

## Beyond Beijing: Putting Words into Action



Worldwide, women are often the first to notice environmental degradation because they are in closest contact with the land. In some African countries, for example, women perform 80% of the work in running households, farming, and gathering wood and water, according to Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF. Many poor rural women are in a particularly difficult position. Desertification has ruined their crop land and deforestation has led them to search farther for fuel wood. In industrialized countries, women affect the environment primarily as the main buyers for their families' needs. Unsustainable patterns of consumption and production in these countries are a main cause of environmental degradation.

Although they may be most vulnerable to environmental problems, women are the most powerless to control them. In most countries they have less political power and technical training than men, and they own only a tiny percentage of the world's property. Women and children also make up the majority of the poor and refugees.

As the result of a United Nations conference in Beijing, China, last September, however, women may gain more power in making environmental decisions that affect their lives. In addition to its primary focus on human rights and economics, the Fourth World Conference on Women also linked environmental degradation to poverty and other ills disproportionately suffered by women.

At the conference, delegates from 189 nations agreed to a Platform for Action, which included addressing environmental inequities. They promised to make clean water available to the world's people, offer women more technical training, and do more research on the effects of environmental degradation on women.

While they may disagree on specific issues decided in Beijing, many attendees call the meeting a step forward from the 1985 women's conference in Nairobi. "One of the strengths of the platform . . . is that it addresses who is doing what and how," says Honorine Kiplagat, acting Gender Focal Point at the Nairobi-based United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). These mechanisms for change were not there 10 years ago, she said.

The Beijing conference was held in conjunction with a gathering of 30,000 women from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in nearby Huairou. There, grassroots organizers discussed environmental issues and other topics related to women's well-being. NGO members also lobbied official delegates to strengthen their environmental commitments.

### Women and the Environment

"No long-term strategy of poverty alleviation can succeed in the face of powerful forces that permit the persistent erosion of the physical resources upon which the poor, especially women depend," said Elizabeth Dowdeswell, UNEP executive director, in a conference speech.

"The achievement of sustainable development is inextricably bound up with the establishment of women's equality," Dowdeswell said. "Inequities that are detrimental to the environment and society at large are particularly detrimental to women."

Because of their close contact with the environment and their physical makeup, women may be more susceptible to environmental toxins than men. For example, recent evidence suggests a connection between environmental toxins and breast cancer; endometriosis has been linked to dioxins in the environment; and radiation from nuclear testing has been blamed for severe birth defects and other reproductive difficulties.

Neijon Edwards, a conference delegate

from the Marshall Islands, asked the gathering for help in dealing with the aftermath of nuclear weapons testing. "The leading cause of death now for women in the Marshall Islands is cancer of the reproductive system," she said in a conference speech. "If I could bring you the voices of these women on every atoll, they would tell you about the children that have been born without bones, with extra or missing limbs, or with gross abnormalities which defy all imagination," Edwards said. Despite such reports, few studies have explored the connection between women's health and the environment. "Too often, studies only look at risks to men," says Lynn Goldman, assistant U.S. EPA administrator for prevention, pesticides, and toxic substances. "We're realizing that we need to make an effort to study effects on women."

### The Platform for Action

The Beijing conference was billed as a "conference of commitments" with governments encouraged to sign an official platform for action and make additional commitments as they chose.

The 135-page platform offers specific ways to empower women and correct social, political, and environmental imbalances in 12 critical areas of concern. The document builds on agreements from prior United Nations conferences on the environment and on women held in Rio de Janeiro and Nairobi, respectively.

"The groundwork had been laid, but it was important to once again emphasize that the environment is also a women's issue," says Jean Nelson, counselor to the EPA administrator and an official U.S. delegate to the conference.

Governments that signed the consensus document vowed to take almost two dozen environmental actions in three main areas: involving women in environmental decision-making, integrating gender concerns in sustainable development, and assessing the impact of developmental and environmental

 This icon was adapted by Jeannene Hansen for use on the WomensNet Beijing homepage from a hand-cut stencil by an unknown Chinese woman artist.

policies on women. Actions were also suggested for NGOs, international organizations, and the private sector (see sidebar).

Governments agreed, for example, to see that all people have clean water by the year 2000. If they manage to accomplish this formidable task, they'll ease the burden of women, who often must walk long distances to find household water in rural areas. They'll also reduce children's deaths from diarrhea and other diseases caused by parasite-contaminated drinking water.

Women should be actively involved in environmental decision-making, the delegates concluded. Overall, accepting the need for equality in decision-making at all levels was the platform's clearest victory, according to the Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO), a political action NGO with 20,000 members worldwide. The platform states that governments can involve women in decision-making by increasing their access to information and education, encouraging protection and use of information from indigenous communities, and empowering women as producers and consumers among other approaches. One of the ways NGOs can encourage participation is to increase access to information and services for women who are farmers, fishers, or pastoralists, the document concluded.

Without women's involvement, sustainable development programs will fail, delegates acknowledged. The platform calls for promoting environmentally sound technologies that women have helped design, and evaluating policies with women in mind. Without giving specifics, governments also committed to empowering women as producers and consumers so that they can take effective environmental action.

In addition, the platform calls for enforcing current conventions on hazardous waste and studying how environmental hazards affect women. "One of the major goals EPA went in with was trying to highlight . . . issues of potential differences in susceptibility and exposure to environmental degradation and hazards," says Nelson. "The data gap was a very important issue for us."

Governments generally have not yet committed substantial new funds to support platform actions. Some NGO members worry about what the lack of new funds may mean to the platform's success. "I think it's going to be an excuse" for not taking action, says Pamela Chiang, co-chair of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, based in the United States.

### NGO Responses

NGO members acted as the conscience of the official conference, reminding governments of grassroots issues important to women and

pushing for a progressive approach to environmental problems. "We're trying to prevent collective amnesia by governments," says Susan Davis, executive director of WEDO.

The Environmental Caucus, a group of NGO members who lobbied delegates on the official platform, decried the document's lack of attention to the environment. "This conference is supposed to promote women's rights, but it is forgetting that a sound and healthy environment is crucial to the full enjoyment of these rights," said Gracie Fong of the Fiji-based Women in Fisheries Network, at a conference press briefing. "Without the foundation of an earth which can provide enough fertile soil, pure water, and diverse ecosystems to meet our basic needs," Fong said, "the well-being and survival of future generations is in question."

Members of the NGO forum also argued that the official platform focused narrowly on a few issues and ignored or shortchanged others. For example, Chiang pointed out that statements on hazardous waste, environmental justice, and intellectual property rights were too weak.

But the conference could not make definitive decisions on all environmental issues, says the EPA's Nelson. "A conference like this is not in a position to preempt other sets of international negotiations" on issues such as hazardous waste and biodiversity, she says. "And though the open discussions prompted by NGO members advanced the conference, not all governments were prepared to take policy positions on them."

Although acknowledging that the environment was not given the highest priority at the conference, Kiplagat of UNEP says that environmental issues weren't ignored. "The environment permeates all the . . . other areas of concern," she says. "You can't really separate the economy from the environment or health from the environment."

While delegates were arguing over the official document, women at the NGO forum in Huairou were discussing myriad environmental issues such as sustainable agriculture and technologies, biodiversity, and consumer awareness. These women introduced ideas into the global lexicon, including the concept of environmental injustice or imperialism—in part, the disproportionate siting of hazardous waste and undesirable industries in minority communities. The outcome of their work was more diffuse than the official conference: they strove not to reach a consensus but to develop a worldwide network for social change.

"The most powerful thing I see is information sharing," said Pat Costner, a senior scientist with Greenpeace International. At the conference, Costner shared strategies with women from India who were fighting haz-

## Government Environmental Commitments from Beijing

**Strategic Objective 1—Involve women in environmental decision-making at all levels by:**

- ensuring opportunities for women to participate at all levels
- increasing women's access to information and education
- encouraging the effective protection and use of the knowledge, innovations, and practices of women of indigenous and local communities
- reducing risks to women from identified environmental hazards
- integrating a gender perspective in the design and implementation of sustainable resource management mechanisms
- empowering women as producers and consumers
- establishing mechanisms to increase the proportion of women decision-makers, planners, managers, scientists, and technical advisers
- encouraging social, economic, political, and scientific institutions to address environmental degradation and the resulting impact on women

**Strategic Objective 2—Integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programs for sustainable development by:**

- integrating women in sustainable resource management
- evaluating policies and programs for environmental impact and women's access to and use of natural resources
- ensuring adequate research to assess women's exposure and particular susceptibility to environmental degradation and hazards
- integrating rural women's traditional knowledge in the development of environmental management programs
- integrating results of gender-sensitive research into mainstream policies
- promoting and sponsoring research on the role of women in resource use and management
- developing strategies to eliminate obstacles to women's participation in sustainable development, and equal access to and control over resources
- promoting education of females in science, technology, economics, and other disciplines relating to the environment
- involving female professionals and scientists in environmental management
- identifying and promoting environmentally sound technologies designed in consultation with women
- supporting women's equal access to housing infrastructure, safe water, and sustainable and affordable energy technologies
- ensuring availability and accessibility of clean water by the year 2000

**Strategic Objective 3—Establish and strengthen mechanisms at the international, national, and regional levels to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women by:**

- providing technical assistance to women
- developing gender-sensitive databases, information, and monitoring systems on environmental issues
- ensuring full compliance with relevant international obligations

ardous waste incineration near their homes. "If one community recognizes a problem and someone else is beginning to have the same problem," she says, "the second party doesn't have to reinvent the wheel."

### Following through on Commitments

Only a handful of nations committed specifically to environmental actions in Beijing, according to a tally drawn up by InterAction, a Washington-based NGO. Several countries, including Namibia, Tanzania, and Zambia agreed to provide clean water to their citizens. Cambodia focused on including women in sustainable development programs, while Lesotho agreed to educate women about alternative energy.

The United States, while not making additional environmental commitments at the conference, plans to follow through on platform pledges and add other environmental plans later. President Bill Clinton formed the President's Interagency Council on Women, made up of representatives from nearly 30 government agencies, to oversee these plans.

The council's environmental efforts focus on improving women's health. For example,

council representatives are organizing a symposium on environmental health risks for women. The EPA's Goldman also points to efforts to develop international guidelines for testing reproductive and developmental effects of chemicals. Agencies represented on the council are also working on studies of environmentally-mediated diseases specific to women. And the group may search for ways to exchange information with other nations seeking to address their conference pledges.

"We believe we have a strong obligation to follow through on our commitments," Goldman says. "Where we need to go is raising the level of consciousness of what the issues are for women. When we make our decisions about new research for regulating risks, we need to take women into account."

In the United States and abroad, NGOs are keeping their commitments alive by coordinating a series of "Bringing Beijing Back" meetings. The assemblies are used to exchange information about the UN conference and offer methods for implementing the Platform for Action.

In addition, NGOs are acting as watchdogs for economic programs and encouraging the search for environmental links to cancer.

WEDO has also joined a campaign to reduce consumption in the developed world, one of the concerns raised in Beijing.

Implementing such changes won't be easy. "[It] will require a major shift in the priorities of both governments and individuals, in relationships between men and women, in redeployment of resources," says Kiplagat.

UNEP has begun working toward the basic commitments made in Beijing. The United Nations organization vowed to enhance recruitment of women, tailor environmental education programs to women, and work to control hazardous chemicals that pose serious health risks to women and children, among other pledges.

"Women must be legitimate partners in environmental management if we want to achieve sustainable development," Kiplagat says. "In order for that kind of balance to be accepted, we need to address the men as well. Progress for women is progress for all."

Carol Blaney

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