



Women Who Carry Stones: Gender, Care, Community, and Civil Society Action for Sustainable Development

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Good afternoon, it is a pleasure to be here. I'd like in particular to thank my friend and colleague Carole Ageng'o, who is a woman of many hats and talents, who I know through her work as a partner of the Coalition for the UN We Need (C4UN) and as Chair of The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET). It has truly been a pleasure to accompany her, and to learn from her during the forum these last three days.

I'd like to start with a declaration that I am sure is obvious to all of us in this room, but that is surprisingly not obvious to everyone: Successful sustainable development requires gender-responsive action.

I learned this very early in my career. Although I wouldn't have phrased it in these specific terms at the time. I learned it through experience. So, if you allow me, I'd like to tell a story.

In 1993, I was fresh out of university, and I was working in rural Nicaragua as a volunteer for a now defunct organization called the Institute for International Cooperation and Development.

We were working with a community of internally displaced people, who had fled the mountains during the Contra War, which had ended just 2 or 3 years prior, and who had set up a rather rudimentary settlement on the outskirts of a small cattle town called Matiguás.

One of the projects that we helped the community to organize was the development of a series of latrines of very simple local construction. They were essentially deep wells lined with river stone and a wood outhouse built on top. The community all pitched in to dig the wells. I don't remember how long it took, but you can imagine it was back-breaking work. Then the time came to source the river stone.



Now, the river stone in mind, you have to understand, were not some small pebbles that would form a nice mosaic: no, these were big rocks, heavy, awkwardly shaped, and not easily accessed.

We gathered the community together to ask for volunteers to go to the river to fetch the rocks. It was a post-Sandinista town, and the collective organizing of community tasks was very common; but when we brought everyone together, we quickly noticed an unusual dynamic. Only the women volunteered.

We stood there for a while. We didn't really understand what was going on: Why were the men standing back? After a time, we felt we didn't have enough volunteers, so we pushed further, and finally one man raised his hand... and to our surprise, all of the other men laughed at him. He sheepishly joined the group of women, and the work was done.

Now, there are two elements of this experience that have always stuck with me.

- One is the way that the river was revealed as a gendered space. It didn't matter that the labor required that day could have easily been seen as work that required a man's idea of strength. Of course these women were strong enough. I have a vivid memory of them hauling the large, heavy rocks off a pick-up truck upon return. Believe me, they were very strong. It didn't matter. According to the gender dynamics of the community, if it was work to be carried out down by the river, it was considered women's work. Why? Because that's where the women went to carry water, to do laundry, to bathe children, or to do any other matter of essential community-supporting activities.
- And two, what has always stuck with me, even now some 30 years later, was the degree to which that work, which was so essential to the community—is there anything more essential than fetching water?—was seen as beneath the men of the community. They wanted no part of it. It was undervalued to such a degree, that the one man who volunteered to go down to the river with the women was ridiculed.

This hierarchy of social and economic inequality is all too often evident in "care economies" the world over. Care economies, those incredibly time-consuming tasks of unpaid work that sustain communities, are fundamentally unequal, and addressing this inequality will be a part of any successful endeavor of advancing sustainable development.

Up until recently—you all I am sure know this history much better than I do— the essential role of this work was largely unrecognized and unsupported, but thanks to the feminist movement and advocates for gender equality, we have seen some progress.

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I am most familiar with Latin America. A former colleague of mine, Evyn Papworth, has written about the development of [“care blocks”](#) in Bogotá, Colombia, where city services are concentrated to help support care givers to address entrenched inequalities, or similar centers in Mexico City.

Indeed, it should be said local action is often well ahead of global action, in many aspects of implementing the SDGs. Implementation is strongest when it is being driven by civil society, local governments, and communities on the ground, and African and Latin American feminist civil society are at the forefront of advancing community-led and youth-driven solutions. UN Women-Africa has also established the [Feminist Economists Taskforce](#) to look at some of these issues. This is all important work, and it needs to be supported by global engagement.

To chart out some opportunities for such global engagement, I’d like to take my remaining time to discuss some of the more recent developments at the multilateral level and identify some points on the calendar for our advocacy.

As recently as last year, one might have been forgiven to feel that despite the headwinds, we were making progress. In 2025, the most recent multi-year programme of work for the Commission on the Status of Women identified “recognizing and strengthening care and support systems to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls” as the priority theme for the 72nd Annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) that will take place in March 2028. But as 2026 has shown, any progress is fragile and must be fought for to be maintained. This year’s CSW70 was historic for all the wrong reasons.

For the first time in history the CSW agreed conclusions were not established by consensus, due to firm opposition by the United States, who among other things pushed for an exclusively binary definition of gender and opposed reference to “sexual and reproductive health and rights,” viewing them as promoting abortion.

Some see the final united defeat of the US as a victory, demonstrating strong international support for gender equality at a time of backlash, but the commitment of the current US administration to an anti-gender-rights agenda supported by a well-financed and coordinated constituency, should give us all pause.

Indeed, beyond CSW, in the last year the U.S. has sought to remove terms like “gender equality,” “intersectionality,” and “diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI),” among others, from all UN documents, arguing they represent “woke” ideology.

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So what is to be done by those who aim to advance gender equality? The multilateral calendar offers a roadmap. Next year’s CSW priority theme is gender equality in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Thus discussions at the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development this week, here in Addis, and in New York at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July will feed into the Expert Group meeting this fall and the subsequent processes on the road to CSW71 in March 2027.

And as my colleague Ishaan Shah has reminded me, the CSW text next year (if adopted) will also become the latest agreed language on gender and sustainable development which will be an important line for advocacy to hold when the 2027 SDG Summit Political Declaration is negotiated next year as well. So these moments in time and advocacy are all connected, and they must be the object of our coordinated efforts.

Looking back, feminist civil society’s organizing power has been decisive for years. It was decisive in shaping the 2015 agenda, in particular securing SDGs 3 and 5, and it will continue to be moving forward. It remains central to “turning the tide” today (in reference to the [theme of the week](#)) by pushing for a gender-transformative implementation of the 2030 Agenda that confronts historical injustices and reminds member states that the pursuit of gender equality is not peripheral but rather foundational to the successful implementation of all of the SDGs.

As I conjure the memory of those extraordinary women of Matiguás, Nicaragua, from so many years ago, one thing is clear: If we remain blind to the gender dimensions of peace, security, and sustainable development, we will never understand why so many women and girls have to carry such heavy stones to line the walls of their community’s progress, and we will all be further impoverished as a result. We must keep this truth in mind as we chart out our engagements in the coming period.

Thank you.