

# **Sustainable development and equality**

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Renowned Indian writer, Arundhati Roy, was right to suggest that the 21st century might be the century of „small things“, heralding the end of big infrastructure projects, big ideologies, big contradictions, the dominance of big countries, the existence of big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. No doubt women are prepared for this new age: they have to be in order to ensure their survival.

Survival is a daily battle for the world's most deprived inhabitants – the majority of whom are women. Two thirds of the one billion adults suffering from illiteracy are women. Eighty per cent of the world's refugees are women and children. Seventy per cent of the 1.3 billion people who live on less than 1 US\$ per day, who live without clean drinking water or electricity, and who have no reliable access to a doctor or midwife are women. As far as the empowerment of women is concerned there has not been much progress since the fourth UN World Conference on Women was held in Beijing 1995. The number of female heads of state and government has gone down, as has the number of ministers; the increase in women held parliamentary seats is only a meager improvement – from 12% to 15% on average around the world. The rankings of the gender development indicators clearly demonstrate that countries which have long favoured gender equality continue to do so, but that there are very few newcomers (with welcome exceptions like Rwanda where the ratio of female parliamentarians now outnumbers that of the rightly praised Scandinavian countries).

To cut a sad story short, now that we are confronted with the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action there is a need to act urgently in order to reduce inequalities based on gender. This action will in turn also contribute to reducing poverty, hunger, misery, violence and death and have an impact on the well-being of all people. The international family and public, development activists and even famous artists call

more for action to save children than their mothers. Women of this world must remind them, as well as heads of state and governments, that gender, like poverty, is a cross-cutting issue in sustainable development and needs to be taken much more seriously in the process of implementing the MDGs. Gender equality and the empowerment of women (objective 3 of the MDGs) are critical. As women in parts of Africa say 'development without women will fail. It is like running a chariot with only one wheel'.

### **Sustainable development**

By definition, everybody is in favour of sustainable development, but there are always barriers to reaching this objective whether because of lack of means and strong decisions, because of the timing, or because of conflicts between different goals. These hurdles exist for industrialized as well as developing countries. All the more reason why the courage of the many women who try to save forests, soil, rivers, lakes and seas – and in so doing fight for their own survival – is to be admired.

### **Women and the environment**

Chapter „K“ of the Beijing Platform underlines the importance of sustainable development and analyzes the problems related to women and the environment. The developers of the Beijing Platform of Action were rightly aware of the essential role women play in the development of sustainable and ecologically sound consumption and production patterns and approaches to natural resource management (see chapter „K“, 246 to 258 of the Platform for Action Paper on Women and Environment). Three years earlier, the 1992 Agenda 21 had already focussed on the position of women – being at the same time those who need a sound and sustainable environment and those who are destroying natural resources because of extreme poverty. Women are both responsible for and victims of pollution and resource destruction. But what to do but cut down trees if you have to build your shelter or cook your family's bowl of rice or maize? Firewood has become rare and other sources of energy are not always available or affordable.

The Marie Schlei Association acts in the interest of poor women in Africa, Asia and Latin America on the basis of a sisterly partnership not on a paternalistic attitude, and welcomes the engagement of women's organizations that approach sustainable development from an environmental perspective. This means, in concrete terms:

- support for women who reforest their landscape, for example in Africa and Latin America;
- support for women who engage themselves in bio-farming, for example in Vietnam, Tanzania, Argentina, Papua New Guinea and Guinea (Africa), and sustainable animal husbandry in Nicaragua;
- encouraging women to use renewable energy in order to process products like dried fruits and vegetables and salt using solar energy.

### **Sustainable development means also social progress**

More than just caring for environmental objectives, women are at the heart of sustainable development policy success. This is due to their complex situation and role in communities. This role differs greatly from one society to the next, but all rely on women as a work force, factor of production and cultural anchor – especially in relation to children. Thus the ecological, employment and social dimensions are part of the long-term perspective. Not only environmental but also social and cultural standards are of concern for the success of sustainable development. Despite its importance, the current World Trade Round, which will be finalized at the Hong Kong Ministerial Conference in December 2005, up to now has had no special gender agenda. This is a grave omission as agriculture, agricultural export rules, trade in textiles, trade in services, intellectual property protection, as well as the introduction of free production zones and other initiatives affect millions of women.

### **Gender and development**

In the run-up to the World Summit being held in September to review progress on the MDGs five years on, women are calling for stronger implementation of the Beijing agenda. Gender justice and empowerment of women is not advancing fast enough. The feminization of poverty and migration, of the victims in disease, natural disasters and violent conflicts has instead steadily grown. Despite the principle of gender mainstreaming progress is not as visible as pretended and gender budgeting is a nightmare for most countries. Less than 50 UN member countries apply this principle. So the gender architecture at large is being put under reexamination and it is clear that fundamental problems are challenging the agenda. The most important can be highlighted as follows:

- 30 years after the first UN World Conference on Women, held in Mexico in 1975, the gender dimension of development is still at stake: this is all down to poverty. But

how can we overcome poverty if women – the rural producers of basic consumption needs – are prevented from gaining ownership of the land by either purchase or heritage? There is still limited access to credit, to appropriate new technologies, or to tools and innovative processes. But experience has repeatedly shown that even the most conservative village communities will change their attitudes if women are courageous and successful enough.

- 30 years after the first World Conference on Women, women's rights are not fully recognized as human rights. This is especially true when it comes to violence against women. More women die because of direct physical violence than due to war, catastrophes, disease or cancer. Physical violence, rape, genital mutilation, the trafficking of women and girls, forced marriages and prostitution are daily events in many women's lives. There have been achievements in some countries, but often the reality is different from the legal situation. There are endless dramatic violations of the physical integrity of women. And they suffer.

- 30 years after the first World Conference on Women the illiteracy of women is simply not an issue. Only the education of girls is on the agenda, despite the fact that development without the contribution of women will not deliver the results needed. More investment has to be concentrated on women's education and professional development. Unfortunately, the New York Conference Beijing+10 did not dare to touch on such new and innovative subjects of concern.

- 30 years after the first World Conference on Women there is progress thanks to the women's NGOs networking all over the world. The migration problems have been well understood because of the Filipinas network, the same accounts for women victims of sexual exploitation across borders. European-African sisterhood has played a role in improving trade conditions, including in relation to the crucial textile industry.

- 30 years after the first World Conference on Women trade has become an issue on the development agenda. The reduction elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers is progress but has not influenced the terms of trade. World trade has increased the participation of women in the labour market but not contributed to equal pay or equal labour standards. Trade justice is not just about terms of trade but also about labour rights and decent jobs, social and food security and how to make sure benefits reach the poorest women.

- 30 years after the first World Conference on Women there is growing concern that gender inequality might worsen. It is feared that the growing information society might create new classes of society and divide those who have and those who have not access to information and communication tools. Here the role of public services and the state is paramount and must pay special attention to women, often the most underprivileged social group.

### **Gender equality and empowerment of women are building the future**

Women, equality, gender justice and promotion of women as well as girls education and women's health are crucial points on the agenda of the MDG, but they do not have priority despite the fact that underdevelopment, hunger, violence and inequality can never be overcome without the equal participation of women.

Engendering all dimensions of public and private life, public and private decision-making and power is a challenge for all, and even more so due to the backlash of gender inequality and repression as a result of the reemergence of fundamentalist tendencies in cultures, ideologies and religions all over the world. Women should not wait for international fora before insisting that their respective governments act, but the MDG +5 World Summit in September should serve as a balance sheet on the state of play and the engagement and commitments of national governments to overcome the gender disparities and injustices in all sectors.

There are so many threats to civilization. Sustainable development is the most logical perspective if you look to the future from the ecological and social stability point of view. A safe environment and safe jobs are not a contradiction but the two sides of the same coin. Concerning developing countries or countries in transition it is important to stress that the gender question has been neglected for too long. Not only must women's issues be moved further up agendas, but women must be fully involved in the design and implementation of policies and solutions. A good example of a move in this direction is UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security which, following the demand of many women's NGOs, not only criticizes the neglect of the protection of women during and after conflicts, but also reaffirms the "important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution".

The betrayal of Beijing by the UN governments has to be overcome through the concerted action of all parties: recognize that the Beijing platform has to be fully integrated into the implementation of the Millennium goals. After all, who will carry the heaviest burden of development? Women! Men – please give women back their half of the planet. You will then get half of the heavens.

Useful links: [www.genanet.de](http://www.genanet.de), [www.marie-schlei-verein.de](http://www.marie-schlei-verein.de)

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