018).

### SDG 5: Gender equality

*SDG 5* aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UN 2015, p. 20). Clearly, gender is seen as a category of difference that presupposes a heterosexual basic assumption. The (biological) difference between women and men is taken as a starting point causing (social) difference and inequality. Accordingly, *SDG 5* points out that women and girls have to put up with physical and sexual violence as well as several biographical disadvantages regarding health care, education, etc. Deficits in education, for example, are claimed to lead to limited opportunities in the labour market. On this basis, the empowerment of all girls and women is thought essential to increasing economic growth and promoting social development. In addition to this orientation towards paid employment, the significance of unpaid care and domestic work is also addressed, a demand being made for the recognition and appreciation of these types of work as well as their fair distribution.

From a (re)productive perspective, this extension of the concept of work needs to be highlighted. It is an acknowledgement of the importance of reproductive work and its gendered notion. What is lacking, however, is a clarification of the contradictions and conflicting goals that arise from such a perspective for an orientation towards economic growth, which is regarded as a goal that is accepted without qualification.

### SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth

*SDG 8* aims to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all (UN 2015, p. 21 f.). The main focus of this *SDG* is on poverty reduction. Employment is therefore seen as a prerequisite for the reduction of poverty and a fair globalisation. The idea of decent work usefully defines further the claim for employment: productive work is addressed that delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration (figure 1, p. 98). Gender equality is addressed directly in this *SDG* by the demand that women and girls must enjoy equal access to equal opportunities with men and boys for employment. This gendered aspect is broadened in the *UN Women's*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment)

<sup>2</sup> *UN Women* is the UN organisation dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women: [www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs](http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs).





statement by pointing out that – among other objectives – equal pay for equal work and the fair distribution of unpaid care work are also central prerequisites for gender equality regarding *SDG 8* (UN Women 2018).

From a (re)productive perspective, the important extension of the concept of work, as carried out in *SDG 5*, is not continued in *SDG 8*. Instead, a narrow view of work as paid employment is taken as a basis. This paid employment is labeled as “productive”. In contrast, a (re)productive interpretation would include the productivity of reproductive work. Although the category of nature is not mentioned in *SDG 8*, the *UN Women* state: economic growth contributes to sustainable development where it extends benefits to all people, actively reduces inequalities and avoids harm to the environment.<sup>3</sup> This is in line with a (re)productive perspective, and makes clear that not every form of economic growth is sustainable in terms of social and ecological needs.

### ***SDG 15: Life on land***

*SDG 15* aims to sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss (UN 2015, p. 27). Like all *SDGs*, the underlying understanding of nature follows an anthropocentric perspective, that is, the ques-

tion is asked what functions nature (especially forests and biodiversity) has for people. Following the ecosystem services approach, both emotional and utilitarian functions are considered. As a consequence, the importance of nature for spiritual and religious purposes as well as for recreation is addressed, as is its economic value. Human beings are considered to be an integral part of ecosystems and therefore need to establish ways of living that sustain nature.

From a (re)productive perspective, *SDG 15* recognises the reproductive functions of nature. Ironically, this also applies to nature’s achievements in dealing with anthropogenic grand challenges such as climate change. Both the protection (“conservation”) and the (sustainable) use of ecosystems are addressed. What is particularly striking is that neither the contradictions nor the conflicting goals that exist between nature-conserving behaviour and the desired economic growth are addressed. The gendered dimension of *SDG 15* is discussed by *UN Women*, who point out the effect of destroying nature, especially on poor women. Moreover,

3 [www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-8-decent-work-economic-growth](http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-8-decent-work-economic-growth)

**FIGURE 1:** In disaster-prone Fiji, recovery efforts after Tropical Cyclone *Winston* had to involve the women vendors of Rakiraki Market. Varanisese Maisamoa, President of the Rakiraki Market Vendors Association, and her colleagues care for a market that is safer – their insights informed the market reconstruction to include cyclone resilient infrastructure, a rain water harvesting system, flood resistant drainage, and a gender-responsive design.



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they adduce the extensive knowledge of women about traditional practices in dealing with nature (UN Women 2018, p. 124).

## Challenges of (re)thinking gender

This article aims to recall the numerous and (theoretically and empirically) well-founded findings of feminist research on gender and sustainable development. Its purpose is to answer the question of how these findings can broaden the debate on sustainable development in general and with regard to the SDGs in particular. As the historical review has shown, it has always been difficult to implement critical feminist perspectives in mainstream debates. This conclusion was illustrated by using the concept of (re)productivity as a feminist critique of the economy for an analysis of the SDGs. Against this background, the title of this article can be changed to *(Re)Thinking gender*. The point is to think about the category of gender again and again and beyond, without losing sight of the challenges that inevitably arise in this process.

The challenges of (re)thinking gender can be summarised as follows: first, there is a gap between women-oriented political approaches, and (actual) approaches from gender studies that address gender as a socially constructed category. The UN discourse on gender and sustainable development runs the risk of becoming a women-oriented discourse unless efforts are made to open it up to social constructivist approaches and at least partially to abandon thinking in a bisexual matrix. The focus on gender equality in the SDGs, however, seems to be widening this gap. Second, biological reduction entails the danger of feminising environmental responsibility. This danger exists not only in the reception of feminist approaches, but is inscribed in some (eco-feminist) approaches as a basic assumption. For this reason, the concept of (re)productivity does not address any emotionally or “naturally” based societal gender or nature relations, but rather takes a decidedly economic-critical perspective. Finally, gender approaches present substantial critical and visionary perspectives, which often thwart political and scientific mainstream orientations in the sustainability discourse. This becomes particularly clear in the contested economic rationalities. While the concept of economic growth remains further determine the sustainability discourse – and so also in the SDGs – feminist economics ask for alternative, for example, (re)productive economies for “our common future”. *(Re)Thinking gender* means nothing less than to make these alternatives strong and to stand up for a critical emancipatory understanding of sustainability.

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