

“Women, Faith and Sustainable Development”  
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**Gender is Socially Constructed:** In *Staying Alive*, Vandana Shiva explains how understanding women and men’s roles as biologically determined is connected to environmentally unsustainable practices. She connects biological death to death of the feminine principle. In nature and in women, this death takes place by associating passivity with the feminine. In nature and men, death occurs when men move away from creativity to destruction and domination. Sustainable behavior must begin with the understanding that gender relations are socially constructed. Drawing on her Vedic Hindi heritage in her analysis of global environmental problems, Shiva links environmental sustainability with the wisdom of many life affirming traditional practices. Sustainable Development occurs when we affirm feminine principles as self-generated, nonviolent, creative activity and male principles as empowering activity. Environmental degradation occurs when violence and aggression become the model of male activity with women and nature turned into passive objects of violence.

**Vision for Flourishing:** But there is more to life than just staying alive. This is where faith comes in. In his latest book, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*, Miroslav Volf (2016) describes how world religions, despite their malfunctions, remain one of our most potent sources of moral motivation. They contain within them profoundly evocative accounts of human flourishing. Globalization should be judged by how well it serves us for living out our authentic humanity as envisioned within these traditions. Through renewal and reform, peaceful religious pluralism enables us to ask “as we remake the world, what *kind of world* are we making? What does it mean to live good lives in a globalizing world?” Faith traditions have resources useful for sustainable development. But relatively few groups actually become publicly engaged.

**Empowerment Amid State Devolution:** And there is good reason for caution *lest their engagement become an argument for letting states off the hook* for shouldering responsibility for financing sustainable development. In the United States, politicians

turned to the religious community to take on the government's responsibility for providing for the general welfare at the turn of the century. At the time, Ram Cnaan questioned whether the religious community had the capacity and capability to carry the additional burden. As early as 1999, he cautioned against romanticizing religious capabilities. When he did the math, each religious organization would have to more than double their entire budget just to make up for the social service cuts being considered at the time (Cnaan 1999:17). "[R]eligious-based organizations should be considered a valuable community resource in a pool of caring public and non-profit organizations," says Cnaan, "not the sole source of salvation" (Cnaan 1999:17). Drawing upon womanist black theology, Chanequi Barnes warns about how views of minority women being strong can result in them being given too heavy of a burden to bear. The ideology of minority women's strength and independence constrains their lives and predisposes them to physical problems.

**Differential Environmental Impacts:** Environmental impacts do not affect women and men in the same ways (Stevens 2010). Take climate change. Women and men often do different work. Women's domestic duties can require more time as a result of climate-related water shortages, reduced mobility, and deforestation meaning less time is available for schooling or paid work. Adjusting the male work model to fit the needs of women who bear most of the responsibility for children means more than offering micro-loans; it means addressing the work/life balance (Stevens 2010:2). Women who manage to survive often lack legal assets and rights to property. Livelihood scarcity leaves women to head households without the social stature or material resources to do so.

**Differential Contributions:** Women are not merely victims. Women have important perspectives and indigenous knowledge important to sustainable solutions. Because women tend to do caregiving, they bring a wide age structure of children and the elderly when they get involved in social change. Inger Furseth compared the role of women in four historic religious and political movements in Norwegian history. She found that women were drawn to religious rather than political movements because in *religious* movements, they addressed everyday life issues related to their focus on individuals

within the private sphere of home, family or community of faith (2001:115). The rewards of joining the religious movements translated into immediate improvement for themselves and their families and connected to their positions in family formation and socialization practices. The *social changes* they initiated were comparatively stable because they affected a broader segment of the population. Women often used their homes as basic units for organizing within the movement, especially as a survival strategy during periods of repression and opposition (2001:124). Women's religious involvement was often organized in opposition to the state *church* as well as the society. The religious movement organizations provided women with leadership roles which *partly embraced* and *partly subverted* dominant ideals about gender relations (Furseth 2001:117). A similar pattern was observed among Egyptian women in Arab Spring pictured here with a wide age structure (Shanahan and Williams 2011).

**The Multiplier Effect:** Investing directly in women can have a multiplier effect on poor economies (Stevens 2010:3). When financial aid is put in men's hands, it can lead to a higher amount wasted on personal use. But when women are engaged as active players in economic development, often the quality of life is also improved for the most vulnerable members of the society. In Indonesia, almost 14% of the population representing 9 million households are headed by women due to the incapacity or absence of a male family member. If these women are not recognized as head of household, they are excluded from government programs for subsidised rice, health care and cash transfers. PEKKA (Pemberdayaan Perempuan Kepala Keluarga) is an Indonesian non-governmental organisation that focuses on empowerment for female headed households by providing support structures for legal mobilisation to a population of Muslim women who are substantially disconnected from the state (Curnow, 2015:214-15). This self-directed women's grassroots empowerment program now operates in 19 provinces with a network of 749 groups and a membership of almost 17,000 female heads of household bringing benefits to approximately 100,000 of their family members (Curnow 2015:220). Women who were previously 'invisible' from the public arena are becoming empowered as active, legitimate community members.

**Wide Chasm:** But a wide chasm remains between vulnerable women and institutional decision makers. The Sustainable Development Goals emphasize gender equality as a key theme throughout the agenda, but the distance between grassroots everyday living and policy making can result in devastating unintended consequences despite the best of intentions.

**Making Conditions Visible:** Sabina Alkire, an ordained priest in the Church of England, hopes that a data revolution will address this chasm by making women's conditions more visible to policymakers. Her commitment to humanity and justice contributed to her sense of calling to create the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) for sustainable development. Drawing on the work of Amartya Sen, the index uses 10 weighted indicators in three areas: *health* (measured by nutrition and child mortality), *education* (with years of schooling and school attendance as proxies) and *living standards* (assessed by access to electricity, sanitation, water, type of floor, cooking fuel, and ownership of basic assets) (Wheatley 2015:2-4). Alkire's vocational calling to economics comes from her deep spiritual search for ways of helping the world's poor as a practical expression of her faith (Wheatley, 2015:5). Without accurate data, it is difficult to glean empirical lessons about how women, faith and sustainable development interrelate in the real world. So how is the MPI index being used, and what are we learning as a consequence?

**Some Empirical Lessons:** In 2010, the indicator was used to gather data from 11 countries in Central Africa (Tchouassi 2012). As the Multidimensional poverty index changed, environmental problems reduced. The *empirical* lesson from this study was clear: "better use of the Central Africa region's female population could reduce inequality and poverty, enhance economic, social and environmental well-being, increase economic growth, and help ensure sustainable development in all the 11 countries" (Tchouassi 2012:396).

**Conclusion:** Women of faith and faith communities are both making positive contributions to sustainable development. But the affirmation of life requires adjustments to how gender roles are frequently lived out. The social construction of gender roles contributes to both

the problem *and* the solution. Although women are more impacted by environmental degradation than men, when empowered, they tend to bring more stable and broad based changes to the community. Investing in women has a multiplier effect for environmental sustainability. When women exercise leadership roles in *religious* movement organizations, they *partly embrace* and *partly subvert* dominant ideals about gender relations. If gender equality keeps us alive, but it is spirituality that enables us to thrive, perhaps *subversive embrace* of the complex interplay between women, faith and sustainability will show us the road to human flourishing.

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