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Emerging issue: Gender equality and sustainable development

**GENDER EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN AND WHERE DOES IT END?***

by

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Today we are addressing the question of women and sustainable development in the light of the upcoming 20 year review in 2012 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). In order to do so it is necessary for us to recall what happened some 19 years ago and to reflect on what has been achieved and importantly on what has not been accomplished.

In order to understand the discourse today about green economy and gender equality, we have to remind ourselves of the historic perspectives that shape this debate.

The UNCED in 1992 was significant in that it brought women from the South, poor women, who were previously excluded, into the discourse. A discourse on the issues facing our planet and how women functioned in the face of economies that had been subjected to structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and the IMF. 19 years ago women were already talking about what it meant to be confronted by the excesses of war and tribalism, to be confronted by value systems that failed to recognize, much less count their unwaged work in the care economy. They also realized how critical women were to the environment.

I wish to remind ourselves of what is possible when we work across national and international divides to open doors. UNCED proved our collective power when we asserted our common experiences as women and as half of the world's population. Path breaking decisions were made 19 years ago—perhaps the most significant was that the consultative process in the UN opened up under what was called the UNCED rules of participation. And for the first time these halls were filled with women and men from all parts of the world, from the developing south and the north. Grassroots women came here in numbers to share their experiences and realities, taking ownership of a process that had previously excluded them from decisions.

We should not be unmindful of this – rule number one –opening the space and providing the means for direct participation of those in whose name we claim to be making policy and those for whom we are bearing witness of the past two decades.

As a WEDO representative today I'm proud of the women and their organizations that galvanized women and men everywhere after the shocking realization that in the preparatory UNCED documents there was hardly any reference to women. We should not be discouraged that the present generation of WEDO women had the same motive to start addressing gender equality in the climate change processes.

At least on paper, that conference brought women in particular into the environment debate and placed women centrally in the development paradigm.

Not only did we manage to achieve these beginnings but we have continued to organize to increase our role in governance and to use the Beijing Conference of 1995 to develop our agenda even further. As of this date, the CEDAW Convention has 186 states parties. The governance role of the CEDAW Committee's work in this respect was and is instrumental for many local women's organizations.

I would like to read to you from an interview with a local indigenous woman from my country who has been part of an indigenous research team:

“The reliance of Suriname’s Indigenous women on our natural surroundings has been complete, and together the water, the land, the forests and the products they yield have formed the basis of our incomes and our contributions to household livelihoods.

Yet the sustainability of these resources is under threat from a variety of external actors, including the national government, foreign investors and more and more even multilateral and

become household words are true to our value systems as women and reflect our aspirations and internalize our experiences.

We must begin by posing the question –what is green and green for whom? A simple enough sentence but until and unless we bring our experience to bear on this we will be failing.

Today we are once again in the slip stream of conversations and new mantras about the environment –the green economy, green governance, eco friendly processes, etc. and there is talk about a paradigm shift. But has the paradigm really shifted in such a way that women are central to the decision-making, have we maintained the rigor and clarity of purpose needed to redefine the segregated nature in which environment and development are dealt with by our governments and the private sector and even ourselves? Every process these days speaks to the need for and the interest in sustainable development but what does that necessitate? Who is defining what sustainable development means for women, especially poor women in the south and the increased number of new poor in the north? Have we yet examined the ravages of the financial system we were warned about at Rio?

The effects of the structural adjustment programmes of the IMF and World Bank often seem trivial in the current world where the mainstreaming of jobless growth and outsourced production to the cheapest and the most exploitable labor can be accessed. Where are women being asked to address climate issues as part of the mainstream? Daily we witness the inability of governments to agree on the urgent need for the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The wrangling at Copenhagen has not produced, in spite of mounting evidence, the plight of the millions and millions of people especially poor people, mostly women, who continue to live on very vulnerable frontlines of climate change. The projection that there could be 50 million climate refugees by 2020 is unthinkable for most of us, yet very real and not so far away.

UNEP has defined a green economy as “an economy that results in improved human well-being and reduced inequalities over the long term, while not exposing future generations to significant environmental risks and ecological scarcities”.

There are three main challenging aspects we encounter when trying to put a green economy definition to practice:

1. The focus of the present-day economy on growth is measured mostly only in GDP, while largely ignoring the fact that economic growth in and of itself has not automatically led to solving poverty or even a more equitable distribution of production in the past.
2. While a common paradigm of well-being embraces the three pillars of employment, education and health, most countries have huge imbalances within and among them. And the commonly promoted belief that education would lead to securing employment and health, has been proven wrong with steadily deteriorating situations in many developing countries.
3. Inclusion and participatory processes are lacking in current economic systems. How does a green economy guarantee these?

But what has sustainable development meant for women? We should indeed not be romanced by

than we have now; a world that will not be based on the over exploitation of the world's resources by the few within and across nations as it continues to deprive the majority of the world's poor-mostly women – from the minimum requirements of a healthy and peaceful life in which their full human potential can be realized. We all have this responsibility to ensure that future generations are not condemned to a world that has less than we have now. We do not bear equal responsibility for how we have gotten here----the developed world must accept its historic and even current over-consumption of the resources. We cannot condone green inequality.

If nature is demonstrating anything in the immediate past it is that human beings do not have either the technology or other capacity to stem the tides –to stop the earth from shaking – to control the wind and the rain. And by the same token we must acknowledge that until and unless we respect the needs and constraints of our human existence we can tinker at the edges –greening our budgets, lowering our carbon footprints, reducing our waste, recycling our garbage, cleaning up our emissions- but not resolve the real issue of how are we going to share this planet with each other in such a manner that we can all look

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