



Governments Gamble with our Future. South Feminists Demand Responsible Action Now

22 June 2012, Rio de Janeiro

While governments were locked in their semantic battles in the Rio+20 process, women's and other social movements continue to fight on multiple fronts for human rights, justice and sustainability. These struggles take place on diverse territories and geographies including the body, land, oceans and waterways, communities, states, and epistemological grounds. Each of these terrains is fraught with the resurgent forces of patriarchy, finance capitalism, neo-conservatism, consumerism, militarism and extractivism.

An understanding of the deeper structural roots of the crises we face today and analytical clarity on the interlinkages between different dimensions are both critical. There is no core recognition that the multiple crises we face are caused by the current anthropocentric development model rooted in unsustainable production and consumption patterns, and financialisation of the economy that are all based on and exacerbate gender, race and class inequities.

In sharp contrast to twenty years ago at the historic Earth Summit when linkages between gender and all three pillars of sustainable development were substantively acknowledged, the Rio+20 outcome document has relegated women's rights and gender equality to the periphery without recognition of a wider structural analysis.

Over the past few months we have witnessed and confronted attempts by a small group of ultra conservative states (with the strong support of an observer state – the Holy See), to roll back hard won agreements on women's rights. We are outraged that a vocal minority have hijacked the text on gender and health and blocked mention of sexual and reproductive rights, claiming that these have nothing to do with sustainable development. Meanwhile most states concentrate on what they considered their 'big ticket' items of finance, trade and aid with little interest to incorporate a gender analysis into these macroeconomic issues.

There is a reference to women's "unpaid work" but without recognizing the unequal and unfair burden that women carry in sustaining care and wellbeing (para 153). This is further exacerbated in times of economic and ecological crisis when women's unpaid labour acts as a stabilizer and their burden increases. For example, reference to the root causes of excessive food price volatility, including its structural causes, is not linked to the risks and burdens that are disproportionately borne by women (para 116). Development is not sustainable if care and social reproduction are not recognized as intrinsically linked with the productive economy and reflected in macroeconomic policy-making.



Reference is made to the critical role that rural women play in food security through traditional sustainable agricultural practices including traditional seed supply systems (para 109). However these are under severe threat unless governments stop prioritising export oriented agribusiness. The reason why such wrong-headed policies are not adequately addressed is because of corporate interests that are protected in the Rio+20 outcome.

Northern governments advocating for such corporate interests have warped the sustainable development paradigm in the so-called 'green economy' that is skewed toward the economic pillar, emphasising sustained economic growth over equitable development and without any ecological limits. Within this section women are regarded as either welfare recipients or as a supplier of labor for the green economy, but not acknowledged as rights holders, especially of economic, social and cultural rights (paras 58k & l).

The 'green economy' concept is somewhat challenged in the text by an affirmation of diverse visions, models and approaches to development as well as the policy space to integrate all three dimensions of sustainable development (para 56). While the recognition of policy space and sovereignty over natural resources, is important, there is a need to deeply question a development model that is based on extractivism and that fails to take into account social and ecological costs.

While the Rio principles including common but differentiated responsibilities are reaffirmed at Rio+20, the outcome is imbalanced across the three pillars of sustainable development without sufficient attention to gender and social justice, including women's rights. It fails to tackle the systemic inequities of the international monetary, financial and trading systems; and prioritises economic growth over the ecology and equity.

Feminists across the global South will continue to demand that governments stop regressing on their commitments and begin to seriously address the structural transformations that are required for genuine sustainable development.

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