

# **Women Challenging Power in a New Global Context**

**THE WEDO MANIFESTO**

**December 2003**



# Women Challenging Power in a New Global Context: WEDO's Manifesto

## WEDO reaffirms its call for economic, social, and gender justice, a healthy and peaceful planet, and human rights for all

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*"I believe that women will change the nature of power, rather than power change the nature of women."*—Bella Abzug, 1995

**W**omen emerged as a strong force for social change in the 1990s. During the previous two decades, women from Africa to Europe and North America, from Latin America and the Caribbean to Asia and the Pacific had built an international movement and defined a far-reaching global agenda. In the preparatory stages of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the first of a series of inter-governmental UN conferences on development, women activists seized the opportunity to make women's equity and equality, along with social justice, more central to the global policy agenda.

For more than ten years, WEDO has been a strong and unifying voice for women at the UN, pressing women's demands and monitoring government implementation of policy agreements. In 2002-2003, the Board and staff of WEDO reviewed the global economic and political changes of the past decade and reframed WEDO's priorities in light of the major forces shaping the world. In this document, we present our history, our analysis of the global context, and our goals and strategies for the future. Going forward, WEDO renews its commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women as a means of achieving a better world for all.

### A Brief Look Back

Former U.S. Congresswoman Bella Abzug and veteran feminist activist Mim Kelber created the Women's Environment and Development Organization in 1991. WEDO was a key organizer for the groundbreaking World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami, Florida that same year to prepare for UNCED. Working in collaboration with women leaders in every region of the world, WEDO helped bring together more than 1,500 women from 83 countries to plan a joint action strategy.

Leading participants at the Miami Congress included, among others, members of WEDO's founding Board<sup>1</sup> of prominent global activists. These women believed that, by bringing the vision, demands, and energy of the global women's movement to the international policy arena, they could persuade governments to make new commitments to women's equity and equality, and to a more peaceful, just, and healthy planet. Together the congress participants formulated and adopted the *Women's Action Agenda*, a comprehensive global vision that articulated women's leadership and empowerment as catalysts for change.

The *Women's Action Agenda* was a direct challenge from the world's women to shape the official platform of UNCED (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992). To advocate for this comprehensive agenda, WEDO established the Women's Caucus, bringing together women from North and South, and

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<sup>1</sup> Thais Corral (Brazil), Elin Enge (Norway), Brownie Ledbetter (U.S.A.), Farkhonda Hassan (Egypt), Wangari Maathai (Kenya), Chief Bisi Ogunleye (Nigeria), and Vandana Shiva (India). Peggy Antrobus (Barbados) was also a key contributor and recommended Jocelyn Dow (Guyana) to join the WEDO Board.

from all levels and across all issues. The Women's Caucus was historic and innovative, creating for the first time a participatory mechanism for bringing women's experiences and voices into UN processes. Organizing together, women won significant changes in Agenda 21, the official conference policy document, including an entire chapter devoted to gender equality and, for the first time, a formal recognition of women's central role in achieving sustainable development.

The success at UNCED positioned WEDO to play a leadership role in putting women's equity and equality on the global policy agenda throughout the decade of the 1990s at key United Nations conferences. These included the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, Egypt, 1994), where formal recognition of women's reproductive rights prevailed despite bitter opposition by religious fundamentalists, and the Social Summit (Copenhagen, Denmark, 1995), where the link between gender equality and poverty eradication was explicitly recognized.

At the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, China, 1995), WEDO pioneered the Linkage Caucus to bring together the broad range of advocacy concerns of the international women's movement: poverty; militarization, war and civil conflict; violations of women's human rights; under-representation of women in politics; environmental degradation; and the growing power of the rich countries to dominate the global economy. The Linkage Caucus represented a new participatory methodology that became a model of engagement for civil society at the UN.

In the resulting Beijing Platform for Action, women won a broad-based agenda for promoting and protecting their human rights worldwide, while establishing the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men in all arenas. Since then, issues of violence against women and women's human rights have gained greater visibility and more government attention and legislative action worldwide. In many parts of the world, women's role in decision-making has become more prominent, access to education has improved, and discriminatory laws have been repealed. At the grassroots level, women have developed innovative approaches to meeting the basic needs of families and communities in the face of challenges posed by the state, private corporations, and fundamentalisms of different kinds.

Yet, despite policy gains at the United Nations in the form of government commitments and ambitious documents, and despite efforts to use these documents to achieve legal and policy changes to protect and advance women's rights at the national level, many women—especially poor women—are worse off today than they were a decade ago. Women around the world continue to face many of the same critical issues that they did when WEDO was founded, but now these issues are even more complex and the need for action is more urgent.

## **Negative Impacts, Global Challenges**

Over the past decade, major global forces have emerged that are undermining the gains made by women. The neo-liberal economic model and market-driven policies—particularly changes in trade and finance rules, and the deregulation and privatization of public goods and services—have exacerbated the poverty, food insecurity, and economic exclusion of the majority, while increasing the wealth and economic opportunities, and thus over-consumption, of the privileged few. At the same time, the world is becoming increasingly dangerous due to unilateral military intervention and communal and ethnic violence. Escalating militarism and new and revived fundamentalisms, both secular and religious, have created a stifling climate for progressive change.

Throughout the world, women and children—who comprise the majority of the world's poor—are experiencing the disproportionate effects of these global forces. The negative impact is intensified among racial and ethnic minorities and indigenous women.

While it is well documented that women's empowerment is central to poverty eradication and national development, women still face significant barriers when it comes to access to resources, wage employment, and decision-making positions. As macroeconomic and national policies are too often gender blind, they are ineffective in addressing the needs of poor and minority women. In many parts of the world, the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has further increased women's income-earning, domestic, and care-taking responsibilities.

Women play a critical role in managing natural resources and have extensive knowledge and experience of the water, land, and energy supplies that sustain households and communities. Yet, women's lack of land tenure or inheritance rights, and current trends such as water privatization, undermine their ability to own, manage, use, and conserve these resources and to provide for themselves and their families.

Women are still concentrated in the informal sector, where there are no job or safety protections, and those entering the formal wage economy tend to be employed in the lowest-paying jobs with the greatest environmental and safety hazards. Women still earn less than men for the same work, outnumber men among those who are illiterate, and are drastically under-represented in decision-making positions at all levels—for instance, only 15 percent of parliamentarians worldwide are women.

The UN world conferences resulted in greater recognition of gender inequalities and propelled governments to make global commitments to advance women's rights. At the same time these external forces and trends, promoted by the international financial institutions and the World Trade Organization, perpetuate and reinforce the structural inequalities between women and men in the economy and in society. Thus, the world faces a democracy deficit in global governance—the power of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization remains unchecked and these institutions lack accountability, transparency, and democracy. Transnational corporations also disregard global norms as they operate without adequate systems of regulation, oversight, or accountability.

The external stronghold on national development policy and frameworks has weakened the ability of some governments to meet basic social needs, while increases in military and 'anti-terrorism' spending further drain limited public resources for education, health, and social services. This emphasis on national security and policing is also being used to undermine hard-won civil rights and civil liberties.

In the United States, the world's only superpower, the current administration employs its unsurpassed military and economic power for narrow economic, political, and ideological interests with dire consequences for people in the US and around the world. The pre-emptive war in Iraq, the most extreme case so far of U.S. unilateralism, was preceded by the administration's earlier repudiation of the Kyoto Protocol, its retreat from the International Criminal Court treaty, and its invalidation of the Antiballistic Missile Treaty. The Bush Administration's war on women started on its first day in office when the President reapplied the global gag rule to international family planning programs. Further, the U.S. has failed to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and promotes abstinence-only in the under-funded global HIV/AIDS program.

Women advocates working to implement the global policy commitments of the 1990s have often been stymied by these global challenges. While the UN is the most universal and legitimate global governance institution, it finds itself at a crossroads, weakened by a lack of resources and a broad agenda, as well as power imbalances among its diverse membership. The voices of developing countries and civil society—particularly those speaking for women, the poor, and other marginalized

groups—are demanding reform. Instead of advancing the status quo by accommodating the international financial and trade institutions, the transnational corporations, and powerful industrialized countries, the UN must emerge as a counterweight and an effective promoter of peace, human rights, gender equality, sustainable development, and economic justice.

## **A Call to Action**

Although this global scenario presents unprecedented challenges for women’s movements, it is also a call to action. The same pernicious forces that are causing so much insecurity in the world have given rise to global and local movements seeking alternatives to war, neo-liberalism, environmental devastation, gender and racial oppression, and social and economic inequalities.

Women are agents of change and have made enormous contributions to social movements worldwide. Organizations pushing for peace and justice cannot succeed without women’s active participation and leadership. However, these organizations and movements have not been equally active in struggles for gender justice, or integrating gender in their own perspectives and positions. WEDO will work to increase global collaboration and solidarity among grassroots social movements, labor unions, and peace, human rights, economic justice, and environmental organizations that share our vision.

The challenge is to identify effective strategies, alliances, and institutions to promote this comprehensive social justice agenda. Women want to move forward rather than merely struggle to hold the line on prior gains. Notwithstanding the weaknesses noted above, the UN remains the international institution in which we have the most hope, where every nation in the world has a voice and a vote, and where developing countries play a leadership role in setting and carrying out its agenda. The UN also provides most systematically and broadly for civil society participation and has unquestionably advanced the global women’s agenda.

Going forward, WEDO will place greater emphasis on structural and institutional changes in global governance to reassert the primacy of the UN charter—which envisioned the Bretton Woods institutions being accountable to the UN—and to bring the World Trade Organization into the UN structure. And we will continue to support the challenges of women worldwide to religious and economic fundamentalisms that undermine democratization, sustainable development, and the implementation of international human rights—including economic and social rights, as well as gender equality.

WEDO will continue to challenge the UN, international financial and trade institutions, governments, civil society and the private sector to recognize and address the negative impacts of globalization, particularly on women. We will join with others to oppose the gross misdistribution of the world’s resources and the growing gaps between rich and poor people and nations, and to promote alternative policies that are equitable and sustainable.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—endorsed in 2000 by 191 governments—do not represent the full vision of either gender equity, equality, and women’s empowerment or poverty eradication and structural transformation envisaged in UN conference and human rights documents. Nonetheless, with their time-bound targets, they are one important mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the international policy documents of the 1990s. They can also be useful tools for advocacy and accountability—for example, to hold international financial and trade institutions and donor countries accountable for creating the necessary enabling conditions and resources for the goals to be achieved. WEDO will promote a gender perspective on the MDGs, advocating for gender equality to be central to each of the goals and for the goals to be more explicitly linked.

To achieve progressive change globally it is essential to confront U.S. unilateralism. As an international organization based in the U.S. and working on global issues, WEDO is committed to partnering with local women's, peace, and other social justice groups to advocate for a U.S. foreign policy that: seeks to advance international law and human rights, including women's rights, and vital treaty commitments; supports a strong and effective United Nations to promote multilateral action to address threats to peace and security and to advance human development around the world; and transforms the global governance system, including the international trade and financial institutions.

## **Goals and Strategies**

In the lead-up to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development ten years after the *Women's Action Agenda* was launched, WEDO—in collaboration with Network for Human Development (REDEH) in Brazil—consulted with women's groups and networks worldwide on an updated platform. The resulting *Women's Action Agenda for a Healthy and Peaceful Planet 2015* sets out a renewed vision that emphasizes peace and human rights; globalization for sustainability; women's access to and control of natural resources; environmental security and health; and democratic governance.

WAA2015 provides the guiding principles for WEDO's work during the next decade. Moving forward WEDO will seek to:

- **Advance democratic, accountable and gender-balanced governance in decision-making processes and institutions at all levels.**
- **Challenge the current global economic system and promote a sustainable development model to achieve human rights, economic and social justice, gender equality and equity, and poverty eradication.**
- **Promote multilateralism and international cooperation to advance peace, human rights, human security, and human solidarity.**

WEDO will use the following interlinked strategies to achieve these goals:

- **Advocacy and monitoring in key global forums, particularly the United Nations**

WEDO will seek to strengthen the United Nations as the primary global governance institution—holding governments responsible for meeting their global commitments and demanding greater accountability from the international trade and financial institutions—by promoting more democratic and transparent decision-making and expanded civil society participation.

WEDO will continue to monitor implementation of government commitments made in the Beijing Platform for Action and other key global conference agreements of the 1990s, by convening Caucuses at strategic UN meetings, undertaking gender analyses of key UN documents, and developing specialized advocacy tools in collaboration with women worldwide.

WEDO will continue to promote a gender perspective in the follow-up processes to the 2000 Millennium Summit, the 2002 Financing for Development Conference, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, advocating that gender equity and equality and women's empowerment are central to achieving sustainable development that links economic, social, and environmental justice. We will challenge global economic and social policies that negatively impact the poor, the majority of whom are women, and promote people-centered alternatives to privatization, liberalization, deregulation, and corporate dominance.

WEDO will promote gender-balanced participation at all levels of decision-making, with the aim of including women's concerns and perspectives in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of policy as an essential component of democratic governance. We will also promote the use of CEDAW—the most comprehensive, legally-binding women's rights treaty—to advance women's participation in decision-making.

**• Support the advocacy efforts of women's organizations around the world and build broad strategic alliances to hold governments accountable for their international commitments**

WEDO will build and participate in partnerships and alliances with other transnational and national organizations, networks, and labor unions that support human rights, economic, ecological and social justice, gender equality, and poverty eradication. We will participate in key civil society meetings to strategize and build common platforms to move this agenda forward.

WEDO will strengthen its partnerships with women's groups around the world by facilitating the participation of women from developing countries in global forums and by promoting global commitments at the national level in regional, collaboratively convened meetings.

WEDO will continue to promote its global 50/50 Campaign for increasing the percentage of women in public office worldwide and ensuring that women have a greater voice in shaping policies to achieve sustainable development and eradicate poverty.

WEDO will continue to develop publications and to utilize its website and listservs for the purpose of public awareness-raising—creating tools that help women and men integrate a gender approach in policy-making and monitor the implementation of global commitments and providing up-to-date information, resources, and tools for effective advocacy at all levels.

**• Engage U.S. women on foreign policy and global issues**

WEDO will promote a broader understanding of foreign policy and global issues among U.S. women, focusing on the impact of these policies on women at home and abroad. We will build partnerships with national women's organizations and other social justice groups to disseminate information and galvanize public support for a foreign policy based on multilateralism and human rights. We will also work to strengthen the linkages between the local and the global on issues of U.S. economic and environmental policy and promote an alternative model of sustainable development.

WEDO will encourage the U.S. to participate in and support multilateral forums, particularly a stronger and more effective United Nations. WEDO will work with national women's organizations to strengthen efforts towards ratification by the U.S. Congress of key UN conventions, such as CEDAW and the International Criminal Court Statute, and implementation of UN agreements, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action from the International Conference on Population and Development.

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