

## **GENDER DIMENSIONS TO LIFE SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS**

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### **Summary**

Women play a central role in economic and social life. From the UN Decade (1975–1985), and throughout the 90s with UN Conferences, women have sought, organized and women self-empowerment, from little communities to international stage. The women’s movement projected a gender equality of 50–50 by 2000. Now, women still average only 11 representations in 185 governments. “Gender dimension” talks about moving women from the margins to the center, empowering their capacities in all fields of our society; but especially in which women are more involved: environment, human rights, health, and family.

The topic “Gender dimension” brings a brief discussion on the themes that will be

treated by the authors in specific papers: the relation of gender with environment, human rights, health, and family, showing women not in a position on the paradigm of “victim hood,” but on the paradigm of social agents that still suffer with fundamental concepts of social order that don’t take better account of women’s lives.

Data from all over the world were researched and are presented. In each theme, efforts and experiences are described in order to give examples to theory. Experiences are analyzed beyond gender perspective and sustainable development.

## **1. Introduction: “Gender Dimension”**

The women’s movement that emerged in the 60s made very specific demands: equal civil rights, women’s rights to control their own sexuality, the right to autonomy. Although women organize into a movement geared to draw attention to specific rights, their political action has embraced other causes that clamor for radical changes in the values that underpin our society.

Unbelievable changes have occurred in lifestyles and the status of millions of women, and everywhere, in the developing nations as well as in the industrialized super-power nations, women are organizing to transform their societies. Although women still are the majority of the poor and illiterate in all countries, many have remarkable progress, and others are on the way. But millions remain ghettoized in cultures dominated by patriarchal and fundamentalist religious values.

Gender dimension means not just looking at what have been named “women’s issues”—like a marginal sphere—but rather moving women from the margins to the center by questioning the most fundamental concepts of our social order so that they take better account of women’s lives.

The approach we have tried to develop in this topic focus on the new experiences and facts that show a protagonism and leadership of women in every field. We believe that the processes of engendering different dimensions of societies will depend upon women’s capacity for shaping new consensus, which will transform the present paradigm of social, economic, and spiritual development.

## **2. Women and Environment—from Rio 1992 to Beijing 1995**

The question of women and environment started to be incorporated as such in the women’s struggles during the 90s, after more than one decade of advocacy for equality in different spheres of human life. During the 70s, at the boost of the feminist movement, it was important for women to call attention to the fact that women’s bodies; as well as women’s lives were in different classes.

Women come into the global debate on environment from a broad range of entry points. Their contribution may take the form of collecting garbage for recycling; like women from the city of Porto Alegre or to fight exploitative logging in the Amazon Region by developing extra-activist activities as an alternative in Brazil or the innovative Citizen’s Clearinghouse that organized against hazardous waste in the Western United States. In

different countries, women have adhered to Women in Black Action, which was initiated by the Palestinian and Israeli women in Haifa, and, which now has become a worldwide movement of women against nuclear tests, violence, and for peace.

Women grow about half the world's food. In Africa they produce most of the food their families consume, while in Asia, and Latin America, women carry out key stages of producing and processing crops, and are the main producers of vegetables, poultry, and livestock for the household. Women's knowledge of local soil conditions, growing cycles, and other environmental aspects make them key in conservation. In India a huge movement gathering peasant women have been boycotting the market of genetically engineered seeds by maintaining seed banks on which local crops depend. They claim that the appropriation of seeds and food by trans-national corporations will deprive local food growers exposing consumers to health risks concerning the new products.

Women of the South have also the primary responsibility for gathering fuel, food, and fodder from forest areas; and for collecting and managing water. Women's traditional use of these natural resources has generally ensured their availability for future use. This perspective, born of everyday experience, differs from the priorities laid out by environmental groups. As a Woman from Fiji Island stated, ozone depletion or global warming are features that look very far from the reality of mothers that see their children dying from drinking contaminated water.

The reality is that women often bear the worst consequences of industrial logging, commercial fishing, intensive pesticide agriculture, toxic dumping, nuclear testing, and other activities that ignore the principle of sustainability. If the water is contaminated or large tracts of forests destroyed or huge dams built, or technology displaces manpower, women are who have to cope with the increased difficulties of day-to-day survival for their families.

This recognition has given women the power force of demanding an equal voice in the "fate of the earth" and for the last two decades women have been bringing their unique life experiences, concerns, perspectives, and holistic analyses into the processes through which the United Nations, governments, international finance, transnational corporations, public, and private institutions shape policies.

The global women's environment movement had a starting point on two major United Nations actions. The UN Commission "Our Common Future"—linking the environmental crisis to unsustainable development and financial practices that were worsening North-South inequities, women and children being the majority of the world's poor and illiterates. And the Earth Summit, the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), result of a General Assembly mandate.

## **2.1 Women at Rio 92—Planeta Fêmea**

Women in preparation for the UN Conference have organized two events addressing the linkages between the global ecological and social crisis. Sponsored by the UN Environment Programme and organized by the Worldwide Network with the Global Assembly of Women and the Environment, in November 1991 brought together in

Miami, Florida, more than 200 women who represented environmental “success stories,” grassroots initiatives that demonstrated that women were effective environmental leaders in solving a variety of problems in every region of the world. Their stories were considered visible, sustainable, affordable, and replicable.

Immediately following the Assembly, the Women’s Environment & Development Organization (WEDO) held the first World Women’s Congress for a Healthy Planet, which featured dozens of workshops and a tribunal of five women judges taking testimony from 15 women experts who presented documented analyses of how the environment–*development* crisis affected and involved women. Attended by 1500 women from 83 countries, the Congress aimed to bring women’s perspectives into the discussions and drafting of UNCED’s *Agenda 21*, and other official documents. Congress participants formulated and unanimously adopted their own agenda.

At the first major NGO Forum ever organized at an UN Conference in 1992, during UNCED in Rio de Janeiro women’s organizations—ranging from community groups to international networks—brought their unique life experiences, concerns, perspectives, and holistic analyses in a very sound and colorful tent, The PLANETA FEMEA. International women’s environment networks were responsible for put an action-oriented program based on the platform of the Women’s Action *Agenda 21*.

## **2.2 Women’s Action *Agenda 21***

The Women’s Action Agenda made recommendations on practical steps that could be taken by the UN, by Governments, industry, and NGOs on a host of linked issues such as land rights and credit for women, foreign debt and trade, poverty, women’s health; and sexual and reproductive rights, bio-diversity and biotechnology, nuclear and alternative energy, environment ethics, and use of women’s consumer power to protect the environment, and democratic rights.

The first item on the Action Agenda “Democratic Rights, Diversity, and Solidarity” highlights a code of practice that has shaped the women’s movement. For women, only a society founded on the values of solidarity and diversity can right the wrongs and injustices that taint the world in which we live.

Women are proposing a code of environmental ethics and accountability based on principles of cooperation rather than competition, “which acknowledges the responsibility that accompanies power and is owed to future generations”. They are critical of the current system, “the barren instruments (systems of national accounts) on which all major economic and environment decisions are made” and suggest that “governments agree to a timetable for implementation of full costs of accounting that includes environmental social costs—and assigns full value to women’s labor in national accounting systems, and in calculation of subsidies and incentives in international trade”.

Women have always been a majority in the organized pacifist movement. They lead most of the movements for the improvement of quality of life that combat disposal of toxic materials, transport, and resource use. In their *Action Agenda 21* they urged “an

immediate 50 percent reduction in military spending, with the money saved reallocated to socially useful and environmentally friendly purposes”. Pragmatically, they proposed that “armies be used as environmental protection corps to monitor and repair damage to natural systems, including clean-up of war zones, military bases, and surrounding areas, and to be available to assist citizens in times of natural and man-made disasters”.

Women also took a clear stand on the foreign debt and the rules of international trade, “rejecting the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) that shift the responsibilities of basic social services from governments to women without compensation or assistance”.

In areas where women represent a majority of the labor force, their lives are particularly damaged by environmental destruction. The item “Women, Poverty, Land Rights, Food Security, and Credit” on the *Action Agenda 21* calls on “UN, governments, and non-governmental organizations to cease discriminatory practices that limit women’s access to land and other resources, to increase allocation of resources that enhance food security; and to provide appropriate technologies to reduce women’s work”.

The topic of “Population and the Environment” was one of those most debated by women during UNCED, where Planeta FEMEA was responsible for coordinating the Population and Environment NGO Treaty. Women objected to insinuations that population pressure is the chief cause of environmental degradation and submitted that the true causes of the problem are “industrial and military pollutants, toxic wastes, and economic systems that exploit; and misuse nature and people”. The women’s point of view also has implications for bio-diversity and biotechnology, nuclear power and alternative energy, science, and technology transfer.

The *Agenda 21* drawn up in Miami stresses one point in particular, which guides women’s action—their power as consumers. “Aware that the power of the consumer is decisive in industrial planning and production, we will engage in campaigns supporting investment in environmentally sound productive activities; and encourage initiatives to reduce fossil fuel energy use, over consumption and wastes”.

The Action Agenda also recommended practical measures that the UN, other international agencies and institutions, governments, industry, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could take as a way of making women accountable.

Besides the *Women’s Action Agenda 21*, in the context of the Rio 92 Global Forum, three major NGO Treaties have had the full input and participation of women in their elaboration. The treaties sought to replicate the conventions and agreements that governments made among them. It was an alternative way of posing questions and issues that have also been elaborated by the governments. The Treaty On Environmental Education For Sustainable Societies And Global Responsibility, the Treaty On Consumption And Lifestyle, and the Treaty On Population And Environment had special input of women.

### **2.3 From Rio to Beijing**

Since Miami, feminist analysis as reflected in the *Women’s Action Agenda 21* has

informed the advocacy work of thousands of women from every region of the world, who have met and strategized in caucuses throughout preparatory processes, and at numerous official UN conferences and implementation meetings.

The Women's Caucus and the advocacy methodology developed during the 1991–1992 UNCED process were key to incorporating 120 recommendations and a whole chapter—*The Role Of Women In Sustainable Development*—into the official *UNCED Agenda 21* approved at the Rio Earth Summit. It has proved to be so effective and popular that WEDO continued to organize Women's Caucuses during the preparatory meetings for the 1994 Sustainable Development of Small Islands Developing States Conference (SIDS), 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the 1995 World Summit on Social Development (Social Summit), and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women.

Towards the Fourth UN World Conference on Women, in unprecedented numbers they have been attending preparatory meetings, the official Conference, and the NGO Forum. Up to 30 000 women were present in Huairou, where the parallel Forum took place. The women and environment events were concentrated at the Second World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, organized by WEDO and the Daughters Of The Earth: The Environment And Development Collaborative Web, an effort of 80 organizations from every region of the world and the Once and Future Pavilion, that made visible women's participation in, and contribution to, a broad spectrum of science and technology activities.

Daughters of the Earth: the Environment and Development Collaborative Web at the NGO Forum in Beijing. The Second World Women's Congress opened the web by reviewing what women have accomplished in the last four years and what still remains to be done in the face of conflict, violence, environmental degradation, poverty, sexual exploitation, rising fundamentalism, lack of political power, and a global economic system that subordinates human well-being to growth.

Four women honorable judges have listened to witness testimonies from different regions on a range of issues and activism, which reveals the struggles of women for environment and social justice. Here are some of the statements made, published in *News and Views*, December 1995 issue:

“As 1/10th of the world's population, Chinese women are a vital force for environment protection. In the (nearly) three years since the first World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, 30 million Chinese women planted 2.1 billion trees”. (Wang Shuxian, Vice-President, All China Women's Federation).

“As habitat and resource bases disappear, many rural and Indigenous communities are becoming environmental refugees. If they enter the waged labor market, they tend to do so at the bottom. Women are caught in a double bind: exposed to new vulnerabilities and dependencies, while still obliged to fulfill existing responsibilities as care givers of the communities”. (Marta Benavides, El Salvador, Instituto Internacional para la Cooperación de los Pueblos).

“As consumers and investors, we women have the power and the leverage to change corporate behavior. Today, corporate social responsibility is discussed in the most conservative of forums. Companies will increasingly devote efforts to addressing social and environmental concerns—if consumers and investors keep the pressure on”. (Alice Tepper Marlin, President Council on Economic Priorities).

“Population programs are virtually a condition for debt relief and loans. There’s a link between structural adjustment programs and women’s reproductive health; the links are lack of water, housing, and other basic needs. The world needs values, a global ethic, which should be allowed to permeate culture, politics, trade, religion, and philosophy. Without such an ethic, the age-old power game, materialism and individualism will take over”. (Adeltoun Ilumoka, Empowerment and Action Research Center).

“We need missionaries for this global ethic: men and women who live it. Acts of charity, compassion, tolerance, solidarity, and non-violence should be seen, not lectured on. The era of missionaries who imposed values they do not subscribe to themselves is over. We have a very important role to play as living examples of what we teach and believe in. That is partly what we have been doing since Miami. That is what we shall continue to do after Beijing. We must continue to lead the way. In our midst are many men who share that intrinsic goodness. We are, therefore, not all alone. We are already a multitude”. (Wangari Mathaai, Green Belt Movement).

“The principles of human rights should be extended to protect all people from risks to life or health arising from environmental damage, hazardous waste disposal; and air, water or land pollution, whether from private acts or the acts of Governments”. (Rosalie Bertell, International Institute of Concern for Public Health).

The Web focused on women’s action, both in the North and South, on some of the most critical issues for the twenty-first century: trade and the global economy; technology and communications; new militarism and new peace movements; health and healing; women’s resistance strategies, sustainable alternatives; and sustainable consumption and livelihoods. Also part of the WEB collaborative event, were the culminating of the 180 days/180 ways Women’s Action Campaign, and a dialogue with senior officials of the major international environment and development agencies.

## **2.4 Perspectives of Women on Trade and Global Economy**

In developing countries, women bear the heaviest burden of structural adjustment policies; they are excluded from basic services and from the mainstream. Global free-trade regimes present new challenges to women. Of the top 100 economies in the world, more than 60% are not countries, they’re corporations. Internationally, trans-national corporations (TNCs) operate largely in the absence of global governance and democratic political structures.

At the Web in Beijing, women put together a series of primers oriented to understand the impact of global economy on women and the environment. On highlighting codes of conduct on democratic global governance for trans-national corporations a series of actions were also proposed.

The impact of the global economy is also seen on food production, an activity that concentrates large numbers of women. Instead of a local community effort, agriculture is now a highly profitable commercial enterprise engaging some 15% of all world trade exports. Many countries, especially the least developed countries, have become net food-importing nations—meaning their people cannot eat without access to foreign foods.

The perspectives and position of peasant women of the South have therefore come into direct collision with the perspectives and power of men who control global institutions.

According to Vandana Shiva, gender analysis in a period of globalization therefore needs to make two major shifts:

Firstly, “Since globalization is primarily a removal of national barriers to trade and investment, gender analysis needs to move from the exclusively domestic paradigm; (either limited to the household or to the country) and needs to understand gender relations between actors globally.

Secondly, gender analysis needs to move from the impact and victim-hood paradigm to a structural and transformative paradigm. Most gender analysis gets limited to how the global economy impacts on women. However, global financial, trade, and corporate institutions have differential impact on men and women, rich and poor, because they are gendered institutions and structures. They are institutions dominated and controlled by men, especially men from the rich G-7 countries, and being shaped by a particular gender, class and race of humans. Gender analysis of globalization therefore cannot limit itself to impact on women but needs to take into account the patriarchal basis of paradigms, processes, policies, and projects of global economic structures. It needs to take into account how women's concerns, priorities and perceptions are excluded in how the economy is defined”.

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## Biographical Sketch

**Thais Corral** is a journalist with a master in public policy by the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Her field of work for the last fourteen years has been in the non profit "third sector". She is the founder of three non-profit organizations, two in Brazil--REDEH (Network for Human Development) and CEMINA (Communication, Education, Information on Gender)--and one in the USA, called WEDO (Women Environment and Development Organization) which is one of the biggest

international advocacy women's organizations working in the area of political advocacy. All these organizations are concerned with women's political and social empowerment, through the use of educational training, communication tools and advocacy strategies.

This was one of the few women that represented civil society and gender concerned over the UN Global Conferences that took place in the 1990s. One of her main interests is the challenges pose by gender and global governance.

Among her accomplishments are the conception and implementation of a database of "best practices", gathering cases of non profits in the area of local integrated sustainable development and the expansion of the use of radio for gender education and women's empowerment in Brazil. The first was considered a benchmark as it gathers 183 initiatives of non-profit organizations, that through partnerships with the government or the private sector, have found innovative ways of solving chronic social problems. The use of radio to provide gender education became a major field of activity for the third sector in Brazil which is reflected by the fact that today there are more than 300 hundred community and commercial radio programs all over the country. Under her leadership gender started to be recognized as a critical aspect for the implementation of local sustainable development in Brazil. Her organization has been collaboration with local governments for the implementation of local agenda 21 in several cities in Brazil.

She has received several awards that express the acknowledge of her leadership: the "100 Heroines Award", the "Award Abril Mulher" for her contribution to the improvement of the status of women in Brazil. She was also recognized as "the Woman of the Year of 1999" by the American Association of Biography.

She is a LEAD fellow of the third cohort. She is also fluent in Portuguese, English, Spanish, Italian and French.