Women: Agents of Change for a Healthy Environment

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Dr. Wangari Maathai, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize stated, "Although this prize comes to me, it acknowledges the work of countless individuals and groups across the globe. They work quietly and often without recognition to protect the environment, promote democracy, defend human rights and ensure equality between women and men. By so doing, they plant seeds of peace." (Oslo, 10 December 2004. [1])

This paper includes an introduction to the history of women's involvement in the struggle for a sustainable livelihood – at individual and community level. Worldwide, women have manifested themselves as agents of change for environment and sustainable development. This has resulted in a gender-specific approach in environment and sustainable development policies and practices. Women's active participation and empowerment are important prerequisites for such an approach. The paper combines empirical developments with some theoretical reflections on the social movement of women for environment. In the final section it will explore some outstanding challenges for the near future.

A short history

The first documented expression of a woman, who gave her life to safeguarding the environment, goes back more than three hundred years ago. The Maharaja of Jodphur, Rajasthan (India), wanted to build a new palace and required wood for it. His men went to the area around the village of Jalnadi to fell the *khejri* trees. When Amrita Devi, member of the Bishnois community, saw this, she rushed out to prevent the men and she hugged the first tree. But the axe fell on her and she died on the spot. People from 83 surrounding villages rushed to prevent the men from felling the trees and by the end of the day more than 350 had lost their lives. When the king heard about this, he apologized and promised the villagers that they would never again be asked to provide timber. With that event the recorded history of the Chipko movement started.
(http:edugreen.teri.re.in/explore/forestry/bisnoi.htm)

The Chipko movement is particularly known because of its actions to resist the destruction of their lands and livelihoods since 1974. In that year, the government of Uttar Pradesh (now: Uttarakhhand region) in the Himalayan foothills diverted the men of Reni village to a fictional compensation payment site. At the same time labourers disembarked from trucks to start logging activities near the village. Under the leadership of Gaura Devi, a 50-year old illiterate woman, women rushed from their homes to hug the trees ('chipko' means hugging) and prevent them from being cut. A four-day standoff ended in victory for the villagers. The actions of the women of Reni were repeated in several other places in the region, as hill women demonstrated their power as non-violent activists. (UNEP, GEO-Yearbook 2004/5, p.60; Rawat, 1996)

In Japan, in the 1950s, the Nakabaru Women's Society and Sanroku Women's Society protested loudly against pollution from industries and power plants in the Tobata region. While industrial development had made the society richer, the environmental destruction began to threaten the health of local citizens. Women started to raise their voices in opposition and organized an increasingly powerful movement. They discussed how to prevent pollution, while holding basic study meetings on pollution and conducting field surveys, collecting scientific knowledge through several years of action. From the authorities and companies, the women claimed the right to live in a safe and healthy environment. This resulted in major pollution prevention measures taken by the local government and corporations. (Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women, 1995).

[1] Prof. Maathai, a biologist by profession, was the first woman to be appointed professor in natural sciences in Eastern Africa. She combined her professional vision with a commitment to action on the ground, establishing Kenya's Green Belt Movement in 1977. Presently she is Assistant Minister of Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife in Kenya.

Another well-known example of women's long-lasting involvement in environment is the Greenbelt Movement, Kenya. Launched on Earth Day 1977 by the National Council of Women, this environmental campaign resulted in the mobilization of thousands of women planting indigenous trees. The Movement has created a national network of 6,000 village nurseries, designed to combat creeping desertification, restore soil health and protect water catchment areas. The 50,000 women members of the Movement have planted about 20 million trees. The movement has always sought to address issues of gender disparities, and food security in combination with environmental protection. The movement's work has spread to other countries through the Pan-African Green Network (Maathai, 2003). As Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement stated, "Implicit in the act of planting trees is a civic education, a strategy to empower people and to give them a sense of taking their destiny into their own hands, removing their fear…"

In Brazil, the women's organisation Ação Democrática Feminina Gaúcha (ADFG) was founded in 1964. Its main objective was to promote social change for equal opportunities. It emphasized educational work with girls and women, especially in poor urban areas. Since 1974, another important issue has been added to ADFG's agenda: environmental protection. Its projects and campaigns began to oppose chemical-based agriculture, and lobby for environmental protection laws. ADFG has developed into Friends of the Earth-Brazil, one of the most important environmental organisations in the country. Women and men in the organisation fought together for ecological justice and sustainable development. (Dankelman & Davidson, 1988)

In Eastern Europe it is primarily the pollution of the environment and its impacts on human health that has fuelled women's environmental activism. These movements have been one of the major drivers of democratization processes in the region over the past decades.

"*Chernobyl stands at the cradle of the Urals ecological movement. My own work is inspired by that of my mother, Sarvar Shagiakhmetova. In 1995 she was the first person to start a lawsuit in order to get recognition of her and our family's diseases linked to radiation and to get compensation from the Mayak nuclear plant. The lawsuit that could have created a precedent for other cases was stopped when my mother died in October 1998, of cancer caused by the accident."*

In 1999 Milya Kabirova founded the NGO 'Aigul', which means 'Moon Flower' in Tatar. It is a beautiful name for a sad flower that doesn't grow under the sunshine, but only in the white stillness of the moon, resembling the nuclear winter. The organisation's main objectives are to protect the civil rights of people who have been exposed to radiation and their descendants, to promote an ecological way of thinking, to eliminate nuclear arms production and usage, and to promote public participation in shaping state policy and laws. (WECF, 2002, p. 97-100)

Individual leaders and collective action

Women's leadership in environmental matters is reflected in the fact that women take on major environmental issues and seek drastic solutions. Organized women's groups are fighting against deforestation, pollution and other forms of environmental degradation. There are also an increasing number of women's groups and unique self-help projects regenerating the environment. Often a woman takes the lead in such campaigns. And individual leaders often become role models for natural leadership and a source of inspiration for a wide range of women. As Estelle Angelinas said, "An example of the role of women in decision making here was during the last administration. Then the prime minister had placed a woman as minister of the environment. During those years, many changes took place" (Estelle Angelinas, Greece; in: UNEP/DAW, 2005).

Individual women have played crucial roles in enhancing public awareness and political will for environmental protection and conservation: Rachel Carson, Donella Meadows, Gauri Devi, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Jane Goodall, Wangari Maathai, Anita Roddick, Bella Abzug and Noreena Hertz, just to mention a few.

According to her biographer (Patricia Hynes, 1989) Rachel Carson – who was a marine biologist by profession - is a powerful example of what one individual can do in the world, with or without a political base. In 1962 Carson wrote in Silent Spring: "*Man's attitude toward nature is today more critically important, simply because of his new found power to destroy it… We now wage war on other organisms, turning against them all the terrible armaments of modern chemistry, and we assume a right to push whole species on the brink of extension….*" (p.5-6) Carson's work resulted in strong legislation and the establishment of environmental institutions in the USA and throughout the world.

The commitment, courage, resilience and patience of millions of individual and organized women, - scientists, activists and local rural and urban women - in sustaining the environment is amazing. Day after day they perform their communities' productive and reproductive tasks, or inform the world community about the need for environmental conservation. They sustain the interface between the human and physical environment, thereby demonstrating a deep understanding and technical knowledge about the ecological characteristics of their environment:

> "*Life is a whole, it is a circle. That which destroys the circle should be stopped. That which maintains the circle should be strengthened and nurtured.*" Julekha Begum, peasant woman from Gaibandha, Bangladesh (1992). "'*My environment, my life', declared a pygmy woman that was driven out of the forest by the forest exploiters.*" (Foibe Mapili, PR Congo; in: UNEP/DAW, 2005)

If we only look in the field of biodiversity, numerous examples are available about women's knowledge of local ecosystems and species, and their commitment and practices to conserve these. Particularly indigenous women, in all regions of the world, are custodians of local biodiversity. Ruth Lilongula from the Solomon Islands noted, "Biodiversity is the very core of our existence within our communities. You cannot say how many dollars this is worth because it is our culture and our survival. In this context biodiversity is invaluable… We value our surroundings as our identity, as who we are and our inheritance that is given to us…Our environment is many things, a classroom, a pharmacy, and a supermarket." (UNEP/IT, 1999)

International, regional, national and local women's environment organizations have been established since the 1980s. They became important catalysts in empowering women and bringing a gender perspective in sustainable development. It is often through these organisations that women's voices are speaking out against environmental destruction and for a peaceful and healthy planet. International groups such as the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO), have followed the international development agenda closely, and tried to influence it through their advocacy work. *The Women's Action Agenda for a Peaceful and Healthy Planet 2015*, developed in preparation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 2002, adds a holistic perspective to the policy arena: with emphasis on the relationships between the global economic and political forces, the social arena, cultural aspects and ecological circumstances.

Since the early 1990s particular thematic networks have been formed and developed in centres of expertise, such as the Gender and Water Alliance, ENERGIA (working on gender and sustainable energy), the Gender and Climate Change Network, Diverse Women for Diversity (working on gender and biodiversity). These groups are not only instrumental in promoting the integration of gender into specific sectors, but also in shaping the very nature and contents of policies. Like Bella Abzug (1920-1998) remarked so eloquently: "Women do not want to be mainstreamed into a polluted stream. They want the stream to be clean and healthy."

Also professional women's organizations have been established, such as the Women Leaders for the Environment consisting of women environment ministers from around the world, and the recently established WOCAN network of professional Women in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management. In November 2004 more than 150 professional women and activists came together in Nairobi for the first 'WAVE

conference: Women as the Voice for the Environment', hosted by UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme).

What drives women?

Taking into account the above developments, a relevant question is: Why are women interested in becoming change agents in the environmental area? And: is their contribution to environmental conservation different from men? From a feminist perspective it is also important to wonder which benefits or trade-backs environmental conservation brings to women.

Although at first glance, the relationship between the human society and the physical environment seems to be class- and gender-neutral – affecting both women and men in similar ways, upon closer examination, one realizes that it is not neutral at all. The differentiated socio-cultural construction of relationships between women and men means that the linkages between people and the physical environment work out differently for either sex.

It is as crucial to underline that women should not be seen as a single homogeneous group. A slew of differences must be recognized, including social class and caste, race and education. However, in general in the lives of local women, the sociosphere (the social environment) and the ecosphere (the physical environment) are linked through their day to day interactions with the environment.

Since the start of human history, women have contributed essentially to the conservation, use and management of natural resources. (Owen, 1998) Boserup (1970) describes how the role of woman-the gatherer was more important for food and security than that of man-the-hunter. Around the globe they play distinct roles from men: in managing agricultural lands, plants, animals and forests, in collecting water and fodder for domestic use and income generation, in the collection and use of firewood and other bio-fuels. By doing so, they contribute time, energy, skills and personal visions to family and community development. Their extensive experiences make them an invaluable source of knowledge and expertise on environmental management and appropriate actions. This human resource and capacity generates a very strong basis for environmental awareness and action.

> "*I grew up in Calcutta, India, and the city's immense pollution problems made me want to study environment. I am now working in the US as an environmental scientist, and still find it very disturbing that environmental priorities are considered very low in developing and developed countries alike*." (Sukanya Basu; in: UNEP/DAW, 2005)

Women's reproductive and productive tasks and roles also often enhance their profound relationship and commitment towards the present and future wellbeing of their children, families and communities. A sense of motherhood and sisterhood generates a powerful commitment to resist any developments that threaten the subjects of that feeling. Therefore environmental degradation and pollution not only affects women's personal work burdens, health and quality of life negatively and limit their access to and control over resources, but are also strong physical, mental and emotional drivers for action.

> "*Probably no other group is more affected by environmental destruction than poor village women. Every dawn brings with it a long march in search of fuel, fodder and water. It does not matter if the women are old, young or pregnant: crucial household needs have to be met day after weary day, every time longer and more tiresome….*" (CSE, 1985, p.172)

In general environmental action manifests itself in different ways: resistance against negative development, advocating for improved / revised policies and actions, and the development of alternative, more sustainable practices. (Arts, Dankelman & Rijniers, 2002) Women are active through all these approaches – at all levels of society. In these women often built a rights based approach towards natural resources. It is noteworthy to mention that in general one sees not only a deep commitment among them, but also a quite holistic vision – linking issues such as health and ecology, peace and environment, and human rights and sustainable livelihoods, thereby bridging different spheres of life. Relevant policy implications of these positions are: ensuring women's participation in environmental institutions, policymaking, decisions and initiatives, and the need to integrate a gender perspective into all environmental policies, and agreements.

A warning is also at its place: environmental conservation and women's environmental rights and wellbeing do not always coincide. Several cases are known in which environmental conservation and policies have limited women's control over natural resources, such as through the establishment of protected areas or the pricing of ecological products. (NEDA, 1997) Therefore a gender analysis of environmental policies and actions is needed. Women's incentives and meeting their practical and strategic needs should be ensured, as well as their access and control over resources, including land tenure.

> "*A sense of ownership is a crucial factor in sustaining natural resources management and other initiatives. Women's participation should be fully ensured in all aspects from conceptualization to the enjoyment of results and benefits*."(Eleanor Dictaan-Bang, Philippines; in: UNEP/DAW, 2005)

Some further theoretical reflections

Several theories have been developed that interpret women's involvement in and commitment to environmental issues. In 1970, Esther Boserup wrote her semantic work on the role of women in economic development and agriculture. In her article on ecological transitions and the changing context of women's lives in tribal India, Geeta Menon (1991) describes work as the active, labour-based interaction of human beings with the material work. Historically this interaction has been intricately based upon the natural environment. Many traditional economies were based on a division of labour along gender lines. This means that in women's work lays the direct connection to the environment.

In 1980 the historian of science Carolyn Merchant published her semantic work '*The Death of Nature: women, ecology and the scientific revolution*'. In the book she reassessed the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the crucial shift towards a mechanistic worldview – or 'the death of nature'- that accelerated the exploitation of human – particularly female - and natural resources in the name of progress. Merchant, one of the first ecofeminists, sees a parallel in society's dominance and control over nature, the environment and women.

Ecofeminism [2] is seen as the connection of the environmental movement and the feminism movement. It is one of the only movements that combine multiple social movements. Ecofeminism works to end all forms of oppression, whether it is by gender, race, class, nature, or the earth. Ecofeminists work to show the interconnections between all of these subjects and how positive relationships will better all of those involved. The reason that the term includes feminists is that the movement uses gender equality as a starting point for working to end oppression. Because of close ties of nature and spirituality, goddess worship and the divine female are often tied to ecofeminism. Academics and activists like Vandana Shiva (India), Ariel Salleh (Australia), Maria Mies (Germany) and Gloria Goldstein (USA) are often seen as important representatives from ecofeminism. (www.EcoFem.org) Critics, like Rosi Braidotti (1994) and Bina Agarwal (1998) argue that ecofeminism has focused too much on ideological arguments and failed to address power and economic

[2] The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by the French feminist Francois d'Eaubonne in 1974.

differences which also contribute to differentiation among women, and that ecofeminists also tend to overestimate the idea of harmonious, ecological, and traditional societies.

Bina Agarwal suggests '*feminist environmentalism*' as an alternative concept. This concept insists that the link between women and the environment should be seen as '*structured by a given gender and class/caste/race organization of production, reproduction and distribution*'. She speaks of class-gender effects of environmental change, and underlines the need to transform the actual division of work and access to resources. The class-gender effects of environmental change are manifested as pressures on women's time, their income, their nutrition and health, their social support networks, and their knowledge. Agarwal's approach is similar to what Dianne Rocheleau (1995) has called '*feminist political ecology*', and both emphasize material relations and their structuring of gender relationships. These are particularly expressed in dynamic and cumulative gendered knowledge of environment, sciences and technologies.

Bringing gender to the environmental arena

Gender equality and equity are not only a question of fundamental human rights and social justice. But as the World Bank and others have found: gender equality is essential for countries' economies and the success of development initiatives. As Lorena Aguilar (2002) argues, sustainable development is not possible without equity.

> "*The gender situation regarding drinking water in rural areas shows that the committees for rural drinking water managed by women are more efficient, transparent and effective. In the specific case of committees in indigenous regions, if there is not a woman included the system simply does not work.*" (Maria-Angelica Alegria, Chile; in: UNEP/DAW, 2005)
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> "*Positive impacts resulting from women's leadership within communities, implementing organizations and educational institutions have not been documented or widely disseminated, thus denying women important role models for change*." (Jeannette Gurung, USA; in: UNEP/DAW, 2005)

However: as – amongst others - a recent Online Discussion on Women and the Environment (UNEP/DAW, 2005) has shown the number of women in environmental decision-making is still very limited. Women's knowledge and their interests are often ignored, and their access to and control over resources of good quality is limited or threatened.

One of the reasons of such denial is probably that apart from a merely technical and statistical angle, gender carries a strong element of politics and power. As Pietilä (2002) concluded: gender equality requires "transformative change". This often evokes a lot of resistance. However, several steps have been taken to mainstream a gender perspective in environment and sustainable development.

During the second UN World Conference on Women (Nairobi, 1985) the international Environment Liaison Centre organized a series of workshops on 'Women, Environment and Development'. The expert meeting concluded that: "*The growth of women's power and sustainability of development are ecologically tied*."(ELC, 1985) The Forward Looking Strategies of the UN Conference mentioned that 'the environment' is an area of concern for women. It was the first time in history that at global level the linkages between gender issues and environment were highlighted. Also in the policy arena two streams were converging – the one on gender with the one on environment.

Not only did the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro – 1992, have 145 references to the specific roles and positions of women in environment and development, it also recognized women as one of the nine major groups to achieve sustainable

development, and included a separate chapter (24) in Agenda 21 entitled: 'Global Action for Women towards Sustainable and Equitable Development.' Maurice Strong, the Secretary General of the 1992 Earth Summit: "*There is a pressing need to continue to centralize women's issues and to ensure the incorporation of their collective perspectives, experiences and contributions to sustainable development. The implementation of the programme areas of Agenda 21 which extensively incorporates the important role of women in sustainable development will help to meet this need*."(UNIFEM, 1993)

The 1995 UN Conference on Women brought thousands of women together in Beijing, China. They agreed on the Beijing Platform for Action. Its Section K focuses on 'Women and the Environment' and has three strategic objectives:
* Involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels.
* Integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programmes for sustainable development.
* Strengthen or establish mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women.

The 2005 Beijing+10 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women re-established the Beijing Platform, and therewith also the need to continue working on 'Women and the Environment'. Similarly international organisations such as the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have adopted policies that aim to enhance gender equality in environment. (UNEP 23rd Governing Council, 2005, decision no.23/11). Through its senior gender advisor IUCN Meso-America has not only been instrumental in advocating and building capacity for mainstreaming gender in conservation work., but also a wide range of very useful documents on gender and environment have been developed. (Aguilar, 2002). As Kunga Ngece from Kenya said, "The choice to involve women is a choice for sustainability. It's a choice that will empower rather than increase conflicts over limited highly needed natural resources" (Kunga Ngece, Kenya; in: UNEP/DAW, 2005)

Challenges for the future

As the recent Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) stresses, the quality and existence of our earth's ecosystems is threatened at an unprecedented rate. These developments are major obstacles for meeting the global development goals. There is a growing acceptance that global environmental change, induced by globalisation and unsustainable production and consumption levels, will jeopardize environmentally based livelihood strategies. Climate change is predicted to accentuate the gaps between the world's rich and poor, as people living in poverty are more vulnerable. Effects of climate change are very likely to be gender-differentiated as gender is a significant dimension in understanding disasters: female livelihood strategies are vulnerable to environmental change. (World Bank, 2001) Similar lessons can be learnt from the recent Tsunami-impacts. Perspectives, responses and impacts surrounding disaster events are varied for men and women. Therefore a gender approach and the active participation of women in disaster mitigation and adaptation are priorities for environmental change management. The importance of women's knowledge in prevention and adaptation should be recognized, as they are able to map risks and vulnerabilities from their own standpoint and play an important role in early warning. More recently, women are also organizing to influence the international climate change negotiations and national policies, e.g. through the recently established Gender and Climate Change Network (www.gendercc.interconnection.org). In their approach global negotiations are linked to local realities.

The privatisation of natural resources, such as water and energy (services), is another global development that should be watched consciously from a gender-perspective. At the 13th Commission on Sustainable Development meeting, New York 2005, women were among the civil society organizations that stressed this issue. They organised several expert meetings on the need for governmental responsibility and corporate accountability with regard to the privatisation of resources. At such events women's groups engage in partnerships with other social organisations, such as the labour movement and indigenous groups.

Finally it is important to underline that women should not be seen as just instruments for environmental conservation and management. The burden of environmental destruction can not be put on the shoulders of women alone. The role of men in environmental conservation and management was stressed throughout the Online Discussion on Women and Environment (UNEP/DAW, 2005). The responsibility for women's participation and empowerment in environment, as well as for gender sensitive environmental policies and practice is a common responsibility of men and women. As the United Nations concluded in 1995: Policies that only target women cannot achieve the best results. Nor can those which assume that public actions are gender-neutral in their effects. Hence, promoting gender equality implies a profound change in socio-economic organization of societies: not only in the way women work, live and care for the other members of the households, but also in the way men do, and in the way their respective roles in the family and community are articulated with the need to earn a living"(UN, 1995).

> *"We rely on both genders for our livelihoods; it is something we all share, we are all responsible for. We must put aside any differences and work together. Therefore, I hope that both genders work together on issues concerning the environment*." (Estelle Angelinas, Greece; UNEP/DAW, 2005)

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