

Gender Inclusivity: Involving Women, Girls and the Boy-child in Sustainable Development

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Gender Inclusivity: Involving Women, Girls and the Boy-child in Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the need to foster gender inclusivity for Sustainable Development. The paper argues that involving women, girls and the boy-child is crucial towards achieving Sustainable Development across all its dimensions including economic growth, social equity and environmental conservation. It discusses ways through which women, girls and the boy-child contribute towards attaining Sustainable Development. Despite their crucial role in the Sustainable Development agenda, the paper notes that women, girls and the boy-child face discrimination and are usually excluded from decision-making processes undermining inclusive and equitable development. Consequently, the paper proposes ways through which women, girls and the boy-child can be involved in Sustainable Development towards gender inclusivity.

1.0 Introduction

Gender describes the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed¹. It has been argued that gender includes norms, behaviour and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other². The term gender has also been defined as the roles, behavior, activities, and attributes that a given society at a given time considers appropriate for men, women, boys and girls³. It has been observed that the attributes, opportunities and relationships that comprise gender are socially constructed and are learned through socialization

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¹ World Health Organization., 'Gender and Health' Available at https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1 (Accessed on 07/07/2025)

² Ibid

³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Gender' Available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/glossary/249> (Accessed on 07/07/2025)

processes⁴. Since gender is a social construct, it varies from society to society and can change over time⁵.

Gender is fundamental in the Sustainable Development discourse. According to the United Nations, gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but it is also a necessary foundation for a more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world⁶. It has been argued that gender equity and inclusivity, centered in human rights, is both a development goal on its own and a vital tool to accelerating Sustainable Development and unless women, girls and the boy-child are able to fully realize their rights in all spheres of life, an all-inclusive human development will not be achieved⁷.

The United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁸ acknowledges that fostering gender equality and empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution towards progress across all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their targets⁹. SDG 5 seeks to uphold gender equity and equality and empowerment of all women and girls by ensuring effective, meaningful and full participation of women and equal opportunities at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life including access to ownership and control over land and natural resources¹⁰. Achieving gender equality is therefore vital for Sustainable Development.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ World Health Organization., 'Gender and Health' Op Cit

⁶ United Nations., 'Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/> (Accessed on 07/07/2025)

⁷ United Nations Development Programme, 'Gender Equality' available at <http://www.africa.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/gender-equality/overview.html> (Accessed on 07/07/2025)

⁸ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 07/07/2025)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

This paper critically examines the need to foster gender inclusivity for Sustainable Development. The paper argues that involving women, girls and the boy-child is crucial towards achieving Sustainable Development across all its dimensions including economic growth, social equity and environmental conservation. It discusses ways through which women, girls and the boy-child contribute towards attaining Sustainable Development. Despite their crucial role in the Sustainable Development agenda, the paper notes that women, girls and the boy-child face discrimination and usually excluded from decision-making processes undermining inclusive and equitable development. Consequently, the paper proposes ways through which women, girls and the boy-child can be involved in Sustainable Development towards gender inclusivity.

2.0 Role of Women, Girls and the Boy-child in Sustainable Development

Women, girls and the boy-child are crucial agents in the quest towards Sustainable Development. For example, it has been argued that the role of women and girls in Sustainable Development is multidimensional and their voices need to be included at every stage towards achieving the environmental, economic, and social aspects of sustainability¹¹. Women and girls comprise a majority of the population in most countries and are not just on the frontlines of development goals but are also deeply impacted by environmental, social, and economic issues, at times more than men and boys¹². According to the United Nations, women and girls are more vulnerable to the most pressing challenges of our time including climate change, biodiversity loss, conflicts, violence and economic crises¹³. However, they also possess ideas and leadership to solve these challenges towards Sustainable Development¹⁴.

¹¹ Role of Women in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Available at <https://www.mahilahousingtrust.org/role-of-women-in-achieving-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs/#:~:text=Women%20are%20more%20closely%20related,are%20all%20key%20sustainability%20areas.> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

¹² Ibid

¹³ United Nations Women., 'Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

¹⁴ Ibid

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It has been argued that women and girls have a critical role to play in unlocking all of the SDGs, with many targets specifically recognizing gender inclusivity and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution towards Sustainable Development¹⁵. The United Nations points out that achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls globally is integral to each of the 17 SDGs¹⁶. By giving women and girls a voice in the Sustainable Development agenda, it is possible to foster justice and inclusion, economies that work for all, and sustain our shared environment now and for future generations¹⁷.

Involving women and girls in Sustainable Development can therefore accelerate progress across all the SDGs. For instance, gender inclusivity is key towards fostering quality education for women and girls enabling them to lead fulfilling lives and empowering them to be more involved in their societies¹⁸. In addition, empowered women and girls make sound and informed health decisions benefitting themselves, their families and societies¹⁹. Gender inclusivity also provides women and girls with economic opportunities therefore fueling economic growth, enhancing access to decent work, and reducing poverty and inequality²⁰. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), gender equity and inclusivity is considered a critical element in achieving decent work for all women and men, in order to effect social and institutional change that leads to Sustainable Development²¹.

Gender inclusivity is also crucial towards achieving environmental sustainability. It has been observed that women and girls have always been at the heart of environmental

¹⁵ United Nations Women., 'Women and Sustainable Development Goals' Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2322UN%20Women%20Analysis%20on%20Women%20and%20SDGs.pdf> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

¹⁶ United Nations Women., 'Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' Op Cit

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Role of Women in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)., Op Cit

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ International Labour Organisation, Gender and Development, available at [http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/economic-and-social-development/gender-anddevelopment/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/economic-and-social-development/gender-anddevelopment/lang-en/index.htm) (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

stewardship throughout human history²². They manage natural resources with multiple and diverse roles within the family and community, such as collecting water, fuel, and food²³. Therefore, embracing the voices of women and girls is crucial in fostering environmental sustainability since they often have deep knowledge of their local ecosystems and are habitually the primary caregivers and providers for their families²⁴. For example, since their daily lives often bring them in contact with nature, women and girls especially those in rural areas play a critical role in protecting biodiversity and its benefits for people and planet²⁵. Further, given their position on the frontlines of the climate crisis, women and girls are uniquely situated to be agents of change providing innovative solutions to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Women play a crucial role in strengthening climate action and conserving biodiversity by practicing sustainable agriculture in harmony with nature, preserving crop biodiversity, protecting pollinators, preserving ecosystems including forests, responding to climate emergencies and spearheading global and national climate movements²⁶. Upholding gender inclusivity is therefore vital in ensuring that women and girls are empowered for Sustainable Development.

The boy-child also has a vital role to play in the quest towards Sustainable Development. According to the United Nations, the boy-child is key to building the peaceful, inclusive, prosperous and strong societies envisioned under the Sustainable Development

²² Sharma. N., 'Role of Women in Environmental Protection' Available at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/role-women-environmental-protection-neha-sharma-luksc#:~:text=Throughout%20the%20history%2C%20Women%20have,%2C%20fuel%2C%20and%20food%20etc.> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

²³ Ibid

²⁴ International Union for Conservation of Nature., 'Empowering the Unheard: Why women's voices are crucial in environmental policy and action' Available at <https://iucn.org/story/202303/empowering-unheard-why-womens-voices-are-crucial-environmental-policy-and-action> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

²⁵ United Nations Development Programme., 'Cultivating resilience: Women's leadership in biodiversity conservation' Available at <https://www.undp.org/blog/cultivating-resilience-womens-leadership-biodiversity-conservation> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

²⁶ United Nations., 'Why women are key to climate action' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/women> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

agenda²⁷. It has been argued that empowering the boy-child is vital in ensuring that all children and the youth have equal opportunities to reach their potential and make positive contributions in their families and societies towards Sustainable Development²⁸. Empowering the boy child has been identified as an integral part of the broader goal of fostering more just and equitable societies²⁹. By breaking down stereotypes against the boy-child, providing them with access to education, offering mentorship and role models, and ensuring their health and well-being, the boy-child can become responsible, compassionate, and empowered individuals who will contribute positively to their families and societies³⁰. It has been observed that young people all over the world including the boy-child are contributing to the resilience of their communities, proposing innovative solutions, driving social progress and inspiring political change for Sustainable Development³¹. For example, the youth are raising their voices, spearheading climate initiatives for a sustainable future, calling for immediate climate action and inspiring change through grassroots movements and worldwide campaigns on climate change³². It has been argued that the knowledge, reach and innovative solutions of young people are essential if Sustainable Development is to be realized³³.

Women, girls and the boy-child therefore play a pertinent role in the quest towards Sustainable Development. However, they continue to face discrimination and marginalization undermining gender inclusivity and its role in ensuring Sustainable

²⁷ United Nations., 'Harnessing the Potential of Boys and Girls to Fulfil the Promise of the Sustainable Development Goals' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/harnessing-potential-boys-and-girls-fulfil-promise-sustainable-development-goals> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

²⁸ United Nations Children's Fund., 'UNICEF and the Sustainable Development Goals' Available at <https://www.unicef.org/sustainable-development-goals> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

²⁹ Empowering the Boy Child: The Key to Africa's Brighter Future., Available at <https://perk-africa.com/empowering-the-boy-child-the-key-to-africas-brighter-future/> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ United Nations., 'Youth and the SDGs' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/youth/#:~:text=Innovators%3A%20In%20addition%20to%20bringing,new%20ideas%20and%20alternative%20solutions> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

³² Ibid

³³ United Nations Development Programme., 'Fast Facts: Youth as Partners for the Implementation of the SDGs' Available at <https://www.undp.org/publications/fast-facts-youth-partners-implementation-sdgs> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

Development. It has been observed that wide gender disparities are present in economic, social and political spheres globally³⁴. For example, limited access to formal education in some countries, gender-based violence, early and forced marriages and the denial of sexual and reproductive health rights and services are some of the major gender inequalities facing women and girls all over the world³⁵. Further, it has been noted that inequities and inequalities in global and national economic policies condemn women and girls to precarious forms of employment; increase their burden of unpaid care work; undermine their livelihoods as small- scale farmers; and hinder their access to essential public services such as safe and reliable urban and rural transport services, which in turn hampers access to health and education among other essential services³⁶. Weak land rights and exclusion from environmental decision-making processes also undermine the role of women in environmental sustainability³⁷.

In addition, many societies have given much attention to uplifting the girl-child to a level that the boy-child has virtually been forgotten³⁸. It has been argued that the low or no concern towards the boy-child has led to deterioration of boys' performance in several areas including educational performance and social interaction³⁹. The boy-child is also severely affected by conflicts that are happening globally. Conflicts undermine the right of the boy-child to education and healthcare while also displacing them from their

³⁴ United Nations Women., 'Women and Sustainable Development Goals' Op Cit

³⁵ Kron. A., 'Gender Equality, Children's Rights and Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/childrens-rights-and-sustainable-development/gender-equality-childrens-rights-and-sustainable-development/AFF4AF3A40F3FBB0B99B53D43C26A2F2> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

³⁶ Upholding Women's Human Rights through the Means of Implementation in the Sustainable Development Agenda., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/15943Upholding%20Women%20Human%20Rights%20through%20the%20Means%20of%20Implementation.pdf> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

³⁷ Geneva Environment Network., 'Gender and the Environment' Available at <https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/gender-and-the-environment/> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

³⁸ The Plight of the Boy Child., Available at <https://gnrc.net/blog/the-plight-of-the-boy-child/#:~:text=We%20can%20all%20agree%20that,%2C%20love%2C%20security%20and%20success.> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

³⁹ Ibid

families⁴⁰. Boys are also often recruited as child soldiers in conflicts with severe consequences for their physical and mental well-being⁴¹. Further, it has been observed that young people all over the world including the boy-child are facing various forms of discrimination, limited political inclusion, high levels of poverty, and limited access to health systems, educational opportunities and decent jobs hindering progress towards Sustainable Development⁴².

In light of the foregoing challenges, it is imperative to foster gender inclusivity by involving women, girls and the boy-child in Sustainable Development.

3.0 Involving Women, Girls and the Boy-child in Sustainable Development

Gender inclusivity is at the heart of Sustainable Development. Women, girls and the boy-child play crucial roles in the quest towards sustainability. However, they continue to face discrimination, marginalization and inequalities undermining their role as agents of change and development⁴³. Advancing gender inclusivity is therefore vital in unlocking the Sustainable Development agenda. According to the United Nations, advancing gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy and prosperous societies, from poverty reduction to promoting the health, education, protection and the well-being of women, girls and the boy-child⁴⁴.

Achieving gender inclusivity involves eliminating all the barriers hindering women and girls from fully participating in the economic, social, political and environmental spheres of life. This can be achieved by ensuring that women and girls enjoy equal access to quality education, healthcare, economic resources, finance and political participation as

⁴⁰ United Nations., 'Harnessing the Potential of Boys and Girls to Fulfil the Promise of the Sustainable Development Goals' Op Cit

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² United Nations Development Programme., 'Fast Facts: Youth as Partners for the Implementation of the SDGs' Op Cit

⁴³ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa., 'Gender equality and the empowerment of women' Available at <https://www.uneca.org/gender-equality-and-empowerment-women> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

⁴⁴ United Nations., 'Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' Op Cit

well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels for Sustainable Development⁴⁵. Gender equality and inclusivity seeks to ensure that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development⁴⁶. It has been argued that combating all forms of discrimination against women and girls in all fields of life, and ensuring full, meaningful and effective participation for women and girls in all decision-making processes including political, social, economic, cultural and environmental decision-making can enhance gender inclusivity for Sustainable Development⁴⁷.

It is also vital to eliminate violence against women and girls which is manifested in various forms including domestic abuse, sexual assault, harmful traditional practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation⁴⁸. Violence against women and girls undermine their human rights and restricts their full and equal participation in all spheres of life thus threatening the quest towards Sustainable Development⁴⁹. Further, the social and economic costs resulting from violence against women and girls places a substantial burden on society as a whole, significantly hampering efforts towards development⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

⁴⁶ United Nations Children's Fund., 'Gender Equality' Available at <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/1761/file/Genderglossarytermsandconcepts.pdf> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

⁴⁷ United Nations Development Programme, 'Gender Equality' Op Cit

⁴⁸ A Call to Action: Investing in a Future Free from Violence., Available at <https://usaidthero.ku.ac.ke/a-call-to-action-investing-in-a-future-free-from-violence/> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

⁴⁹ International Planned Parenthood Federation., 'Gender Equality: The Key to Ending Violence against Women' Available at https://www.ippf.org/sites/default/files/violence_against_women_and_girls_-_gender_equality.pdf (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

⁵⁰ Ending Violence against Women and Girls - Protecting Human Rights: Good Practices for Development Cooperation., Available at <https://www.rewi.hu-berlin.de/de/lf/lb/bae/w/files/lspbdf/enendingviolenceagainstwomenandgirls.pdf> (Accessed on 08/07/2025)

Empowering the boy-child is also vital in the quest towards Sustainable Development. It has been argued that when provided with the necessary skills and opportunities needed to reach their potential, young people including the boy-child can be a driving force for supporting development and contributing to peace and security⁵¹. It is therefore necessary to empower both girls and the boy-child through education, and access to opportunities in the economic, social, and political spheres in order to fully realise their potential as agents of Sustainable Development⁵².

4.0 Conclusion

Gender inclusivity is at the heart of Sustainable Development ensuring that women, girls and the boy-child are involved in the journey towards sustainability. Women, girls and the boy-child are important agents of change whose contribution is necessary if the Sustainable Development agenda is to be realised⁵³. It is therefore vital to foster gender inclusivity by embracing the participation of women, girls and the boy-child in economic, social, political, cultural and environmental spheres of life⁵⁴. Further, the boy child should not be neglected and needs to be empowered through education, access to decent work and employment opportunities, finance and economic opportunities, and involvement in decision-making processes in all spheres of life⁵⁵. Fostering gender inclusivity is therefore a vital ideal that needs to be fast-tracked towards involving women, girls and the boy-child in Sustainable Development.

⁵¹ United Nations., 'Youth and the SDGs' Op Cit

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ United Nations Women., 'Women and Sustainable Development Goals' Op Cit

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ United Nations., 'Youth and the SDGs' Op Cit

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