

WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT FROM A NORTHERN PERSPECTIVE

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Our starting point for discussions in the WIDE women and environment group has been to look at how environment is both a northern and southern development issue. The present environmental and development crisis affects all of us, in different ways, and therefore all of us have to look to our own solutions as well as working with partners towards global solutions. This has been a subtle shift in our way of thinking where until very recently we saw our major role in development as northern women as an instrumental one in lobbying northern colleagues to be more aware of southern women's needs: ensuring that their concerns were on the agenda.

With the impetus of the environment crisis and in response to what we increasingly recognize as the lack of a northern women's voice on development alternatives within a global context, we are now moving towards a broader assessment of northern development issues

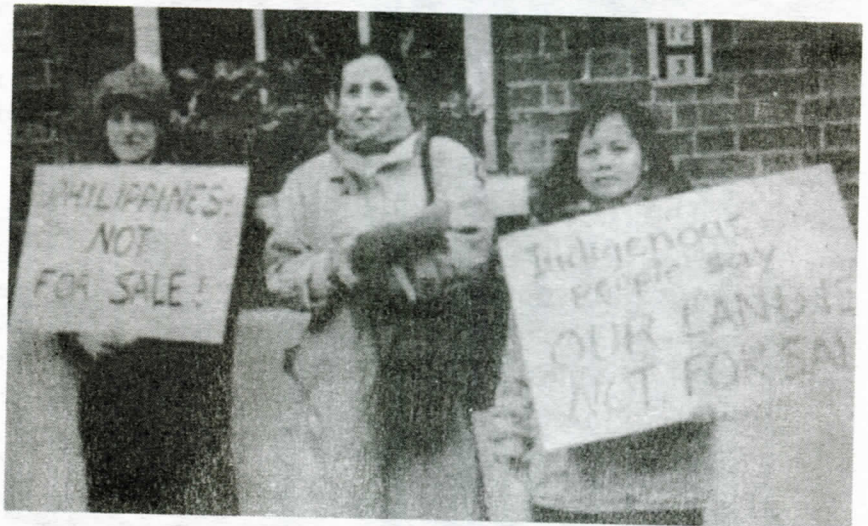
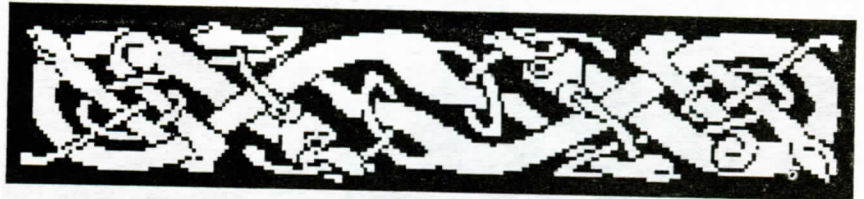


Photo: Gerry Atkinson

and learning from the reality of the changes in the world around us.

The UNCED process, building up to the Rio Earth Summit and beyond, has been part of the whole re-thinking in the 1980s of the costs of development - both as environmental and equity issues. The environmental crisis, what was once seen as a fringe "greenie" concern quite outside our social, political or economic life, had moved to centerstage and has to be seriously considered by politicians and people throughout the world, albeit with different emphases. Similarly, growing economic independence and the recognition that we have to share "one world's" resources for all of us to survive means that development issues are no longer just the terrain of the South.

In WIDE we are not "technical experts" in environment nor in linking women, environment and development do we plan to "add" women to the environmental equation along sectoral lines, but rather we can contribute to the debate our gender perspective to look at the changes necessary in our developmental approach to environment, economics, society and culture. From our various histories and politics we are reexamining the economic growth imperative, the legacy of positivist science and the costs of modernization for women, non-western cultures and peoples in order to create a comprehensive gender approach to northern develop-

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ment policies within the context of the global environmental crisis. In this way we are seeking both to understand and to empower our own position as women working in the North and to contribute a set of gender literate, people focused, ecologically and culturally aware strategies to the worldwide movements seeking to transform the present iniquitous and damaging form of development.

SEARCHING FOR A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

One of our first tasks is to disclose the stereotypes in which the debate is being carried out. One such stereotype is that women are closer to nature and therefore have a special knowledge to "save the earth". In WIDE we have been uncomfortable with that assumption partly because of its seductiveness, it would be nice to think we could save the world, but mainly because it seemed to leave women outside of the present attempts to change world development and to deny other group's, including men's, important contributions. The assumption that women are closer to nature, even if seen in a positive light, seems to echo some of the very prejudices we, as feminists, have been fighting. On the other hand the debates on environment certainly have marginalized women's contribution and many so called "experts" on environment do not see where women or a gender analysis enter the debate at all.

We have therefore thought it important not to dismiss the special appeal to women but to look in our search for a gender perspective on environment and development at the conceptual links between women, environment and nature and how they relate to economic development and the modernization project of science.

POWER/KNOWLEDGE

Development in its historical context has been part of the modernizing project based on the rationale of unlimited growth and unlimited resources to economic and social progress, part of a world view which originated in the enlightenment and helped produce modern science and modern economics. Science and economics are powerful systems of knowledge and practice based on a system of dominance of men over women, of culture over nature, the rational over the irrational. Our current environmental and development dilemmas are founded in this world view. In order to formulate strategies to transform development we have to question the "neutrality" of this world view and look at the patterns of hierarchy in knowledge and power which are deeply inscribed into our thinking but are made to appear "normal," "natural," "neutral."

GENDER AND NATURE

Feminism and ecology have revealed the hierarchies of thought and practices in our modern discourses on the feminine and nature. At the heart of the modern scientific discourse is the domination of women through gender relations and the domination of nature through a science base on the objectification and exploitation of natural resources. Since the enlightenment, science as the domain of men has excluded women as "the other"

as the "sex," the gender, more defined by her bodily functions not by her mind. Within the same reasoning nature, symbolic of the unknown, to be conquered and tamed became more and more the object and product of human scientific action. Images of nature as female, passive ready to be tamed and controlled parallel images of women as the objects not subjects of knowledge systems. In this way nature and

women are linked together as the objects of science and "man's" desire to transform and control the "natural" world. Hence women have become symbolic of nature and its oppression by men. Women are seen as more "natural," instinctive and caring but less rational, less able to be part of the scientific world of progress. The practice of science, of our modern systems of thought, in its very conception appear to justify hierarchical gender relations and neutralize other knowledges of nature.

QUESTIONING THE FOUNDATIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

This system of thought based on the hierarchies of rational science over women and nature was translated into the project of development where rationality and progress have come to be identified with the science of economics. Through colonialism and development practice these hierarchies of western thought have been transported to the Third World where other ways of understanding nature and gender relations were excluded in favor of modern economics and progress. The scientific discourse of economics and development systematically devalues every "other" (difference) to the male, western, bourgeois self: women, other races, lower classes and nature are reduced to objects to be utilized and raw material to be reinterpreted through western knowledge systems. First through

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colonialism and now through development cooperation, western power seeks to integrate all peoples and nature as human and natural resources for the universal modernizing project of economic progress controlled and determined by (and largely benefiting) the western powers. The ecological crisis can be seen as the inevitable outcome of the logic and practice of a development based on a science and technological expertise whose object since the enlightenment has been to turn everything into resources for appropriation and to dominate people and nature for economic reasons.

MULTIPLE POSITIONED STRATEGIES

Going back to the question posed above about the appeal to women to save the world we can see that the fundamental concepts of the western world view leads us to see women as outside culture, the non-holders of scientific knowledge, linked to nature as the objects rather than subjects of western culture. Given the present environmental crisis and failure of development it is tempting to reverse the dominant hierarchies and argue that the excluded, women with their special relationship with nature, must now take the reigns of power. A strategy which has its use. But even if women could use some instinctive knowledge which could save the planet, how do we make men give up their power and change their whole way of see-

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ing to a non-dominating, non-hierarchical world? It is perhaps a little too simple just to state that women understand nature better - this is after all what men have been telling us for a long time - can we just ask those in power to reassess the values they give to the "other" of nature and women?

What perhaps would be a more useful strategy is to try and change the knowledge/power base on which development is founded. This means looking at empowering women and nature not within the dominant hierarchies of power but from where we stand in our own locus of power and knowledge. We need to resist the universalizing model of development which is based on the uncritical belief of the manageability of people and nature by taking up our own power in our local context as women from the North, grassroots movements in the South, environmentalists, political activists, ordinary people in the South and North who are seeking change. We need to learn and devise strategies based on multiple realities and ways of seeing the world which break what are the apparent "truths" of our dominant knowledge system. In this strategy WIDE, as women from the North, would join with many others who are questioning the imperative for economic growth begun in the North and exported to the South and who are seeking to form alternative power/knowledges which challenges the deep male bias in western culture, the unthinking exploitation of nature and seek to restore the place of "the other."

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