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# Gendered vulnerabilities and the blind spots of the 2030 Agenda's 'leave no one behind' pledge

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## ABSTRACT

Agenda 2030 with the Sustainable Development Goals makes the transformative pledge to 'leave no one behind.' This paper asks how Agenda 2030 bring certain gendered vulnerabilities to light and make others invisible, and how this affects that transformative pledge. Through a close reading supported by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's discourse theory we explore the concept of gender in Agenda 2030 and how it captures gendered vulnerabilities. For contrast, we analyzed a statement by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) activists.

## KEYWORDS

Gender; sustainable development goals; development policy; vulnerability

## Introduction

No discursive-political framework has had a greater impact on the world of global development work over the last five years than Agenda 2030 with the Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs). As a universally endorsed framework consisting of seventeen goals that encompass most issues relevant for human and planetary development, the SDGs enjoy a status as the standard that will set the world on a path towards sustainable development and, by extension, healthy lives on a healthy planet. 'Gender equality' is one of these seventeen goals.

'Gender' in fact figures both as a stand-alone goal on gender equality and as a crosscutting concern in the Agenda. The concept sits within an unresolved and at times contradictory discourse around gender in the rather heterogeneous sphere of development policy. This muddled discourse is testament to a missing coherence between the traditional foci of gender programming in development and the multitude of gendered vulnerabilities that are perceived to exist just outside the grasp of these operationalizations. Central among these excluded vulnerabilities are those related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer persons (LGBTIQ), some of which are articulated within human rights discourse.

This paper starts from the vantage point of these contestations around gender in the development discourse, directing its focus at underlying questions of human vulnerability. We thus aim to answer the following questions: How does Agenda 2030 with the SDGs bring certain gendered vulnerabilities to light, and make others invisible? Moreover, how does this impact the agenda's ethos to 'leave no-one behind'?

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## Background

### *Agenda 2030 and the sustainable development goals*

The UN General Assembly adopted the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in September 2015, after over 3 years of extensive consultations, preparations and drafting known as the post-2015 process. They are the operational part of Agenda 2030, a comprehensive plan for building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to ensure sustainable health and well-being for all humans (Sandset, Engebretsen, and Heggen 2021). A central criticism of the MDGs had been that they were too narrow and technocratic, and that they were built on a problematic view of development as something that flows from the global North to the global South (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). It is in this context we must understand that ‘leave no-one behind’ became the agenda’s central ethos. The clean and narrow goal setting of the MDGs was replaced by explicit commitments to those groups and issues at risk of being ignored by global development efforts. ‘Leave no-one behind’ therefore reflects an intention for the Agenda to ‘focus [...] in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable’ (United Nations GA. 2015, 2), to ‘reach the furthest behind first’ (United Nations GA. 2015, 3), and to envision a ‘just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met’ (United Nations GA. 2015, 4).

Agenda 2030 in other words both emerges from, and is a central agenda-setting document for, global development policy and practice. In the early 1980’s, feminist criticism of development aid pointed out how women were seen neither as resources nor as rights holders, and that their (gender-) specific needs were not acknowledged by the sector. From this criticism emerged ‘women in development’ (WID) as a field of development studies and practice, where women’s potential as resources for development was the primary focus (Krook and True 2012). Feminists over time criticized WID for promoting an overly instrumentalized approach to women’s role in development. This led to the emergence of the ‘gender and development’ (GAD) perspective in which more attention was paid to the impact of gender norms on development issues (Krook and True 2012). However, the mainstream focus remained on women, and on traditional notions of women’s roles and challenges. This is largely the situation across the sector today. While programmes targeting LGBTIQ persons and programmes targeting men and boys specifically (rather than by default) do exist, these are very rarely framed as addressing the target groups’ gendered vulnerabilities. Rather, the former tends to be part of larger human rights and anti-discrimination programming while the latter tend to be aimed at men’s role in women’s marginalization or vulnerability (Wallacher, 2012; Olivius, 2016).

Nevertheless, as queer theory started gaining ground politically and in international activism, its influence has also been evident in the development policy discourse (Mason 2018). Queer development theory does not see ‘women’ as the a priori only oppressed position in terms of gender (Doan 2018). Rather, these scholars contend that the failure to approach gender as a category of analysis, and instead conflating the concept with ‘women,’ underscores the marginalization of LGBTIQ persons (Mekler in Mason (ed.) p 159). This perspective opens up for recognizing challenges and discrimination based on ‘non-conforming’ gender identities and sexuality as relevant for development, in addition

to how gender norms define masculinity and femininity in ways that impact all members of a society. These perspectives are still marginal in mainstream development policy and practice (Doan 2018).

### ***Gender contentions in development and human rights discourse at the UN***

The gendered development discourse at the UN remains, alongside the general mainstream development sector, anchored in the women-focused WID/GAD perspective, even as the discourse has matured to acknowledge the complex impact of gender roles and their intersection with other (vulnerable) group identities. However, within the intersecting human rights sphere we see that the elimination of discrimination and persecution on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) has been steadily (though contentiously) gaining ground over the last two decades (Mekler, 2018). The UN LGBTI Core Group,<sup>1</sup> for example ‘work within the UN framework on ensuring universal respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, specifically [LGBTI] persons [...] with a particular focus on protection from violence and discrimination (UN LGBTI Core Group 2020).’ Additionally, several UN organizations and actors within the development sphere, e.g. UNICEF and UNDP, are active in bringing forth research and recommendations pertaining to the state of LGBTIQ rights around the world (Gary and Ruben 2012; Lhant 2019). This underscores how, as Mekler (2018) notes, the understanding of gender as distinct from the binary notion of biological sex, and the relevance of this for a range of vulnerabilities, has a much more established position in the UN human rights discourse than in the UN development sphere, even as many of the same actors populate the two fields.

A number of states and UN actors have issued statements recognizing SOGIE issues as a serious human rights concern (Blondeel et al. 2018; Symons and Altman, 2015) although these rights are not explicitly recognized in politically or legally binding documents (Lhant 2019). Such developments are strongly resisted by states opposing the recognition of LGBTIQ rights with reference to religious or cultural values, among which many have serious domestic challenges regarding treatment of sexual minorities (Lhant 2019; Vik, Stensvold, and Moe 2013). This opposition towards a non-binary understanding of gender is sometimes referred to in the literature as ‘anti-genderism’ (Vik and Moe 2019). The actors opposing SOGIE rights overlap significantly (though not completely) with the opposition to progress on SRHR issues at the UN (Vik, Stensvold, and Moe 2013). Additionally, it is important to note the resistance against a non-binary notion of gender, and against all or parts of the SOGIE agenda, that existed and continues to exist among certain feminists and women’s rights activists (Otto 2015). This adds a further dimension of tension to the gender discourse at the UN, akin to the tensions addressed by Elias and Holliday in relation to the position of sex workers rights in the SDGs (Elias and Holliday 2019).

In sum, existing research paints a picture of an unresolved gender discourse within the development policy sphere. While central global development policies employ a binary notion of gender that centres traditional notions of women’s vulnerability, the wider development discourse has been increasingly influenced by the attention given to SOGIE-related vulnerabilities in human rights discourse. This creates a discursive tension for the development sector, which we seek to explore in our analysis.

## Theory and Methodology

In our effort to interrogate how the meanings that ‘gender’ is imbued with in Agenda 2030 makes certain gendered vulnerabilities come to light while hiding others, we turn to the discourse theory developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). Through applying core elements of their theoretical framework and paying close attention to how struggles to fill gender as a concept with meaning makes some vulnerabilities visible while obscuring other, we believe we can get closer to grasping what’s at stake in the articulations of gender in Agenda 2030. Even using the word ‘gender’ in UN development and human rights discourse remains contested, and contestations keep playing out in the way that the concept’s meaning is disputed and articulated in formal texts including the SDGs.

A central tenet of the discourse theory is that a full closure of meaning is at the same time an impossibility and a final goal for all discursive practices (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, 91). A discourse is therefore a partly successful attempted closure of meaning within a given field. Discourses are formed around ‘nodal points’, which are privileged discursive signs around which related discursive concepts, called ‘moments,’ are arranged into a meaningful whole. These moments largely derive their meaning from their relations with the nodal point (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, 99). We believe it is useful to analyze ‘gender’ as a nodal point in global sustainable development discourse and look at how other concepts (e.g. equity, discrimination, and empowerment) are given meaning within this specific discourse from their relationship with this central concept, and how they in turn give meaning to the nodal point. The heterogeneous meanings of ‘gender’ that we see within the wider UN discursive landscape suggests that the concept functions as a ‘floating signifier.’ It is potentially both unifying and divisive and is therefore the site of struggles between opposing discourses to fill it with meaning. At any time, there are therefore ranges of potential meanings that are not articulated in a discourse, but that could have been. It is useful to think of this as meanings that are assigned to a concept in other discourses, present or historic, but which are excluded from this specific discourse as it does not fit into its established articulations of meaning. This notion of a surplus of meaning echoes Lacan’s theory of the subject, particularly his understanding of the subject as something that is always overdetermined – that is, that the subject always has the potential of containing a multitude of sometimes contradictory identities (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, 99; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

In our case, we can observe the way that elements such as ‘identity’ and ‘expression’ are articulated as moments that give meaning to ‘gender’ in the human rights discourse, while these are excluded from the meaning-making around ‘gender’ in the Agenda 2030 discourse. This connecting of nodal points with moments to form articulated meanings are referred to in the discourse theory as ‘chains of equivalence’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, 115).

Laclau and Mouffe build their notion of hegemony on Gramsci’s concept of historic blocs, understood as hegemonic formations (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, 61). Fundamentally, the notion is that the ascription of meaning within the social, be it a reproduction or a change of meaning, is political in nature and concerned with struggles between competing discourses to constitute elements of the social (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). These acts of political meaning ascription are what is referred to as articulations in their discourse theory, and the means through which discourses work to

achieve, maintain, or challenge hegemony of meaning within a given field (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). It is precisely this foregrounding of the political in a discursive field that is interesting to our analysis. The articulations of ‘gender’ in the sustainable development discourse plays into larger political contestations around gender norms in global politics, and we believe that this discourse theory can help us critically examine how this plays out and how it influences which vulnerabilities come to light in the SDGs.

### ***Vulnerability and ‘leave no one behind’***

If Agenda 2030 pledges to ‘leave no-one behind’ and to focus on ‘the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable,’ this begs the question: Who are these ‘most vulnerable’? Who are ‘the furthest behind’? What does it mean to be vulnerable in the context of Agenda 2030? Maybe more importantly: what does it *not* mean? If we accept that ‘gender’ acts as a floating signifier in sustainable development discourse, it follows that the visibility of gendered vulnerabilities in the Agenda will depend on the prism created by the text’s articulation of gender. To understand the risk of these articulations excluding important gendered vulnerabilities from the scope of the Agenda and thus leave someone behind, we must first clarify what we mean by ‘gendered vulnerability.’

‘Vulnerability’ is not a static theoretical concept, but one that is invoked in a range of scholarly traditions that also include feminism and gender studies. Pulkkinen (2020) for example writes about the differences in how the concept is mobilized in the writings of the feminist scholars Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero. According to Pulkkinen, Cavarero employs a notion of gendered vulnerability that is built on ‘the gendered understanding of the transcendental philosophical subject,’ and seeks to address the injustice of ‘the cultural hegemony of the masculine.’ She thus illuminates the fundamental injustice of hegemonic masculinity and how this produces vulnerability for the gendered subject. Butler, on the other hand, is ‘questioning its very foundations of setting the scene in terms of a generalized transcendental subject that is conceived in no-time, no-space, in its generality,’ and addressing injustices related to a plurality of norms that limits the perceived humanity of certain subjects, including in gendered terms (Pulkkinen 2020, 162).

Outside the feminist discourse, Julia Kristeva’s writing about vulnerability in connection with disability (Kristeva 2010, 29–45) is interesting to look at, particularly as it has its roots in Lacan’s theory of the subject in common with Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory. There is an interesting parallel to our inquiry in her illumination of how ‘the irreducible singularity of being’ is denied in socio-medical discourse as singular subjects are grouped according to externally defined commonalities into what she refers to as ‘categories of difference.’ The differences that are seen and acknowledged are seen by this categorizing gaze as ‘categories of nonbeing’ in contrast to the perceived corresponding categories of the ‘full being’ of that which is perceived as normalcy (Engebretsen 2020).

We observe that for all their differences, which we will not be addressing here, both Butler and Kristeva illuminate the insufficiency of categories of vulnerability through their refusal of the notion of a transcendental human subject and in how they both bring to the fore how the normative gaze produces ‘categories of non-being’ (Kristeva) or

limited perceived humanity (Butler). Butler furthermore emphasizes how norms and social conditions create and shape vulnerabilities in ways that are contingent and fluctuating across time and space (Pulkkinen 2020, 158).

Kristeva points out how the subject somewhat analogous to the nodal points in discourse theory, are overdetermined; they have a greater potential meaning than they can contain, and this makes closure of meaning an impossibility. We see this in how gender expectations, norms, and understandings, as well as the linguistic structures for talking about these aspects of the human body, experience and expression differ and change across time and space. If we accept that these processes take place, they are likely to have a real impact on human vulnerability as conceived by Butler, not least through the constant negotiation of a subject's sense of self with gender norms that seek to establish clear and predetermined categories of being.

These critical approaches to vulnerability complement our use of the discourse theory to grasp what is at stake in the discursive struggle around the concept of 'gender' in the SDGs. They help illuminate how there is a vulnerability in having a singular body and a singular gender identity that is at odds with the categorizing expectations and norms of the hegemony of heteronormativity (Mekler 2018). Because of this vulnerability it becomes crucially important how the SDGs – 'determined to [...] ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment' and to 'leave no-one behind' (United Nations GA. 2015) – conceptualize gender.

Existing research that addresses gendered vulnerabilities from different angles helps ground our analysis in relevant empirical findings. In their study of gender in Australian alcohol policy, Duncan et al. (2020) remark on the tendency of these texts to 'enact women as vulnerable subjects whilst obscuring men, men's conduct and masculinities from discussions of violence and harm generally.' At the same time, they point out with reference to Krieger (2003) how gender can function as a demographic variable that, even when one recognizes it as a social category, is intimately tied up with biological sex in a way that facilitates 'clear and quantifiable categories of men and women' (Duncan, et al., 2020). Their study shows a strong tendency in their data material of constituting 'women' as a vulnerable category that must be managed and protected, while 'men' remain ungendered in the policies. There are obvious parallels here to the mobilization of gender in mainstream development discourse as described above. Duncan et al. focus on how the gendered aspects of alcohol consumption and its consequences that are not primarily tied to perceptions of women's vulnerabilities are made invisible in their data set. What they don't address in depth but that nevertheless is implicit in their analysis is how gendered vulnerabilities that don't map neatly onto the above-mentioned 'clear categories of men and women' with 'women' as the vulnerable gendered category are equally obscured.

The material vulnerabilities that affect many individuals and groups because of their failures to conform to gender norms and expectations are precisely those that are of concern to the SDGs, such as poverty, health inequalities and violence (OHCHR with ILO, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNODC, UN Women, WFP and WHO 2015). As an illustration, Bhattacharya and Ghosh (2020) provide a rich snapshot of research on adverse health outcomes for gender non-conforming persons as a background for their own study that shows poor health-related quality of life along

mental health parameters for gender non-conforming groups in India. They relate this to issues of ‘historical and sociocultural stressor’ such as poverty, violence, non-acceptance from the community, and discrimination (Bhattacharya and Ghosh 2020, 8). Furthermore, a critical scoping review on definitions, domains, and measures in empirical research on transgender stigma by King et al. (2020) illustrate a range of these vulnerabilities as they propose a definition of anti-trans stigma along structural, intra-personal and individual axes. Their call for future empirical research on transgender stigma to ‘identify how continuous creation and enforcement of the gender binary generates anti-trans stigma’ adds motivation to our inquiry into the blind spots of the gender discourse in Agenda 2030.

As we move forward with the analysis then, we will speak of gendered vulnerabilities as those belonging to the singular, emerging subject’s relationship with societal gender norms, and the SDGs’ ability to address these vulnerabilities.

## Analysis

It is noteworthy that the term ‘gender’ is in fact never defined in the Agenda 2030 text, an omission that is likely made strategically to accommodate the varying meanings actors imbue the term with. Instead, it is left as a floating signifier that the reader, implementer, and practitioner is tacitly expected to understand, shaped by the context in which the concept is used, or what in discourse theoretical terms are called the chains of equivalence, whereby specific moments are attached to the nodal point of gender. These chains of equivalence guide the reader’s gaze in very specific directions, determining which gendered vulnerabilities become visible and which are obscured, which in the final instance shapes the policies, priorities, and problem perceptions of the implementers and practitioners.

We may read ‘gender’ at two levels in the agenda: as a crosscutting or mainstreaming concern, and as the programmatic focus of one particular goal. It is particularly instructive when addressing gender as a crosscutting concern to look at the preamble to the resolution, where the intentions of the drafters and the text’s relations to prior and existing documents are addressed. In short, we find that where the word gender is used in the preamble, it is accompanied by a reference to women and girls, constructing chains of equivalence between these concepts. These references do not necessarily appear immediately before or after gender, but always within what we may term meaning-making clusters such as a sentence, a bullet point or a series of sentences making up an argument or stating a point. The total effect of this is to equate the word gender with the notion of women’s (and girls’) position in society, implicitly vis-à-vis men (and boys), although men and boys’ position appears not to be of any great concern in the text.

Gender first appears in a substantial way in the following clause of the preamble:

*‘We resolve, between now and 2030, [ . . . ]; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls [ . . . ]’; (preamble para 3)*

The floating nature of gender as a signifier opens up gender equality for the potential to embody not just equality between the male and female sexes, but also equality in the recognition of and protection against vulnerabilities related to gender in whichever way they manifest. It is the meaning attached to gender (and, to a lesser extent, to equality) that determines what the ideal of ‘gender equality’ looks like in the Agenda. It is fully



possible to imagine a discursive context where ‘gender equality’ signified an ideal state where gender norms did not construct vulnerabilities through cultural hierarchies or taboos related to any gendered features.

However, where gender next appears (§8), gender equality is portrayed as something that will be enjoyed by women and girls. The wide-ranging potential vulnerabilities stemming from gender norms and expectations, and the manifold and singular manifestations of their impact on all, also men and gender and sexual minorities, seems irrelevant.

*‘In §8: We envisage a world [. . .] in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality.’  
(preamble para 8)*

This equation of gender with improving women’s position is further cemented in §20. This paragraph strikingly makes the case for the necessity of mainstreaming gender throughout the agenda if the world is to meet the ambitious goals it has just set for itself. At the same time, it ties this concept closely to the empowerment of women and girls:

*‘Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. [. . .] The systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda is crucial.’*

Reading these quotes with Laclau and Mouffe, we ask what are the moments that are mobilized to give the nodal point ‘gender’ its meaning? We see that there are certain moments that appear tied to gender every time the concept is evoked, one of which is (in) equality. This is hardly surprising given that gender equality is in fact the explicit focus of SDG 5. Further, we see women and girls and empowerment as central to the articulations of gender in the preamble. The text builds a chain of equivalence where ‘gender’ is given meaning by its relationship to equality, women and girls, and empowerment. The policy implications of this are that the goal of gender work within the sustainable development goals is to empower women and girls in order to achieve equality, implicitly with men and boys. What this equality would entail is a question for a different inquiry. For now, we will let this chain of equivalence point us towards SDG 5 (Table 1) where gender is treated as a programmatic focus.

A striking observation is that the word gender hardly figures in the text of SDG5 at all. In fact, it appears only in the main goal formulation (‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’) and in point 5 c (‘Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels’). In both instances, it is followed by a reference to women and girls. The word women, in contrast, figures seven times, and the word girl four times. In all of these sub-goals (5.1 through 5 c), women or women and girls are articulated as the targets of the action that is required to reach the goal, and these actions again reflect the central mobilized moments of empowerment or (in)equality. In addition, we find moments alluding to (the need for) protection, such as violence and discrimination mobilized in sub-goal 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3.

The nodal point of gender is thus put in a chain of equivalence with the moment women (and/or women and girls) as target, the moment (in)equality, discrimination, and violence as concerns for the goals’ anonymous implementer, and the moments empowerment and protection as means towards the goals.

**Table 1.** Full text of SDG 5.

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate
5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life

The capacity of gender to encompass meanings related to sexuality or gender identities beyond the biological (perceived) binary is thus suppressed. In the context of ongoing debates around the position and meaning of the concept of gender in UN development discourse, this reinforces the traditionally hegemonic gender-as-women discourse. The counter-hegemonic SOGIE discourse has disappeared from view. What this means in practice is that the vulnerabilities that are visible and relevant for implementers of SDG 5 are narrowed, and that the gendered vulnerabilities that are not readily categorized as stemming from being 'a woman' in the heteronormative way become invisible. There is no space here for recognizing how the gender norms that create vulnerabilities for women also create vulnerabilities that cannot be categorized for all the singular subjects in process<sup>25, 26</sup> that at some point fall foul of these norms.

SOGIE-related gendered vulnerabilities are thus rendered invisible in the programmatic focus-area of 'gender' in the SDGs. However, the crosscutting function attributed to gender in the preamble suggests that we may look to the other substantive goals to see if they bring alternative gendered vulnerabilities to light.

A keyword search for gender\* (capturing gendered, genders etc.) reveals that any cross-cutting ambitions are limited to SDG 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all "(gender also appears in SDG 17 which is more of a meta-goal concerned with means of implementation). A closer reading of SDG 4 (Table 2) reveals that this is limited to an acknowledgement of both girls and boys (or women and men) as beneficiaries of the future achievement of the goals. Sub-goal 4.1, for example, reads as follows, 'By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes'.

This pulls a veil over the wide range of gendered vulnerabilities and particularly gender non-conformity. First, the recurrence of the phrases 'women and men' and "girls and boys have the cumulative effect of establishing a chain of equivalence that insists that the reader (as policy maker or practitioner) perceives – and looks for – the beneficiaries of their interventions in their gendered capacity within the heteronormative binary framework. Given the in itself reasonable development sector consensus that women's gendered vulnerabilities and needs must be addressed by development aid efforts, this in practice means looking for women and thinking about how to reach them with interventions that are relevant and appropriate to them. The problem is not that this is a priority, but that women and gender becomes conflated to the exclusion of other vulnerabilities that have their roots in norms, roles, and expectations around

**Table 2.** Full text of SDG 4, our emphases.

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
4.1 By 2030, ensure that <b>all girls and boys</b> complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
4.2 By 2030, ensure that <b>all girls and boys</b> have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for <b>all women and men</b> to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

gender. Like human vulnerabilities in general (Kristeva 2010), gendered vulnerabilities refute categorization and fixation. Their commonality is in the source of the vulnerabilities – the restrictive and punishing norms and expectations – rather than in any categorizable and shared essence of being. Thus, the potential of ‘gender equality’ and ‘gender disparity’ in SDG4 to encompass these vulnerabilities as they relate to education are effectively subverted by the strong chain of equivalence that throughout the Agenda uses women, men, girls, and boys to give meaning to gender as a signifier.

### ***A counter-hegemonic case***

In order better to see what is at stake in this articulation of gender and the exclusions it produces, we turn to an attempted counter-hegemonic intervention in the Agenda 2030 gender discourse.

On 29 September 2015, 4 days after the adoption of Agenda 2030 by the UN General Assembly, 12 UN entities including UNDP, UN Women and the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released the statement ‘Ending violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people’ (OHCHR with ILO, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNODC, UN Women, WFP and WHO 2015). This statement (hereafter the LGBTI statement) is thus the progeny of organizations that are involved in both the human rights and the development sectors of the UN, making it an interesting insider-outsider product that brings the SOGIE discourse to bear on the Agenda 2030 process.

The two-page statement is divided into an introduction and three substantial chapters headed ‘protecting individuals from violence’, ‘repealing discriminatory laws’ and ‘protecting individuals from discrimination.’ The introduction provides a two-tiered presentation of the current global situation for LGBTIQ persons that serves as background and justification for the statement and its recommendations. First, an argument from human rights states that a wide range of violent and discriminatory practices target these individuals in different countries around the world and asserts that this constitutes human rights violations. This serves as an imperative argument, positing that this situation is ‘cause for alarm – and action’ in its own right. Second, it instrumentalizes respect for LGBTIQ rights as a necessary measure to enable the fulfilment of the SDGs. In this section the statement first ties itself to the SDG discourse that is practically unfolding in the meeting room next door, but interestingly without explicitly claiming a place for their arguments in the text under negotiation. Instead, the authors point out the

increased vulnerability of LGBTIQ persons on a range of concerns central to the SDGs, arguing that a failure to address these vulnerabilities will hamper the realization of the goals. Importantly, they highlight how discrimination, violence and exclusion is not just a concern for the individuals in question, which would mean that the impact on the realization of the goals would be limited to the impact on the statistics from leaving this group behind. Instead, they make the claim that leaving this group behind will have negative compound effects on the realization of the goals through the impact of their exclusion, ill health and vulnerabilities on families, communities, and the economy as such.

As the concerns of LGBTIQ people are clearly excluded from Agenda 2030 insofar as they are not explicitly mentioned, the potential for vulnerabilities related to LGBTIQ status to be recognized in the future implementation of the SDGs hinges crucially on the meaning attributed to gender as a floating signifier in the Agenda. Considering how 'gender' stands in a strong chain of equivalence with 'women' and 'girls' (and men and boys), as well as with (in)equality, an intervention in this hegemonic articulation must attempt to disrupt all or parts of this chain. The LGBTI statement consistently attempts to disrupt the 'gender as women'-chain by articulating gender in equivalence chains with identity and expression. In this sense, the statement contributes to destabilizing the meaning of gender that the Agenda relies on and promotes. This, however, is insufficient if the goal is to disrupt the Agenda's hegemonic articulation of gender. Crucially, the LGBTI statement does not use the phrase gender equality at all.

The phrasing of SDG5 to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,' suggests a close relationship, even equivalence, between gender equality and women and girls' empowerment. The operationalization of the sub-goals makes this explicit: Out of nine sub-goals (5.1–5.6 and 5.a–5.c), seven specifically reference women and girls while the remaining two deal with issues that are, or are considered to be, 'women's issues' (female genital mutilation and sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights). The articulation of gender equality as that which relates to women's position vis-à-vis men appears to approach a hegemonic status that closes off the possibility for it to encompass wider notions of inequality connected to other forms of gendered vulnerabilities. Instead of intervening in this articulation of gender equality, the LGBTI statement relies on a human rights approach, arguing not from the perspective of an expanded notion of gender equality but from the perspective of minority protection. This is tied in with the SDGs as the drafters argue that (continued) violation of the rights of LGBTIQ persons will hamper the realization of a range of the SDGs along key parameters such as health, economic inequality, and poverty. Crucially, this argument is not made specifically to challenge the articulation of gender equality in SDG 5.

The LGBTI statement's emphasis on discriminatory human rights violations stands in contrast to sub-goal 5.1, which calls for an end to 'all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.' Neither this nor any of the following sub-goals call for an end to the discrimination of LGBTIQ persons. This underscores how Agenda 2030 promotes a binary articulation of gender that is solely concerned with the relationship between the mutually exclusive categories of 'men' and 'women,' and where gender equality is interchangeable with women's empowerment or women's rights. In this articulation of gender, elements such as identity and expression are excluded, and with them a range of gendered vulnerabilities.

While the LGBTI statement brings these vulnerabilities into the light, it is crucially unable to articulate them as relevant for the efforts undertaken by SDG 5 to ‘end gender inequality.’ The statement remains locked in a logic of categories of vulnerability, whereby these vulnerabilities are constructed as new categories whose recognition must be argued for. While it manages to challenge the hegemonic chain of equivalence equating gender with women, the role of the moment (in)equality in this chain is not disrupted and the statement is therefore ultimately unable to intervene in SDG 5. Instead, it addresses the exclusion of SOGIE-related vulnerabilities from the overall scope of the SDGs from a human rights perspective. These vulnerabilities thus remain outside the realm of the SDGs, articulated in the statement as minority protection issues rather than as issues neglected by the Agenda’s scope for addressing gender inequality. This effectively illustrates the hegemonic nature of the gender-as-women articulation that underpins the meaning attributed to gender equality as a goal under Agenda 2030.

## Discussion

These findings are significant for two reasons. First, they point to the potential consequences that the invisibility of real and existing vulnerabilities in the SDGs may have on global agenda setting. As Sara Davis demonstrates in her discussion of the SDG target to end HIV/AIDS, ‘invisibility reinforces invisibility’ (Davis 2017, 1144). Her concern is with the way in which several groups, including under the LGBTIQ umbrella, are at elevated risk for HIV/AIDS while at the same time being exposed to stigma, discrimination and sometimes-outright persecution based on their sexual orientation or (perceived) gender identity. This creates a need for individuals to remain invisible in their communities, and an incentive for many governments to deny or underplay the presence of these groups in their countries (Davis 2017). Taken together, this becomes a feedback loop where invisibility enables denial at policy level that again reinforces invisibility. In a similar manner, SDG 5 on gender equality have made a range of gendered vulnerabilities, including those related to sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, invisible, enabling exclusion and denial at policy and implementation level which reinforces invisibility and, ultimately, vulnerability. Since the adoption of the Agenda, we see that state, intergovernmental and civil society development actors have significantly framed their priorities and activities in light of the SDGs, for example by specifying how an activity contributes to the realization of specific goals, targets, and indicators. A feedback loop of increasing invisibility for certain vulnerabilities under the auspices of this agenda is therefore a serious matter that contravenes the leave no one behind ethos.

Second, our analysis illuminates a fascinating ability of the global policy discourse to construct conflicting silos of meaning around gender as a floating signifier. It is worth keeping in mind that the articulation of gender and gendered vulnerabilities dominant in the SOGIE discourse at the UN is familiar to global development actors. Hence, many actors are likely to be of the impression that ‘gender’ is, in a sense, ‘taken care of’ in the Agenda, as ‘Achieving gender equality [...]’ is in fact one of the 17 goals. However, as we have seen, the reality is that the goal targets only gendered vulnerabilities related to women’s status, in line with what has been the concern of development policies aimed at women for several decades. This is interesting in light of the

close relationship that exists between the human rights discourse and the development discourse. As we saw in our analysis, the SOGIE discourse is often framed in a language of human rights, which provides a powerful framework from which to argue against any types of persecution or discrimination. Conversely, the right to development and the rights-based approach to development are central tenets in mainstream development discourse (Ulvin 2007; Gauri and Gloppen 2012; OECD and The World Bank 2013) including in Agenda 2030, which is ‘grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, [...]’ (United Nations GA. 2015 para 10 p 4). These two spheres are thus in dialogue with each other, intervening in each other’s spheres and in many instances providing each other with legitimacy and content. Still, we see that a concept such as gender can be imbued with significantly different meanings across these discursive spheres, to the extent that those attempting counter-hegemonic interventions in the SDG development and implementation processes have recourse to human rights, particularly the basic non-discrimination principle, in order to frame their positions.

There are some potential pitfalls to this strategy. While the human rights principle writ large is fundamentally universal in scope, protection and anti-discrimination clauses tend to apply to pre-defined categories of people. Anti-discrimination clauses in central human rights texts tend to be open-ended, while minority protection texts rely heavily on identifying just the right categories to capture the vulnerable population(s) the text sets out to protect. (Smith 2003).

From the discursive rather than legal point of view, this logic of protected categories risks leaving those vulnerabilities not explicitly mentioned effectively excluded. This suggests a tension between the universal and the specific in human rights that remains unresolved. To leave no one behind, development and human rights need to meet in a place of true universality, with a framework that sets out to recognize and address human vulnerability in all its messy diversity and ever-evolving subjectivity.

## Conclusion

Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals have as their foremost ethos to ‘leave no one behind,’ an explicit ambition to ensure that efforts to reach the goals are particularly geared towards reaching marginalized and vulnerable groups, populations, and individuals. At the same time, central concepts of the agenda function as floating signifiers, and the meaning that these are filled with will determine which vulnerabilities become visible to the implementers of the agenda and which disappear from view. In this paper, we have examined gender as one such floating signifier. Through a focused and critical reading of Agenda 2030, we see that gender in the agenda is put in a chain of equivalence with (in)equality and women and girls in such a way as to exclude from view a range of vulnerabilities stemming from gender norms and expectation.

A statement from 12 UN agencies engaging with the SDG discourse from the SOGIE perspective helped illuminate how the chain of equivalence established between gender, equality, and women and girls in development discourse is reinforced through the Agenda. The hegemonic binary notion of gender in which gender equality is equated

with the improvement of the position of women and girls vis-à-vis men and boys is thus reinforced. In practice, this means that the ambition to 'leave no-one behind' is circumvented by the SDGs inability to recognize gendered vulnerabilities beyond those that are traditionally recognized by mainstream development discourse and that pertains to the unequal and inferior status, rights and opportunities of women compared to men. We maintain that the impact of gender norms, roles and expectations create myriad vulnerabilities that are better brought to light by abandoning the discourse of categories of vulnerability in favour of one that builds on a recognition of the singular, emerging subject in potential tension with societal norms. Counter-hegemonic interventions from the vantage point of human rights have highlighted the acute existence of some of these vulnerabilities but have been unable to challenge and expand the meaning attributed to gender in the SDG discourse. Vulnerabilities created by the same gender norms and expectations that create women's and girls' vulnerabilities thus remain in the dark, forcing us to conclude that in terms of gendered vulnerabilities, the SDGs do indeed leave someone behind.

While the SDGs are long since a fait accompli, the close interconnectedness of the human rights discourse with the development discourse holds some tentative promise for a path towards a truly universal recognition of gendered vulnerabilities that can expand the sustainable development discourse on gender beyond SDG5. This is the path chosen by actors attempting to bring SOGIE vulnerabilities into the Agenda 2030 light. Their inability to destabilize the basis of the articulation of gender in the goal points at the same time to the strength of the gender-as-women hegemony and the paradoxical inability of the human rights discourse to recognize the fundamental singularity of the vulnerable subject in spite of its claim to universality.

Nevertheless, we believe that the SOGIE intervention in the SDG discourse shows us something valuable: The hegemonic articulations of gender as a nodal point may prevent a range of vulnerabilities from being acknowledged by the SDGs in spite of the ambition to leave no-one behind. This realization should spur development practitioners and policy makers to question critically whether their implementation of Agenda 2030 is able to capture important gendered needs and vulnerabilities that the Agenda itself fails to acknowledge. Human rights discourse may help bring some of these into view, but its reliance on categories of vulnerability means that it, too, is ill equipped to recognize the vulnerability of the singular emerging subject. Still, a return to the universality at the heart of human rights may offer a fruitful path for embracing the singular, emerging nature of the individual and the conditional and undetermined vulnerabilities that emerges from its tension with shifting societal norms. Here, there may be a starting point for thinking about what it would mean in global policy terms for sustainable development efforts to truly leave no-one behind.

## Note

1. An informal group of about 30 UN member states, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch and OutRight Action International.

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