

**Commission on the Status of Women**  
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**Statement by Lorena Aguilar**  
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Madame Chairperson,

IUCN welcomes the opportunity to comment on the importance of the environmental sector for the promotion of gender equity and equality.

Over the past 15 years, the world conservation movement has been gradually committing itself to gender equity, as clearly evidenced by several international fora: the Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro, 1992; Habitat II, Turkey, 1996; the 2nd and 3rd World Water Fora, The Hague, 2000 and Kyoto, 2003; and the World Conference on Sustainable **Development**, Johannesburg, 2002.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, joined this worldwide movement by calling for:

- The active involvement of women in environmental decision-making;
- Gender equity mainstreaming throughout sustainable development policies and programs;
- Strengthening or development of regional, national and international mechanisms to assess the impact of environmental and development policies on women.

The past decade has extensively demonstrated that the conservation and sustainable use of natural **resources** is vital to sustainable human **development** and poverty reduction. **None** of the goals of the millennium will be reached, even partially, unless we promote environmental management from the gender equity perspective.

- In order to reach the millennium goal on poverty eradication, it is essential to acknowledge that women account for 70% of the poorest populations and that over 50% of those poor women live in rural areas where their livelihoods are dependent upon a healthy biodiversity.
- Universal primary education, proposed by the second millennium goal, will remain a utopia while girls are unable to attend school due to the long hours they have to put into water and firewood hauling activities.
- No real gender equity will exist (Millennium Goal 3) while women have access to only 5% of the concessions granted worldwide on natural resource use and management. Nor can we speak about justice while women bear most of the responsibility for food production at a worldwide level, while holding ownership to less than 1% of the land.
- The environmental situation is a determinant factor in improving the levels of maternal and child health:
  - In Uttarachal, India, the miscarriage rate is 30% higher than the national miscarriage rate and has been related directly to the physical strain imposed on women due to water and firewood hauling activities.
  - According to the World Health Organization, 80% of the developing countries' populations depend on traditional medicine for primary health care. For the most part, the knowledge and uses of medicinal plants are within the women's realm.
  - Pregnant women are particularly susceptible to water-related diseases.
  - Anaemia-resulting from malaria- is responsible for a quarter of maternal mortality.
- Ensuring the environmental sustainability proposed by the millennium goals does, indeed, imply the need to recognize that women are responsible for securing firewood and other household fuel sources; that indoor air pollution kills annually about two million women, girls and boys; that most of the financial resources women obtain from the use of biodiversity are

used to improve the living conditions of their families; and that droughts are the major cause of food scarcity around the planet.

Experiences in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East show that conservation strategies are an opportunity to promote equity between women and men, since the actions promoted are innovative and have not been previously labeled and classified as pertaining to one sex or the other. For example, the work involving rearing of different species –butterflies, iguanas, medicinal plants, and orchids, is a "neutral" activity in gender terms; from a social standpoint, it is neither assigned to men nor to women. Therefore, the promoters of such actions have the unique opportunity to develop mechanisms based on equitable participation, where both women and men will be able to work.

The undeniable relationship between environmental management and gender equity urges us to encourage countries committed to the construction of a just world to:

- Increase their efforts to influence environmental public policy-making in order to ensure a more equitable, effective and fair distribution of the benefits derived from the use, management and conservation of biodiversity.
- Get involved and make use of the mechanisms offered by international environmental conventions in order to ensure that the needs and interests of women are fully considered. Strategic issues are currently being debated within the framework of biodiversity, climate change and desertification conventions.
- Include management of risk, from a gender equity perspective, as an essential component of development proposals.
- Actively promote and get involved in discussions and initiatives that promote environmental management, not only as a mechanism to ensure a healthy environment for future generations, but also as a strategy for poverty reduction. An immediate challenge is to ensure that gender equity will be adequately considered at the forthcoming Millennium Declaration review, in September 2005.

All of us, the people and countries gathered here, have repeatedly stated our commitment both to the construction of a world governed by fair relations between men and women and to the equitable and sustainable use of natural resources. While progress has been made towards this goal, steps have also been taken backward. Now is the time to make headway.

Thank you, Madame Chairperson.