

Strengthening gender equality as a road to sustainability

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Exploring the road

Exactly 20 years ago, women from Europe, North America and all other corners of the world started to organize meetings, conferences and seminars to prepare for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. We formulated our own *Women's Action Agenda* in order to influence the outcomes of the Rio conference. We were convinced that a global agenda on environment and development (Agenda 21) would be a failure if women were not recognized as main actors in sustainable development. Also: the idea was that a critical analysis and reform of our ongoing economies and development agenda's were prerequisites for any development to be sustainable and just.

Gender and environment advocates from the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO; www.wedo.org) and other civil society organizations, worked together and have been quite successful in drafting and lobbying for global texts that mainstream gender aspects in environment and sustainable development policies, such as the latest resolution of the Commission on the Status of Women on gender mainstreaming in climate change policies and strategies (4 March 2011). Translation into regional and local texts and legal frameworks was a next step. The implementation of that wide spectrum of commitments and plans, however, is another challenge still to be dealt with.

Climate change: magnifier of existing inequalities

More than in the so-called 'softer' sectors, such as education and health, in more technical areas, such as chemicals, energy, transport and climate change, social aspects are often not recognized and neglected. For example: until recently no gender specialists or advocates entered the so-called gender-neutral arena of climate change.

However: When we look at household or community level, we can see that the effects of environmental changes, including climate change, are diverse for different groups of people: for poor and rich, for young and old, for women and men. Social constellations and their intersections determine to a great extent the effects of environmental changes for diverse population groups. It are the already existing relationships between women and men at household levels and in our societies, that determine the unequal effects of environmental changes on gender equality. It is more than a preposition: climatic changes increase existing gender inequalities! In that sense this physical phenomenon forms a magnifier of social – incl. gender – constructions. A myriad of examples in disaster studies shows it clearly: if environmental changes hit, it are often women who bear the burden and are amongst the first victims because of gender-specific **vulnerabilities**. On the other hand, gender-specific **capacities** and the full participation of both sexes are essential for successful climate change adaptation and mitigation.

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What if we fail to include women?

The question should be raised what would happen if we fail to include women's needs, priorities and visions in our environment and (sustainable) development agenda's. We would develop policies and practices that are gender-blind, and that do not touch on the basic needs and priorities of half of our region's population. We would not increase the livelihood security of the most disadvantaged such as single mothers, female migrants and elder women. We would not be able to recognize and tackle detrimental side effects of environmental (incl. climate) disasters, such as increased incidences of violence. In poor families girls whose families are confronted with a changing climate would drop out of school earlier. We would adapt our towns and villages to climatic changes, and develop energy plans without due account to the specific needs of women and girls.

If we neglect women, we would exclude them from environmental information, mechanisms and tools, including from its environmental funding facilities. And we would develop policies that do not get into the root causes of environmental problems, engaging more in a compensation for damage done than in a fundamental changes of attitudes and collective behavior. Finally: we would enlarge gender equalities. In other words: we would jeopardize our gender equality agenda.

Recognizing and empowering women for sustainable development

Some recent European studies (e.g. in France, Germany, the UK, Sweden en Finland) have shown that women as consumers and as care-givers are critical in accomplishing more sustainable development. Key to confront the new environmental frontiers such as climate change lays in women's **capacities**, and not so much in their vulnerabilities. In many corners of the world, including in Europe and North America, women are actively involved in strengthening community resilience and adaptive capacities, often through civil society organizations. For example in the Gulf region in the USA, the organization Coastal Women for Change has been very active in strengthening women's livelihoods in the coastal area. Traditional and new knowledge are merged to strengthen local livelihoods, and in every country women have become strong advocates for climate justice, such at the National Federation of Women's Institutes in the UK, LIFE in Germany and Mama'86 and the Black Sea Women's Club in the Ukraine. In promoting that process, many local, national and regional organizations and institutions have played a leadership role. In our region, e.g. Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF; www.wecf.eu), the Gender-cc network (www.gendercc.net) and ENERGIA (www.energia.org) have been very active in areas such as health and environment, sustainable energy and climate change. Support for and cooperation with such groups, as well as with local academia, is essential for women's empowerment and for sustainable development policies to become more gender-sensitive.

New opportunities: towards environmental justice for women and men

There is a wide range of actions in which we – women and men - can engage to promote environmental justice, sustainable development and gender equality in our region and beyond:

- (1) **Prepare gender analyses and assessments of our environmental and SD policies and plans, and budgets.** It is important to involve local women's groups and institutions in such assessment processes, including national or regional women's/gender departments, and/or experts from UN women.

(2) **Ensure women's (and girls) access to environmental information and education.** I am sure my colleague Ms. Corat from UNESCO will refer to this aspect, and to the seminar on gender and climate services we organized at the World Climate Conference of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

(3) **Guarantee (local) women's active participation in (development and implementation of) environmental and sustainable development policies and actions.** For this capacity and resources are essential. A good example of what this step means forms the Women's Delegate Fund that enables women delegates to participate in climate change negotiations. The fund is administered by WEDO and presently funded by the Governments of Finland and Denmark.

In order to enhance women's and governments' capacities in these areas training and other forms of capacity building, such as provided by the senior gender advisor of IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) is important.

(4) **Secure environmental and climate funding, as well as (access to) adaptation and mitigation techniques for women; e.g. in our programs on sustainable energy and climate change.** A good example is the Katrina Women's Response Fund, that was established by the Ms. Foundation, UNDP's work in this area, and the efforts of the Global Gender and Climate Alliance (GGCA), WECF and others to push for adaptation funds, REDD+ mechanisms and other climate change funds to become available to be gender-sensitive and accessible for local women.

ENERGIA and LIFE are playing an important role in enabling women to have access and control over sustainable energy technologies and devices.

(5) **Specifically support (local) women in UNECE's technical cooperation with countries in C. Asia.** In this respect the work of WECF should be mentioned, a network in which local capacity building on sustainable development in E. Europe and C. Asia is central.

(6) **Mainstream gender in our (green) economy plans and promote women's sustainable entrepreneurships - in cooperation with local academia and private sector partners.** In this respect attention given to the green economy in the Rio+20 process forms a challenging opportunity, and UN Women with civil society partners should play a key role.

(7) **Involve men in these processes in order to increase their awareness and support.** It should be an honour to become a gender hero, such as the Dutch astronaut and professor in sustainable development, dr. Wubbo Ockels, who supported the 'Ladies First' initiative to make the Netherlands clean and sustainable by 2050.

The role civil society is playing in gender mainstreaming environmental and sustainable development policies and strategies is manifold: research, study and acting as centres of expertise; monitoring and being watchdogs; organizing and campaigning; lobbying and advocating; raising awareness, informing and educating.

All of this is important, but not without the real support of you, Governments and delegates: it is you who have the decision-making power and the budgets to make to so much needed changes possible.