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Women empowerment and cultural sustainable development

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Abstract - This study looks at digitalization from a gender and development perspective. It investigates which countries and, within countries, which segments of the population have been able thus far to benefit from the dynamism provided by digitalization, especially through e-commerce and technological advances in agriculture. The study points to digital divides between developed and developing countries, as well as to other divides linked to gender, age and socioeconomic factors that determine individual's ability to have access to digital technologies and use them in a productive and beneficial manner.

Cultural sustainability as it relates to sustainable development (or to sustainability), has to do with maintaining cultural beliefs, cultural practices, heritage conservation, culture as its own entity, and the question of whether or not any given cultures will exist in the future. From cultural heritage to cultural and creative industries, culture is both an enabler and a driver of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.¹ The importance of cultural sustainability lies within its influential power over the people, as decisions that are made within the context of society are heavily weighed by the beliefs of that society.²

Key words: Empowerment, Sustainable Development, Growth, Gender, Environment.

Introduction - Women, who make up half of the world's population, have benefited more than men from the progress in economic and social development in the last three decades. Nevertheless they continue to be overrepresented among the world's most vulnerable groups, as access to resources and power remains highly skewed towards men. Gender equality is a goal in its own right but also a key factor for sustainable economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability.³

The concept of empowerment - Empowerment can be defined as a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important". Women's empowerment means women gaining more power and control over their own lives. This entails the idea of women's continued disadvantage compared to men which is apparent in different economic, socio-cultural and political spheres.

She can determine her own choices, and has access to opportunities and resources providing her with an array of options she can pursue. She has control over her own life, both within and outside the home and she has the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, both nationally and internationally.⁴

Gender role expectations are institutionalized through legislative, educational, political and economic systems. Women need to be "empowered" in order to narrow the "gender gap" and to create an equal playing field between women and men before gender equality

can be reached and maintained. In the late 1980s the report *Our Common Future* by the World Commission on Environment and Development defined the concept “sustainable development” as development which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. While aiming to maximize the well-being of today’s generation, it is important to take a long-term perspective, taking into account the consequences of our actions for our children, their children and grandchildren, ensuring that the resources they will require for their own well-being are not depleted, and that the natural environment into which they will be born will not be polluted or destroyed.⁵ Sustainable development is conceptualized as resting on three interrelated pillars: economic development, social development and environmental protection.

A fourth pillar – the preservation of cultural diversity has been proposed. This conceptual categorization might lead to treating these areas in isolation without accounting for a whole range of channels through which these pillars reinforce each other and bring about sustainable development. Instead, by taking an integrated and holistic approach to socio-culturally responsible, environmentally-friendly economic development, sustainable development can be revealed as a multifaceted and dynamic process.⁶

1. Sustainable development has been defined by World Commission on Environment and Development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.⁷

2. **Cultural heritage** - Cultural memorabilia and artifacts from a culture's history maintain an important role in modern society as they are kept as relics and shrines in order to remember the stories, knowledge, skills and methods of ancestors and learn invaluable lessons from the past. Today, cultures use libraries, art exhibits and museums as a placeholder for these important objects and other culturally significant artifacts.⁸ Cultural buildings such as museums oftentimes fail to receive the funding it needs to continue the preservation of culturally significant artifacts. Human-centered design and cultural collaboration have been popular frameworks for sustainable development in marginalized communities.⁹ These frameworks involve open dialogue which entails sharing, debating, and discussing, as well as holistic evaluation of the site of development.

Empowering women for cultural sustainable development - Women’s empowerment is a process and Sustainable development encompasses socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects and thus covers an enormously wide domain. So far gender issues have been primarily dealt with as a social issue. This is reflected in the areas of poverty reduction, education and health care in the Millennium Development Goals. UNDP coordinates global and national efforts to integrate gender equality and women’s empowerment into poverty reduction, democratic

governance, crisis prevention and recovery, and environment and sustainable development.¹⁰

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), otherwise known as the Global Goals, are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. UNDP focuses on gender equality and women’s empowerment not only as human rights, but also because they are a pathway to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and sustainable development.¹¹

An overview of digitalization and digital transformation

- According to the organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Digitalization is the use of digital technologies and data as well as interconnection that results in new or changes to existing activities. These processes lead to shape what is commonly referred to as the digital economy.

There is not a universally agreed definition of the digital economy; the OECD (2020) defines it as “all economic activity reliant on, or significantly enhanced by the use of digital inputs, including digital technologies, digital infrastructure, digital services and data. It refers to all producers and consumers, including government, that are utilizing these digital inputs in their economic activities”.¹² The digital transformation that was experienced over the last 20 years has not only changed the way that people communicate, but also impacted the way the economy functions.¹³

Major global and regional commitments to overcome the digital and gender divides

- According to Kularski and Moller (2012), “the digital divide is composed of a skill gap and a gap of physical access to Information Technology (IT) and the two gaps often contribute to each other in circular causation. Without access to technology, it is difficult to develop technical skills and it is redundant to have access to technology without first having the skill to utilize it”. The gender digital divide is referred to by Thystrup (2020) as the “impaired access to IT infrastructure or IT skills education based on gender”.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals - Among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 5 aims at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Target b sets a clear link between ICT and women’s empowerment: “Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women”. Progress towards its fulfillment is tracked by measuring the “Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex”. SDG 8 promotes sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Digitalization can prove instrumental in achieving higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation¹⁴.

E-commerce opportunities E-commerce can help small businesses – many of which in developing countries are owned by women – by reducing the initial investment costs

needed to begin operations. The greater time flexibility associated with online versus offline trade and the possibility to work from any location represent advantages for women who are time and mobility constrained (World Bank and WTO, 2020). Digital solutions that remove the need for face-to-face interactions can also help women overcome discrimination.

As citizens, women can interact with national and local administrations in a more streamlined, transparent and less time-consuming manner. Technology has the potential to improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability of public administration, which can improve women's access to information, upon condition that investments are made to help women acquire digital skills at par with men.

The gender digital divide - drivers and barriers In addition to digital divides between countries at different levels of development, access and use of digital technologies are also affected by gender.

Women are on average poorer than men and tend to have limited control of household income, they may therefore opt for a basic subscription that allows only limited use of the Internet.¹⁵ They may also have less access to devices, such as smart phones or laptops, which has an impact on the possibility to use the Internet for business or educational purposes. Among the 23 LDCs where statistics on gender disaggregated mobile phone ownership are available, ownership among women is 13 per cent less than that of men.

Digitalization in agriculture - the challenges and opportunities for women - In certain cases, as observed in some African countries, women do not have the legal or customary right to own land. By doing so, digital technologies can facilitate the integration of smallholders into the domestic and global value chains, both upstream and downstream, in turn becoming an important instrument for reducing rural poverty and contributing to more sustainable and inclusive development.¹⁶ As financial considerations 226 CHAPTER 11 can be a constraint for the adoption of digital technologies, especially in the LDCs, government policies (in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders and in a context in which digital cooperation at the global level is enhanced) are critical to help support safe and affordable access to the Internet.¹⁷

Policy recommendations - This study examined the opportunities that digitalization can provide. It has identified gaps between and within countries that, if not addressed, risk leaving behind countries and those segments of the population that are already at the margin of globalization. The focus of the analysis has been on the promises that digitalization can especially bring to women, but also on the gendered barriers and challenges they face. The agricultural sector was selected for sectoral analysis both because it remains a female-intensive sector in many developing countries and because digitalization is a rapidly growing trend within agriculture.

The 2030 Agenda and other global commitments affirm that technological capabilities, especially in ICT, are critical to support women's empowerment, as well as economic productivity, international cooperation, and more sustainable patterns of production and consumption. Technological capabilities set a virtuous circle between access to technology, women's economic empowerment and overall development.

Sustainable tourism - Tourism is a traveling method for which people can venture to different areas of the globe and experience new ways of living, and explore landscapes not native to their country of origin. Tourism is constantly being criticized for its impact on the social, political and environmental landscapes due to its high volume of mass consumers. Within the realm of tourism exists more sustainable practices and ideals that are aligned with the idea of cultural sustainability.

Conclusion - Since digitalization is expected to keep expanding in the coming years, commitments to close gender gaps and digital divides need to be translated into concrete policies and initiatives.¹⁸

Cultural sustainability can be regarded as a fundamental issue, even a precondition to be met on the path towards sustainable development. However, the theoretical and conceptual understanding of cultural sustainability within the general frames of sustainable development remains vague. And consequently, the role of culture is poorly implemented in the environmental, as well as political and social policy. Determining the impact of cultural sustainability is found by investigating the concept of culture in the context of sustainable development, through multidisciplinary approaches and analyses. This means examining the best practices for bringing culture into political and social policy as well as practical domains, and developing means and indicators for assessing the impacts of culture on sustainable development.

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Foot note

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