



EARTH SUMMIT+5

Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise
the Implementation of Agenda 21

Women and Sustainable Development

Since 1962, when American author Rachel Carson alerted the world to the dangers of pesticide poisoning in her groundbreaking book "Silent Spring", women have played a vital role in the global environmental movement. In 1988, the World Commission on Environment and Development, headed by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, published its report, "Our Common Future", linking the environmental crisis to unsustainable development and financial practices that were worsening the North-South gap, with women a majority of the world's poor and illiterate.

Over the years, women have continued to speak out for policies and practices that do not threaten the health and well-being of future generations. They continue to fight for improved living standards and protection of the environment. In almost all countries, women are disproportionately represented among the poor. And studies have found that the poor, in urban and rural areas of rich and poor countries, bear the greatest burden of environmental degradation and pollution.

In almost all countries, women have the primary responsibility for nutrition, child care and household management. They are also active in environmental management. In most developing countries, women play a major role as farmers, animal tenders, and water and fuel collectors. Yet, despite their roles, women are not adequately represented in the decision-making processes related to the issues of environment and development at local, national or international levels.

The expertise, knowledge and perspective of women have been overlooked for years and women are now demanding that their voices be heard. They recognize that an integrated approach to sustainable development is necessary since political, economic, social and environmental issues are closely interlinked.



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From Rio to Beijing to Earth Summit+5

Women actively participated in the Rio Earth Summit process and succeeded in obtaining a chapter on women and sustainable development and over one hundred references and recommendations pertaining to women in the final agreement, Agenda 21. The 1992 Rio Summit, together with the 1993 Human Rights Conference, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the 1995 Social Summit and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, have focused the work of the United Nations on the environment, population, human rights, poverty and gender, and the relationships between these issues.

In Rio, women were considered a "major group" whose involvement was necessary to achieve sustainable development. Today, there is a growing emphasis on "mainstreaming"--integrally incorporating women's concerns and participation in the planning, implementation and monitoring of all development and environmental management programmes to ensure that women benefit. The United Nations system is in the process of mainstreaming a gender-perspective in its work.

The Platform for Action, adopted unanimously by 189 delegations in Beijing at the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995, stresses that empowerment, full participation and equality for women are the foundations for peace and sustainable development. The plan also acknowledges that sustainable development policies that do not involve women and men alike will not succeed in the long run.

In March 1997, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women made a series of recommendations on women and the environment, some of which are excerpted below.



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- The Earth Summit+5 meeting should focus on mainstreaming a gender perspective into the development and implementation of all legislation, policies and programmes with a view to achieving gender equality.
- All responsible actors should support the active participation of women on an equal footing with men in sustainable development at all levels.
- Governments should ensure that policies for the liberalization of trade and investment are complemented by gender-sensitive social policies and environmental policies to ensure that the benefits of growth are shared by all sectors of society and to avoid deterioration of the environment.
- Research should be intensified on the impact of environmental pollutants and other harmful substances on the reproductive health of men and women, and the findings should be widely disseminated.
- International agencies should continue to assist countries in carrying out gender-impact assessments.
- Multilateral and bilateral donors should increase support for women's organizations to play an active role in sustainable development.
- The knowledge and expertise of women in the use and preservation of natural resources should be protected and fully used in the design and implementation of environmental management programmes.
- Laws should be designed and revised to ensure that women have equal access to and control over land, and women should be fully represented in the decision-making bodies that allocate land and other forms of property, credit, information and new technologies.

Women's groups are monitoring implementation of the Platform for Action and participating in the preparations for the Earth Summit+5 review. They have presented reports and policy papers to delegates in preparatory meetings so that women's concerns and needs are reflected in the meeting's final agreement.



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The Platform for Action recommends action to:

- Involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels, including as managers, designers and planners, and as implementers and evaluators of environmental projects;
- Integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programmes for sustainable development; and
- Strengthen or establish mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels to assess the impact of development and environment policies on women.

Women and Poverty

"All States and all people shall cooperate in the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, in order to decrease the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of the people of the world."

Beijing Platform for Action, para. 247

Today, more than one in five people around the world is living in conditions of extreme poverty on little more than \$1 per day. In all developing regions except East Asia, the number of poor people has been rising since the 1980s. Studies indicate that the gaps between rich and poor are widening, and that the majority of the world's poor are women. Since the 1970s, the number of rural women living below the poverty line has increased by 50 per cent, in comparison with 30 per cent for men.

The United Nations Development Programme has defined sustainable development as development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably, that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it, and that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It is development that gives priority to the



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poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities and providing for their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

Many women's groups are concerned that current patterns of economic development and globalization are increasing the gap between rich and poor, benefiting men more than women, and leading to increased environmental degradation. In a report written in preparation for the Earth Summit+5 meeting, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) says, "The imperatives of the global economy seem to be outrunning the post-Rio agenda five years later. How to bring them into closer step is the current challenge." Women are calling for gender-sensitive research in this area. They are also calling for increased access to resources--land, credit, education, technology and information--so that they can participate equally with men in key decisions that affect their lives and all life on planet Earth.

Women are also demanding that Governments establish new forms of economic accounting to include women's unpaid work and promote public policies that will reduce the disproportionate time women spend working, which is often twice as much as men. In addition, women want Governments to meet the goals set at the Microcredit Summit, held in Washington, D.C., in February 1997, to provide \$21.7 billion in microcredit funds to enable 100 million of the world's poorest people to achieve self-employment by the year 2005. Women are also at the forefront in the fight for gender-sensitive economic policies that do not increase poverty and hardship.

In September 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, women's groups started a campaign to monitor the World Bank and the impact of its policies on women. The "Women's Eyes on the World Bank" campaign has recognized the Bank's stated commitment to gender equity and popular participation and has welcomed the Bank's initiation of Regional Gender Action Plans and the increase in Bank-NGO dialogue in some countries.



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In May 1997, the global campaign made the following recommendations to the Bank:

- Increase participation of grass-roots women in projects and economic policy decision-making;
- Institutionalize a gender perspective in all Bank policies and programmes with specific funding;
- Define gender equity and empowerment goals, benchmarks and regular reporting mechanisms;
- Increase the number and authority of gender experts on staff;
- Increase World Bank investments in women's health services, education, agriculture, land ownership, employment and financial services; and
- Increase the number and racial diversity of women in senior management positions.

Management of Natural Resources

"The strategic actions needed for sound environmental management require a holistic, multidisciplinary and intersectoral approach. Women's participation and leadership are essential to every aspect of that approach."

Beijing Platform for Action, para. 251

In Africa, Asia, Latin America and other developing regions, women are often the primary users and managers of land, forest, water and other natural resources. Women in rural areas of developing regions spend major parts of their day growing food, gathering fuelwood, cooking and carrying water.

Women are responsible for most local food production in Africa and Asia. Consequently, they are responsible for the selection of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides and the maintenance of productive soil to nourish seedlings and plants. Women are also



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users, preservers and managers of biodiversity. Research on 60 home gardens in Thailand revealed 230 different species -- many of which had been rescued from a neighbouring forest before it was cleared.

Indigenous women have a special relationship to natural resources. Their cultures and practices promote a balanced, respectful use and preservation of natural resources so that future generations can meet their needs. Yet most development schemes today ignore the needs and practices of indigenous peoples.

As consumers and producers, caretakers of their families and educators, women play an important role in promoting sustainable development through their concern for the quality and sustainability of life for present and future generations. However, due to discrimination, many women are unable to exercise their full potential in natural resource and environmental management, given their lack of training, status, land and property rights and capital.

Women and Water

In rural areas in most developing countries, women are the managers of water resources -- often walking miles to fetch water for basic household chores. In some parts of Africa, women and children spend eight hours a day collecting water. The proportion of rural women affected by water scarcity is estimated at 55 per cent in Africa, 32 per cent in Asia and 45 per cent in Latin America.

Access to safe water is also an issue of increasing concern for urban women and families. It is estimated by the United Nations that the number of urban dwellers without access to safe water may increase by almost 60 per cent between 1990 and 2000, from 244 million persons to some 384 million.



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Poor water access and quality affect not only women's crop and livestock production and the amount of labour they must expend to collect, store and distribute water, but also their health and that of their families. Water-borne diseases such as cholera, dysentery, typhoid, malaria and diarrhoea claim millions of lives each year. Parasitic diseases, such as onchocerciasis (river blindness), are also spread through contaminated water.

However, despite their responsibility for water collection and sanitation management, women rarely participate in decision-making when the construction of facilities is planned. All too often they have no say about the location of a pump or the design of latrines. It is now recognized that the exclusion of women from the planning of water supply and sanitation schemes is a major cause of their high rate of failure. In order to improve health and quality of life for women, water and sanitation programmes must concentrate on reducing the time and energy women expend in water collection, and increasing women's participation in community decision-making regarding water and sanitation.

Efforts must also be increased to ensure access to safe water. Currently, the United Nations estimates that almost one billion people in developing countries do not have access to safe water. Recent estimates are that \$54 billion would be needed between 1990 and 2000 to provide universal coverage in only the urban areas of the regions most in need -- Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia. The resources required are more than three times the rate of present expenditure.

Commercialization of Agriculture

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the rapid modernization of agriculture and the introduction of new technologies, such as those that characterized the green revolution, have benefited the wealthy



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more than the poor, and men more than women. This premise is also supported by the International Labour Organization, which has found that new techniques in agriculture, particularly those involving commercialization, "often shift economic control, employment and profit from women to men". The diversion of income from women causes increased suffering for families because studies have found that, in general, income controlled by women benefits families more than income controlled by men.

Recent studies by the FAO have found that the mechanization of agriculture in Bangladesh has displaced female workers from between 3.5 and 5 million days of labour per year. In Java, the introduction of a subsidized scheme for motorized rice hullers is estimated to have thrown 1.2 million landless women, who were employed in the handpounding of rice, out of work.

Today, most agricultural trade is controlled by a small number of transnational corporations. According to WEDO, fewer than five companies control 90 per cent of the export markets for wheat, corn, coffee, tea, pineapple, cotton, tobacco, jute and forest products. WEDO warns that the increasing monopolization of the world's food supply, supported by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), has led to "increased landlessness for farmers, escalating unemployment, community displacement, chemical-intensive and energy-intensive production, lower nutritional values, increased transportation costs, and an utter loss of food security".

At the national level, women are organizing to establish and protect rights to land and agricultural and marine resources for small and marginal farmers and fisherfolk. In many countries, women are promoting sustainable agriculture as the only means of safeguarding health, livelihoods and food security.

Environment and Women's Health



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"Wildlife and humans the world over are carrying vast numbers of measurable man-made chemicals in their bodies that were never in anyone's body before the 1920s. There is now undeniable evidence that a female shares some of these chemicals with her baby, in her womb, and during breast feeding -- chemicals that are capable of interfering with the natural chemical messengers the body produces to tell the baby how to develop."

Dr. Theo Colborn

World Wildlife Fund

More than 70,000 new chemicals have been introduced to the planet since the industrial revolution, and many have never been tested for their harmful effects on health and the environment. Today there is no part of the planet that is free of man-made chemicals -- some of which accumulate and magnify as they go up the food chain.

Each year, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on research on the environmental causes of cancer. Focus is being placed on pesticides, food additives, toxic wastes, radiation emissions from nuclear power plants and non-ionizing radiation from electromagnetic fields. A major research priority is breast cancer, which is the number one cancer for women in the United States, having killed more than 44,000 women in 1996. Worldwide, it accounts for 19 per cent of all female cancers, and its incidence has risen by 26 per cent since 1980.

A number of studies suggest that breast cancer could be related to exposure to environmental compounds, such as some organo-chlorine substances. The most common finding is an association between breast cancer risk and tissue levels of the pesticide DDT and its derivative DDE--both banned in industrialized countries but still widely used in the developing world. An epidemic in Turkey between 1955 and 1961 of severe



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poisoning by the grain fumigant hexachlorobenzene (HCB) resulted in the death of every newborn child in the affected region that was breastfed. It turns out that HCB is selectively taken up by the breast and secreted into breast milk.

Another alarming story is the migration of harmful chemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers via air and water currents to the polar regions. Indigenous Inuit women who live near the North Pole have been advised to stop breastfeeding their babies due to the high levels of harmful chemicals in their breast milk--chemicals which entered their bodies through the wild fish and game that make up their diet. Although the women never used or benefited from these chemicals, they are now being poisoned by them and forced to abandon the most basic life-sustaining practice of breastfeeding.

In many developing regions, women are increasingly concerned about the health risks associated with poor working conditions in factories making clothing, shoes and electronic goods for export. Health risks range from exposure to carcinogenic chemicals to excessive noise, heat, humidity, physical strain, eye strain and allergic reactions. Electronic assembly workers report a loss of visual acuity, and textile workers complain of pulmonary problems, dermatitis, hand injuries and chronic back pain.

For many rural women around the world, a major environmental concern is the use of biomass fuel--wood, straw and dung--and coal for domestic cooking and heating. These fuels are used by about one half of the world's population, often in poorly ventilated dwellings. Possible effects on health include conjunctivitis, respiratory infections, chronic bronchitis and other lung diseases. It has been estimated, for example, that women who cook on open fires in closed rooms are inhaling as much of the carcinogen benzo-a-pyrene as they would if they smoked 20 packs of cigarettes a day.



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Women are also concerned about occupational exposure to hazardous substances, particularly during pregnancy. One study by the World Health Organization found that pregnant women who cultivated flowers in Colombia and were exposed to pesticides faced a higher incidence of spontaneous abortion, premature birth and birth defects than women who had not been exposed. Studies have found that a number of industrial or agricultural chemicals, as well as ionizing radiation, may lead to infertility, abortions, stillbirths, birth defects and inherited diseases.

Environmental Activism

Women have been active in promoting an environmental ethic, reducing resource use, and reusing and recycling resources to minimize waste and excessive consumption. Everywhere in the world, women are in the forefront of grass-roots environmental organizing.

In 1989 in the United Kingdom, the Women's Environmental Network (WEN) launched its "Wrapping is a Rip Off!" campaign on food packaging and persuaded supermarkets to reduce, reuse and recycle packaging. WEN forced Stora, one of the biggest forest owners, to abandon plans to cut ancient forests in Sweden to make Pampers disposable diapers. WEN also works to expose companies that use false green claims to mislead consumers and is working to make the new European ecolabelling scheme effective and honest.

In Russia, women recently led a national campaign to ban nuclear power. Pledging never again to have another Chernobyl, the women organized a referendum to ban the construction of new nuclear power plants throughout the country.

In Venezuela, a woman is leading the non-profit Volunteer Guardians of the Environment Association in Caracas to stop harmful mining practices that destroy the environment. In the



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United States, women are demanding nutritious food that is free of harmful pesticides, growth hormones and other chemicals. They are also researching and speaking out against the links between environmental pollution and cancer, especially breast cancer.

In Thailand, Tunjai Deetes helped found the Hill Area Development Foundation, which has initiated sustainable development efforts in 28 villages of five tribal groups. As a result of her leadership and dedication, many of the hill tribes have developed into self-reliant communities that now serve as national models in sustainable agriculture and resource conservation.

On the African continent, women are also active in community efforts to safeguard land and water resources. Professor Wangari Maathai, Kenya's first woman Ph.D., has achieved international fame as one of Africa's leading environmentalists. She is the founder and director of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, a grass-roots organization which, since 1977, has expanded to more than 30 African countries and the United States. Through her organization, more than 20 million trees have been planted in Kenya to combat deforestation and desertification, and more than 1,500 plant nurseries have been established.

Women are often the leaders in community-based environmental activism. However, women remain largely absent at all levels of policy formulation and decision-making in natural resource and environmental management, conservation, protection and rehabilitation. Their experience and skills in resource management too often remain marginalized in policy-making and decision-making bodies. Although some progress has been made in incorporating local women in the planning and design of various development projects, there is still a wide gap between rhetoric and practice.



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It is clear that women are neither the sole victims of environmental degradation nor the saviours of the planet. They are simply half of the population, without whose equal participation in decisions at all levels sustainable development will remain elusive.

Earth Summit+5 is an opportunity for the international community to reaffirm the goals of Agenda 21, to reflect the new understandings of population, poverty and gender issues that have developed since 1992, and to set the agenda for sustainable development for the future.

While the United Nations system as a whole is mainstreaming a gender perspective in its policies and programmes, there are two bodies--the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)--which are working to ensure women's equal participation in sustainable development.

UNIFEM is focusing on the political and economic empowerment of women in developing countries. The Fund recently launched the Women's Dollar Campaign to raise money to help women reach their full potential.

INSTRAW recently released a multi-media training package to assist policy-makers and development officials in integrating women's needs and participation in all phases of sustainable development and environmental management.

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