

Keynote Speech || Northeast Asia women's Conference on Environment

September, 13 ~ 15, 2001

Seoul, Korea

**Women's Role in tackling Environmental
Problems in Northeast Asia**

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I. Introduction

I am very pleased to hold the Northeast Asia Women's Conference on Environment and to have eminent women environment activists from China, Japan and Korea in this conference. It has a significant meaning to have this conference at this moment since we have the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) one year ahead of us, which will be held in September 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa. And I strongly believe that this conference will make a great step toward to the World Summit.

As you know, the theme of the conference is "women's alternatives toward sustainable society." Under the theme, we have several purposes to pursue, such as 1) to share a women's perspective on the issues of environment and development; 2) to share our experiences of women's environmental movement and to develop a common agenda on environment; 3) to build a firm platform for a women's environment network among China, Japan and Korea; 4) to develop a model of NGO-government partnership at the Northeast Asian regional level. And it is planned to adopt a resolution as a result at the end of the conference.

I understand this conference also has a character as a preparatory meeting of Northeast

Asia women for the WSSD in 2002 and to use this opportunity for making one voice to be heard at the World Summit. It may end up that we will publicize the Northeast Asia women's declaration, and the resolution that we will adopt at the end of this conference may be a draft of the declaration. I don't think that this work will be completely done at this conference, but rather it should be continued to be elaborated and matured for the next year, whether in Tokyo or in Beijing after this conference in Seoul.

On the other hand, Northeast Asia women environment activists should be participated in the preparatory process for the World Summit at various levels and make a great contribution to the summit by closely observing its direction and expressing one's opinion. In this context, it is our great pleasure to inform you that some eminent environment activists and experts such as Mrs. Yukiko Oda of Japan, Mrs. Shery Liao of China, and Dr. Eun-Kyung park of Korea have already taken a leadership role in the preparatory process of the World Summit.

The theme of my speech is Women's role in tackling environmental problems in Northeast Asia. I want to take this opportunity to open an active discussion floor for you to get involved by raising some very important environmental issues that we all are facing together in this region and providing my perspectives on these issues.

II. Environmental Issues in Northeast Asia from a women's perspective

The very serious environmental problems that we are facing all together in this region are 1) the air pollution and acid rain problem caused by over-consumption of energy (this region is recorded as the World's third victimized area of acid rain; 2) soil erosion and desertification caused by forest development and economic development in China and Mongolia; 3) water and ocean pollution in the Yellow Sea and the East Sea; 4) preservation of bio-diversity and eco-system, such as migratory birds in Northeast Asia; 5) a high population density in China, Japan and Korea, and a fast growing rate of population; 6) the fast growth of resource over-consuming population; 7) food shortage caused by an increased income level and changing dietary habit; and 8) military problem.

The trend of fast growing economic power, consumption and population in Asia, including Northeast Asia, with such a high productivity surpassing the West makes this region the most polluted area in the world and becomes a very dangerous threat to the fate of the

entire Earth. For this reason, the world is now watching this region with great concern. Therefore, there should not be any excuse to put aside this very important task of preserving the environment in Northeast Asia and it is inevitable that women should take an initiative to sort out these problems.

Very fundamental causes of the Earth environmental problems that we, human beings are facing now are mass-production, mass-consumption and mass-disposal of consumer goods, fast growing population and urbanization, and poverty which is the theme of the upcoming World Summit. These are all requiring us to reflect our life styles.

Recently, among intellectuals who are worried about the end of the world civilization, there has been a great controversy on whether it is possible to control the desire of a human being. It is very urgent to change the style of production and consumption, which is also strongly urged in Chapter 4 of UN Agenda 21. The assessment of implementation of Agenda 21 at the Rio+5 UN Special Assembly on Environment pointed out that the Chapter 4, the most fundamental task, has been least implemented. Therefore, the women environmentalist from around the world consistently raised their voice for Action all throughout the assembly.

We, women environmentalist should start from the place where we are now in, no matter how complicated and huge the environmental problem is today. We can find a clue to sort out all these complicated problems from a very trivial activity - observing a environment-friendly life rule such as saving a glass of water, a bulb of light, and a sheet of paper. This is an effort to make a difference starting from the cause of the problem, not from the symptom.

We believe that a through practice of resource saving principle becomes a motive power to draw environment-friendly production and administration. And the deterioration of the global environment is being accelerated by the structural depravity of global politics, economy, society and culture.

Women environmentalists recognize that the global environmental problems have been caused by human beings' exploitation of the Nature and men's exploitation of women based on the logic of the powerful. We have also become to recognize that these two issues share the same root and brought about change of recognition and behavior on women's environment and development, while witnessing reckless development which has caused today's serious global environment and conceptualizing Sustainable Development.

In developing countries, poverty, economic and gender disproportion, condition of environment and its threat that the poor are facing have been deteriorating during the process of development. On the other hand, in the developed countries, the effort to quest for an alternative to human-centeredness and man-centeredness based on the logic of the powerful gave rise to “eco-feminism” as a new paradigm suggests a new relationship between human beings and the Nature, and between human beings. These two streams have been settled at conferences discussing sustainable development as an important agenda and helped women’s voices emphasizing not only environmental aspect but also social aspect to be heard

III. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 and Women

Environmental problems today have to be dealt with a global perspective. Due to the globalization of the world economy geared by the International finance and International trade organizations, such as WTO, and multinational corporations, the environmental problems that we are facing today have also been globalized and required us to make an effort to tackle those problems at a global level as well as at a local and/or national level. It is very important to note that we should view the issues with a global perspective while we are implementing proper and firm actions at a local level. We are, therefore, watching the movement of various international conferences on environment including the WSSD.

I believe that the WSSD in 2002 will be a very momentous opportunity to women environment activists. Because it is expected that all the critical issues related to sustainable develop will be reflected through a gender perspective at the World Summit. In the Korean language, there is no difference in meaning between “gender(성 sung, 性)” and “sex(성 sung, 性).” But, in the English language, “sex” implies a biological difference between women and men and “gender” implies a difference formed in a social and cultural context between women and men. Therefore, I will use ther term, “gender” in order to specify the critical meaning it has.

Minu Hemmati wrote that assessing the implementation of Agenda21 and planning future implementation programs should be reviewed in terms of women’s concerns and needs, and contributions on her article, “Women and Sustainable Development” in <A New Deal> published by UNEP of UK. And she also emphasized that women’s perspective

should also be incorporated in policy decision on the future and women's movements should raise their voices through the whole process and challenge it.

According to a publication of UNDP in 1995, the Earth environment is said to be in danger if the issues around it are not engendered. Sustainable development should be accomplished through full and equal participation of women in every field of issues around it. It is also affirmed that the sustainable development can be accomplished in none of the fields without solving out gender inequality and inequity problems. Women's rights are human rights and engendering issue has become a mainstream at all levels of decision-making process in every field of sustainable development through the chapter 24 of UN Agenda 21 and the Action Plan of UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

Hemmati urges women who are preparing to participate in the WSSD as follows: We still have a long way to go although our great efforts have made some difference. The primary task we have to do is to raise the awareness on gender issue and to engender the issues. In doing so, we have to get more research outcomes and contributions from feminists, scientists, economists and other academia but it doesn't mean that women want a revolution. Women don't want to exchange the place with men, either. Nevertheless, it is the revolution that women are equally participating in activities of various interest groups. In this process, finance is inevitable but the problem is that the sources of financial resources are not secure. In this regard, we, Northeast Asia women are not exceptional. Security of funding sources is another task that we women environmentalist should look for.

The NGO women's caucus looking for sustainable development at the WSSD suggest that women's groups should organize their activities around two strategies to make a significant contribution on the global environmental issues by: 1) to assert women's rights and urge the Government to support women's NGOs to participate in the World Summit; 2) to suggest gender cognitive tasks based on recent research outcomes and reliable data and policies and strategies

One of the two strategies is to alarm the stakeholders about the serious environmental problems by submitting declarations or documentations to the UN Committee for Sustainable Development and the preparatory committee of WSSD. The other is to present field experiences and research outcomes at conferences, which women have conducted in the field. This is a traditional method that women's NGOs have been using. Women have

used a dual approach as a common political strategy. One of them is to conduct advocating activities from the outside of the system and the other is to act within the system. We may need to take the same approach at this conference.

Hemmati is suggesting that women's caucus should make a close network among international women's NGOs and with UN agencies related with women's issues and engendering programs in order for women environmentalist to get an outcome at the WSSD. And she also suggests, in order to get a substantial some takes as follows: 1) to set up inclusive and transparent priority tasks through consultations with pervasive women's NGOs; 2) to confirm engendering perspective in NGOs' documents preparing for the WSSD and documents of Committee of Sustainable Development and its preparatory committees; 3) to develop materials for discussion and meetings of women's caucus and for pervasive uses (this should be developed with various groups to include various local characteristics and keep equity); 4) to distribute information on women's priority agenda and interest in engendering perspective to all the stakeholders including NGOs, governments, UN agencies, etc. so that they should be reflected in all the reviews and discussions; 5) to distribute the developed materials to the stakeholders much in advance in order to make a visible outcome in terms of gender-mainstream.

The article of Hemmati, who is involved in a UN agency for women's issues and sustainable development issue, can be a good reference for us to get prepared for the WSSD.

VI. Sustainable Development and Empowerment of Women

The concept of sustainable development has been settled as a common thesis of human being since the UNCED Conference in Rio in 1992 and global governance has started to be theorized at the same time. It has become a ethos that the governance done by the government move to the governance by various bodies.

The global governance committee was formed in 1992 to seek sustainable development and integrative management and operation of global environmental problems. And the importance of roles of civil movements and NGOs has been emphasized in management and operation of global environment. The reason why the expectation on NGOs' roles has been highlighted is profit-motivation of the market function and rigid policies and

bureaucratization of the government. NGOs are seen to be able to make a significant contribution to preserve global public goods because they are free from national interests, and they make solidarity beyond borders so that they can control and mediate conflicts among nations, and collaboratively impede anti-environmental issues, which was well shown at a recent anti-globalization campaign. The global network of civil society has started to move the international politics and it is becoming increased in its scale and influence. The role of civil society has also been emphasized in overcoming the domestic conflicting situations.

Nonetheless, civil society needs empowerment in order to build an equal partnership with the government that has authorized power and the market that has economic power. Empowerment means to get ability and influential power to accomplish something. And anti-empowerment means a condition that one is deprived from power or equal opportunities based on economic power, which is also witnessed in a condition where civil society is placed.

The powerlessness of women is still left as a chronicle agenda at international conferences, although I am not going to provide its current situation due to a lack of time. In this context, the empowerment of women means to build a new gender relationship getting out of a framework of exploitation through the power that she has got by self-development of ability. Women's power can be doubled through women's network and cooperation among women. Gender planning has been attempted as a development plan for the gender issue for last ten years in order to set women free from exploitative social structure and accomplish social equality, equity and empowerment. Some more time has to be set aside to probe this issue later on.

Ms. Caroline Moser, who wrote a book, "gender planning and development," said that gender equality is a starting point of transformation to move to a new power relation in our civil society, local communities, and homes, and it also a dispensable prerequisite.

V. A Women's Role in Environmental problems

The theme of this conference is women's alternative to sustainable society. When we regard the global environmental problems a result of the male-dominant logic of the powerful, the potential and perspective of women who are still left as a possibility can

bring about an alternative to the hopeless global environmental problems and women's participation itself can be an alternative.

Today, women are composing 70% of world absolute poverty population of 1.3billion and less than 10% of total women's population is participating in decision-making processes which define their life conditions. Job opportunity and payment of women are far behind of those of men. More than 1600 women are dying from reproduction everyday and women are more exposed to environmental pollution than any other groups of human being. In this circumstance, women have to find their unique and original roles to survive.

Women who have experienced oppression by men share a feeling of sympathy with the other oppressed having suffered from the powerful and the Nature. And special role of women are expected based on a strong belief that women's perspective from this experience can make an alternative. The role is to help the powerless and the powerful to make a world for both of them.

A Japanese feminism theorist, Professor Ueno Chizuko urged in her book "Can women save the world?" that women don't have to take the entire responsibility of saving the world even if they strongly believe women's principle that women can save the world and women should save the world with men who share the women's principle by saying that women can do what men can do and women cannot save the world that men cannot save.

VI. What can we do in solidarity with Northeast Asia women?

We have experienced that it is hard for an individual to keep practicing environment-friendly life behaviors by her/himself. Much more difficult it is to reverse the direction of a wheel of unsustainable World Order without solidarity.

The Northeast Asia Women's Environment Network will be formed as a result of this conference. I would like to cast a question, "what can we do with collaborative power of this network?" Can we generate a power to reverse the direction of mass-consuming life trend stimulated by development-centered economic policies and governmental policies? May we give up, if it is too difficult? If not so, from where should we start? We have come here to this conference today to discuss about these issues.

It is very difficult to identify the region of Northeast Asia as national economy; politics, society and culture are quite different from each other. There are countries like Japan whose GNP is world first or second grade, China whose population is nearly a quarter of world population and which will have to import 170million tons of grains, the total production of exporting countries, if its population continues to grow, Korea still divided into the South and the North and spending enormous money on military, and whose democracy is till far beyond the degree of economic development.

If Northeast Asia women environmentalists, in spite of differences we are facing, can build a cooperative relationship beyond national conflicts which impede sustainable development of this region, we can also contribute to solve out the standstill environmental political situation between the North and the South that the international society is facing today. It is also said that the Agenda 21, adopted at the UNCED Conference in 1992, should be reviewed with the Oriental perspective since the World has become interested in the Asian philosophies due to the limitations of modernization initiated by the western civilization and the Agenda was initiated by the West. In this regard, if we succeed in identifying our unique role as Northeast Asia women environmentalists, we could definitely make a great contribute into the WSSD. An individual's voice is very limited and we have to make a great use of our unique quality, cohesion.

VII. Conclusion

I, as one of the representatives of Korea Women's Environment Network, would like to express my gratitude to speakers and panel debaters and all the participants from three countries, and my special thanks to the staff who made this conference happen in spite of many difficulties. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the organizations that support us to have this conference by providing financial resources and accommodations and facilities.

Finally, I strongly hope that this conference is not finished here but it will continue to work until we, Northeast Asia women environmentalists, make a contribution to preservation of global environment at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.