

## Gender and the Environment by Helen Lynn

### Why Women and the Environment

Women have a unique relationship with their surroundings. Their bodies bear testament to the state of the environment and are indicative of the way the planet and its resources are mistreated and undervalued. Along with children, women are the first to experience the effects of poverty and environmental degradation including climate change<sup>1</sup> because of their unique social and economic status.

Socially determined factors such as family life, poverty, education and health govern the work women do and make it more likely they work in low paid, part time or family run businesses. Much of this work is unregulated and women are less likely to be involved in the decision making around their work practices and environments. Hence their health can be adversely affected by toxic exposures in the workplace, from products used on a daily basis, and through food, air, soil and water.

The links may be more obvious in the less industrialised countries where women are more in touch with their environment through the growing of food and the gathering of fuel and water. But in spite of these links or maybe because of them women are the ones most likely to be most concerned about environmental issues<sup>2</sup> or impacts on health from exposures to toxins and therefore are more prepared to take action.

### Ecofeminism

The term *ecofeminism* was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*.<sup>3</sup> It is used to describe the philosophical and political movement that applies feminist ideas to ecological concerns. Ecofeminists work both locally and globally towards creating a healthy environment and ending ecological injustices such as the destruction of land and contamination of water. But increasingly, the new wave of Ecofeminists are focusing their attention on their own bodies and campaigning for a healthier environment in which to live and work.

There has been much debate as to whether it is inherent in women's nature to care more about the environment because of their matriarchal and caring roles or whether it is because of their experience of the degradation of environmental resources threatening their lives and wellbeing that increases consciousness of the environment.<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that the caring stereotype focuses too much on the mystical connections between women and nature and not enough on the conditions women experience and their potential to bring about change.<sup>5</sup>

It seems more likely that gender coupled with a feminist consciousness contributes to making an environmental activist, along with other socio demographic facts such as age, education, income, race, ideology and party identification.<sup>6</sup> '*Feminist consciousness*' has been defined as '*an awareness of and sensitivity to the unequal and gendered nature of society and a commitment to ending the inequalities*'.<sup>7</sup>

In 2005, the UN celebrated women as 'custodians of the environment', thus unwittingly adding to their multiple roles as child carer, home maker, worker, citizen, leader, scientist, artist, opinion shaper etc. There is a fine line to be drawn between recognising the realities of some women's lives and consigning them to these roles, especially as these roles are often carried out voluntarily.<sup>8</sup>

Women are not a homogenous group and there are vast differences between how women live their lives especially between the northern and southern hemispheres and those living in rural or urban settings. In India concern about food and water sovereignty and the patenting of seeds by global

corporations urged Vandana Shiva to set up Navdanya which supports environmental activism on these issues. Shiva believes feminism and environmentalism are inseparable. *"Women who produce for their families and communities are treated as 'non-productive' and economically inactive. The devaluation of women's work, and of work done in sustainable economies, is the natural outcome of a system constructed by capitalist patriarchy. This is how globalisation destroys local economies and destruction itself is counted as growth."*<sup>9</sup>

The Greenbelt movement founded by Nobel prize winner Prof. Wangari Maathai highlighted the impact of environmental degradation on women in Kenya. Women had to walk further and further each day to find water and fuel in order to feed their families. While in the US, environmentalist Sandra Steingraber campaigns on the environmental and health impacts of fracking, the proposed solution to our energy needs.<sup>10</sup>

### **Women at work**

Increasing numbers of women have entered the workforce since 1940, especially into jobs traditionally not carried out by women. But health and safety has been slow to catch up with this new workforce and specifically with work environments and practices that impact adversely on female bodies.

Historically, research on health and safety in the workplace was not gender-specific and was extrapolated from male study groups to determine female exposures.<sup>11</sup> Therefore women's occupational exposure has been underestimated. Many female dominated workplaces are considered 'safe' with little attention given to women's differing physiology.<sup>12</sup> Women may be presented with different hazards or the same hazard in different forms. For example, male and female agricultural workers may have different exposures to pesticides as women do more planting and weeding and men do more pruning.<sup>12</sup>

Women can experience 'double jeopardy'<sup>13</sup> through toxic exposures in the workplace and home environment. We now know that specific occupations and practices carry with them a greater health risk for women, for example brain cancer rates have been found to be higher in women working in the semiconductor industry<sup>14</sup> and working nights more than twice a week is associated with a 40% increased risk of breast cancer<sup>15</sup>. Excesses of breast cancer have also been found in women working in the agricultural, automotive plastics, and food canning industries.<sup>16</sup>

Women tend to perceive various hazards as more risky in comparison to men,<sup>17</sup> and are less willing than men to impose health and environmental risks on others.<sup>24</sup> With only 13 of the world's 500 largest companies having a female CEO,<sup>18</sup> instilling leadership potential in women and breaking the glass ceiling could lead to greater corporate social awareness and worker health protection.

### **Women's slice of the power pie**

Women have less influence and control over decisions which affect them. Around the world there is a lack of gender balance in institutes which influence or determine policy. And this means that decisions are often made without considering the impacts on women or having the benefit of women's knowledge or experience.

Only 21.4% of the world's parliamentary seats are held by women,<sup>19</sup> with 7 of the 150 heads of state (10%) and 11 of the 192 (21%) heads of government being female. But there is strong evidence to support the fact that increased representation of women in national governments has a positive effect on the creation of state protected land areas.<sup>20</sup> Evidence also shows that carbon dioxide emissions per capita are lower in nations where women have higher political status.<sup>21</sup>

The further you travel down the decision making ladder, the more women you will find. But in some

countries and regions quotas enable women to overcome the barriers to political representation and participation. The Quota Project aims to redress the imbalance but stresses that there are many other issues which need to be addressed alongside introducing quotas such as the economic, social, cultural and religious constraints within both formal and informal public and private spheres.<sup>22</sup>

Shifting the power towards a critical mass of women in positions of power is one way to ensure gender aspects are considered and supported and that there are female role models for young women on environmental issues. The breakthrough level for this critical mass is between 30%-35% female participation.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the mere presence of more women will not guarantee that entrenched disparities are overcome. Additional changes are needed to address institutionalised masculine attitudes and raise awareness among men of the price they pay for upholding patriarchy and to work with them to change institutionalised male culture.

It is especially important to redress the gender imbalance in environmental NGOs as women have been shown to be more concerned about the environment and are more likely to take affirmative action locally or on international platforms.<sup>24</sup> Yet this is not reflected in the management of international environmental NGO's although many have a large female volunteer force.

### **Human Right to a healthy environment**

Although the right to a healthy environment is not specifically spelt out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights we must start from the premise that *"health is a fundamental human right indispensable for the exercise of other human rights."*<sup>25</sup> The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) defines discrimination against women and gender based violence. The convention has been ratified by 188 countries and is a legally binding document. It outlines measures to eliminate discrimination in order to attain the highest standard of health.

This is not possible when women's health is being harmed by toxic chemicals, so effectively by violating the right to health and the aim of the convention, exposure to toxic chemicals could be viewed as an act of violence against women. The convention identifies many other types of environmental harm that can adversely affect the rights protected under the convention including: *"The right to protection of health and safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the function of reproduction"*.<sup>26</sup> The right to prevention in relation to epidemic, occupational and other diseases has also been addressed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights.<sup>27</sup>

At the World Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 Mary Robinson, then the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated: *"The contribution of environmental protection to the realization of basic human rights, and the role of human rights in protection of the environment are undeniable. Substantive rights such as the right to food, health and the right to life itself will not materialize for all of the world's inhabitants unless we maintain a clean and healthy environment with a sustainable base of environmental and natural resources. Certainly, the full potential of human rights cannot be realized when an increasing portion of the world's inhabitants find their human potential constrained by a polluted and degraded environment and are relegated to hopelessness in extreme poverty."*<sup>28</sup>

### **The way forward**

Increasingly women's organisations and environmental groups are forging coalitions and alliances to campaign on the more internalised health effects of environmental and occupational exposures. For example activism on breast cancer in the early 1980's specifically forged alliances between women's organisations and environmental groups, because of the links between environmental and occupational exposures and breast cancer.<sup>29</sup>

Primarily women need to be actively involved in all environmental and health decisions that affect them, with allocated funding and training accordingly. But there needs to be a deeper look at how power is allocated and upheld in political, social and academic institutes and decision making forums, where gender roles are reinforced and the current male dominated status quo is upheld. New millennium development goals are needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century to carry us forward. All new policies need to undergo an environmental and gender analysis to inform outcomes and processes. Women's health needs to be factored into all risk assessments and production and consumption patterns need to embrace environmental impact and sustainability. Women must not longer bear the scars of what is termed progress.

*"May the world's feast be made safe for women and children. May mother's milk run clean again. May denial give way to courageous action. May I always have faith."* Sandra Steingraber.<sup>30</sup>

### More info and links to resources

Association for Women's Rights in Development - [www.awid.org](http://www.awid.org); Blue Green Alliance - [www.bluegreenalliance.org](http://www.bluegreenalliance.org); Campaign for Safe Cosmetics - [www.safecosmetics.org](http://www.safecosmetics.org); Canadian Women's Health Network - [www.cwhn.ca](http://www.cwhn.ca); Clean Clothes Campaign - [www.cleanclothes.org](http://www.cleanclothes.org); Diverse Women for Diversity - [www.navdanya.org/diverse-women-for-diversity](http://www.navdanya.org/diverse-women-for-diversity); Ecofeminist web resource - <http://eve.enviroweb.org>; Greenbelt Movement - [www.greenbeltmovement.org](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org); National Network on Environments and Women's Health - [www.nnewh.org](http://www.nnewh.org); Women in Europe for a Common Future - [www.wecf.eu](http://www.wecf.eu); Women's Voices for the Earth - [www.womensvoices.org](http://www.womensvoices.org); Women's Environment and Development Organization - [www.wedo.org](http://www.wedo.org); UN Sustainable Development Platform - [sustainabledevelopment.un.org](http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org).

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<sup>1</sup>UN Women Watch factsheet. Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change.

[http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate\\_change/downloads/Women\\_and\\_Climate\\_Change\\_Factsheet.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf) 2009

<sup>2</sup> Chapman, J. What Women Do: Exploring the link between pro-environment actions work, travel and home. Centre for work and life. University of South Australia. Feb 2012. <http://w3.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/cwl/documents/What-Women-Do-report-final2012.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> D'Eaubonne, Françoise. *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. Paris, P. Horay 1974. ISBN 978-2705800185

<sup>4</sup> Jackson C., *Women/nature or gender/history? A critique of ecofeminist development*. *J Peasant Studies*, 1993. 20: p. 389-419.

<sup>5</sup> Biehl, Janet. *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*. South End Press 1991. ISBN 978-0896083912

<sup>6</sup> Gupte M. *Gender, feminist consciousness, and the environment: exploring the 'natural' connection*. *Women & Politics*, 2002. 24(1):p. 47-62.

<sup>7</sup> Conover, P., Sapiro, V., *Gender, feminist consciousness and war*. *Am J of Political Science*, 1993. 37: p. 1079-1099.

<sup>8</sup> Toepfer, K. Celebrating Women As Custodians of the Environment. International Women's Day 8 March 2005 UNEP Press Release.

<sup>9</sup> Vandana Shiva. Environmentalist and founder of Diverse Women for Diversity. Article *The Guardian* 8/3/11:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/08/vandana-shiva-100-women>

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Steingraber – [www.steingraber.com](http://www.steingraber.com)

<sup>11</sup> Schiebinger, L. Women's health and clinical trials. *J Clin Invest*. 2003;112(7):973–977.

<sup>12</sup> Messing, K and Ostlin, p. *Gender Equality: Work and Health. A review of the evidence*. WHO 2006

<http://www.who.int/gender/documents/Genderworkhealth.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Chavkin, W. *Double Exposure: Women's health hazards on the Job and at home*. New York, Monthly Review Press. (1984).

<sup>14</sup> European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU –OSHA). *New risks and trends in the safety and health of women at work*. 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Hansen, J & Lassen, C. *Nested case-control study of night shift work and breast cancer risk among women in the Danish military*. *Occup Environ Med* 2012;69:551-556. (2012)

<sup>16</sup> J. T. Brophy et al., "Breast Cancer Risk in Relation to Occupations with Exposure to Carcinogens and Endocrine Disruptors: A Canadian Case-Control Study," *Environmental Health* 11(87) (2012): 1-17, doi: 10.1186/1476-069X-11-8

<sup>17</sup> Flynn, J et al. *Gender, race, and perceived risk, the 'white male' effect*. *Healthy risk and society*. Vol: 2. No. 2. 2000.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *The Worlds Women – Trends and Statistics*. 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Fast Facts. UNDP. <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/fast-facts/english/FF-Gender-Equality-and-UNDP.pdf> Feb 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Nugent, C & Shandra, J. *State Environmental Protection Efforts, Women's Status, and World Polity: A Cross-National Analysis* *Organization & Environment* June 2009 22: 208-229, first published on June 2, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Johnsson-Latham, G (2007). *A study on gender equality as a prerequisite for sustainable development*, Report to the Environment Advisory Council, Sweden (2). Pages 22, 26, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Quota Project. Global database of Quotas for Women. <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutquotas.cfm>

<sup>23</sup> Bhatta Gambhir 2001 'Of Geese and Ganders: mainstreaming gender in the context of sustainable human development' *Journal of Gender Studies* 10,1.

<sup>24</sup> Norgaard, K & York, R. *Gender Equality and State Environmentalism*. *Gender and Society* Vol. 19, No. 4 (Aug., 2005), pp. 506-522.

<sup>25</sup> *The Application of Human Rights to Reproductive and Sexual Health: A compilation of the work of international human rights treaty bodies*. Nov 22. 2000. Compiled by Stanchieri et al for Action Canada for Population and Development.

<sup>26</sup> Article 11. CEDAW - <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx> New York 18/12/79

<sup>27</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. United Nations Human Rights. 3/1/76 Accessed 1/4/14.

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>

<sup>28</sup> Statement by Mary Robinson, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at the World Summit on Sustainable Development

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Plenary Session Jo'burg, 2002. <http://www.un.org/events/wssd/statements/unhchrE.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Breast Cancer and the Environment: Prioritizing Prevention: Interagency Breast Cancer and Environmental Research Coordinating Committee (IBCERCC). <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/about/boards/ibcercc/> Feb 2013.