

Irene Dankelman, The Netherlands. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 11 on the human rights and active participation of women and girls

Gender Equality and Equity: At the Heart of the Earth Charter



Irene Dankelman has specialized in environment and sustainable development, with a special focus on gender issues. She works with national and international non governmental organizations, governmental and United Nations agencies, and with academia. The book, *Women and the Environment in the Third World: Alliance for the*

Future, co-authored with Joan Davidson in 1988, became a pioneering publication. Irene was involved in organizing the first United Nations Environment Program women's assembly on the environment, *Women as the Voice for the Environment* in 2004. Dr. Dankelman is a university lecturer at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, a consultant and a board member of several organizations, including the Women's Environment and Development Organisation, the Nature College and Women in Europe for a Common Future. The principles of the Earth Charter form an important source of inspiration for her work and life which she translates into practical initiatives.

Principle 11 of the Earth Charter calls for us to "Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity." With this Principle, the Earth Charter emphasizes, as a central element of its vision, the need to not only provide well-being and equal opportunities for women and men, but it also incorporates the equal and inalienable rights of all women and men.¹ Principle 11 has three Sub-principles: "Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them" (Subprinciple 11.a); "Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries" (Subprinciple 11.b); and "Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members" (Subprinciple 11.c).

This year not only marks the five years since the launch of the Earth Charter in The Hague, it coincides with the Ten Years Review of the World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Beijing Platform for Action focused on many aspects of women's

lives, and as Bella Abzug mentioned in the Plenary Speech on 12 September 1995, "The Beijing Platform for Action is the strongest statement of consensus on women's equality, empowerment, and justice ever produced by the world's governments." She saw it is a vision of transformation – of what the world can be for women and men, for this and future generations.

The Beijing Platform for Action inspired the Earth Charter and was reaffirmed during the special session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 28 February - 11 March 2005 in New York. It identifies as one of its critical areas of concern "Women and the Environment." Other sections of the Beijing Platform for Action deal with women's human rights, the need to end all violence against women, and women's active participation in all spheres of life, including at decision-making levels.

Five years ago, at the Millennium Summit in New York in 2000, all 189 United Nations Member States committed themselves to establishing a better, healthier, and more just world in 2015. The Millennium Declaration promises "to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and diseases and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable" (Goal III.20). The Declaration includes Millennium Development Goal III.19, eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; and Goal IV., ensuring environmental sustainability.

Principle 11 of the Earth Charter, therefore, seems to be a reconfirmation of major international insights and commitments in the area of gender equality and environment. As the Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental values and principles, it also offers an holistic ethical framework to inspire the effort of those working to achieve sustainable development that embraces the gender component and women's roles in sustainable development. As United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan stressed at the opening of the Commission on the Status of Women meeting, 28 February 2005 in New York: "... Above all, I would urge the entire community to remember that promoting gender equality is not only women's responsibility; it is the responsibility of all of us....Study after study has taught us that no tool for development is more effective than the empowerment of women."²

Therefore, all organizations that have endorsed the Earth Charter, be it at local, national, or international levels, are committing themselves to secure the human rights of women and girls, and to promote their active participation in all sectors of society. It indicates an intention to use the Earth Charter to promote gender equality, equity, and social change, and to cooperate with others for the implementation of Principle 11.

The Earth Charter itself has been endorsed by many women's organisations or women's groups, such as the Medical Mission Sisters, Saint Mary's College, and the Women's Environment and Development Organisation. For some groups, such as the indigenous Tawo Seed Carriers in the Philippines, the Earth Charter has particular relevance. They have been made grateful recipients of the positive attitudes emanating from the media dissemination of information regarding respect for Mother Earth. On 10 March 2005, Lilia Adecer Cajilog (Firefly), a Tawo Seed Carrier, stated:

The genuine Tawo has been always respectful to all natural phenomena as handed down to us by our Elders. (...). There is a hole in our Earth ship and it is the utmost urgent responsibility of all women to nurture love and compassion to the hearts from our self-generated poisons of ignorance (delusion), greed (cravings) and hatred (violence) (...). We commend your much needed work on the Earth Charter to educate and promote respect for all natural creation of Mother Earth. Women, wake up!

In their March 2005 newsletter, the Bioneers organisation, a non governmental organisation promoting practical environmental solutions and strategies, endorsed the Earth Charter, and honoured women's leadership in environmental protection. Bioneers emphasizes that one of the most promising trends in recent years has been the emergence around the world of grassroots, women-led movements that are developing solutions to social and environmental problems by reconnecting relationships. In that same newsletter, Sue Zipp further defined the organisation stating, "Encouraging a convergence between women and the environment holds great potential to engage many more women around restoring the Earth and our communities.

For the international Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO), endorsing the Earth Charter was a natural step. In reflecting principles of respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, non-violence and peace, the Charter clearly offered a holistic ethical framework for implementation of its own Women's Action Agenda for a Peaceful and Healthy Planet 2000 and 2015. That agenda was developed through worldwide consultations amongst women's groups and focused on issues such as: peace and human rights, access and control of resources, environmental security, and health, globalization, and governance for sustainable development (WEDO, 2002).³

The representative of the Buddhist organisation Soka Gakkai International (SGI) to the NGO-Committee on the Status of Women, Mary Mack, reports (15 March 2005) that the SGI works closely with the Earth Charter Initiative sponsoring panels, films, and other educational activities. SGI has collaborated with the Earth Council in production of the video "A Quiet Revolution," an educational film highlighting three cases where an individual or group of individuals led a significant change in the area of sustainable development. SGI has also collaborated with the Earth Charter Secretariat in developing the "Seeds of Change" exhibition that has travelled throughout the world.

On Earth Day 2002, Saint Mary's College, a women's liberal arts institution in the USA, endorsed the Earth Charter. A visitor to the campus asked a simple question: "So what?" His point was that singing the Earth Charter was not sufficient. This inspired a group of faculty, staff, and students to form a Community Leadership Team that would begin investigating ways to implement the Charter's principles and encourage the College community to become pro-active in this respect. They have been doing this for two years and have just received College support for a third year. There have been some significant changes and the community is pleased with the results to date.⁴

Not only can the Earth Charter inspire gender equality and equity in the context of sustainable development, it also offers powerful tools for local and national governments, women's and environmental organisations, companies, and individuals to make these linkages in their work. There are major opportunities to translate Principle 11 into practical steps in education and in development planning.

As the initiatives in this essay have shown, the holistic character of the Earth Charter forms an invitation to women from very diverse cultural backgrounds to become dedicated carriers of the Earth Charter's messages, to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, and to stand up for human rights. The Earth Charter's call for the enhancement of our collective "caring capacity" – ensuring humanity's well-being and the Earth's future – is an appeal that speaks to our minds, hearts, and souls. •

Notes

- 1 Gender equality is equal visibility, empowerment, and participation of men and women in all spheres of public and private life; often guided by a vision of human rights, which incorporates acceptance of equal and inalienable rights of all women and men. Gender equity is a set of actions, attitudes, and assumptions that provide opportunities for both women and men; recognizes differences and accommodates them in order to prevent the continuation of an inequitable status quo; and, emphasizes fairness in process and outcome.
- 2 A complete copy of Annan's speech can be found at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/sgsm9738.doc.htm>.
- 3 For more information, see http://www.wedo.org/files/agenda2015_eng.htm.
- 4 According to R. Jensen, Saint Mary's College, on 17 March 2005.