Notice of Doctoral Dissertation Examination

Sara Rose Taylor
PhD Global Governance

"The role of indicators in promoting gender equality through the Millenium and Sustainable Development Goals"

Wed June 6th 10 AM

BSIA Boardroom 1-23

Chairperson
TBD
Advisor
Rianne Mahon

Committee
Ken Jackson
Will Coleman
Internal/External
Sue Horton

External
Sakiko Fukuda-Parr

Dissertation will be on deposit in the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for perusal

ABSTRACT

With the global rise of evidence-based policy, indicators have become an increasingly important part of governance. Indicators are statistics that represent social experiences, turning complex norms into simplified representations. Although seemingly objective, indicators reflect the values and beliefs of the actors who create them. An indicator's normative underpinnings have significant consequences for social governance and policy because of an indicator's power to shape understanding. This multi-manuscript dissertation analyzes the impact of governance by indicators as seen in the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals (MDGs and SDGs), two major United Nations initiatives in the field of global social governance. The focus is on the goals for gender equality, MDG 3 and SDG 5. The dissertation shows how gender indicators can be used as strategic frames for advancing gender equality. My work takes a feminist and pro-quantitative approach, showing how these two approaches can and do work together.

Paper #1 presents indicators as 'actants', or non-human actors, that act as a method of communication. The paper argues that they can be contested but that effective contestation and change depend on engaging with, rather than simply dismissing, numerical language. When spaces of contestation open up during transitional periods, as happened during the move from the MDGs to the SDGs, engaging with the language of numbers and indicators helps actors gain an audience.

Paper #2 explores a feminist critique of measurement and knowledge production in the MDGs and SDGs, based on UN Women's engagement. In so doing, the paper shows the value of engaging with indicator-driven agendas as a successful feminist strategy. In recognizing the value of quantification and data-driven evidence in policy, this paper also speaks to the tension between feminist critique of quantitative knowledge production and the feminist approach's welcoming of multiple ways of knowing.

Paper #3 assesses the possibilities and challenges of evaluating the MDGs using official MDG data, comparing pre- and post-treatment results. It shows how statistical constraints in the form of availability, quality, and predictive ability create roadblocks for MDG evaluation, despite the fact that the Goals were set up with measurability and accountability in mind. The paper argues for greater consideration of the framing effects of indicators, as they shape understanding of a problem and potential solutions. While MDG indicators were designed for measurement, the way they frame issues may have more important implications for empirical evaluation.