

WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES: TOWARDS AN ETHICAL, EQUITABLE, JUST AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD IN THE 21ST CENTURY



Source: Graphically Speaking, 1979

By Peggy Antrobus and Judithe Bizot

This paper is a compilation of women's ideas and actions. It is testimonial to what women are thinking and doing about the crisis in development and the environment. Its inspiration is drawn from the UNESCO courier "Women Speak Out on the Environment," March 1992, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) "Environment Development: Grass Roots Women's Perspective," and the Declaration by Women at the Global Forum, June 1992.

THE STORY OF THE SACRED TREE

For all the people of the earth, the Creator has planted a Sacred Tree under which they may gather, and there find healing, power, wisdom and security. The roots of this tree spread deep into the body of Mother Earth. Its branches reach upward like hands praying to Father Sky. The fruits of this tree are the good things the Creator has given to the people: teachings that show the path to love, compassion, generosity, patience, wisdom, justice, courage, respect, humility and many other wonderful gifts.

The ancient ones taught us that the life of the Tree is the life of the people. If people wander far away from the protective shadow of the Tree, if they forget to seek the nourishment of its fruit, or if they should turn against the Tree and attempt to destroy it, great sorrow will fall upon the people. Many will become sick at heart. The people will lose their power. They will cease to dream dreams and see visions. They will quarrel among themselves over worthless trifles. They will become unable to tell the truth and to deal with

each other honestly. They will forget how to survive in their own land. Their lives will become filled with anger and gloom. Little by little they will poison themselves and all they touch.

It was foretold that these things would come to pass, but that the Tree would never die. And as long as the Tree lives, the people live. It was also foretold that the day would come when the people would awaken, as if from a long, drugged sleep: that they would begin, timidly at first but then with great urgency, to search for the Sacred Tree.

The knowledge of its whereabouts, and of the fruits that adorn its branches have always been carefully preserved within the minds and hearts of our wise elders and leaders. These humble, loving and dedicated souls will guide anyone who is honestly and sincerely seeking along the path leading to the protecting shadow of the Sacred Tree."⁽¹⁾



***"Our first environment
is our bodies
our children
and our families,
the earth
that sustains us and
our communities."⁽²⁾***

***"What do forests bear,
soil, water
and fresh air,
soil, water
and fresh air,
the basis of our
lives."⁽³⁾***

Margarita Arias, the former First Lady of Costa Rica at the opening of the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet said that no one speaks out for the protection of the environment with greater moral authority than women. "Only those who have fought for the right to protect their own bodies from abuse can truly understand the rape and plunder of our forest, rivers and soils." She also pointed out that a world that spends over US\$1 trillion annually on armaments (US\$800 billion in industrialized countries and US\$200 billion in developing countries), a world in which 14 million children die yearly, is unable to raise US\$2.5 billion to eradi-

cate infant malnutrition. This is less than the amount spent on armaments in a single day. Ever since Costa Rica abolished its army back in 1948 it has been able to divert its resources from military spending to housing, education, health and, more recently, to improving the environment.

Mrs. Arias is a good example of what women, at all levels, are saying and doing around the world to survive and to improve the quality of living in their communities and in the world.

The above quotes are an example of how womens' perspectives are different. Whether

you look at them from the North or the South, women are listening to their inner wisdom created from centuries of experiences and observation, and they seek new involvement at all levels of society. They pooled their collective experiences and hopes and demands from the South and North into the recommendations of Agenda 21 presented and adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio, June 1992. Over 2,000 women (environmentalists, peasants, researchers, sociologists, writers, scientists, economists...) committed themselves to change, to a conviction that 500 years after Columbus and 40 years of post-colonial development, a new world order based on other

attitudes, values and behavior has to emerge.

The difference between women's and men's perspectives lies in the different gender roles. Gender is a social construct which assigns certain attributes, behaviors and attitudes to males and females. However, most societies are constructed in such a way that attributes, behaviors and attitudes associated with the female are considered of less value, of less importance. From birth, socialization practices are constructed to enforce gender differences.

Gender is thus an essential factor in women's subordination to men, and the subsequent devaluing of the femi-

nine in relation to the masculine. To the extent that the feminine values of cooperation, caring, compassion are important to achieving an ethical, equitable, just and sustainable livelihood, understanding gender-power relations is critical to understanding how we might make the necessary changes.

Women have brought a different perspective to the environment debate, because of their different experience base. Poor women's lives are not compartmentalized and their work is not seasonal. They therefore see the problem from a much broader and more holistic perspective. They understand more clearly than policy makers that economics and the

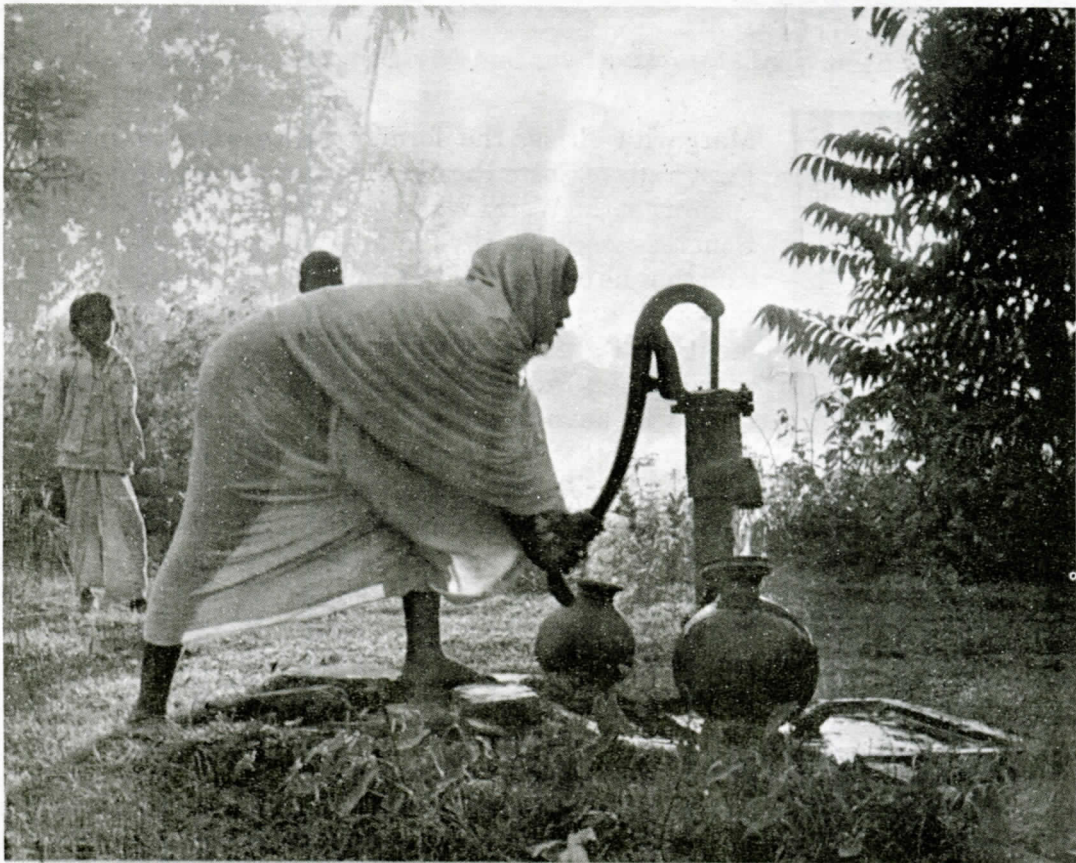


Photo: ILO

environment are compatible. Their experience makes this clear to them, because the soil, water and vegetation which the poor require for their basic livelihoods necessitates specific care and good management. Women from the South do not separate people from the natural resource base.

Because women and the poor have the biggest stake in the natural resource base and the best knowledge of specific local conditions, problems and needs, solutions cannot be left up to even the most enlightened state, business, institution or representatives of local government. These agencies and actors must be accountable to the community which includes the women. Because women's vantage point is different from that of men, and because women - as women - have been largely excluded from policy-making processes, their perspectives have to be specifically included and their involvement in decision-making institutionalized. Women's importance to environmental policymaking, planning and programming derives from the roles that they play in many sectors central to environmental planning and management, and the fact that they play an important role socializing the young and shaping societal values and attitudes to the environment. Their perspective is therefore crucial to planning, conceptualizing and implementation of effective environmental management programmes which can help to maintain the quality of life in the 21st century.

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An analysis from the perspective of grassroots women illuminates the linkages between the problems in development and those in environment, as no other analysis does. Starting with a focus on health and livelihoods of the poor, women's analysis takes us directly to a consideration of the macro-economic policies which affect health and livelihoods. This, in turn, leads to an understanding of the patterns of production (including the arms trade) and finance which also destroy the ecological system.

This analysis comes from a network of Third World feminists promoting Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN). On the eve of the conference marking the end of the UN Decade on Women (1975-1985), women researchers, activists and those engaged in policy formation and communication came together to

reflect on what they had learned from their experience of development during the Decade. The result was a feminist critique of the growth-oriented model of development, and an analysis of the inter-locking crises of food insecurity, environmental degradation, debt, deteriorating social services, militarism, and political conservatism.

From DAWN's perspective, growth-oriented development is fundamentally flawed for the following reasons:

- ✗ The exclusion of women's unpaid work from calculations of Gross National Product (GNP);
- ✗ Its failure to recognize the link between economic production and social reproduction;
- ✗ Its failure to acknowledge the existence of gender-based hierarchies in the household,

workplace, the community and society at large.

Internationally-influenced policies of structural adjustment, adopted by governments to deal with the debt crisis of the 1980s, are a good example of the kinds of policies and programs which emerge from this model of development. The cuts in social services, which are a prime consequence of these policies, emphasize economic production at the expense of the social sector (the separation of production from social reproduction), substitute women's unpaid work in the household for publicly-financed services in health and welfare and underline the powerlessness of women to secure benefits for those dependent on their care - children, the elderly and the sick. DAWN's vision is of "a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country, and from the relationships among countries ...Where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated...".

In its analysis of environment and development, DAWN draws on local experiences of grassroots women living in the economic South. These experiences explode several widely believed and oft repeated myths of the environmental and development debate. Two which are most detrimental to the search for solutions are the following:

THE MYTHS

The Poor are Destroying the Environment.

On the contrary:

- * The poor have the biggest stake in protecting the natural resource base that provides the water, food, fodder and housing which are the basis of their livelihood.
- * The state, using its legal power in collusion with big business contributes to damage to the environment which, both in terms of scale and quality of damage, has been unsurpassed.
- * The data indicate that the interaction between people and their natural environments has been broken by forces external to the community. They include the globalization of capital and the incorporation of even the most remote areas into the global market. These factors combined with debt and structural adjustment policies have created major rifts within

communities and between people and their natural environments. Material poverty is increasing and, both globally and nationally, the gap between the materially wealthy and the material poor is increasing.

Population is Responsible for Environmental Degradation.

On the contrary:

- * Areas of low population, falling population and decreasing fertility rates are examples of extreme and growing environmental degradation.
- * As many case studies show, extremes of wealth and poverty leading to overconsumption by some and the erosion of livelihoods of others, skewed distribution and use of resources, and patterns of human settlement have a stronger demonstrable relationship to environmental degradation than population size per se.
- * Research also indicates that fertility rates decline when

If all countries followed the industrial example, five or six planets would be necessary to serve as mines and waste dumps.



Photo: World Council of Churches

women have access to adequate reproductive health care and their livelihoods and basic rights are respected. This is extremely difficult to achieve in the current global and national context.

Anticipating the pervasiveness of the belief that population is responsible for environmental degradation, DAWN worked with the Social Science Research Council and the International Social Science Council to examine the scientific evidence of the relationships between population growth and the environment. Their conclusion is that the assertion of "population growth as a central variable in environmental degradation is not supported by research findings,"

and that "the focus on population growth as the key factor in degrading environment is thus misplaced."

DAWN's analysis of environment emphasizes:

- * the need for greater community control in environmental management;
- * the need for women to have access to education and health care (including reproductive health care);
- * the need for sustainable development to be grounded in sustainable livelihoods defined to include sociocultural, spiritual and political elements along with material and ecological;

* the need for a new international order based on justice and equity and respect for diversity of cultures, and for the identification of human development and sustainable livelihoods as primary objectives of development;

* the need to alter affluent lifestyles and eliminate overconsumption.

"Some of the most serious environmental problems today facing the planet originate in the rich countries, and there is clearly a relationship between high levels of consumption caused by wealth and environmental degradation. It is also argued by some that profligate northern consumption in combination with the unequal



Photo: ILO

North-South political and economic power relations are underlying causes of poverty and environmental degradation in developing countries.⁽⁴⁾

In short DAWN reflects the growing awareness of women for an alternative development paradigm: one which focuses on social-cultural needs of people rather than on unlimited economic growth.

Within this paradigm, priority should be given to: health, education, housing over military spending; ecology and conservation over unlimited economic growth; local over global management; survival over destruction; justice over profit; peace over war; accountability to communities over accountability to international mar-

kets; bio-cultural diversity over imposition of one culture; living in harmony with one's needs over never "enoughness"; women's rights to control their own bodies over intervention from governments and agencies.

Although in today's world these choices may seem to be unrealistic, they are increasingly accepted as the vision expressed by expanding networks of a variety of people, including academics, scientists, scholars, activists and peoples' movements for peace, environment and "alternative development." They include youth, women, indigenous groups and others. Essentially, these people are all saying that no matter how powerless one feels, things could be different.

"In 1960, the Northern societies were 20 times richer than the Southern countries. In 1980, 46 times. It is evident that the gap is widening. It's not so much a question of injustice as it is of having lured all countries into the same development model. If all countries followed the industrial example, five or six planets would be necessary to serve as mines and waste dumps."⁽⁵⁾

Vandana Shiva, the Indian physicist and feminist who works with community action groups fighting against the dominant model of development and environment destruction, made her position clear on this point: "It should also be recognized that scientists are as fallible as anyone else and that science and its institutions are, more often than not, prostituted to economic interest, since the structure of power is so closely married to the structure of knowledge. Many technologies are used to serve the economic interests of the powerful, not choices based on ecology and ethics. Women have already made their choices on these issues."⁽⁶⁾

Today we are witnessing the collapse of both socialism and neoclassical liberalism paradigms. This collapse creates space for the emergence of new ethics and values and quality of life versus unlimited growth. It focuses on human and community development versus international aid and intervention.

Money cannot buy the human gestures which confer respect and dignity.

If listened to and given the self-confidence, these women can help us to look more critically at ourselves, and question our values. We must learn to shirk our smugness, listen and search for the silenced voices. The process here is not so much one of women or men, but of values. Bringing out the values in all of us is what is essential. At the center of these values is caring, sharing, reciprocity. Money is not the only currency for women and the poor. Money cannot buy the human gestures which confer respect and dignity. Those seeking for alternatives today say that when economics and maximizing profits are put aside as central forces of existence, then we can find the seeds of change for the future.

For many, the major disappointment of the whole process leading to the Earth Summit was the failure to make the connections between the crisis in our ecological system and the crisis in our economic systems. In our view, the real differences at the recent events in Rio were not between the North and South (despite the clear differences between these two sets of governments), or between governments and NGOs, but between those who believe that the environmental crises can be solved by sustained growth, free trade, cleaner technologies and by better pricing of natural resources, on the one hand, and on the other, by those who believe that what is required is a fundamental shift in values, and a different approach to development. One which puts people at the center - a new paradigm of development.

The essential issue, however, is that women's perspectives have still not been adequately taken into account, incorporated into other networks -

thereby weakening the analysis. The call for a change in the "balance between assertiveness/acquisitiveness and cooperation... and the recognition... that this would be more easily achieved if feminine values were no longer subordinated to masculine ideas,"⁽⁷⁾ requires an understanding of the imbalance of gender-power relations.

In the call for fundamental social change, it is grassroots women embedded in their cultures, lacking inhibitions, with nothing to lose, marginalized outside the system, who have the greatest potential to see things differently and to help change the status quo. "Why is it that women sense destruction faster and are more preserving in their struggles against destruction? Why do they carry on when everyone else is cynical and hopeless? The reason is that women have a distinctive perception of what life is, a sense of what is really vital, which colours their view of what is at stake in the world."⁽⁸⁾

Footnotes:

1. *An Inuit saying.*
2. *Caribbean Women, Environment and Development: Grassroots Women's Perspective*, by Rosina Wiltshire, DAWN for UNCED 1992 "Rio Listened".
3. *Chipko Women songs from the Himalayas.*
4. *This document was not available to the editors at the time the present document had to be finalized.*
5. *See note 4.*
6. *The phrase in double brackets is entirely the responsibility of the editors.*
7. *References will be provided later.*
8. *See note 7.*

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