

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

A Woman's Place is in the World: Have Your Say on Beijing+20

20 February 2015, Dublin Castle

Address by

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‘Beijing+20: The Climate Justice Way’

I congratulate the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the National Women's Council of Ireland on this conference, coinciding with the Beijing+20 process which is reviewing progress in achieving the goals of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action since 1995. Twenty years on from an international Declaration that recognised that women's rights are human rights, that gender equality is essential for progress in our world across all areas of life, we have to recognise how much still needs to be done.

2015 will be a critical year for the advancement of gender equality, not only in relation to Beijing+20, but across two other key international processes on which I wish to focus my attention today. Work on the elaboration of a post-2015 development agenda, including the finalisation of a set of Sustainable Development Goals, will conclude with a UN Summit in September 2015. Efforts to reach a legally binding international climate change agreement will culminate at COP21 in Paris in December 2015 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The outcomes of these processes will frame the future of humanity in a climate disrupted world.

20 years ago, the Governments that adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action identified women and the environment as one of the 12 critical areas of concern. However, climate change was not mentioned as an issue to be addressed or as a threat to the realisation of all human rights, including women's rights and women's empowerment. Today, in 2015, we know better. Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel

on Climate Change (IPCC), most recently in November 2014, unequivocally state that the climate is changing, that human activity is the primary cause of these changes and that if we do not take action urgently we will do irreparable damage to the natural systems on which life depends.

Working to ensure that gender equality serves as a guiding principle across the international climate change agreement and post-2015 development agenda is a key part of the work of my Foundation. Climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable, including women, and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly. As the world takes action on climate change and we make the necessary transition to a low-carbon economy, we must ensure that those who have contributed least to the causes of climate change, and are most vulnerable to the impacts are not left behind.

Across the globe, women play an essential role in tackling the climate change challenge. Men and women are affected by climate change in different ways, because of the societal and cultural roles and responsibilities expected of them by families and communities. For example, women tend to be primary food producers and providers of water and cooking fuel for their families, while having greater responsibility for family and community welfare.

We know that climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone women spend an estimated 40 billion hours collecting and carrying water. According to the FAO women produce over 60% of food in some countries and during extreme events such as drought, floods and other climate-related impacts, women face additional risks and are bearing the disproportional brunt of these disasters.

Against all of this we know with absolute certainty that women can be powerful agents of change. Women across all sectors of society are already leading the way in efforts to build resilience and adapt to the impacts of climate change. They are demonstrating their unity, collective ambition and their willingness to act with urgency, regardless of societal or political position. At local and community level, women are driving

innovative climate action and their participation in the ongoing climate debate will be critical to the attainment of a fair and equitable climate agreement.

So, what needs to be done to ensure that we develop gender-responsive climate policies and capitalise on the resourcefulness of women as we tackle the challenges of climate change? Even as I ask this question, I know that you will inherently understand and recognise the solutions, because at core they are obvious. It doesn't matter whether we are talking about women's role in addressing the impacts of climate change, overcoming women's poverty, achieving women's economic potential or any other issue that you will address today.

How best to ensure that policies in all of these areas are gender sensitive? Firstly: Ask women! And yes, strange though it may seem, this does need to be said loudly and clearly! Participation by women is key. Women must be enabled to participate in decision-making processes across all levels, local, national and international. It is critical that the voices of grassroots women are heard and amplified so that they are part of the planning, design and implementation of policies that impact on their lives. The inclusion of so many participants from community-based organisations at this conference is to be commended and it should be commonplace. Leadership is not confined to the realms of politics and Government or board rooms – it is happening every day in households, communities and towns across this and every country.

So how do we involve women in decision making on climate change and ensure gender responsive climate policies? We have work to do, because although there is a gender equality goal (Goal 5) in the Sustainable Development Goal process, there is less guarantee that gender equality will be reflected strongly in the Paris climate agreement.

From the beginning of our climate justice work my colleagues and I recognised that the gender dimensions of climate change required strong women's leadership in response. With the help of the three women who had chaired three climate COPs in succession, in Copenhagen, Cancun and Durban, we formed a Troika+ of Women Leaders on Climate Change. Our biggest success to date was to have a decision taken at the Doha COP in 2012, bringing gender balance into participation at climate conferences, beginning work on gender sensitive climate policy, and having an item on gender on the agenda of all

future conferences. It gave us great pleasure to hear this described as “the Doha Miracle!”

Now we are focussed, with UN women and many women’s organisations, on ensuring that gender equality and women’s empowerment will be central to the climate agreement in Paris in December. We see the Beijing+20 process as being helpful in achieving this. Next week, at a high level women leaders event in Santiago, Chile, hosted by President Michelle Bachelet and UN women, we will seek to have language inserted on gender, women’s empowerment and climate change. We will then follow up at the Commission on the Status of Women in New York in March looking to insert a similar provision in the Beijing +20 Declaration.

Last September, on the margins of the UN Secretary-General’s Climate Summit in New York, my Foundation co-hosted with UN women the ‘Leaders’ Forum on Women Leading the Way: Raising Ambition for Climate Action’. It brought together indigenous women, young women, women farmers and community leaders, women heads of state and government and former heads of state and government, women in business and academia from 54 nations. I listened as these women called on their governments to give courageous leadership and to act in solidarity for climate justice. At the Leaders’ Forum it was clear that as women and men are affected differently by the impacts of climate change, climate actions have to be gender responsive. In summarising their discussions, the women present identified key messages that reflected their needs and experiences. Women’s empowerment, greater participation in decision-making processes, increased accountability, courage in leadership and the need to integrate human rights into climate actions were among the issues repeatedly highlighted.

As we work on strategy at the international level, we have to constantly remind ourselves of the realities of the lives of those who are already living with the impacts of climate change; those who have lost loved ones, lost livelihoods, lost homes and been displaced. We have to be careful to listen to their voices and experiences – for too long those of women living on the frontlines of climate change have gone unheard. Women offer solutions, and they also offer hope for successful adaptation and low carbon development through their critical knowledge, experience and the unique role that they

play in agriculture, food security, livelihoods, income generation and management of our natural resources.

We have a distance to travel before climate policies at national and international level acknowledge this fact, but I am confident that the inclusion of gender equality as a guiding principle in the 2015 climate agreement would see us take the necessary leap forward. Anything less would be an affront to those women who on a daily basis display courage, skill and tenacity in adapting to the negative impact that climate change is having on their lives.

The second solution relates to access by women to resources: natural resources, land rights, finance, education and technology. The cross-cutting role of gender in all aspects of climate change, across adaptation, financing and technology mechanisms must be a key component of the new agreement. Creating an enabling environment for the increased participation of women in decision and policy-making in local, community, national, regional and international institutions and processes is essential. Given access to knowledge, resources, education and finance women will be able to develop enhanced coping mechanisms.

Irish women's organisations and supportive men, many of whom are represented here today, will continue to address the needs of Irish women but, as you begin your deliberations, I urge you also to champion the rights of women beyond our borders. Women who are disempowered and oppressed, who are living in poverty without access to basic human rights like water, food and shelter, and whose rights are being further undermined by the destructive impacts of climate change. Their geographical and cultural context may differ from ours but their knowledge, experience, wisdom and capacity to contribute is just the same.

Each encounter with a woman or community living with the reality of climate change brings home to me the truth of those words spoken by Eleanor Roosevelt on the 10th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination.

This was the essential message of the Beijing Declaration, and our challenge is to make it happen in 2015.

Thank you.