

WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The Big Picture

In Canada

- Canada is committed to a coherent approach to economic, social, environmental and foreign policies. Sustainable development is the key objective of integrating social, economic and environmental goals.
- Canada is committed to including women's perspectives on achieving sustainable development.
- Canada recognizes the special relationship of Aboriginal peoples with the environment.

Around the World

- Women in the developing world are the daily caretakers of the living environment, depending on its renewable resources to provide the basic necessities of food, water and shelter. For them, physical survival and environmental sustainability are one.
- Agenda 21, adopted at the UN World Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio (1992), recognized the critical role of women in achieving sustainable development. The results of UNCED and its five year review, as well as other world conferences such as those on Population and Development (Cairo 1994), on Women (Beijing 1995) and on Human settlements (Istanbul) reflect an evolving understanding of the inter-linkages between women, environment, population and sustainable development.
- As childbearers and primary caretakers of health, women are affected by adverse health impacts of environmental degradation and pollution.

Facts and Figures

In Canada

- Canadians are the heaviest users per capita of electricity in the world; we are also one of the most wasteful people, generating 2.2 kg of garbage each day. (Environmentally Sound Packaging Coalition, *Women and the Environment*, Ontario Advisory Council on Women's Issues, 1990)
- A recent poll shows that women (23%) are more inclined than men (16%) to believe that their health is currently affected "a great deal" by environmental problems. The poll also found that women are more likely (55%) than men (45%) to believe the health of future generations will be affected "a great deal" by environmental problems. (The Environmental Monitor, 1996)
- Canadians use 1.7 billion disposable diapers each year accounting for approximately 2.5% of all municipal solid waste going to landfill. The manufacture of disposable diapers in Canada consumes approximately 65 tonnes of pulp, 8,800 tonnes of plastic and 9,800 tonnes of packing material.
- *Breast Cancer and the Environment: The Chlorine Connection*, a 1992 Greenpeace report, is part of growing documentation that chlorine-based compounds (used in plastic, pesticides, bleaching) are a significant factor in causing breast cancer.

Around the World

- In developing countries, women are the primary collectors and managers of wood fuel, non-wood forest resources and water; the main producers of subsistence food crops and the primary users of communal lands and forests.



- As forests disappear, women must walk further to collect wood and biomass for fuel. In the Himalayas, it takes a woman a full day to gather wood, compared to two hours only a generation ago. Similarly, water contamination and diversion are increasing women's search for water sources, and women may spend up to 4 hours a day retrieving water, often carrying 20 kg or more in containers.
- Local and indigenous knowledge of natural resource management practices is playing a greater role in environmental sustainability, and women are key repositories of this knowledge.
- Women's organizations and networks play an increasingly important role in advocacy and in specific actions to improve the environment.
- Global results of 27,000 people surveyed across 25 countries indicate that women (41%) are more inclined than men (37%) to believe that their health is currently affected "a great deal" by environmental problems. The Survey also found that women are more likely (59%) than men (54%) to believe the health of future generations will be affected "a great deal" by environmental problems. (The International Environmental Monitor, 1999)

Towards Equality

In Canada

- Canada strongly supported the 1992 UN Earth Summit decision that women's contributions to and concerns about the environment be treated both as a separate issue and integrated throughout the Summit document. Agenda 21 devoted a separate chapter to women, the result of advocacy by women's groups, supported by Canada and other concerned governments.
- Part of Canada's Women's Health Strategy is the reduction of environmental hazards that threaten women's health. Under this strategy, Canada will accelerate screening and assessment of new and existing substances, improve management and control of toxic substances and track progress.
- Many groups in Canada are concerned with the issue of women and the environment, including Women for a Just and Healthy Planet and Friends of the Earth.
- In 1998, Dalhousie University announced the creation of the Elizabeth May Chair in Women's Health and Environment. The mandate of the Chair is to advance knowledge, promote debate and ensure research results become integrated into public policy in the areas of women's health and the environment.
- The 9th International Women and Health meeting, to be held in Toronto in 2001, will include women's health and the environment as a theme, and will examine the environmental risks faced by women.

Around the World

- Canada promoted the integration of a gender perspective in the texts of international sustainable development agreements, including the review and assessment of the Rio Summit and recommendations of the Commission on Sustainable Development. Canada has proposed and supported texts that promote gender equality or the integration of a gender perspective in a number of areas of sustainable development, including all levels of decision-making, poverty alleviation, health, population, human settlements, capacity-building, science, education and awareness, information and tools for measuring progress.
- Canadian indigenous women have been fully active in Government of Canada efforts to meet commitments under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. Canada has provided financial and policy support for their participation at both the Canadian Open-ended Working Group on the Biodiversity Convention and at international meetings, such as the Fourth World Conference of the parties and the Madrid Workshop on the UN Biodiversity Convention/Traditional Knowledge. Canada recognizes that indigenous women are often key observers of environmental health and are sensitive to environmental change.
- The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funds a number of international projects to mobilize women at the community level to sustainably manage the environment. For example:

- in Cote d'Ivoire, 100 women volunteers, elected by their peers, were trained in health, hygiene, environmental protection and creation of cooperatives. When they returned to their villages, they mobilized their neighbours to set up local hygiene committees, install more energy-efficient stoves and create waste pits and kitchen storage facilities.
- a women's organization in Gujarat, India, supported reclaims unproductive wasteland lost to salt damage by constructing a rainwater catchment system, planting saline-tolerant trees, constructing biogas plants and introducing smokeless stoves.
- initiatives to support women's role in managing natural resources and safeguarding the environment such as water supply projects in Sri Lanka, Peru, Honduras and Ghana, which incorporate training for women in hand pump use and maintenance, and water and sanitation practices; community forest projects in India which emphasize women's roles and participation; and agricultural programs in Africa which target women farmers.