



WEDO Accepts UNEP Champions of the Earth Award Singapore, 21 April 2006

Speech delivered by
June Zeitlin, Executive Director of WEDO and
Srilatha Batliwala, Chairperson, Board of Directors of WEDO

On behalf of the Women's Environment and Development Organisation, we would like to thank the United Nations Environment Programme for this great honour.

With us, here tonight, are seven of WEDO's board members, representing every region of the world. Each of us is proud of this achievement, because it recognizes the contributions of the visionary women who founded and guided WEDO: Bella Abzug and Mim Kelber (United States), 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Winner Wangari Maathai (Kenya), Vandana Shiva (India), Thais Corral (Brazil), Chief Bisi Ogunleye (Nigeria), Elin Enge (Norway) and Jocelyn Dow (Guyana) - who we are so pleased to have with us tonight. These women brought a passionate commitment to make WEDO a dynamic force for change.

In accepting this Award, we recognize that women have long been champions of the earth - in their families, in their communities and in their societies. This Award honours their struggle every day to haul clean water, fetch firewood, and grow our food. Countless women share their knowledge, and preserve the resources of the earth for the generations to come.

As the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan, has said "Investing in women is the best strategy for sustainable development."

This Award also recognizes WEDO's leadership in moving gender equality and women's human rights from the margins to the centre of global policy on sustainable development. The Earth Summit in Rio (1992) was a watershed for WEDO, demonstrating how women could successfully influence global policy. Just ask Mr Tommy Koh, who led the Rio process.

Ten years later, at the World Summit On Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002), the gains of Rio were seriously threatened. WEDO rallied women and men to hold the line and led a march for women's rights under the banner of "Women's rights are human rights."

Clearly there is much to celebrate, but also much needs to be done to improve the lives of women and girls everywhere.

Last year, WEDO released the report Beijing Betrayed. This report assessed the progress and the gaps in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action --10 years after the 4th World Women's Conference. While it showed important gains, it also showed that many women, especially poor women, are worse off today.

Women's Action Agenda 21, at Rio, warned that increased militarization and economic globalisation, especially the emerging World Trade Organisation, could threaten the lofty vision and commitments of Agenda 21. The challenges we face today are even greater than we imagined:

The gap between the rich and the poor is growing, yet the major world powers and global institutions continue to promote policies that result in economic injustice. Increased militarism and violent conflict, US unilateralism, as well as fundamentalisms of all kinds, stand among the major barriers to peace, justice and a healthy planet.

Nevertheless we know that change is possible. This Award recognizes that change is possible because of people, like our staff, our board and our partners around the world. I would like to specially mention Irene Dankelman, who has tirelessly worked for more than two decades to link gender equality and sustainable development.

Finally, we would like to leave you with the prophetic words of our founder Bella Abzug: "Change is not about simply mainstreaming women. It is about transforming the stream – cleaning it up, changing stagnant pools into fresh, flowing waters....to reach our common goal of a healthy and peaceful planet and human rights for all."

Thank you.