

A Healthy Self, a Healthy Society, a Healthy Planet (or What Women Have in Common with Camels)

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If you look at the environment through women's eyes, you will understand why Mother Nature needs an Earth charter to be her bill of rights. Mother Nature is in deep trouble partly because she is a woman. She is expected to be nurturing, protective and fruitful -- asking little in return. If we saw nature differently -- as a powerful patriarchal figure -- we might bow humbly to natural laws and offer gifts in exchange for favors. If it were Father Earth the environment might be in a lot better shape, and that could make all the difference.

When the UN Charter was drafted more than 50 years ago, governments were not attuned to the importance of a healthy planet. However, the global ecological crisis has worsened as modern science and technologies have altered women's relationship to natural environments. Most often, large scale projects such as dams, mining and rural power plants bring economic benefits for men who control land and water resources. Green Revolutions provide jobs and increase food production, but their impact on women is ignored and often hidden from the eyes of planners. Nevertheless, differences in gender roles mean that women are often the most vulnerable when ecological degradation happens. Traditional herbs disappear with deforestation, and women's key roles in maintaining biodiversity and seed selection is marginalized in favor of male-controlled cash crop lands. In cities, dense populations change the balance between people and natural resources. Poor women find that their double burden as wage earners and homemakers becomes heavier and they have to spend more time to get basic needs like food, water, and fuel.

Women and environment groups have supported an Earth Charter idea because it is a beginning to help change all this. The purpose of the Earth Charter is to define a basic set of values for a healthy planet based on sustainable, human development. It calls for a value-based world view in which personal ethics are connected to principles of justice and global well-being. But such principles do will not apply equally to men and women unless we pay special attention to gender inequality.

If you sign onto the Earth Charter, read the Principle number ten concerning gender equality carefully. That principle is to "Affirm and promote gender equality as a prerequisite to sustainable development." Human society can be seen as a living social body. Like a living organism with organs and circulatory system, its parts are interdependent. When one section of the social body -- notably girls and women -- doesn't function well, that affects the entire system. This means that we must be committed to provide, "on the basis of equality of women and men, universal access to education, health care, and employment for the full development of every person's human dignity and potential." These important rights of women should be seen in relation to

women's right to full and equal participation in civil, cultural, economic, political and social life." I believe these are all worth supporting -- and so do many other women's groups.

Last year, a meeting was held at the Boston Research Center that brought together women leaders to discuss the latest benchmark draft of this document, known by then as the Earth Charter. The participants discussed important issues women don't always think about like How do we relate to nature? Where does a women's perspective fit in?" The results of those exchanges have been published by the Boston Research Center entitled "Women's Views on the Earth Charter."

There is a feeling among many women's groups that "It's about time." For us, values and ethics are the essence of political change. Youth and women's groups have criticized the goals of a consumer culture --- profit without regard for sustainability, over-consumption, and just plain greed -- that are at odds with our environmental well-being. Feminists have argued that the problem of resource scarcity is not a population's size but how that population behaves. With less than 5 percent of the world's people, the US emits more than 25 percent of the world's green house gases. This said, let's stop blaming women in developing countries for their high fertility rates. In the last few years, the richest fifth of the world's population in the North and in the South has doubled its per capita consumption of foods and natural resources while the poor have hardly increased their consumption at all.

What can be learned from the women's movement? One of the most important lessons is to connect the personal with the political. If we really want to change society, we probably have to change ourselves as well--our values, our personal relations -- even our language. So before I talk about the importance of changing values for the sake of the environment, thought it I should begin with how values affect women personally.

First, we should be concerned about the value of the Feminine Self. I know that the term sounds a bit odd, but for me this makes the point that we have to pay attention to how our psyches are evolving. I will share with you an experience of self-realization I had last year. I was feeling pretty good about myself because some readers had praised a column I wrote for the Earth Times newspaper. When I tried to figure out the source of my brilliant ideas, I realized that I couldn't really take much credit because all of my learning-- theories and facts -- came from parents, teachers, books and my education.

All of my wisdom originated in childhood teachings, school taught values, and great men and women's teachings. That is when I grew more humble. Society had created and given to me all that was my inner Self. And I was only a vehicle -- a unique one -- through which everyone else spoke. Similarly, every cell in my biological Self is but a reflection of my natural history, interaction with the environment, and nature. I was but an extension of that nature and, yet, still, the one and only Moi. Amazing, I thought. And that is how, in a crude way, I realized how inseparable is the future of the Feminine Self from social life and mother earth.

Yet growing up female is pretty tough in most societies and when we talk about the feminist struggle, much of that happens within. Furthermore, how society treats women affects that process.

If you have any doubt that gender bias exists, consider that in some cultures, discrimination happens even before birth. Take the case of sex selection in some parts of India. In one hospital, 700 people sought prenatal sex determination. Of these, 250 turned out to be male and 450 female. The most startling result was that 430 of the 450 females fetuses were aborted. Why? In some parts of India, sons are just a better economic bet. They are more likely to stay at home after marriage and care for parents in old age. Girls on the other hand leave home and take family wealth with them. More girls mean more dowries and, for many poor families that can lead to financial ruin.

As women, we must also learn to value ourselves. Our self-esteem is one of the most fundamental prerequisites to "total well-being"-- mental as well as physical. It's the secret ingredient that makes women assertive patients and motivates them to apply useful health knowledge. It also helps girls compete on a level playing field with boys in education and later in life as professionals and scientists. Yet, the devaluation of women's worth is one of the most difficult barriers to overcome -- mostly because women internalize gender biases.

We are all subject to the process. I remember once visiting quarries near the Egyptian pyramids. A scruffy stone worker gave my husband and me long hard looks. I thought they were just signs of curiosity, but they turned out to mean much more. He stopped his work and with the help of our translator, proposed to buy me. In between the misunderstandings about the exact price, there was something about how white and straight my teeth were. Fortunately, Rick wasn't short of cash and he declined. Later I learned from my Egyptian friends that I had experienced something fairly common in rural areas--evaluating a potential bride by her teeth. According to them, women's teeth indicate their age and health status. It seems that the teeth are also considered a private, sensual part of the body. I was less amused when they told me that the prices of camels were also determined by using similar standards.

Second, for a healthy Self, the society must also be healthy. Feminist have argued for years that no society can be healthy if half of the population--notably women--are at risk. No nation can be said to have a healthy democracy if domestic violence holds a reign of terror over women and children in the home. Who do we mean by a "healthy economy" if women don't have access to the resources they need to pull themselves out of poverty? Female heads of household are increasing in almost every country and women and children constitute the majority of the world's poor. Yet in many societies, women may provide nearly 70 percent of the food, but they own less than 3 percent of the land and have little access to credit. Social structural changes are needed to make basic institutions like education, the economy, social welfare, and politics relevant to women's lives.

Disregarding women's welfare has its social and economic costs. This is illustrated by the crisis of gender apartheid in Afghanistan. In Taliban controlled territories, including

Kabul, women have been barred from attending schools and work. But the UN team sent to Afghanistan reported that the education for boys was jeopardized because nearly 70 percent of all elementary school teachers were women. Similarly, hospitals were unable to provide services because the nurses were mostly women. Apparently, when the Taliban realized that their own wounded were left without treatment, they compromised the strict enforcement of their holy laws.

Although this is an extreme situation, my point is that women's role as workers as well as homemakers are essential to regenerating the social body. In case you're asking what recommendations the international women's movement would make about how to achieve this, I refer you to the Beijing Platform for Action adopted by 181 governments as the best global consensus we have so far.

The next step is to see the close interrelationship between society and nature. It is almost self-evident that a country cannot develop without the support of a safe and stable natural environment. But a healthy environment is also dependent on a healthy society. Consider the current ecological crisis in North Korea. Last weekend, the New York Times reported that after a four-year gap the two Koreas are finally talking. The world attention is again focused on the tragedy that millions are starving. The soil is exhausted because of disastrous agricultural policies and three years of floods and drought. It is hard for me to believe that this is the same North Korea of my parents' generation. Then, with rich natural resources, it was the center of industrialization and commerce. But now women forage for wild bulbs, unable to breast-feed their newborns. Grandparents have stopped eating so that the children will survive. There should be a law enforceable by the International Criminal Court that punishes governments for ecological crimes against its people. In North Korea's case, a society's corrupt political economy was its own plague and the true cause of its environmental disaster.

In very simple terms, achieving the goal of "a healthy self, a healthy society and healthy planet" is the challenge that faces us today. Changing values is a good starting point because they--not rationality--lead to changes in human behavior. A global consensus on gender equality as part of sustainable, human development has the potential to redirect the future of our sciences, economics and politics. (If you think about it, this is already happening.) At the same time, we should remember that changes in values are only good if you can also act on them. That is why empowering women with political and financial support is vital for the feminist vision is to become a reality.

It is sobering to realize that human beings are still struggling to define common principles for living sustainably like an Earth Charter. How awkward and boorish our first steps in human evolution seem compared to our possibilities. As for the future, I sometimes play the fortune-teller. Maybe in the coming generations, our brains won't get bigger--our consciousness will -- so that we can see women's welfare related to the larger community of life. Then, Mother or Father Earth might look on us with greater indulgence and give us a second chance to get it right.