

Yes, We Do

The Satya Interview with June Zeitlin



June Zeitlin. Courtesy of WEDO

Sixteen years ago, former U.S. Congresswoman Bella Abzug and long-time activist and writer Mim Kelber had what then seemed like a radical idea: bring 1,500 women from more than 80 countries together to hammer out

The gravel-voiced Abzug, who was never seen without her trademark hat, and her college friend Kelber, anticipated the need for an organization that would put pressure on the world's governments (often through the United Nations), as well as support women in struggles for environmental, political, economic and social equality around the world. Together, they established the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), among whose founding board members was Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai. WEDO is now headed by former Ford Foundation program officer **June Zeitlin** who, as a younger lawyer, was on Abzug's Congressional staff. Today, from an office in midtown Manhattan, WEDO continues the work Abzug and Kelber began nearly two decades ago. The UN Environment Programme recently named WEDO one of its "Champions of the Earth." **Mia MacDonald** spoke with **June Zeitlin** about WEDO's current work, its feminist history, the barriers to realizing its vision, and what gives her hope.

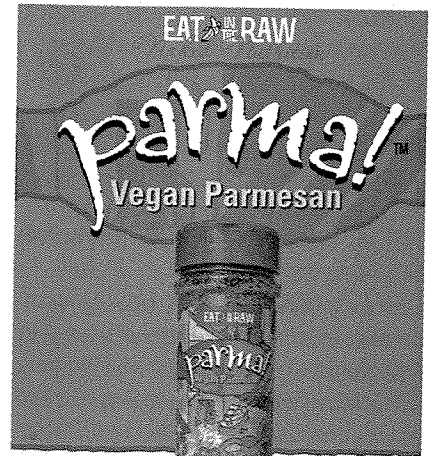
The good thing about working globally is that something good is *always* happening somewhere in the world. Sometimes these days it gets a bit harder to find. But the past year or so have been an amazing time for women's leadership at the highest levels in a number of countries.

a plan for the planet's future the world's political leaders would pay attention to. The manifesto they created in Miami in 1991, the Women's Action Agenda, laid the groundwork for women's advocacy at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. There, the connections between gender equality, women's rights and prospects for sustainable development were recognized in the outcome document (Agenda 21), breaking new ground in global policy debates and, ever since, in actions on the ground.


How would you define what the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) does?

WEDO works to make sure that gender equality and women's human rights are at the center of global policy, particularly relating to development, economic, social justice and human rights questions. It's also a great acronym. What we really mean is "we do" and we do a lot!

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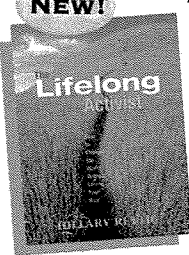
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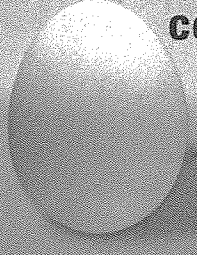
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Tell me about a few of the initiatives WEDO is working on.

One is to bring women [into governments] in sufficient numbers so they can shape the policy agenda. We have a "50/50—Get the Balance Right" campaign, because part of getting different policy outcomes has to do with who's sitting at the table. The campaign has a lot of resonance because it's fair. How can you have a democracy where half the people are not represented? But it's not just about numbers. It's about social change. When women get into governmental positions, their perspectives and

able development. Linking these issues together to bring women's voices and perspectives to conflict prevention, peace building and reconciliation really hasn't been done. We feel this is a gap WEDO is uniquely positioned to fill.

In addition, we do economic justice work. Most recently we've been looking at transnational corporations and their impacts, particularly on women. A lot of work has been done around corporate accountability and social responsibility related to the environment and some labor rights issues, but there's been very little attention to women. We recently launched

How did WEDO gather such an amazing group of women from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean as founding board members? Many U.S. women's organizations are still pretty parochial and were more so back then.

Bella was looking for people like herself—leaders in their own countries who could also be effective globally. She recognized, and in this she was ahead of her time, that as an American, even a very powerful American, if you're working at the UN you need to be representative of all regions of the world. Exactly how she connected with people like Wangari Maathai and Vandana Shiva from India, I'm not sure. But unlike other strong, powerful people, Bella was not afraid of surrounding and connecting herself with strong, powerful figures. [In fact] she saw this as a way of extending the agenda.

When men control the global purse

Worldwide men dominate in economic decision-making: in governments (86% of all parliamentarians); in the biggest transnational corporations (99% of top executives); and on the board of directors at the World Bank (91%) and International Monetary Fund (100%).

Where's the symmetry when world leaders (94% men) spend \$800 billion on militarization each year but won't spend the \$80 billion needed to end poverty?

Women get short-changed

Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours and produce half of the world's food, but earn only 10% of the world's income, own less than 1% of the world's property, and are the majority of the world's poor.

Poster from the 50/50 campaign. Courtesy of WEDO

experiences change the environment and economics—they improve things for the poor. We have been working with groups in about 18 countries that have adopted this campaign.

We have also been working on trying to integrate gender equality more directly into environment and sustain-

a new website, the Misfortune 500 (www.misfortune500.org), which documents the impacts of corporate practices on women in many parts of the world—highlighting both bad and good. We hope this can be a resource and an advocacy tool for women to use in their own countries and for us to use globally.

Why do you think more groups don't address the complexities of the challenges the planet and the people on it are facing?

They are probably smarter than we are. It's easier to focus on one sector. You are very clear about what you are doing, you can articulate it succinctly, and quite frankly, it's easier to raise money. One of the legacies of Bella and Mim and the founding WEDO board is this

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holistic vision of sustainable development that connects [many movements]. It's always a challenge to convey what we do very crisply to an audience, but we do see all the complexities and the interlinkages, and we think that makes our work much stronger.

Also, if you're trying to affect women's lives day to day, they don't compartmentalize their lives and say, "well now I'm working on livelihoods and income generation, then I'm going to go home and do reproductive health and food security." They view the world holistically and so do we. It's important to have that vision in front of us so we know where we are going, but you also need to break it down into specific steps so it's manageable. More and more people see the shortcomings of a narrower approach. But it's hard to get out of that way of working because it makes things so much more complicated.

What are some obstacles to what WEDO is trying to achieve with respect to the environment?

The general public, in part because of the media, in part because of the way the

issues are presented, has trouble seeing the connections and links. In the U.S., the environment is seen as "let's protect our national parks." It's not really about people. It's also something that's taken for granted. [Many people say] "climate change is a long way off; it's not a problem that affects our lives," so it hasn't been much of a motivational issue. A lot of the environmental groups feed into that perception instead of highlighting the linkages between environmental justice and economic justice, which are so inextricable. This allows people working on economic issues to ignore the environment, and allows the mainstream to say, "well, those who are talking about economics, the environment and human rights is some small fringe." We need a different way of looking at issues linking environment, economic justice, human rights and women's rights.

What is the legacy of Bella Abzug and Mim Kelber? Many young people—feminists even—don't know about Bella, let alone Mim.

Mim and Bella were students together at

Hunter College—Bella the student [body] president and Mim the editor of the school newspaper. They had a partnership all their lives of mutual commitment to radical transformational social change and to activism, and they respected the contribution that each brought to it. Mim was the writer. She was behind the scenes. Bella was the public person, the one who could connect to the audience. But needless to say, they were both very strong women with very strong ideas. If you got in the middle of one of their arguments, watch out. After Bella died [in 1998], Mim played a very important role in ensuring that WEDO stayed the course and continued to pursue the ideas, approaches and the activism it had under both of their leadership.

I always think that's sad when people, especially young women, don't know who Bella is, because she was an amazing woman. She not only helped lead the women's movement in the U.S. and globally, but was a leader of the peace movement, the civil rights movement

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and the environmental movement. She helped the women's movement to see environmental issues as important. There aren't too many other figures who were leaders of national and global movements, and who, as Americans, saw the connection between U.S. and international advocacy.

The other thing I would have to say, especially given the political situation in the U.S. today, is that Bella was unafraid to speak truth to power. She knew when to do it, how to do it, and to do it so she was heard. And she *was* heard, by U.S. presidents and world leaders. But she also knew how to connect at the community level, so she could be a strong voice expressing their aspirations in the halls of power. We at WEDO try to live up to that legacy but it's a very large legacy!

What gives you hope, given the world we're living in?

The good thing about working globally is that something good is *always* happening somewhere in the world. Sometimes these days it gets a bit harder to find. But the past year or so have been an amazing time for women's leadership at the highest levels in a number of countries. We've seen the election of the first woman head of state in Africa, in Liberia [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf], and in Chile, the election of Michelle Bachelet, who comes out of Chile's feminist movement. She's already formed a cabinet that's 50/50 [women/men] and she's insisting on this throughout the government. I suspect Chile and Liberia are not the first countries people would think of having a woman head of state. We are increasing the numbers and also the kinds of women who are elected and their platforms, which really are about progressive change for all women but particularly for poor women. That gives me hope.

Women are playing an increasing

role at the local and national level in trying to build peace and reconciliation. This is mostly under the radar: Israeli and Palestinian women are setting up a new women's peace commission. Of course, it's not supported by the government in either location, but it's an effort to cross borders. We have been in contact with women in Iraq, as other women's groups have, trying to build connections, and we're looking at the possibility of trying to reach out to women in Iran. This is something women's groups have been doing at a community level without a lot of fanfare. But translating these ties into formal peacemaking processes within new governments and reconstruction [efforts] is a challenge.

Issues of reproductive and sexual rights are a flashpoint. But while we are seeing a lot of backlash, in response to that backlash, many governments are taking much stronger positions to defend and advance the rights of women. To me the biggest challenge is still on the economic front. Despite an acknowledgment that something has to be done to address growing inequality, there is still a failure to fundamentally alter or challenge the dominant economic ideology that is having such a negative impact on the poor, poor women and poor countries. I'm not sure how we're going to get there. ■

Mia MacDonald, a Satya consulting editor, is a policy analyst and writer on gender, environment, development and rights. Recently, she collaborated with WEDO on a set of proposals for the UN Environment Programme. One of her indelible memories is Bella Abzug, using a wheelchair but unbowed, debating sexual and reproductive rights with the Vatican's chief negotiator (a male priest) in the media center of the 1995 UN women's conference in Beijing. For information on WEDO see www.wedo.org.