

Editorial: Whatever Happened to Women, Environment and Development?

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I warmly welcomed the proposal from Poh Sze Choo, Barbara S. Nowak, Kyoko Kusakabe and Meryl J. Williams to publish a set of papers on gender and fisheries in this special volume on environment and development. It seemed timely to reengage on gender and environment issues. Indeed, their proposal forced me to consider what has happened to the passionate dialogues and debates on women, environment and development that had first drawn me into development in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In that period women and environment was the subject of the first global women's meetings to address the newly emerging 'sustainable development' paradigm. The 'World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet' held in Miami, USA in late 1991 and the series of meetings hosted in the Planeta Femea or The Women's Tent at the 'Global Forum', the non-governmental forum of the United National Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, the 'Earth Summit'), held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil mid-1992¹ were examples of holistic forward-thinking research and advocacy that led, among other things, to the formation of the Women and Environment Development Organization, which was, in the early 1990s, a leader in the UN debates on gender, environment and development.

Now, a decade or more later, it seems that the political struggles of gender and development policymakers and women's organizations have shifted to other terrain. The subjects that are flagged currently include women's rights, economics and trade, globalization, aid policy, racism, sexual and reproductive health and rights, public health, sexual and gender-based violence, conflict and security, land rights, militarism, and cultural and religious fundamentalisms. It seems that subjects such as agriculture, aquaculture, forestry and fisheries are left within the gender and development domain to technical projects and service provision. Other concerns such as toxins and environmental health and the gendered nature of 'sustainable development' have not been taken up with the same zeal as in past years.

With the exception of some outspoken cultural critics such as Vandana Shiva, an internationally known scientist from India who since 1986 has been critical of western science's ties to 'biopiracy', there has been very little written from a global political ecology perspective by feminists in the last decade. There has been acknowledgement that women-centred knowledge sustains local agriculture and community well-being

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and that women farmers are on the frontline of many changes by global agribusinesses. Wangari Maathai, for her work with rural Kenyan women in the Green Belt Movement, has, after all, been awarded the Nobel Prize. But the conceptual links between ecology and feminism have fallen behind the critical and innovative work on feminism and economics, and feminist advocates' redefinitions of sexual rights, conflict and security, health systems and poverty.

With the recent rise in awareness about global warming and its devastating health and livelihood effects borne most severely by the poor in all parts of the world, and with talk now of another 'green revolution' and the shortage of clean water and food worldwide, it is critical that feminists working in gender and development and women's rights movements start to take seriously alarms raised about many environmental crises. Feminist analysis needs to take into account how life science companies are appropriating and manipulating genes for food and medical purposes without enough public debate and consensus. The new biotech research has profound implications for farmers (and fisher people and pastoralists) and for food sovereignty worldwide impacting millions of poor women's livelihoods. Major agribusiness firms, such as Syngenta, BASF, Bayer and Monsanto are reformulating their pesticides at the nano-scale to make them more biologically active and to win new monopoly patents. It is estimated that over the next two decades, the impacts of nano-scale convergence on farmers and food will exceed that of farm mechanization or of the Green Revolution.

Equally, the rising sense of crisis around climate injustice, the growing economic inequities and techno fix solutions proposed for 'adapting' to a changing climate make it vital that researchers and activists working on political ecology, diverse economies and global gendered relations build stronger alliances. The dominant patterns of economic development based on neglect of the environment and uneven development implicate all of us. It is important to bring together technical scientific knowledge about women and environment and articulate it within an analysis that can explain the nexus among new technologies and

the global economy, environment and women's rights. This type of analysis and vision is needed in order to critique and propose alternatives to industrial monocultures including agriculture, fisheries and forests; new seed technologies and seed sovereignty; biodiversity and conservation initiatives; agrofuels and energy technologies; carbon trading, carbon sequestration technologies and geo-engineering to solve the crisis of global climate change; genetic technologies and bio-engineering to solve the global environmental health crisis; industrial production systems driven by technological convergence at the nano-scale; and the unexamined allure of 'sustainability projects' and 'sustainable development'.²

Giovanna Di Chiro's book in progress *Uncommon Expertise: Women, Science, and Environmental Politics* is one example of how such a new analysis is evolving based on women activists' encounters with scientific knowledge in grassroots environmental, health and development struggles. She argues that 'the recent intensification of globalized capitalist production' has made 'the accomplishment of social reproduction (including the ability to procure decent food, clean water, shelter, clothing, healthcare) difficult if not impossible for many people around the world'. Her proposal is for a 'feminist political ecology addressing the intersection of environmental justice and reproductive justice issues can help to make visible the 'living environmentalisms' or 'environmentalisms of everyday life' that can be seen in many community-based struggles and movements occurring around the world'.³

In this issue of *Development* we set the grounds for such an analysis to emerge by focusing on the technical knowledge already gathered on gender and fisheries. Such knowledge and experience focused on gender relations in the work of fisheries, and the impact of development on women and men, their environment and culture needs to be firmly embedded in an analysis that makes the links between local and global change. The beginnings are there. We need to take time to deepen our understanding of 'living environmentalisms' if we are to find the alternative ecologies and economies that protect the rights of people and the health of the Earth.

Notes

- 1 World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet was held on 8–12 November 1991, Miami, Florida, USA attended by 1,500 women from 83 countries. Planeta Femea was the Women's Tent organized by the local Brazilian committee together with WEDO and DAWN. The documents fed directly into the 92 Global Forum of the 'Earth Summit' also fed into the women's Chapter 24 of the Earth Summit final declaration under the section 'Strengthening the Role of Major Groups in the Agenda 21 "Program of Action for Sustainable Development"' – the final text of agreements negotiated by Governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 3–14 June, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- 2 The project of building a feminist political ecology is being pursued by the Global South women's network Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era. A very initial conversation has started at the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation with a Feminist Seminar alternative working group, which has discussed how feminist researchers could engage with other activist groups working on convergence technologies and climate justice as part of the What Next project. Thank you to all the members of the group who inspired the subject of this editorial.
- 3 Quotes taken from Giovanna Di Chiro (2008).

Reference

- Di Chiro, Giovanna (2008) 'Living Environmentalisms: Coalition Politics, Social Reproduction, and Environmental Justice', *Environmental Politics* 17(2): 276–98.