The Gender and Development Initiative was launched in 2014 by faculty in the International Affairs Program and Department of Economics at Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA

Gender and Development Initiative
201 Renaissance Park
360 Huntington Ave.
Boston, MA 02115
617.373.5472/5367 (f)
www.northeastern.edu/cssh/internationalaffairs
Women’s Empowerment and International Organizations: 
Achievements, Opportunities, and Constraints 
Organized by the Gender and Development Initiative 
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Friday 22 April 2016, 9.30 am – 4.30 pm

Conference Report by Alice Verticelli and Valentine M. Moghadam

The Conference was opened by Uta Poiger, Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities and Professor of History. In welcoming the speakers and the audience she described the experimental, global, and local nature of the College and of Northeastern University and programs such as the Gender and Development Initiative (GAD-I) in particular, where students and researchers are encouraged to combine theory and practice and develop critical and analytical thinking for the classroom and the broader world. She noted the multiple backgrounds of the guest speakers who would unpack the path toward women’s empowerment since the 1995 Fourth World Conference in Beijing, the role of structures for economic and political development, and the potential for sustainability and human security.

Prof. Moghadam, Director of the International Affairs Program and Professor of Sociology, gave some background information on the GAD-I and then introduced the topic of the conference, drawing on the conference’s Concept Note. Since Beijing, important achievements for women’s empowerment include recognition and integration of women’s rights in national laws and policies; the expansion of democracy leading to broader opportunities and participation for women in some countries; an increasing number of women in leadership roles as government officials, members of parliament, judges; and the growth and spread of gender-focused NGOs, university-based women’s studies programs, and feminist networks at the global, national, and local levels. Despite these achievements, commitments, and resources, obstacles and challenges remain, and setbacks occur. The spread of gender-based violence, the expansion of militarism and war, austerity, and the dominance of men in politics, development and other domains hinder women’s voice and agency and undermine their civil, political, and social rights of citizenship. Moreover, institutionalization of the women’s rights agenda often has been accompanied by cooptation, bureaucratization, and funding conditionality.

Prof. Moghadam added that institutions such as the World Bank, UN Women and other UN agencies, IOs and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), can provide a normative space for the kind of work that feminist scholars and gender specialists and
practitioners are tasked or desire to do. She gave the example of her personal experience while working at UNESCO in Paris in 2004-2006. While the growing violence in Iraq precluded the work that had been planned to be carried out with Iraqi women, she was able to successfully implement projects in collaboration with the Palestinian Minister for Women’s Affairs. Yet other work could not be carried out due to lack of funding. She concluded with some orienting questions: What has been accomplished for women’s empowerment and how? What constraints remain and how might they be overcome?

Speakers in the morning sessions were Dr. Caren Grown, Senior Director for Gender, World Bank Group; Dr. Diana Alarcon, Chief of the Development Strategy and Policy Unit, United Nations Department for Economic and Social Development (UN DESA); and Dr. Shahra Razavi, Chief of the Research and Data Section, UN Women. The afternoon session speakers were Dr. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Professor of International Affairs, The New School, and former director of the UNDP’s Human Development Report Office (1997-2004); Mr. Wade Channell, Senior Economic Growth Advisor for Gender, USAID; and Dr. Jennifer McCleary-Sills, Director of Gender Violence and Rights, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).

**Opportunities:** The speakers identified the enabling normative environment created by the global women’s rights agenda; the growth of women’s movements that work domestically, regionally, and globally; resources provided by donor countries, international or multilateral organizations (IOs), and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs); advocacy by gender specialists and feminist advocates within the organizations; partnerships between different actors and institutions; normative advances in the global agenda on women, peace, and security. There is increasing recognition that women’s equality and empowerment are not only human rights issues (important as these are) but are also economically beneficial. There was consensus that the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which set a series of goals and targets to be achieved by 2030, represent a huge advancement over the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) through recognition of many elements essential to women’s empowerment, including violence, control over earnings and finance, economic participation, and others. Both the MDGs and SDGs encourage the collection of data that are disaggregated and more detailed; they also permit increased funding and resources for gender equality, which now amounts to a respectable proportion of total development finance.

**Achievements:** The speakers focused on advances in women’s primary, secondary and tertiary education; increased access to employment; rising rates of women’s political participation, in part due to the “quota revolution”; the adoption by many governments of
gender equality policies; and advances in measurement tools to track and compare progress. The MDGs had allowed for a broad collection of data harmonized across countries, and it is expected that the SDGs will improve data collection even more.

**Constraints:** Speakers highlighted the gaps between policies and laws on the one hand, and implementation and enforcement on the other; women’s unpaid family labor and unrecognized care work; the persistence of violence against women, from domestic violence to street harassment to sexual abuse during armed conflicts; patriarchal interpretations of culture and religion; the persistence in some countries of discriminatory laws (e.g., on sexual and reproductive rights, inheritance, marriage, divorce, etc.); an adverse macroeconomic environment that can impede progress or undo the advances that have been made.

Highlights from the presentations follow.

Caren Grown, World Bank: “**Gender Equality, Poverty Reduction, and Inclusive Growth**”. Empowerment is something that women do themselves, individually and collectively, while donors provide the enabling environment by giving resources and setting the rules of the game. Improving conditions in one domain does not always translate in amelioration in other domains. Empowerment is a process that takes time, and there can be steps forward as well as setbacks.

Shahra Razavi, UN Women: “**Global Women’s Rights Advocacy: Confronting Power and Ideology**”. Maternal mortality has decreased by 45% since 1990. Women’s representation in national parliaments has doubled from 11% in 1995 to 22% today. Despite these promising trends, major gaps remain, such as discriminatory family laws. Besides gender gaps, inequalities within the female population continue, in domains such as quality of education, skilled birth attendance, and access to good jobs. Women’s educational attainment is not matched with quality employment and reduced pay gap, while heavy and intense unpaid care workloads limit women’s enjoyment of human rights. Value is not attached to caregivers, and there is bias in the definition of skills. Structural inequalities systematically prevent progress, especially for certain categories of disadvantaged women. Economic advantages and disadvantages spill over into the sphere of “human capabilities.” Dr. Razavi stressed the role of her agency, UN Women, in economic and social justice and in advocating stronger alliances with progressive forces including trade unions and other civil society groups, for better public infrastructure, transfers, and public services.¹

¹ See UN Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights* (NY: UN, 2015). For an earlier set of analyses and recommendations, see Valentine M.
Jennifer McCleary-Sills, ICRW, *Progress and Pitfalls in Expanding Voice and Agency: The Case of Violence Against Women*. Violence against women persists in many forms with widespread violations of sexual and reproductive rights. Child marriage is still prevalent in many regions (with the highest absolute numbers in India and highest percentages in some sub-Saharan countries) and is related to other aspects of development. It is estimated that 1 in 3 women globally is a victim of gender-based violence, and the vast majority of those who respond positively to surveys do not seek any form of formal or informal support. In many cases, overarching normative structures serve to influence perception, with women themselves often supporting or condoning abusive practices such as wife beating. An intriguing point made during her initial presentation of data on increased life expectancy and rapid fertility decline, was that fertility decline is not necessarily a success in and of itself if it is not mirrored by increased choice and agency among women and families.²

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, The New School: “*Human Rights and International Development Agendas: A Critical Review of the MDGs and the SDGs*”. She problematized the very concept of turning frameworks, goals, and norms into data and indicators. In her introduction, she contextualized global goals as historically (since the 1960s) set by the UN to mobilize the attention towards neglected priorities, with their essential function being a tool of communication. With the MDGs, global goals were increasingly used to define consensus priorities; she emphasized the fundamental flaws of global goals as a policy tool in global governance, when there is an attempt to quantify complex social transformations. Prof. Fukuda-Parr criticized the MDGs for sidelining important issues such as national strategies, the developmental state, systemic reforms in global institutions, employment, pro-poor growth, dissenting policy approaches, increasing income inequality, and all the other complexities in development. In practice, the strategies that were selected for implementation went in the direction of macroeconomic stabilization and neoliberal market reforms. These target-driven agendas may have been easier to turn into lists for political mobilization or planning targets, but led to over-simplification, reductionism, and development narratives that obfuscated the complexity of women’s lives and interrelated structures of power.³

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On the face of it, the SDGs appear to be an improvement on the MDGs, but it remains to be seen if the indicators will be more comprehensive as well as more reliable in measuring progress and improving social outcomes.

Diana Alarcon, UN DESA: “Women’s Empowerment in the UN Development Agenda”. She drew attention to The World’s Women 2015, published by the UN Statistics Division, and to the rich data available on population and families, education, labor force participation, migration, environment, housing, violence against women, poverty, and political participation. The MDGs may have been deficient in some respects, she said, but the process did allow for consistent cross-country data. Indeed, data collection may have been the biggest contribution of the MDGs. With the adoption of the SDGs, a broader agenda will be in place, and women’s issues will be mainstreamed across all the goals. Dr. Alarcon added that today, there is greater recognition – certainly at the level of international organizations but also of many national governments and local authorities – that women’s empowerment and development are deeply interconnected. Change, however, comes about at the national level; IO’s can only provide the normative and enabling environment for action by governments and NGOs.

Wade Channell, USAID: “Walls and Bridges: Building a Comprehensive Approach to Women’s Economic Empowerment and Equality”. He began by presenting some of the difficult questions that those working in development have to face in their daily work, from responding to Congress and American taxpayers to being able to tell exactly when a goal (often very complex) has been achieved. This struggle often leads to construct measurable goals and narrow timelines for issues that would take generations, and multidimensional approaches. Yet, he stressed the need to compromise between these needs. With respect to growing awareness of the costs of women’s exclusion and the benefits of women’s contributions, Mr. Channell said that inequality and gender-based violence hurt business, as women who have been injured or have trauma are less productive at work, and women with fewer opportunities may not even be part of the productive labor force. The narrative needs to change to one whereby bad regulations on women’s participation and rights hurt everyone, not only women, while change towards more equality benefits everyone. Women’s empowerment is in everyone’s best interest.

What follows are some of the key points that were raised in the different presentations, organized by topic.
Population, families, health

Drawing on the UN Statistical Office’s database, *The World’s Women 2015,* Dr. Alarcon began with data on population and families. In younger age groups, men outnumber women; in older age groups, women outnumber men. Although child marriage has declined, almost half of the women in Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa marry before age 18. Adolescent birth rates have declined almost everywhere but are still high in many African and Latin American and Caribbean countries. Lone mothers with children constitute about three-quarters of one-parent households worldwide. The proportion of women aged 45-49 who are divorced or separated is at least 25% higher than that of men in the same age group. The majority of older persons living in one-person households are women. Health conditions related to pregnancy and childbirth, combined with HIV/AIDS, are the leading cause of death among young women aged 15 to 29 in developing regions, mainly due to the heavy toll of these deaths in Sub-Saharan Africa. Maternal health has improved considerably, yet in Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa only half of pregnant women have adequate care during childbirth.

Education

Education can be among the factors that give a better bargaining position within the household, increasing decision-making power over assets and income. Dr. Grown pointed out that primary school enrollment has become more equal, with the important exception of a few poor countries with high inequalities and, within countries, poor households. In tertiary education, which is a crucial step towards greater returns in the labor market, there has been progress as well, with women’s enrollments exceeding those of men in many countries. A closer look at the data, however, reveals some contradictions, in terms of quality of schooling and the jobs available. This was echoed by Dr. Alarcon, who noted that in poor countries, millions of girls remain out of school, and millions of adult women remain illiterate. Progress has been seen in tertiary education, where enrollment rates are increasing for women faster than for men, but the proportion of women graduating in science and engineering remains low. Dr. Mc Cleary-Sills noted that the data are on enrollment, which does not include completion and quality.

Economic Opportunity, Participation, and Employment

Although women today represent 40% of workers worldwide, the types of work they are engaged in remain of a different nature and with lower returns. Women on average earn 10-

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4 http://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/worldswomen.html
30% less than men, and they are also more likely to be involved in informal employment. Grown, Razavi, and Alarcon pointed to earning gaps and gender segregation in the labor market, and to women’s continued unpaid care work in the home. Grown and Razavi both noted that for many policymakers, women’s economic empowerment is associated with entrepreneurship, while others would disagree with this. The multi-layered constraints that prevent women’s equality of economic opportunity, Dr. Grown said, may be more or less formal, ranging from social norms to the regulatory and legal environment (such as laws that require the permission of the spouse for a woman to be able to borrow). The persistence of women’s unpaid care at home, as well as the lack of adequate care services, constitutes one of the major challenges of our time. Men need to take more tasks of care work for gender relations to become truly equal, she said.

Dr. Alarcon noted that the gender gap in participation has narrowed in only some regions but remains widest in Northern Africa, Western Asia and Southern Asia. Women’s unemployment rate remains higher than men’s in most countries, and the differences remain substantial. Vulnerable employment, including own-account and contributing family work, constitutes half of women and men’s employment globally, but is most common in Africa and Asia, especially among women. Women predominate in the services sector of employment, especially in education, health, and social work, and private households as employers. Many women are excluded from economic decision-making within their own households. The use of formal financial services is lower for women than men in all regions; globally, 47% of women have an individual or joint account at a formal financial institution compared to 55% of men.

**Decision-making and political participation**

Dr. Alarcon noted that the number of female heads of state or government reached 19 in 2015, but this was only seven more than in 1995. Women’s representation in lower or single houses of parliament has increased, yet globally only about one in every five of parliamentarians is a woman. Women’s representation among cabinet ministers increased from 6% in 1994 to 18% in 2015. Women’s participation in local government has grown in many countries, yet remains far from parity. Women are outnumbered by men among judges and magistrates in about half of the countries with data, and at higher levels of the judicial hierarchy, women’s representation declines drastically. The glass ceiling appears to be most impenetrable in the world’s largest corporations; less than 4% of chief executive officers (CEOs) are women and the gender composition of executive boards of private corporations is far from parity.
The environment, poverty, and women

In drawing attention to the interconnections between poverty and gender, Dr. Alarcon noted that half of population in developing regions lack access to improved drinking water on the premises, and the burden of water collection falls mostly on women. Environmental problems can have a heavier toll on women. Age, sex and differences in gender roles and norms are significant factors in mortality due to natural disasters, although their contribution varies by country and type of natural hazard. Non-partnered women with children and older women in one-person households have higher poverty rates than men with the same characteristics. Women’s access to their own income remains low in developing regions, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa. In nearly a third of developing countries, laws do not guarantee the same inheritance rights for women and men, and in an additional half of countries discriminatory customary practices against women persist. Such laws can contribute to women’s lack of access to assets and thus to poverty.

Violence against Women

Dr. Alarcon said that physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence affected women across the world; intimate partner violence accounts for the majority of women’s experience of violence. In 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East where the practice is concentrated, more than 125 million girls and women alive today have been subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM). In the majority of countries, less than half of the women who experienced violence sought help of any sort, and among those who did, most looked to family and friends as opposed to the police and health services. The good news is that most countries have passed laws on domestic violence and have laws on sexual harassment, although only 52 have laws on marital rape. Availability of data on violence against women has increased significantly in recent years, she said.

Dr. McCleary-Sills focused on progress on the elimination of violence against women (EVAW), highlighting the many resolutions, agreements, and institutions that have been adopted, especially since the UN General Assembly adopted in 1985 the Resolution on Domestic Violence and following the Yugoslav wars. The year 1994 saw many EVAW steps taken, including the International Violence Against Women Act, the UN’s Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, the International Criminal Court was founded, and the UN’s International Day for EVAW (November 25), which has become an important tool for advocacy and activism. Since 2000, the Security Council has passed a number of resolutions on women, peace, and security and the protection of women in conflict. These resolutions and new institutions are important, she said, but they are not implemented in all conflict cases.
Q&A and Comments

One question was about gender-based violence (GBV) and informal justice systems, and about the possible strategies of working with men and boys. Dr. Grown replied that formal as well as informal justice is important when it comes to GBV and she underlined the importance of men’s engagement. There are issues of normative change of the structures and rules that privilege men and cannot be changed without engaging them. Not only the issue of violence, but gender equality itself is not a zero-sum game, and it is in everyone’s best interest to make a change. Dr. Razavi agreed, but noted that not all informal forms of justice are fair to women.

Another question concerned the challenges of formulating a women’s rights agenda during the development of the SDGs, and what strategic alliances could further the different goals. Dr. Alarcon replied that the process preceding the SDGs was an unprecedented dynamic of broad consultations and intergovernmental discussions involving huge constituencies such as women, farmers, unions, civil society groups, and the private sector. At the end of this complex but inclusive process and the many drafts, gender issues came to be high on the agenda. The challenge now will be implementation at the national level. Because negotiations almost collapsed on some specific issues, such as women’s right to inherit land and sexual and reproductive rights, it is easy to imagine that implementation will vary across socio-cultural contexts. Regarding possible connections with other goals, Dr. Alarcon argued that the link between gender and environment is very important. Climate change and environmental degradation have a different impact for different segments of society, the highest on women with intersecting levels of inequalities.

Dr. Razavi also addressed this question by highlighting some of the obstacles encountered during the negotiations for the SDGs. She identified vague language on some important gender issues such as violence, unpaid care work, and sexual and reproductive rights. The challenge now lies in the development of indicators that would capture the targets. She then argued that development and human rights should go together, as it is increasingly being advocated in several arenas (SDGs include human rights issues). Austerity measures make implementation very difficult.

One question pertained to the importance of participatory research in capturing complexity beyond numbers and statistics, and another to the UN dialogue with national governments and local actors and the “battle of indicators”. Dr. Alarcon replied that the problem of detail and disaggregation of data is a deep one, not only on gender but also, for example, on environmental issues, where knowledge of the location of the communities most vulnerable to
environmental degradation can be challenging and limited. She stressed the gains in collection of statistics, comparison, disaggregation, and harmonization, but added that “we need to go further and deeper”. With respect to the SDGs and “the battle of the indicators”, Dr. Alarcon recognized that it will be difficult to have different actors agree on a reasonable number of meaningful indicators for such broad targets. She added that global indicators – limited in number, easy to keep track of – will be different from national level indicators. Dr. Razavi pointed to problems with the fixation on numbers and statistics. Despite recognizing the need for indicators, she argued that quantitative and qualitative studies need to complete each other, since mere indexes sometimes can hide more than they show.

Questions were posed about “land grabbing” in Africa, food security, and about the role of women in agriculture and what policies should be sought in a sector that is 70% women. Dr. Alarcon noted the problem of the prohibition to land ownership for women in some countries. She added that land grabbing is not exclusively a North-South issue, as it involves new players. Dr. Razavi, whose doctoral research in Iran had been on agriculture and land, pointed out that land grabbing is happening not only in Africa, but also in India with urban development projects, and in Indonesia with biofuels. Food security, she added, is an issue in both rural and urban areas; global markets and crises affect food security that are very tangible for households throughout the world and for women in particular. Mr. Channell said that in terms of food and agriculture, more production and supply would not be the answer; rather, there should be more investments in infrastructure, roads, and systemic thinking about markets and behavioral change.

A member of the audience had a comment on the privilege of white men and wondered whether gender equality would truly benefit everyone. She also noted that as a researcher of El Salvador she had observed that notwithstanding the presence of favorable laws, court documents and institutional behavior revealed deep biases. What could be done to change the structures and the ways that institutions function? Dr. McCleary-Sills argued that equality does in fact benefit everyone, and this needs to be made evident to men and husbands. Dr. Fukuda-Parr reiterated that equality-as-a-social-good can be an important point for persuasion, and she emphasized the intrinsic value of uncovering patriarchal dynamics and empowering women. Mr. Channell stressed that there is a need for funding for activists to push for implementation of laws through the court system, in El Salvador and beyond: a poor woman is in no position to appeal, so funding for advocacy groups and media coverage can make a difference.
A second comment from the audience addressed the potential and challenges of microcredit in relation to women’s empowerment, stressing how the change in status of a marginalized group such as women could trigger unintended consequences. For example, not involving men and boys from the start could trigger increased domestic violence when power dynamics within the household change and threaten the “established authority”.

Another question was on the issue of indicators, asking how to avoid oversimplifications. Mr. Channell pointed out that indicators are approximations of a complex reality, but we need people to fill numbers. Dr. McCleary-Sills echoed others who had said that the SDGs are more promising because they address women’s issues more holistically. Still, she called for a new way of thinking of measurement and success, which might include asking people themselves how they would assess progress.

Prof. Moghadam offered some reflections on the strength of structural constraints despite the very real progress that has been occurring. She expressed her dismay at the fact that women’s unemployment rates continued to be high, and higher than men’s, in most countries. She had conducted research on the topic in the early 1990s and had coined the term “feminization of unemployment.”

She also suggested that it might be easier to change discriminatory family laws in the Middle East than to shift the macroeconomic policy environment from neoliberal to an economic arrangement that prioritizes social rights and people’s welfare. Nonetheless, we need to continue to work on alternatives.

Dr. Bilge Erten, Assistant Professor of Economics and International Affairs at Northeastern University, referred to her research on Turkey, which is often at the bottom of the list for gender equality, domestic violence, and women’s education. In her research, she looked at the relationship between secondary education and formal employment, income, and other outcomes, and found that there is some positive change, yet domestic violence – namely financial control and psychological abuse - increased instead of declining, which showed the complexity and multidimensionality of gender empowerment. She also said that goal-setting efforts diverted attention from the next important steps of policy formulation and implementation, which are hindered by powerful constraining structures of political, cultural, normative, and economic nature. Despite thinking that we live beyond the Washington Consensus, neoliberalism is still an important factor guiding and limiting development.
**Recommendations**

In the course of presentations and the Q&A, a number of policy recommendations were offered. Dr. Alarcon said that data should be brought together to keep track of change and disaggregated by relevant categories (e.g., by sex, geography, and income). In that connection, there should be direct participation in dialogues, debates, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

In her comments on income inequality, Dr. Razavi emphasized the need for more attention toward rights to work and rights at work, access to formal protection, social health insurance, and the wage gap, which affect women of different classes.

Dr. McCleary-Sills advocated multi-sectorial responses to violence against women, arguing that the costs of inaction are too high. Strategies to prevent or eliminate VAW involve complex responses for a complex problem, including social protection, access to justice, media, engaging men, communities, and families, education, and economic opportunities. A focus on quality services for survivors and implementation of prevention strategies that include boys and men as well as girls and women and could break the cycle of violence and mitigate its effects, she said, and gave three positive examples of successful projects in Senegal and Uganda.

Mr. Channell noted that from a legal perspective, rights consist in three, multiplicative, dimensions: promulgation, knowledge, and enforcement. It is important that the gap between formal rights and the real enjoyment of opportunities and rights be narrowed. Moreover, given the multifaceted nature of empowerment, a multiple approach is needed that does not focus only on one isolated segment but considers at once social, educational, cultural, and political empowerment for women. Here, again, men’s engagement is important.

Dr. Erten noted that opportunities that lie ahead for women’s empowerment include partnerships and alliances between different institutional actors such as the IMF, World Bank, the UN, and academia. Analyzing and learning from best practices as well as from failures should be on the policy-oriented research agenda.