

# Why women in a Changing World

ZONTA IWDA presentation, Lisa Kendal, 11 March 2010

Thank you so much for the opportunity to talk at this International Women's Day event. IWD is very dear to my heart, as many years ago in my late teens I worked as a volunteer with the International Women's Development Agency to organise an IWD event. This marked the beginning of my commitment to voluntary work, something I have kept up over the years and found incredibly rewarding and an essential part of contributing and feeling connected to my community.

As you know, I am the EO of BREAZE – the Ballarat Renewable Energy and Zero Emissions group. BREAZE is a not for profit community climate action group that began in late 2006. BREAZE has grown to become one of the largest and most effective climate action groups in Australia, with over 850 financial members and over 1,700 on our email distribution list. BREAZE is only one of many many groups forming across the country and indeed the globe, working to empower our local community to take action on climate change and other environmental issues.

I have called my presentation this evening “Why women in a changing world?”

I have chosen this theme because the **world is changing**, and because **women are disproportionately impacted** by these changes and because women have the capacity to be **powerful agents of change** to guide our communities towards sustainable and happy lives.

## So, how is the world changing?

For the last 200 years we have been living in the fossil fuel era, with abundant cheap energy, and have seen more change than at any other time in human history. We have moved from predominately local, self sustaining village style communities to a global community that transports chocolate biscuits from one side of the world to the other and that provides technology that allows for instant communication across the globe.

According to Vandana Shiva, one of the world's preeminent environmental thinkers, scientists and activists, we are “facing a triple convergence of crises, each of which threatens our survival”: These crises include Climate Change, peak oil and food scarcity.

- **Climate change** is occurring as a result of increased CO<sub>2</sub> and other GHGs in the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels and clearing land. It is causing a rapid and dangerous shift in climate patterns, higher global temperatures, an increase in frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and natural disasters, sea level rises and destruction of ecosystems.

- **Peak oil** is occurring as oil reserves in many parts of the world are now past their peak and past the point of easy extraction. This will result in energy scarcity with significantly higher energy prices, and predictions for petrol prices in Australia to increase to about \$5 - \$8/litre by 2020
- **A Food crisis** is emerging as a result of the industrialization and globalization of agriculture, and loss of local self sufficiency. Currently 1 in 6 people in the world are starving, and around 50% of people living on less than \$2 day. The pending food crisis will further divert food and land from the poor.

As these changes in the world gain momentum and become more apparent, we will see:

- Extreme weather events damaging property and ecosystems
- Drought, floods and heat waves
- Higher energy and food prices
- Conflict resulting from resource scarcity
- Displacement of communities as a result of sea levels rise and catastrophic events (with projections of up to 1 billion displaced people by 2050)
- Severe impacts on human health and wellbeing, including increase in vector borne diseases, emotional distress and increase in deaths, with a potential doubling of people in extreme poverty.

All of these issues will be exacerbated by our growing population – which has grown from around 1 billion to 6.7 billion in the past 200 years, and is expected to increase to around 9 billion over the next 40 years.

### **So why think about women in the face of these changes?**

We know that women and men are not affected equally in the face of these changes. In general people in developing countries, who are least responsible for climate change, are most affected by it. And women contribute less to global warming, yet will be hit harder by its effects

To paint a global picture:

- Women represent 70% of the world's poorest people, mostly in communities that are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood and are disproportionately vulnerable to and affected by climate change.
- Women are 14 times more likely to die in a natural disaster. In 2004 Asian Tsunami 70% of deaths were women. In the 1991 Bangladeshi cyclone around 90% of all deaths were women - totaling approximately 126,000 people! This occurred for a range of social and cultural reasons – such as women as primary care givers protecting children first, women not being able to swim or climb trees as these are considered male activities and women dressed in long outfits, not being able to move quickly when needed

- Women have primary responsibility for household energy, food and water management, and are negatively affected by drought, uncertain rainfall and deforestation as they have to put more time and effort into meeting basic needs – such as walking long distances to source water
- Pregnant and lactating women are more susceptible to health risks associated with increases in infectious diseases and lack of health services in poorer and disrupted areas
- Women have lower levels of education than men and have less input into decision making for communities. Limited access to resources and decision-making processes increases their vulnerability to climate change.

Closer to home, women are experiencing the impacts of climate change through:

- Natural disasters – heat waves and wildfire events, and
- Family and economic stress, particularly in rural areas.

### **So what is the way forward?**

Vandana Shiva says “the convergence of these three crises provides us with the convergence of three opportunities – to create living economies, living democracies and living cultures”. By bringing back dignified work based on human energy and living energies (not dead fossil fuel energies) we can mitigate climate change and make a transition to a society beyond oil and ensuring food security for all. This will require us to:

- **power down** energy and resource consumption; and
- **Power up** creative, productive human energy and community energy to make the transition.

Economist and environmentalist Tor Hundoë says “after 200 years of genuinely fantastic, rapid change, based in large part on exploiting non renewable fossil fuels and pushing agriculture to the poorer margins of arable soil, we have come to realize that there are limits to growth in material living standards”.

He also says that the meaning of life, or “the human project” is to achieve “a good sustainable life”.

“Poverty, environmental diseases and conflicts over resources are not simply matters to be dealt with because they frustrate environmental outcomes, [but because] their existence diminishes human well-being”.

Achieving social justice and equity are intrinsic to addressing environmental issues.

## **Why women are key agents of change in the face of these challenges?**

Women are well placed to be agents of change on this journey to the sustainable good life.

Women are:

- Natural networkers and good communicators
- Women are nurturers and primary carers
- Women have good knowledge of how the world works
- Women are creative and resourceful

Women are natural **community builders** who:

- influence kids, partners, elderly parents and friends
- plan for the future of their family and the community
- are inclined to create or maintain social networks to reduce anticipated risks
- prefer locally-based community actions as a means for creating a healthy society, such as creating community/school gardens, food cooperatives, farmers markets other local endeavours

## **So what role can women in Australia play?**

So far I have painted a very global picture of the challenges facing women. Let's look for a moment at the role of women in Australia and other developed countries in addressing these challenges.

We know that women in developed countries:

- Have relatively high concern for the environment
- Show a willingness to act to preserve the environment
- Are skeptical regarding new technologies and their potential impacts and risks
- Are inclined to make sustainable purchasing choices
- But have lower levels of detailed knowledge about environmental matters

We also know that Australians are the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gas in the world. If everyone lived as we do, we would need at least 4 planets to supply our material demands.

The energy we consume in our homes and our private vehicles is significant, but only represents about 25 - 30% of per capita emissions. What we purchase and consume daily is much more significant in determining our carbon footprint – about 60%. This includes what we buy to eat, wear and how we spend our leisure time. I did read the other day that the average Australian woman purchases around 100 new items of clothing each year!

Like most developed countries we have found ourselves in an expanding consumer culture. And research shows that women make the majority of the purchasing decisions that affect household emissions of greenhouse gas pollution.

Crudely speaking, the purchasing decisions we make in Australia have a direct impact on the lives of our sisters in other parts of the world.

### **So, let's talk about women taking action...**

Women are acting all over the globe to tackle environmental and social challenges. In fact, women have been significant throughout history in the story of environmental action:

The first documented expression of a woman who gave her life to safeguard the environment, was in the early 1700s. The Maharaja of Jodhpur in Rajasthan, India, wanted to build a new palace and required wood for it. He sent his men to the forest near the village of Jalnadi to fell the Khejri trees. Indian woman Amrita Devi protested against King's men's attempt to cut the trees down, as it was prohibited in Bishnoi religion. She said that she would give away her life to save the green trees. In saying this, she offered her head. The axes, which were brought to cut the trees, were used to cut off her head. Her three young daughters Asu, Ratni and Bhagu also offered their heads, and were met with the same end. People from 83 surrounding villages rushed to prevent the men from felling the trees and by the end of the day more than 363 had lost their lives. This began the Chipko movement, or Tree Hugging movement, that continues until this day.

Marine biologist Rachel Carson is considered to be the Founder of the modern day environmental movement, with the publication of her landmark book *Silent Spring* in 1962, in which she claimed a connection between the use of chemicals in agriculture and negative impacts on ecological systems and human health.

Modern day environmental challenges are being met by movements such as One Million Women Climate Coolers, in which Australian women are challenged to reduce their carbon footprint by 1 tonne. "The aim of 1 Million Women is to mobilise at least 1 in 8 women of Australia to take personal action on climate change." According to co-founder Natalie Isaacs "It's powerful when women work together to make a difference. Through this campaign women can act individually and collectively as part of an empowering women's movement".

Closer to home, and as part of the community climate action movement I mentioned at the beginning, there are hundreds of local BREAZE women acting to create a new sustainable future. For example:

- Michele – and her husband have made a family choice for her to dedicate her time to voluntarily working for our climate action group
- Julia, Andrea and Jenny - have trained as home energy auditors

- Mel and Jill - have chosen to dedicate hours of volunteer time to apply their professional design and web skills to support BREAZE and national campaigns, such as 100% renewables
- Tracey – and her husband have decided to become a single income family to allow time to volunteer on climate action
- Meredith has installed a solar electricity system and supports the local solar installation team; and
- Chris has dedicated herself to growing community involvement in the climate action movement.

Many more women are taking action in their own lives by growing veggies, buying local food, riding bikes, washing clothes in cold water, purchasing greenpower, installing SHW systems ...and the list goes on.

These action is replicated in communities across the world, with women taking direct action to reduce their footprint on the planet, and to protect the future of their children's children.

### **Conclusion**

I have heard it said recently that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the Masculine Century – focused on modernism and creating uniformity and conformity BUT that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be the Femine Century – focused on layering, complexity and contradictions to create a meaningful, healthy and rich life.

Writer Victoria Covell says “There is no doubt about it...women all over the world are on the move. ... Many women who now awakening to this crucial period of human evolution are carrying within them the seeds of global transformation”.

A challenge to the women here - Key actions that we can all take to lead our communities towards a sustainable good life are:

- To get informed about the issues and discuss them
- To review our buying choices, to buy less and buy sustainably
- Use our creativity to do less with more
- Take time out to socialize with friends and family, and experience the “good” life – as a nourishing and low emissions activity; and
- To network with others to create a movement for positive change.

In closing I would like to quote from pioneering Anthropologist Margaret Mead:

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

