

History of the Women's Movement and Sustainable Development

The women's movements played a key role in the road to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, and during the 1992 Earth Summit itself, when women from all over the world gathered in the Women's Tent: or the 'Planeta Femea'.¹ In November 1991 the "Global Assembly of Women and the Environment" in Miami, USA² was co-organised by UNEP with the participation of 215 women who had undertaken projects to successfully improve the environment in local communities around the world.³ UNEP had already hosted 6 years earlier, in 1985, several meetings during the Third UN Women's Conference, in Nairobi. During these sessions the linkages between women's empowerment, gender equality and sustainable development were made explicit on the intergovernmental level.⁴

Women's World Congress for a Healthy Planet 1991

Immediately after the Global Assembly in Miami, a "World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet" was organized by the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO)⁵ through its International Policy Action Committee (IPAC), also in Miami.⁶ More than 1,500 women from 83 countries attended.⁷ Together they worked on a strategy towards the Earth Summit (UN Conference on Environment and Development) and adopted a common platform entitled 'Women's Action Agenda 21' (WAA21).⁸

Agenda 21 recognizes women as a Major Group

At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit the combined advocacy of women leaders from government and civil society gained recognition of the importance of "public participation" in the outcome document "Agenda 21", that resulted from the Earth Summit. To ensure broad public participation, the nine "Major Groups" were recognized. They include farmers, trade unions, indigenous peoples and their communities, women, children and youth, NGOs, local authorities, science and technology, and business and industry, thus creating a formal mechanism for diverse constituencies of civil society to have representation in the follow-up activities of the Commission on Sustainable Development convened under the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Women's priorities core in Agenda 21

The 1992 Earth Summit, reflected efforts by women advocates and allies to integrate gender equality and women's rights through "Agenda 21". Agenda 21 has an entire chapter dedicated to Women and Sustainable Development, Chapter 24⁹. This Chapter, entitled 'Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development', remains highly relevant today. In UNCED the "Women's Action Agenda 21" from Miami, served as a tool for women activists to lobby for the inclusion of critical references to women and gender issues throughout Agenda 21.¹⁰ In addition to Chapter 24, Agenda 21 includes at least 145 references throughout the text to the specific situations and roles of women in environment and sustainable development.¹¹ Also, principle 20 of the Rio Declaration reads as follows: "*Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable*

¹ Nayar, A and Sen, G. 2012. "Population, Environment and Human Rights: a Paradigm in the Making" in Powerful Synergies: Gender Equality, Economic Development and Environmental Sustainability (Sept 2012), UNDP, NY.

² http://www.unep.org/gender_env/About/index.asp

³ <http://statements.bahai.org/92-0311.htm>

⁴ http://www.unep.org/gender_env/Historical_background/index.asp

⁵ Women Environment & Development Organisation (WEDO) was created in 1991 following a meeting in October 1990 with 50 women at the United Nations Church Center including leading environmentalists such as Wangari Maathai, Vandana Shiva, Claire Greensfelder and Bella Abzug participated, New York Times (1990). <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/28/world/women-s-group-seeks-environmental-role.html?src=pm>

⁶ <http://www.iisd.org/women/about3.htm>

⁷ <http://www.wedo.org/about/our-story>

⁸ <http://www.iisd.org/women/action21.htm>

⁹ Chapter 24 of Agenda 21, "Women in Sustainable Development"

¹⁰ WEDO, Redeh, Heinrich Böll Foundation. *Women's Action Agenda for a Healthy and Peaceful Planet 2015. A decade of women's advocacy for sustainable development.*

¹¹ http://www.unep.org/gender_env/Historical_background/index.asp

development.” Further information on the history of the environmental women’s movement can be found in the UNEP publication “Women and the Environment”¹²

From the Earth Summit 1992 to the Beijing 1995 World Women’s Conference

At the time of the Earth Summit (UNCED) in 1992, plans were already underway for a Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in 1995. It is therefore that Agenda 21 Paragraph 24.3j encouraged Governments to review their progress in the areas of Chapter 24 and to submit a report based on that with recommendations to the Beijing Conference. The 1995 World Conference on Women, entitled ‘Action for Equality, Development and Peace’, built further on many issues in Chapter 24 and adopted a Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Strategic objectives and actions in the platform include Women and poverty, Education and training of women, Women and health, Violence against women, Women and armed conflict, Women and the economy, Women in power and decision-making, Institutional mechanism for the advancement of women, Human rights of women, Women and the media, Women and the environment, and the Girl Child.¹³ The Beijing Platform for Action has since then been used to improve gender equality in many areas, including the situation for women in sustainable development.

Rio-1992 Earth Summit and further ratification of CEDAW

The UNCED Agenda 21 Paragraph 24.5 calls for the strengthening of UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women(CEDAW), particularly its elements on environment and development, including access to natural resources, low-cost housing, creative banking facilities, technology, and pollution and toxicity control. Today CEDAW has 187 parties, of which 75 have been added since UNCED.¹⁴ In order to strengthen CEDAW in respect to the threats of gendered violence, the UNGA adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in 1994.¹⁵ On 6 October 1999, a CEDAW Optional Protocol was adopted as a separate treaty open to parties of the convention. This Protocol includes a communications procedure that gives individuals and groups of women the right to complain to the CEDAW Committee about violations of the Convention, and includes an inquiry procedure that allows the Committee to investigate systematic or grave abuses of women’s human rights.¹⁶ The Optional Protocol entered into force in December 2000 and currently has 103 Parties.¹⁷

Earth Summit and ICDP

Agenda 21 Chapter 24¹⁸ also provided a global momentum for other integrated frames of human rights and sustainable development in global, regional and national policymaking. One such process is the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Anita Nayar and Gita Sen explain¹⁹ how ICPD helped to move “from a prevalent Malthusian focus on demographic targets through population control, toward a perspective recognizing human rights, women's right to decision-making over their bodies and reproductive choices and sustainable development”. The Women’s Major Group continues today to prioritize integration and interlinkage of sustainable development and other global intergovernmental processes such as the ICPD Beyond 2014 and others, such as the UN Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), and of course, the Sustainable Development Goals and the post-2015 agenda.

¹² Further information on the history of the environmental women’s movement can be found in the UNEP / WEDO publication by Irene Dankelman et al.: “Women and the Environment”

<http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=468&ArticleID=4488&l=en> .

¹³ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>

¹⁴ http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en

¹⁵ [http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/A.RES.48.104.En?Opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/A.RES.48.104.En?Opendocument)

¹⁶ CEDAW Optional Protocol (full text) http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/54/4

¹⁷ http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8-b&chapter=4&lang=en

¹⁸ Chapter 24 of Agenda 21, “Women in Sustainable Development”

¹⁹ FES & Women Major Group “Strengthening Gender Justice – Recommendations for the Sustainable Development Goal and Post-2015 Agenda” <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/global/10229.pdf> Sept. 2013