The revolutionary result of a two-year long process of intergovernmental debate and deliberation was a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that was formally declared in a UN summit from 25th to 27th September 2015. Also known as the Global Goals, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations General Assembly aim to push highly relevant agendas to be addressed by the year 2030. Amidst the targets set that facilitate basic human existence, such as no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, there is the equally important strong Goal 5 that need special focus. The increasing wave of feminism and feminism-educated individuals created on bringing to fruition the agenda of Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality.

Goal 5 holds world governments accountable to their role in putting an end to gender inequality. According to the UNDP’s official manifesto, it proposes to stamp out discrimination and gender-based violence; eliminate child marriage, educate women on their sexual and reproductive health and their reproductive rights, ensure that they have adequate access to PHCs for sexual health check-ups; work on making education and the workforce and equal-opportunity platform for men and women; expand economic opportunities for women and girls; and finally, attempt to reduce the unfair conditions of unpaid work on women. As compared to the earlier designed MDGs that focused minimally on gender roles, these edicts represent a paradigm shift in the thinking of policy makers.

When we talk of feminist mobilization, we often start with a bleak picture that progressively improves. Women with radical opinions are ignored or dismissed as being inexperienced. Out of the many roadblocks faced by feminist groups, a primary one is a general feeling of not being heard. This ranges anywhere from a despondent acceptance to abject frustration. Moreover, this does not exist only in the context of men. Smaller feminist movements are often drowned by larger, more populist feminist agendas. Younger women who are developing their philosophy on feminism tend to choose offbeat paths as they aggressively reject traditional governmental structures. In a large number of instances, there is enough initiative but a dearth of resources.

Since the 1990s, there have been the advent of a number of structures that are, at their core, against the idea of an independent woman, who sees herself as equal to a man in every way. A few of these include; an unstable global economy that is also wrestling with economic inequality among nations; a completely disregarded worldview on climate change and global warming that pays no heed to an increasingly large number of climate refugees, out of whom women and children survive the least; an increasing number of non-liberal governments and organizations in both high and low income countries where women are discriminated against and seen as second-class citizens; a large mass of migrant displaced populations that keep exponentially increasing due to new clashes daily; and a regression of popular opinion into what seems like medieval times, with no respect for integrity, bodily autonomy, and sexual and reproductive rights, as well as basic human rights to refugees and migrants in receiving countries. Not to mention, the gamut of telecommunications in the present times coupled with the massive volume of information exchange have pushed us as a people into a world where social media is regarded as the gospel truth, and the messages sent via these platforms are used to spread ideas of hatred, inequality, false perceptions and discrimination.

These increasing societal challenges, go hand in hand with deeply unsettling evidence on the widespread inequalities and gender crimes that seem almost entrenched in the fabric of our existence. The Global Gender Gap Index is a system of ranking a total of 144 countries according to their education, economic opportunities, health delivery systems, and political participation. The most recent version of this index was published in 2017 by the World Economic Forum, whose findings show that some parameters of the gap may have worsened in recent years instead of getting better. In terms of estimating earned income in USD, the gap increased considerably after the financial global meltdown in 2008. The index has made an estimate that going forward from 2017, it will take 217
years to completely abolish this gap only in the workplace, and over 100 years to close this gap overall. It seems that only the health and education sectors are somewhat progressing when it comes to achieving some kind of equality, but the same equality in the economic and political sectors between women and men seem to be but a distant dream – they are exponentially increasing each year.

However, there has been renewed interest from funding sources and policy makers on ‘investing in women and girls’ and combined with this strong push from the UN, has made some significant headway.

In The Context of India

As with feminist mobilization, one tends to take on a slightly defeatist attitude when talking of India’s role in global feminism. However, by no means can it be said that India as a country has not been making strides. In 20 years (1994-2014), India has lifted nearly 144 million people out of abject poverty under various government schemes, including the largest employment scheme in the world, the MNREGA, almost half of whose members are women.

In a historic 2016 legislation the law promised 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, to ensure that women do not quit the workforce after planning a family. A renewed push towards gender equality in education is seen by the advent of programs such as the Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan and the Right to Education Act, 2009, which have been instrumental in helping to exponentially increase the gross enrolment rate for girls at the primary school level. Further, there have been similarly encouraging statistics recorded at the secondary school level – the rate of enrolment for girls has increased from 55.5% in 2008 to 78.9% in 2014-15 and at the higher secondary school level it has gone up from 31.6% in 2008 to 53.8% in 2014-15.

While these findings are highly significant, it points to the gamut of work that is still to be done. While India seems to progress in the right direction in terms of policy, it tends to lag behind in understanding the cultural applications at the grass-roots level. According to a study conducted by the Oxfam Organization, there appear to be deep stigmas attached to women working in agriculture. There is also a statistic that might seriously impact India’s feminist movement – that highly educated women tend to leave the workforce to make ‘respectable’ marriages to higher caste and higher income households.

This points to a shocking number, that being that the contribution of women all over the world to the global GDP is 35%, but Indian women represent less than half of that at 17%. Based on the rankings released by the Labour Force Participation, India comes in at a rank of lowly 120 out of a total of 131 countries, even though 42% of Indian women graduate by education.

Between the years of 2005 and 2012, the Indian workforce was severely depleted by almost 20 million women, due to various reasons. This staggering figure is almost equal to the collective population of Sri Lanka. Every one of these women who chose to discontinue their professional aspirations should be regarded as a lost opportunity for their families and for their country, but most importantly, for themselves. The Indian feminist movement that has paved the way for these discussions to take place in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, has played an important first step in reaching a state of equal respect and opportunity by 2030.

According to policy makers at the ECOSOC Youth Forum held at the UN Headquarters in New York, Mr Ravi Karkara (Senior Adviser to the Assistant Secretary General, UN Women) and Mr Rohith Porhukuchi, the young feminist movement has been indispensable in cementing the SDG agenda. Further, they recommend a greater number of educated women taking up the mantle at advocacy campaigns related to the equality and women empowerment sectors. For example, the UNiTE campaign is creating a large impact through its global, regional and multinational advocacy initiatives and is actively working to mobilize individuals and communities to its cause. This campaign supports the efforts of women’s initiatives and organizations dedicated to their upliftment, but actively engage in work with men – to sensitize and educate them to their cause – along with celebrities, artists, sportspeople, media, corporates and a whole host of others.

The UN Women’s “Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality” campaign, again holds world governments accountable to make national public commitments to uplift women and eliminate the challenges that prevent them from reaching their full potential. The HeForShe and MAN UP campaigns also take a stand on gender equality and women’s rights.
Conclusion
During the ongoing process of deciding the SDG agenda, it was common knowledge that key economic issues such as financing, investments, trade, tax laws and unlawful transactions, while extremely important, grossly outstripped and took precedence over issues of feminist advocacy. This problem was further complicated by the decrease in the authority of the UN, and the rise of ultra-conservatism in many powerful nations across the globe as a result of rapidly spreading religious fanaticism and evangelism.

In spite of these issues, the global and Indian feminist movements have been extremely organized and have used their resources effectively to bring about small facets of change, using techniques learned from the time of the 1990s conferences and their 5-yearly regional and global reviews. According to the paper Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: Feminist Mobilization for the SDGs, by Gita Sen, some of these almost ground-breaking reforms include:

- Recognizing in the initial stages that there is value in being awarded an official status as part of the Major Groups and utilizing the Women’s Major Group as a platform to voice feminist issues, especially as civil society is moving more into a zone of closed spaces.
- Utilizing bodies such as WWG in order to involve concerned persons in critical aspects of campaigning, such as financing and media engagement.
- Actively seeking out other bodies with similar interests and agendas and networking with them in order to reach shared goals.
- Being able to coordinate with and mobilize these bodies peacefully with effective and quick conflict resolution when required.
- Making it a point to never compromise on technical support, language and expertise on processes, so that they can come across as trustworthy and strong in their dealings with official negotiators.
- As an extension to the above, further honing the negotiation abilities of young budding feminists.

Feminist advocacy platforms need to be constantly discussed and negotiated periodically. Feminists need to forge valuable partnerships with select organizations and perhaps even corporates that are sympathetic to the feminist cause, but also are able to effectively bring about long-term changes in areas such as finance, education, trade, investment and climate change among others. The annual Spotlight Report on Sustainable Development is the result of a feminist group working with tandem with such an organization (www.2030spotlight.org). The first report was unveiled during the UN High Level Political Forum in July 2016 and was received well among both UN member states and civil societies, being the first major media published which was critical of ongoing responses to feminist needs. The ability of feminist organizations to defend their vision will need a clear manifesto, exceptional analytical skills, better communication and organizational strategies, and the ability to form collaborations where the youth plays a strong role.

In totality, this work makes the claim that is that the size of the environment affected is directly proportional to the strength, organization and nature of facilities involved in bringing about a significant social mobilization.

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