Redefining Sustainable Development
From Gender Perspectives

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What “sustainable development” means to me is that there’s some food left to feed my children at the end of the day. (A woman activist from South Africa)

A decade has passed since the momentous Earth Summit in Rio, Brazil which recognized the crucial roles of women in conserving the environment, and launched the idea of “Sustainable Development” as a global development goal. Yet today we only witness the continuing deterioration of the environment, widening inequality and the spreading of armed conflicts, all of which make our global environment harder to inhabit. What happened during the last decade? What and how should we change? This article attempts to revisit the idea of “Sustainable Development” from gender perspectives and to reconsider an agenda for a movement towards an alternative global society.

Looking Back On Rio
The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that took place in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Rio Summit) was a historical event because for the first time serious questions were posed about the conventional economic development model from the perspective of the sustainability of global ecology. The Conference recognized that the rapid economic development of Third World was causing serious environmental destruction and pollution, while industrialized countries kept consuming inordinately large amounts of resources, the combination of which was threatening the survival of all species on the globe. On the basis of such recognition, the Conference endorsed the idea of “Sustainable Development” as a more equitable and environmentally sound development model. Japanese citizens, who were seeking “true richness” in the aftermath of the bubble economy in 1980s, also positively responded to this concept with national and local governments, private firms and NGOs launching a number of related initiatives.

In the decade since then, one would have difficulty finding reminders of the hope prevailing the world at that time. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, or “Rio plus ten”) to evaluate progress since Rio and to discuss a future agenda met in Johannesburg, South Africa in August 2002. Yet, as many had anticipated only minor meaningful agreements were concluded at the conference, which was often derided as
“Rio minus ten”. Despite further poverty and environmental deterioration, and the need for a more effective and binding framework, the WSSD process was dominated by conflicts between those who held to maintaining the conventional political and economic systems to promote globalization, and those who insisted on their modification. “The war on terrorism” insisted on by the US also posed a serious threat to the process. As economic globalization proceeds rapidly, the ideal of "sustainable development" looks to have been completely defeated by the neo-liberalism that promotes cutthroat market competition.

Yet let us take this opportunity to revisit the issues and problems that “sustainable development” placed on the agenda ten years ago, because the Rio Summit was also a crucial event in the course of the development of global feminism. In the preparation process for Rio, women from the South and the North coordinated closely on discussions and analysis into the complex relationship between the environment, development and gender, and worked together for mainstreaming gender. As a clear consequence of their efforts, the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 clearly recognized the critical roles to be played by women in the conservation and management of environment and the need to empower women to enable their active participation in decision-making related to development. These important achievements provided a firm foundation for further enhancing women’s rights at subsequent series of UN conferences including the Cairo Population Conference in 1994 and the Beijing Conference in 1995.

The conflicts in the WSSD process demonstrated how difficult it is to resolve discussions for rebuilding governing mechanisms and also how the present international frameworks are ineffective and insufficient for formulating viable solutions for the many problems that the globalization of economy worsens such as poverty, inequality, environmental deterioration and armed conflict. As the hopes of Rio are dying, however, we should like to take this opportunity to look back pragmatically upon the last decade and to share a vision for a new agenda to create more equitable world with women. As, despite all the past defeats and future difficulties, we all need to survive in this terrible world even if the UN conference fails.

**Sustainable Development And Gender**

**What Were The Issues?**

The Rio Conference widely diffused the term "sustainable development". However there were and are a wide range of different interpretations as to what the term means exactly, and these definitions often contradict each other and lead to sharp confrontations. At Rio, many countries in the North and their multinational corporations insisted on solutions based upon the introduction of “eco-friendly” technologies and market mechanisms, while countries representing the South demanded greater financial resources and the transfer of technologies to tackle prevailing poverty. Many environmental NGOs and women’s groups likewise demanded a fundamental transformation of development models. Such diverse responses and disagreements could be attributed to different understandings as to what were the fundamental causes of the environmental crises.
In the process leading up to the Rio Conference, women’s groups concentrated their analysis on the relationship between the environment, development and gender on the basis of findings and arguments concerning the development impact on women in the South as well as the grassroots experiences of active participation in environmental conservation. I will briefly summarize the major issues next.

As early as in the 1960s, many researchers and practitioners pointed out that the roles and status of women were often undermined in the course of economic development in the South. As farming lands, forests and rivers were exploited and degraded for cash crops production or industrialization, the roles and knowledge of women who bore the responsibility to supply daily food, energy and water from local natural resources were often devalued, and also as a direct consequence, the burdens on women to implement these tasks also became heavier. The modernization development model based upon rapid economic development never offered full appreciation of women’s roles in sustaining daily family life by utilizing and managing natural resources in the same way as it never acknowledged the significance of nature. Here we can clearly see the ongoing tradition of modern knowledge which equates women and nature, and proposes to dominate both of them with modern science and technology.

In fact, as feminist researchers pointed out, women all over the world endure tremendous amounts of labour to sustain the daily life of family and community, including the procurement and management of food, water, finances and other resources, bearing and raising children and taking care of family members. Without such “subsistence work” by women, the market economy would be unable to keep
expanding. Nevertheless, such women’s work has not been recognized as labour and is thus left unpaid. Pointing out that this “housewifization” of women is the key concept in the global market economy, some feminist scholars such as Maria Mies insisted on a fundamental transformation of the conventional development model that seeks continued expansion of the market economy to an alternative development model that is based on subsistence agriculture. By redefining the significant role of subsistence work, women in the South and the North were able to find a common ground upon which they criticized the global capitalist economy that devalued and exploited nature and women’s work. They also insisted that women had special interests in conservation of the environment, as they were responsible for caring for their families and for managing natural resources and thus could more sensitively respond to any threats to their lives from environmental destruction, pollution and so on. Thus they demanded women’s full participation in decision-making on environment and development issues, and for the fundamental transformation of the conventional development model, expanding their analysis to various issues, including industrialization-oriented development projects which neglected and undermined women’s roles, debt and adjustment programs imposed on the Southern states, threats to food security under free trade regimes, systematic domination over women’s bodies and reproduction, and war, conflict and militarization.

The Rio Conference, however, never properly challenged the present global economic and political structures whose growth-oriented development model has exacerbated inequitable resource distribution. It did recognize that over consumption in the North and poverty in the South should be modified and that impoverishment of women, indigenous peoples and small-scale farmers stemmed from the conventional patterns of development. They agreed on the need to change the unsustainable patterns of production and runaway consumption habits of the North and to expand financial aid in order to tackle poverty in the South. They also recognized a number of important principles, such as the participation of different agencies including women in development process, the precautionary principle, and the polluter pays principle. Nonetheless those agreements, lacking enforcing mechanisms, concrete timelines and financial instruments, were unfortunately left to the voluntary commitment of governments and other actors.

The Progress Of Globalization And Post-Rio Issues
Ultimately the commitments made at Rio were never realized. Rather, neo-liberal policies which allowed the free market rule over broader areas of human activity were pursued all over the world. While the world’s wealth is being increasingly concentrated within a fortunate minority, poverty is concurrently expanding throughout the North. Speculative money games are destabilizing societies, and multinational corporations, operating borderlessly and free from government regulations, are disrupting the lives of many people with their large scale influence on local food supplies and
employment. Furthermore sentiments against this inequitable situation are causing higher risks of violence and militarization. As the large scale, often unruly, anti-globalization demonstrations since the WTO conference in Seattle indicate, more and more people feel that the present pattern of economic globalization which accompanies inequality and instability should be changed. It can be said that the negative impacts of globalization are now felt by a far larger number of people, compared to 10 years ago when only the global environment was considered to be of concern to our common future. Such dramatic changes in perception are also reflected in the major agenda of the WSSD, in which the most critical issues of sustainable development shifted from the global environment to poverty reduction.

Despite this agenda change, however, mainstream groups at the WSSD firmly held to the dominant development views that only if better governance systems are provided can globalization of economy benefit everyone and that enhancement of free trade regimes and strong growth-oriented development is necessary for poverty reduction. It is certainly true that rebuilding of global governance systems is an urgent need, and that in doing so, important principles of the Rio Conference such as participation of diverse groups including women in decision-making process should be reassured, while other critical principles related to gender equality recognized at the Beijing should also be reflected.

At the same time, however, we should not reduce the concept of “sustainable development” to the promotion of globalization that is “eco-friendly” or gender-equal. Poverty reduction under existing systems that are dominated by large corporations and a small number of industrialized countries would mean nothing but letting the poor die, as Farida Akhtar, a Bangladeshi feminist, points out. What is required of civil movements is that they should be to make linkages between social, economic, environmental and gender issues that are dealt with separately by promoters of globalization, and to bring them on the table as political issues.

Problems affecting the sustainability of environment and gender justice, most of which were pointed out at Rio, have become more serious and widespread during the past 10 years. While free trade policy is effecting basic living needs such as foods and water in rural areas, consumers in urban areas also find increasing threats to their food safety as shown in the case of “mad cow disease” panic in Europe and Japan. Flexibilization of labour, privatization of public services and the destruction of environment are putting heavier burdens on subsistence economies, while care work in industrialized countries is increasingly borne by immigrant women workers. The effects of globalization, which are commonly observed more or less in every part of the world, at the same time indicate significant differences between women in diversified circumstances. Women’s situations differ greatly as to whether the country in which they reside is capable of sustaining the state’s autonomy against global market forces. Furthermore, the growing pressure on subsistence
economies imposed by the competitive market economy suggest that whether a woman has the resources and opportunities to successfully manage to escape from bearing the burden of subsistence work accounts for the decisive differences amongst women. In fact, a large number of Japanese women do not dare to choose to have children in the current circumstances.

These significant differences simply make the claim of women as defenders of the global environment difficult. At least women in Japan, which is one of richest countries and thus most responsible for the poverty prevailing in the rest of the world, are required to identify our differentiated responsibility and our own political agendas, while seeking a common ground to share with women in other parts of the world. On the other hand, the very diverse effects of globalization suggest that there are still greater possibilities for resistance in more diverse areas and in more diverse ways.

Japanese Feminists’ Agenda For Sustainability And Gender Justice
It is well known that one of the consequences of Japan’s rapid economic growth was the increase in serious environmental problems such as Minamata Disease. Despite the myth that those environmental problems were successfully solved by Japan’s sophisticated technologies which emphasize the roles of intelligent male engineers - the fundamental structures were sustained and most environmental problems were simply transferred to developing countries where less stringent regulations applied. On the other hand large public investments were made for economic infrastructure to sustain the growth that was large corporation-oriented, while welfare for the aged and children and environmental conservation were largely dependent on the unpaid labour of “housewives”. These conventional social systems in Japan that were built on the assumption of sustained economic growth are now facing massive socio-economic transformation to a low-level of growth and a rapidly aging society.

The restructuring plans of the Japanese government have double-edged effects: on one hand, labour market competition would be intensified promoting women’s participation in labour market, whilst on the other hand subsistence work such as caring for elderly people and children and other household work may increasingly be put into the hands of market. Externalized subsistence work would, to a large extent, depend on the cheap labour of Japanese women, but also on the global market which provides cheap goods and services from all over the world, as shown in the development of food industry and an increasing number of immigrant workers who are engaged in elderly care.

What should be the agenda of a civil society based upon sustainability and gender equality in this situation? Attempts to seek one’s own safety and convenience, without challenging the market structures that promote market efficiency and devalue subsistence economy, may end up with you only finding a somewhat better place in the global economy but transferring the costs to someone else, as Koyu Furusawa in this volume points out. Although it is certainly true that those who bear heavier costs in the present economy are disproportionately
women, gender equality movements are also not free from the risks of imposing heavier costs on others if we fail to challenge the complex dimensions of inequality in global economic structures.

I have discussed the problematic nature of the concept of “sustainable development.” Nonetheless, discussion and experience of movements based on this idea have demonstrated that various social movements including environmental movements, women’s movements and peace movements can be closely linked with each other, and that these movements should be linked with the need to adjust the unequal global distribution of resources, finances and power. Japanese feminists’ agenda must not be limited to demands for equal rights in Japanese society only. If we are to sincerely respond to the South African woman whose words I quoted at the beginning, we also should support various initiatives for alternative economies and work to give up excessive consumption and exercising of the power that we have enjoyed so far. In doing so, enhancement of individual rights for participation in political and economic activities, as well as for enjoying family and community life are critical.

Of course it is not easy to challenge the economic, political and social frameworks presently driving the global market that transfers the costs of growth to the environment, women and global South. Therefore it is all the more important that we do not envisage a single path to alternative development, and in particular, to be careful of the claim of any “return to traditions.” The traditional rural community has never been an ideal place for women as some environmentalists tend to romanticize.

Instead of going back to the past, we can already find diverse practices taking place. Initiatives in Japan and elsewhere include changing food and energy consumption into more sustainable patterns, making paid labour more compatible with subsistence activities, and introduction of a local currency that aims at facilitating markets but does not necessarily promote growth. Some economists such as Marilyn Warling try to prepare economic indexes to help alternative socio-economic development. It is possible and necessary to pursue such methods of resisting growth-oriented globalization. As we look to innovating more diverse alternatives, the failure of the WSSD in Johannesburg should not automatically invite despair, even though it was a great disappointment to us all.

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