

# Women and the Environment

## Report of online discussion



### Organized by

Gender Unit, UNEP  
in collaboration with the Gender Unit, UNHABITAT

1– 26 February 2010

The discussion on "Women and the Environment" was part of a series of United Nations online discussions dedicated to the fifteen-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000); and was coordinated by WomenWatch, an inter-agency project of the United Nations Inter-agency Network on Women and Gender Equality. It is a unique electronic gateway to web-based information on all United Nations entities' work and the outcomes of the United Nations' intergovernmental processes for the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment.

For more information and other "Beijing at 15" online discussions, visit <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/beijing15/Disclaimer>: *The views expressed in this report reflect the opinions of participants to the online discussion and not the official views of the United Nations*

**Women and the Environment**  
**Summary of a Women Watch Online Discussion**  
**Moderated by Gender Unit, UNEP**  
**1 – 26 February, 2010**

## **I. Introduction**

The online discussion on Women and the Environment was a collaborative initiative between the Gender Unit of UNEP and the Gender Unit of UNHABITAT. The discussions which were posted on the UNHABITAT discussion forum were moderated by UNEP. The online discussion was part of a series of United Nations online discussions dedicated to the fifteen-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000). The series of discussions were organized by WomenWatch, an inter-agency project of the United Nations Inter-agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE).

The online discussion on women and the environment was intended to build upon the recommendations made at the Beijing plus 10 Review and highlight the emerging environmental and disaster related challenges and impact of these issues on meeting the commitments made under the Beijing Platform for Action. The objective of the e-discussion was to bring together experts, practitioners and policy-makers, from within and outside of the UN system to formulate critical policy messages to the 15-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action; the ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review on gender equality (AMR); and the High-level Plenary Meeting of the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly, focused on the Millennium Development Goals.

This report is a summary of the online discussions that were held between 1- 26, February 2010 and has been prepared as background information for the 54 the session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which will take place March 1-12, 2010. Women and the Environment was one of the Critical Areas of Concern identified in the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, which notes the linkages between poverty, natural disasters, health problems, unsustainable development and gender inequalities. It therefore calls for a holistic and multidisciplinary approach in dealing with environmental issues. In addressing women and the environment, Section K of the Beijing Platform for Action set out three strategic objectives:

1. Involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels.
2. Integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programmes for sustainable development.
3. Strengthen or establish mechanisms at the national, regional or international levels to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women.

Key achievements and challenges were identified in the five and ten-year reviews of the Beijing Platform for Action. Since then, there has been further progress in many areas, although several gaps and challenges persist. Participants were encouraged to bring out issues of innovations by women that enable them to manage the environment or adapt to emerging environmental challenges such as climate change and to share how women's knowledge can influence and inform policy, and how successful innovations that have been identified can be up-scaled and replicated. Where such

efforts have already been undertaken, participants were encouraged to share good practices to show that it is possible to influence and inform policy from the grassroots. The online discussion on Women and the Environment provided an opportunity for stakeholders to share views on achievements, gaps and challenges, and propose future action.

The discussion ran for four weeks (1 – 26 February, 2010). We had very interesting and informative postings from every continent, with close to 156 individuals registered as participants in the discussions. Participants were from different disciplines, backgrounds and organizations, including academics, non-governmental organizations, researchers, gender advocates, civil servants, international organizations, etc. They actively participated and shared their thoughts and experiences and made cogent recommendations on Women and the Environment. There were over 2505 hits and over 50 contributions, which reflected the broad nature of the topic and its relevance. Many points of view were expressed, and the discussions were lively and fruitful. They addressed the following issues:

- 1 – 5 February: Achievements
- 8 – 12 February: Gaps and Challenges
- 15 – 19 February: Future Actions
- 22 – 26 February: Summary of the Discussions.

This report summarizes the major issues and views raised during the online discussion. While it was challenging to accurately capture the wide variety of thoughtful, analytical and useful contributions made by the participants, an attempt has been made to ensure that those issues were appropriately consolidated and reflected. Although there was only a single contribution from participants with regard to achievements, it can generally be agreed that there has been progress in women and the environment over the last fifteen years, especially in the reflection of gender issues in international treatise and conventions. Most participants felt that the challenges and gaps far outweigh achievements and that much remains to be done. That said, participants also provided several recommendations on how to address the challenges

## **II. Women and the Environment: Concept note**

The concept note on women and environment was posted to provide participants with an overview of the issues. Even though participants were not required to respond to the concept note, this section generated the greatest number of hits (712) and about 8 contributions were received.

Discussions on this section ranged from the importance of inclusion and participation of women in the environmental debate at all levels, to the fact that women who bear the disproportionate burden of climate change have largely been overlooked in the debate pertaining to the problems of rising seas, droughts, melting glaciers and extreme weather, and the need and importance of sex disaggregated data and development of indicators to track results on gender and environment.

## **III. Women and the Environment: Achievements**

During the first week of discussions, participants were asked to focus on achievements made since 2000 with a particular emphasis on those attained in the last five years as they relate to the three strategic objectives for Women and the Environment presented in the Beijing Platform for Action.

Participants provided their perspectives from a personal, organizational, national or regional point of view. Participants were asked the extent to which women's knowledge and experiences at the local level (and in urban and rural areas) have been used to inform and influence national development and environmental policies and processes. They were asked to identify what had contributed to successful collaboration between women, policy makers and program implementers in urban and rural areas and to provide examples of good practices. Although there were 399 hits on this topic, only one contribution was received.

It would appear that participants felt that there are very few achievements with regard to women and the environment. However, it was noted that in Nigeria, while there are women with expertise in the area of urban environment, particularly in academics and institutions of higher learning, they do not work in the field. However, the government has made attempts to create space for women experts and involved them in policy making but the numbers are too low for the impact to be felt. It was noted that women who are present in parliament had made valiant attempts at ensuring gender is addressed in the various policies that deal with women and the environment.

The main points of the discussion are summarized below:

***1. Representation of women in political institutions.*** The representation of women in governments, parliaments, and institutions is an important avenue to making environmental policies more gender responsive. Greater support is required in strengthening the capacity of women in political institutions, such as women members of parliamentary Committees on Environment. Women candidates can be supported to run for elections at different levels. Emphasis on women's education, including incentives and scholarships for women in science and policy, is important to ensure a consistent pipeline of well-qualified women candidates for senior positions in public and private organizations in order to narrow the huge gap and also provide greater support at the field level.

#### **IV. Women and the Environment: Gaps and Challenges**

During the second week of discussions, participants were asked to focus on gaps and challenges. This section generated a lot of discussion by participants and had the greatest number of contributions. Participants were asked to reflect on the gaps and challenges that women have faced in the current global environmental crisis (in terms of climate change and natural disasters) with regard to mitigation, adaptation, technology transfer and financing. Participants were asked several questions with regard to Adaptation, Mitigation, Technology transfer and Climate change financing. Most participants felt that the gaps and challenges faced by women the global environmental crisis far outweigh any achievements that may have been made. There were 539 hits on this topic, with over 20 contributions.

Most of the gaps and challenges were focused on the absence of women in decision making at all levels and integration of gender into policy formulation, reflecting the fact that, although some progress has been made since Beijing, much remains to be done, and that, even in the areas where progress has been achieved, significant gaps remain. Most of the existing environmental policy and legislation ignores the issue of gender and is therefore not likely to lead to sustainable development, leading to a counter-productive effect on gender equality. Without taking gender aspects into consideration, the task of preventing issues such as climate change would be impossible to achieve. This is due to a lack of substantive inclusion and participation of women in decision making at all

levels and a lack of recognition of the importance of gender relations. Presently, environmental policy and legislation does not take into account the full diversity of social groups (e.g., children, the elderly and migrants) and their living situations, which leads to a lack of improvement of recommended solutions and a lower acceptance of gender issues amongst the global populace.

Some of the most pressing gaps and challenges identified in the discussion are summarized below.

**1. Participation.** Many participants noted that women form the largest group of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. They are disproportionately represented among both of these groups and are often on the front lines of climate change. In developing countries, in particular, due to their role as primary providers of food, water, and fuel for their families, women are not only the most affected by climate change but are also a pivotal force for building responses to direct climate impacts. More importantly, women are frequently the decision-makers about household consumption, and represent an increasing share of wealth around the world, yet they are not included or allowed to participate in decision making roles in climate change bodies at the national and international levels. The fundamental explanation for the lack of gender considerations in climate debates, generally, is the fact that women are poorly represented in planning and decision-making processes in climate change policies, limiting their capacity to engage in political decisions related to climate change. At the national level, the picture is similar. The integration of women is most likely to succeed at the regional and local levels, but even here, it is the exception rather than the rule.

**2. Raising awareness and building capacity of women on environmental issues.** There is an urgent need to raise awareness and building capacity relating to gender and environment issues (such as climate change and natural disasters) among decision-makers and other stakeholders working on climate change in order to achieve improved policies. This calls for educating and building the capacity of women (and men) as well as youth and children in matters that relate to gender and climate (and natural disaster) issues in order to increase pressure on policy-makers for effective mitigation and adaptation efforts, and more importantly, to bridge the gap between local action and decision making by bringing local experiences to the decision making levels through advocacy and lobbying. The global knowledge base on gender and climate issues must also be increased through research, action learning and frequent knowledge exchange in order to identify a growing host of options for effective mitigation and adaptation. It is necessary to educate people about the possible multiple benefits: for example, find out together with women which the best and most efficient technologies for their tasks are (environmental benefit), how to produce and maintain the technologies (poverty reduction), how to participate in further training, promotion (education and information) and so on, for both industrialized and developing countries (and emerging economies as well).

**3. Women's Knowledge and Contribution.** In many parts of the world, women's knowledge, as well as the traditional roles they play in managing natural resources and food security, is crucial. However, women are often excluded from participating in land conservation, in development projects and in policy. Not taking women's knowledge and contributions into consideration in decision making is likely to conceal women's knowledge and practices that are related to environmental resources. Policy makers do not pay attention to women's indigenous knowledge or they downplay their contributions by using a top-down approach. Participants felt that the time is now ripe to harvest women's knowledge by ensuring that policy decisions are informed by innovations at the community level because they might be surprised by what they discover.

**4. Adaptation.** Given their historic responsibility and differentiated economic development, adaptation actions are generally taken in less developed countries, with some notable exceptions. However, it is important to link adaptation and mitigation in order to confront the effects of climate change, as well as to relate them to combating poverty which is often the priority of least developed countries. Such actions are likely to be more effective if they are made using a decision-making process that allows the full participation of all parties involved, particularly women, indigenous populations and migrant groups. Issues such as access, control and distribution of benefits must also be addressed. Viability of communal and natural resources is an important aspect as are the levels of vulnerability, resilience and autonomy of men and women when confronted with different threats. Vulnerability and capacity of a social group to adapt or change depends greatly on their assets. As such, next to their physical location, women's assets such as resources and land, knowledge, technology, power, decision-making potential, education, health care and food have been identified as determinant factors of vulnerability and adaptive capacity. The more assets people have, the less vulnerable they are and the greater the erosion of people's assets, the greater their insecurity. Data from around the world indicates that women tend to have less or limited access to assets (physical, financial, human, social and natural capital). The importance of local knowledge for social and economic development must be taken into account as well as disaster risk reduction management to take action on causes and lessen impacts.

**5. Mitigation.** Given their historic responsibility and differentiated economic development, mitigation actions are generally taken in developed countries with some notable exceptions. As such, actions associated with mitigation are grouped into two areas: reducing emissions of greenhouse gases; and carbon capture, fixing and sequestration. As such, the solutions or initiatives are different in developed and developing countries and, consequently, so is the way in which gender considerations are articulated. Fortunately, many elements of the necessary transformation can be accomplished in ways that contribute to broad development goals as well; for example, providing clean energy to women also improves local environmental quality. Approached in this way, the challenge becomes a less narrow and costly pursuit of environmental protection, and a broader effort to reorient our societies and economies toward a sustainable development path.

**6. Technology Transfer** Technology is not gender neutral because women and men have different attitudes to and relationships with all aspects of technology. In the traditional sense of tools and machines, technology has long been considered a "male domain" and it is only in recent years that girls and women have been encouraged to pursue studies in mathematics and engineering. Despite women's ingenuity and ability to improvise with whatever materials they happen to have at hand, women in most parts of the world are highly under-represented in the formal creation of new technologies yet they are active users of technology. Women's specific needs in technology development, their access to technical information, tools and machines often is very different from that of men. All of this influences how (and if) they will have access to, or make use of, new technologies. Given that technology is not gender-neutral, technology-based strategies for both mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change sometimes have different implications for women and men. These differences must be recognized and integrated into our thinking about climate change. If technologies are to be used by both men and women, they must be designed to reflect the circumstances and preferences of both sexes. This is especially true in the case of technologies aimed at tasks most frequently performed by women. While the participation of women in decision making about technologies will not guarantee gender sensitivity, it is an important aspect, and ultimately may help to make the technologies more useful and productive for both men and women.

### ***7. Climate Change Financing.***

Governments must apply a gender-budgeting lens in mobilizing and disbursing environment funds, which involves a systematic examination of government budget allocations to climate-change and disaster related programs for their different impacts on women and men as well as decision-making that promote gender equality in raising and spending funds. For example, a just and sustainable financing framework for mitigation and adaptation must guarantee that the financial burdens of coping with climate change risks are not transferred to those who contribute minimally to greenhouse gas emissions. Financing policies for climate change mitigation and adaptation must explicitly consider as well as respond to different experiences and needs of women, especially those women who are on the socio-economic margins of society. At the national level, successful climate strategies, policies and programs must link with efforts to combat poverty and land degradation, and enhance food insecurity and access to safe water. Thus, financing to deal with climate change must be situated within the broader context of development financing and development goals: gender equality, poverty eradication and sustainable development. The mobilization of these funds must be complemented by a range of development policies that address poverty and social imbalances, e.g. debt and investment management. Additionally, the funds ought not to be raised at the expense of but rather in addition to other development commitments that continue to be severely under-resourced.

***8. Women and men as agents of change*** Many participants rightly noted that women and children tend to be the most affected by the effects of climate change. However, it is important to note that women are not vulnerable because they are “naturally weaker”, but because the conditions of vulnerability faced by men and women are different due to their gender. Women, like men, have particular socially-built vulnerabilities and capacities which have been developed through a socialization process. Women are capable of bettering themselves, they can become empowered, and change. Women are not passive, they do not only wait to receive help – they are active agents with different capacities to respond to the challenges posed by climate change. As such, there is a need to avoid being simplistic and just seeing women (because of their sex) as victims. Women and men face different vulnerabilities due to their different social roles.

***9. Urban dimension.*** The poor (the majority of whom are women) are likely to be physically located in places vulnerable to disaster risks and in poorly built environments. For example, in urban area, they are likely to have inadequate housing, living in slums and shantytowns, while in rural areas, they may be small agricultural farmers living on hillsides and river embankments which are prone to soil erosion, and therefore are at risk of losing their source of livelihood. An example was given of women in Bangladesh, who when floods arrived, poor women did not have the capacity and resources to move to higher grounds.

## **V. Women and the Environment: Future Actions**

During the third week of discussions, participants were asked to focus on future actions based on the adverse effects of climate change that are already felt at the local level and in urban and rural areas in relation to sectoral issues and environmental governance. Participants were asked to suggest measures which are necessary to ensure adequate attention is given to gender perspectives in climate change efforts in relation to the following sectors: energy; water and sanitation; food security; urban planning; and housing & transport. They were also asked to identify future actions taking into consideration the achievements and the obstacles to be found in women and the

environment, looking at what has worked and what has not according to their own experiences. Participants were asked to suggest proposals on how environmental governance can be improved to ensure women become active participants at all levels in order to achieve environmental sustainability. Proposals ranged from broad global and national macro policies, strategies, legislation, enforcement, etc., to focused actions at the local, institutional and individual levels. There were 516 hits on this topic, with 17 contributions.

It was recognized that gender equality is a cross-cutting issue, and that proposals would undoubtedly cover many different angles. This is in line with a general agreement among participants in the discussion in the first two weeks, that women's problems all over the world are often similar, but cannot be solved with the same actions. However, some general guidelines on future actions emerged, and these are summarized below.

**1. Research and data** – Not enough is known about the gender aspects of environmental issues such as climate change. For example, with regard to climate change, all instruments for mitigating or adapting to climate change must be subject to a gender-focused analysis. All climate change-related data, scenarios, and so on, need to be disaggregated by gender. Gender-disaggregated data are lacking for both the developed and developing countries. Relevant research needs to be developed and financed, which requires gender experts and climate researchers to closely collaborate on the issues. It also requires development partners and donors to support such research projects. Based on existing knowledge in the area of environment, in particular climate change and other areas, specific suggestions for research projects can easily be developed and advocated.

**2. Participation.** Women must be involved in climate protection negotiations at all levels and in all decisions on climate protection. Representation by numbers is not enough. We need women represented and we need gender experts involved.

**3. Gender Mainstreaming.** Gender must be universally integrated into all environmentally related legislation, e.g., climate change negotiations and policy making at national and international levels. The different needs, opportunities and goals of women and men need to be taken into account. The beginning post 2012 process offers an offer an important opportunity to do so.

**4. Information and Publications.** There is lot of information on the technical aspects of the environment but a general information deficit with regard to women and the environment and related policies. New information materials and strategies need to be developed to provide policy and decision makers with sufficient information that would enable them to make well informed decisions. Gender relevant aspects would need to included and targeted to specific groups and tailored for women's information channels.

**5. Monitoring.** Gender mainstreaming of environment-related research, policy making and implementation needs to be monitored at the national, regional and international levels. This can be summarized within three main goals.

- Close the knowledge gaps that relate to gender aspects of environmental issues (e.g., climate change) through research and the collection of gender-disaggregated data.
- Include more women and gender experts in environment-related negotiations and decision making at all levels.
- Integrate gender-related knowledge into policy making, implementation, monitoring, and communication strategies and materials.



## **VI. Women and the Environment: Summary**

After three weeks of very lively discussions on achievement, gaps and challenges, and recommendations for future action regarding women and the economy participants were asked to take stock, while reflecting on the Beijing strategic objectives on Women and the Environment, and on the messages received during the last three weeks. Participants summarized the progress made, existing gaps and challenges and made recommendations on how to address the issues. Participants agreed that, some strides towards involving women in environmental decision-making at all levels but more needs to be done. More importantly however, is that gender concerns and perspectives need to be integrated into policies and programmes for sustainable development and mechanisms at the national, regional or international levels must be strengthened and/or established in order to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women. There were 343 hits on this topic, and 9 contributions were received.

It was noted by participants that women's indigenous knowledge and experiences are unrecognized, especially in policy-making and decision-making processes. This is in addition to other factors such as illiteracy, poverty, economic that constrain their effectiveness as decision makers. Consequently, women's voices remain unheard despite their being key stakeholders. Given that the main discussion points regarding diagnostics and recommendations for future action have been already summarized above, this section will only mention a few highlights. The consensus that emerged was that women have made and continue to make essential and enormous contributions to the environment at the household, local and community levels, but the benefits they receive are not commensurate with their contributions. Lack of involvement and participation of women in decision making was repeatedly identified as a critical issues and the need to ensure that women's contributions are factored in to inform policy.

Another element that was discussed was that climate change is likely to affect all countries, in all parts of the globe but its impacts will be distributed differently among regions, generations, age classes, income groups, occupations and genders. The poor, the majority of whom are women living in developing countries, will be disproportionately affected. Yet most of the debate on climate so far has been gender-blind, yet climate change and gender inequalities are inextricably linked. As such, participants felt that a gender equality perspective is essential when discussing policy development, decision making, and strategies for mitigation and adaptation because climate change affects women and men differently. Frequent mention was made of the fact that women are not just helpless victims but powerful agents of change, and their leadership is critical. Women can help or hinder strategies related to energy use, deforestation, population, economic growth, science and technology, and policy making, among other things. Several participants noted that by not addressing gender relevant aspects in environmental issues such as climate change is likely to exacerbate inequality overall and thereby slow progress toward gender equality and impedes efforts to achieve wider goals like poverty reduction and sustainable development. Finally, there was consensus that gender inequality can worsen the impacts of climate change. It is therefore critical that critical steps be taken to narrow the gender gap and empower women in order to help reduce these impacts.