

Women and Sustainability

The involvement and empowerment of women is essential to any effective response to environmental and resource degradation.

Women in most of the world tend to basic family needs through close contact with natural resources—crops and water, trees and animals. As women prepare meals they are more exposed to smoke and indoor air pollution. Where sanitation is lacking, disease spreads. Constraints like shortages of water and fuel, erosion of topsoil and degradation of land all profoundly affect women's lives—and through them the lives of everyone.

- Gender inequity not only exacts a toll on women's lives, health and potential, it is closely associated with high fertility.
- Where women are denied education, secure livelihoods, and full legal and social rights, bearing children may be their only means of attaining status and security.
- Increasing women's rights improves their health and well-being and that of their families, and also slows the pace of population growth.
- National laws and local customs often deny women the right to secure title or inherit land, which means they have no collateral to raise credit and improve their lives.
- Poverty, precarious land tenure and lack of expert support discourage women from investing in newer technologies or more sustainable practices such as crop rotation, fallow periods, or reforestation.

- These conditions encourage woodland clearing for fuel and income, and the cultivation of fast-growing cash crops such as cotton, which quickly exhaust the land.

In effect, many women are stuck in a vicious downward spiral of environmental degradation, poverty, high fertility, poor health, and limited opportunities. If the planet is to achieve sustainable development, its women must be empowered as stewards of natural resources and contributors to economic progress.

Women and Land Degradation

- Deforestation increases the time women spend seeking fuelwood. In the state of Gujarat, India, women now spend four or five hours a day collecting fuelwood, where previously they sought fuel once every four or five days.
- Degraded environments create additional time burdens, and occur on top of days already full with household and family responsibilities. Women typically work longer hours than men: an average of 13 hours more each week in Asia and Africa.

Women and Food

- Women do the bulk of the work producing food for family consumption: 80 to 90 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, 50 to 60 percent in Asia. Up to 80 percent of

all fish and shellfish caught in tropical Africa, Asia and the Pacific are cleaned, dried, smoked and marketed by women and children.¹

- Women's agricultural work often goes unrewarded. Women receive less than 1 percent of the total credit available to agriculture.²
- Research on women-headed households has revealed markedly improved diets compared to male-headed households, especially for children under five. In Rwanda and the Gambia, members of female headed-households consume an additional 300 calories per person per day compared to male-headed households.³

Women and Health

- Toxic chemicals and pesticides in air, water and earth enter women's body tissue and breast milk, and can be passed on to infants.
- Water pollution in three Russian rivers is a factor in the doubling of bladder and kidney disorders in pregnant women.
- Women tending flowers in Colombia for export are exposed to 127 different types of chemicals, many of which have been banned in developed countries.

Empowering Women for Sustainable Development

- Providing women with legal rights for land ownership, tenure and inheritance, and increasing their access to credit can create incentives for sound land management.
- Access to reproductive health information and services, including voluntary family planning, saves lives by reducing

maternal and child mortality. Available services do not meet today's demand, and needs will grow rapidly in the next 20 years.

- Sustainable development requires that women be full participants in development of environmental policies and programs at all levels.
- Universal adoption and implementation of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) would be a crucial step forward.

UNFPA: Advocacy for Women

UNFPA supports programs to advance women's rights and roles in sustainable development.

- In Azerbaijan, UNFPA helps mainstream women into sustainable development efforts. The government is preparing a comprehensive national policy with explicit reference to population, gender, sustainability, environment, and development.
- In Nepal, UNFPA is part of an effort to strengthen women's leadership skills and increase their confidence for better household management, family planning, family and child health, sanitation, nutrition and prevention of HIV/AIDS infection.
- In Vietnam, UNFPA assists government work linking economic empowerment, environmental management and reproductive health services.
- In Yemen, UNFPA and its partners work to integrate women in the socio-economic process by promoting their literacy, marketing skills and economic opportunities.

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Source: United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population 2001—Footprints and Milestones: Population and Environmental Change*, UNFPA, New York, 2001, except as noted below.

¹ United Nations Population Fund, *Food for the Future: Women, Population and Food Security*, UNFPA, New York, p. 6

<http://www.unfpa.org/modules/intercenter/food/womenas.htm>

² Ibid. p. 7

³ Ibid. p. 6