



Women Rio+20 Steering Committee

## **A Gender Perspective on the 'Green Economy' Equitable, healthy and decent jobs and livelihoods**

### **Women's Major Group position paper in preparation for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development 2012**

*Prepared by ENERGIA, Earth Day Network, Global Forest Coalition, VAM, WOCAN, WEDO and WECF, March 2011*

#### **A 'green' economic system must promote social equity**

A truly sustainable 'green economy' would involve economic development that takes place within the limits of nature, and ensures a fair distribution of resources among all countries and social groups - as well as between men and women. Social equity and environmental justice must remain at the heart of sustainable development, and the outcomes of the Rio+20 UN conference in 2012.

Environmental conservation is critical for maintaining the earth's ability to continue to support life, and human livelihoods. As countries confront the challenges of providing food, fuel, shelter, health care and employment for growing populations, their governments must find ways to preserve vital ecosystems and limit the disruptions of climate change, and to manage the world's natural resources in an equitable manner, with an emphasis on human rights, gender equality, and environmental justice.

Twenty years after the first Rio conference, great inequities remain. While the wealthy consume more and more natural resources and are responsible for increasing levels of environmental damage, the poor are suffering from degradation of their agricultural land, forests, water supplies and biodiversity, and alteration of natural weather cycles due to climate change.

Social and economic inequities are especially hard on women and children as they form the majority of the world's poor. The UN estimates that approximately 70% of the 1.3 billion people living on less than one dollar a day are women, and these figures are rising with current food, fuel and financial crises.

We need an economy that provides incentives for zero-waste, low-carbon economies that enhance and restore the natural environment, while also providing new 'green' livelihoods, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for women as well as men.

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## **Women contributions are critical**

Women are key agents of change. Their contributions to new 'green' economic activities are essential for achieving the Millennium Development Goals and responding to global and local environmental threats. Throughout the world, women are already engaged at all levels of the economy, from providing basic necessities for their families - food, water, fuel, homes and health care, to building communities and running businesses. They are forest stewards, farmers, land managers, community leaders, researchers, political leaders, technology designers, and entrepreneurs. Women reinvest a much higher portion of their earnings in their communities and make important investments and purchase decisions. Yet due to societal gender inequality, in many countries women's skills and contributions remain unrecognized and undervalued.

## **Jobs versus livelihoods – women in the informal sector**

Currently the livelihoods of many women in developing countries are based on informal sector activities. Programs for creation of 'green jobs' in the formal sector might in some cases even be a threat to women's livelihoods. For example, female agricultural work is often not seen as a 'job', even though women produce much of the world's food. Their production and processing activities tend to be far more sustainable than the agro-industrial activities many men engage in, but these sectors may become the focus of 'green' job creation programs. 'Green jobs' should represent sustainable livelihoods for men as well as women. Female empowerment is supported by recognizing and strengthening women's roles in both formal and informal economic activities.

## **Government policies should recognize and promote women's economic contributions**

We need profound policy and legislative changes that:

- secure women's property rights, land tenure, and control over natural resources;
- promote women's access to services and technologies needed for water, energy, agricultural production, family care, household management and business enterprises;
- provide safe health care facilities, including for sexual and reproductive health;
- enable women - and men - to combine their jobs with childcare;
- support investments in women's economic empowerment; and
- promote women's participation in government and business leadership.

## **The 'green economy' requires social security, family planning and childcare**

Women must have access to reproductive health care and family planning resources in order to be able to participate in productive activities. At the same time, gender equitable childcare solutions are needed. This ensures that all family members are adequately cared for, and leads to a just future in which girls and boys, women and men all have the time and opportunities to learn, innovate, and lead the transition to a new 'green economy'. A number of countries have

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legislation that guarantees access to childcare services well before school age, and have incentives for shared parental leave.

For all to participate in the 'green economy', the most deprived members of our societies need to have access to basic services. In many countries women are the poorest of the poor. As the example of various countries show, when social support programs reach women directly - when the payments are made to the female members of the family<sup>1</sup> - the entire family benefits.

**We call for policies that guarantee child care, health care and social support programs specifically for female household members.**

**Targets, technology and training will ensure engagement of women in a 'green economy'**  
In order to become more effective in 'green' development activities and businesses, women need to be freed from patriarchal systems and economic, legal and political constraints that limit their ability to own land, control rights to natural resources, obtain necessary training, access information, raise financing and acquire relevant technology. In addition, a sustainable global economy will depend in part on the availability and transfer of environmentally friendly technology, which requires a profound reform of trade-related intellectual property rights.

Development of a 'green economy' will depend in part on the availability of environmentally friendly technology. We emphasize the need for women-friendly technologies - ones that can free up women's time, reduce their drudgery, and expand their economic, social and political opportunities. Access to sustainable and advanced technologies for household management, agricultural production, business enterprises, transportation information media and communications will allow more women to become engaged in sustainable livelihoods.

For example in India and other developing countries, access to radios and television has promoted women's community engagement and education. Women in these communities are now being introduced to the use of computers and the Internet for livelihood enhancement activities. Cell phones have penetrated many rural areas and are helping women farmers to do business without 'middle men', improving their income.

Access to sustainable and advanced technologies for agricultural production and business enterprises will allow more women to become engaged in sustainable livelihoods, if they can obtain those technologies, along with appropriate training and skills to use them.

In many developing countries, however, women's ability to benefit from improved agriculture management, and to enter related fields, such as horticulture, fisheries, and forestry, is still

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Brazilian "Bolsa Familia" social program has as its key success factor that the money was given to the women in the families, bringing 46 million people out of deprivation 3



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relatively very low, due in part to patriarchal attitudes and social conditioning. There are few women agriculture officers or extension workers, and due to socio-cultural reasons male agriculture officers and extension workers are not trained, expected or willing to talk to the women farmers who contribute the most in agriculture. This is one of the most important reasons for women farmers not having access to the information, technologies, and credit they need.

**We recommend specific targets for women with regard to technology training, business management skills and extension services, in order to ensure equitable treatment and representation.**

**We call for gender balance in decision-making and investments**

To ensure equitable participation in decision-making, we call for gender balance on all management boards, expert panels and advisory groups. In this, we are looking to the example of Norway, where legislation requires private companies, as well as public bodies, to have 40% women on their boards. Equal representation of women in decision-making bodies will ensure that women's perspectives are included. In addition, gender analysis and assessments are needed in order to evaluate differing impacts on women and men. When governments become aware of specific gender inequities in their policies, they are more likely to ensure that women have a greater share in the benefits. Gender-sensitive economic and social indicators will help provide the data needed for a proper gender analysis.

'Green' investments should provide new targeted funding for women's activities that promote sustainable agriculture, conserve forests and other critical land and water ecosystems, reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and create sustainable livelihoods.

**We call for gender balance and targets of at least 30-40% women on all management boards, experts panels and advisory groups.**

**We also call for new financing and credit facilities dedicated to women's sustainable economic activities, in order to promote greater social equity.**

**Women need secure land, property and resource rights**

In many countries, women produce close to 80% of the food, but own only 1% of the land. Women need to own land and property in order to provide for themselves and their children. Without recognized tenure rights, women have only limited say in household decision-making, and no ability to borrow against these assets for business ventures, or in times of need. Women's rights to use commonly held property and publicly owned resources for food, fuel, water and other necessities must also be secured so that rural and indigenous women are not displaced and marginalized by government land use policies and private sector agro-business

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ventures. Respecting indigenous territories and community governance systems has proven to be a powerful way to conserve commons like forests and other ecosystems. The role of women in such systems should be respected and enhanced.

**We call for measures to protect commons and access of women to common lands, and for measures to promote women's land ownership, including affordable legal advice.**

**'Green jobs' need to be healthy jobs**

Some types of jobs typically done by women expose them to harmful chemicals, e.g., women in the flower industry are exposed to pesticides, and women hairdressers use chemicals linked to breast cancer. Women also have different health risks from working with chemicals than men. Women are the "first environment" for their children; when the mother is exposed to hazardous contaminants in the workplace - such as pesticides or other chemicals - so is the developing child. Babies are very vulnerable to even relatively low doses of hazardous substances, and a woman's exposure during pregnancy often leads to lifelong health effects for their children. In the name of equality, some countries have introduced regulations that have led to more women working in hazardous jobs where, for example, they are exposed to nuclear radiation. This is contrary to the goals of a 'green economy' – both men and women should have healthy jobs. In most countries in the world, better standards and regulations are needed to protect women and men in the workplace from hazardous substances. Furthermore, family members of workers, and communities living in the vicinity of companies that emit hazardous substances into the air, soil and water, need to be much better protected. For example, studies show that wives of asbestos workers can die from the dust brought home by their husbands, and communities around mines or chemical factories often suffer from birth defects caused by toxics, heavy metals and radiation infiltrating into the environment.

**We call for international legally binding measures to assure that enterprises do not emit hazardous substances in the workplace or into the environment, and for creation of an industry fund to pay for damages and historic pollution.**

**'Green' energy policies must incorporate a gender perspective**

Gender-equitable energy policies, legislation and investments could effectively boost women's opportunities for economic and social empowerment and their ability to contribute to the 'green economy'. According to the UN, close to 2.4 billion people in developing countries still depend entirely on traditional biomass fuels, and it is often women who are the ones tasked with collecting and managing biomass fuel supplies such as firewood, dung and agricultural residues. The resulting time, labor and health burdens have adverse impacts on the wellbeing, educational opportunities and productivity of women and girls. There is a clear need for significantly expanded investments in more efficient and less polluting fuels and energy technologies, as well as training and education to promote women's empowerment and

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business development - including designing, producing, marketing and managing new energy products and services. Electrification based on environmentally sound energy sources is a priority for rural as well as urban women (whether through expansion of national grids or decentralized off-grid systems).

Furthermore, 'green energy technologies' should be gender-positive, i.e., leading to positive effects on women by helping to improve women's livelihoods, income and social status. Therefore, we recommend that women are involved from the start in technology design, so equipment is adapted to women's skills rather than women having to adapt to the technology.

Renewable energies can be used in places where there is no electricity grid, bringing non-polluting energy to low-income and remote areas. Renewable energies can also be installed quickly, and create local employment opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Unlike nuclear energy - with its military uses and unsolved waste disposal concerns - or fossil fuel industries that contribute to enormous environmental and atmospheric damage, decentralized renewable energy allows democratic management and decision-making with full involvement of civil society, and creates decent employment that does not endanger human health or the lives of future generations. Many countries have created legislation and set targets to promote further development of renewable energies, but fossil fuels and nuclear energy remain heavily and unfairly subsidized.

**We call for targets for women's engagement in the (renewable) energy sector, gender criteria for renewable energy funding programs, and a phasing out of fossil and nuclear energy subsidies.**

#### **Water and sanitation are essential for women's economic development**

A large number of the world's people live without access to clean water or basic sanitation. Due to gender roles, it is women and girls who are often most affected by lack of water, as in many countries they are primarily responsible for obtaining and transporting water for daily use. Women and girls may travel many miles and spend much of their time securing essential water supplies, and their task becomes more difficult as rivers and lakes become polluted and ecosystems degraded. Lack of safe water and sanitation limits women's development possibilities. This starts with girls' school attendance, which decreases when there is no access to safe sanitation, thus limiting their ability to get an education. These services are also essential for women's participation in the economy

Furthermore, environmental protection policies and enforcement of water protection measures are needed, and women and other stakeholders should participate in their development and implementation. Sustainable and affordable technologies and management of water and sanitation need to be accessible to women. Integrated water management democratizes

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control over basic water supplies and sanitation services. Privatization of water resources - in particular of water sources, rivers and lakes - can have a disproportionately damaging impact on women who have less economic power and access to income from formal employment. A number of countries have introduced legislation that prohibits privatization of water sources, provides incentives for efficient water use, and supports public investments in water supply and sanitation services. Some countries have also introduced targets (including quotas) for women in water management and control organizations, and this has had a beneficial impact on quality of services and cost recovery. In 2010, the UN General Assembly recognized a human right to water and sanitation and proposed criteria for its implementation.

**We call for dedicated funding programs to ensure that women and girls obtain safe water and sanitation at homes, schools and other public places, as well as the adoption of legislation which protects water sources as public goods.**

Women's Major Group activities are led by the Women's Steering Committee and coordinated by the two organizing partners:

**VAM-Voices of African Mothers** [nana@vamothers.org](mailto:nana@vamothers.org)

**WECF- Women in Europe for a Common Future** [secretariat@wecf.eu](mailto:secretariat@wecf.eu)

The Women's Steering Committee consists of international, regional and national organizations that promote women's rights and gender issues in sustainable development, including among others: ENERGIA International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy, IUCN Gender Team, Global Forest Coalition, VAM, Women's Environment Development Organization (WEDO), WECF, Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resources Management (WOCAN), Earth Day Network, Earth Care Africa, Commonweal, Eco-Forum Kazakhstan, Black Sea Women's Club, and others.

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