

# GLOBAL ACTION FOR WOMEN TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT: A CANADA-US PERSPECTIVE

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## Summary

The search for equality of women in development today can be traced back to a larger history of women's inferior social status. Numerous explanations for the inequality in the treatment of women have been posed. The idea of women's intellect as biologically inferior to that of men, along with the promotion of patriarchy in major social institutions, has been longstanding. Such inequities have resulted in gaps in status, pay, and opportunities between men and women, leading to situations of an uneven playing field between the sexes. Sex differences are associated with biological differences, while the gender identities of women and men are socially, psychologically, historically and culturally determined and may change over time. Policies and practices leading to gender discrimination become embedded in the cultural and social mores of our societies. Gender analysis is a way of bringing to light gender considerations crucial to development. Globalization practices can have different impacts on the lives of women as compared to those of men. Globalization and multinational organizations often seem to set a challenge of sustainability for women in the developing world. Since 1975, the United Nations has coordinated and encouraged governmental action for change in women's lives through a series of major International Governmental Conferences on Women at such locations as Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing.

## 1. Introduction

*Women play a vital role in the welfare and future of their societies around the globe. Their multiple roles, as mothers, income earners, managers of key natural resources such as water, energy, soil, and forests, community workers, educators, and health-care providers, make their contributions critical to sustainable development. (Canadian International Development Agency)*

The international Development Strategy of the Third Development Decade has defined development as “the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population on the basis of their full participation in the process of development and a fair share of the benefits therefrom.” Efforts to link social and economic activities and to encourage the equality of participation of women, nevertheless, have been problematic.

Global action by women in Canada and the USA towards rectifying the difficulties of the sustainable development of women at home and abroad has developed shape and direction over the years. Feminist thought and discourses, the women’s movement, and the support of the periodic global United Nations conferences for women since 1975, all have influenced global action.

The present difficulties of equality of women in development relate to a larger history of the inferior social status of women. As a social movement, the first feminist wave of action in the west is said to have begun in England in 1792 with the publication by Mary Wollstonecraft of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. John Stuart Mill, a male feminist, in his work, *The Subjection of Women*, argued in 1869 that the power to reason was humanity’s highest achievement; women, like men, must have the right to the fullest cultivation of this faculty through education and through legal equality in all capitalist institutions.

The ideas of these earlier writers spread throughout the commonwealth and remain today as central tenets in the North for examining the rights of women. Such ideas were in place with the first wave of feminist action in the 1900s, resulting in women obtaining the vote.

Collective actions, generically known as the women’s feminist movement, in a second wave, swept through countries of the North, beginning in the 1960s. Women in North America in increasing numbers entered the work force and public life. Many “had their consciousness raised” as they became politicized from their inequality experiences. “Sisterhood is powerful” became an important slogan as women became aware of the importance of collective action for social change in their lives, not only for their roles in the workplace and public life but in their homes as well.

The second wave of the women’s movement was born on this continent when women working in the civil rights movement in the United States became aware of their secondary status through their treatment by both fellow white and black workers. Many white middle class women are said to have formed their consciousness of their secondary status relative to men through the work of Betty Friedan and her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1975).

Black North American women soon reached a sense of collective consciousness through understandings that the theoretical explanations and remedial actions to redress inequities advocated by white women did not always fit black women's experiences. More recently, gay women have questioned the lack of their inclusion by heterosexual women in their design of appropriate remedial actions, questioning whether such approaches can liberate gay as well as heterosexual women.

While the North American women's movement began at the local community level, it then spread to operate at many levels: municipal, provincial (state) and federal levels. Its concerns pertaining to the rights of women have gone beyond Canada and the United States with its activism and theorizing engaging women at international levels.

The internationalism of North American women as well as their leadership in international women's movements over the years has often been criticized as Eurocentric. Despite the contradictions and difficulties inherent in attempts by women from a "developed" society in the North to take a global perspective, many, as Ruth Pierson reported in *Canadian Women's Issues* in 1995, have contributed to global feminist initiative. What has been less well documented is the extent to which feminist movements in southern countries have, in turn, affected women's development in northern countries.

Many global action policies with respect to women, adopted now by North American development agencies, were formulated from ideological positions established at international women's conferences attended by governmental representatives. Such official conference have been held under the auspices of, and at venues provided by, the United Nations. Nearby these venues were non-governmental forums.

In December 1972, the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 1975 to be International Women's Year. The first of the major international women's conferences was held in Mexico in 1975. The global concerns of women, hammered out at such conferences, as well as the action plans advocated by government representatives and by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), will be discussed further in this chapter.

Dialogue amongst the governmental representatives (men and women), and the NGO women, during the women conferences and in preparation for a series of the conferences over the years, should not be underestimated. Such dialogue has been important in the consciousness-raising of all parties as to the nature of the global issues affecting the health and viability of women around the world.

Women have not been able to participate equally in development, nor have they shared equally in its benefits. Despite progress made in all fields in the last 20 years, women still lag behind men in critical areas. Women around the world earn 30 to 40 percent less than men doing the same kind of work. Women in Asia and Africa have been found to work 13 hours a week more than men and are mostly unpaid. For example, studies of women's roles in agriculture, reported in a work edited by Tina Wallace and Candida March (1991), from a sample of Africans living in Senegal, Gambia, Uganda and Kenya, showed that women contributed between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of the total

agricultural work.

More recently, ensuring that women and men have equal opportunity to benefit from development projects has come to be viewed as a human rights issue. In 1993, United Nations researchers, gathering information about the world's women, noted that so far they had not found a single country that treated its women as well as its men.

What impact has the history of women's activism in North America had upon global action for women towards sustainable and equitable development? Why is it that, around the world and within each country, women as a group are treated less well than men as a group? Why is it that women are not participating fully in the development of their countries? Why is gender a development issue? Why is it that globalization and multinational organizations involved in globalization often seem to set a challenge of sustainable development for women? Questions such as these will be explored further in this chapter.

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Dr. **Catharine E. Warren** is Professor Emerita in the Faculty of Continuing Education at the University of Calgary. Her Ph.D. in Sociology is from the University of London, England. Her career as sociologist and adult educator has centered upon gender and issues of concern to women both at home and abroad. She has undertaken several gender consultancies funded by the Canadian International Development Agency: at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok; at the University of Fiji in Suva; and, in India with the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute. Pertinent published projects include: C.Warren, U.Rost, & Y.Wang. *Asian Women and Technological Careers: Gender Analysis*. Bangkok: AIT. 1994; U.Rost, C.Warren, & S. Mishra. *Asian Women and Technological Careers: AIT Women Graduates Tracer Study*. Bangkok: AIT, 1994; and C.Warren, "Thai Women and Human Rights", in *Human Rights and Women's Realities: Reflections on Beijing and Beyond*, edited by R. Tiessen, 137-144. Guelph: World University Service of Canada, 1996.