

**Welcome address by Gila Altmann,
Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature
Conservation and Nuclear Safety on the occasion of the International Conference**

**‘Gender Perspectives on Earth Summit 2002 -
Energy, Transport, Information for Decision-Making’
Berlin, Jagdschloss Glienicke, 10 – 12 January 2001**

**Jointly hosted by the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and
Nuclear Safety, Germany and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Germany**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have great pleasure in opening this Conference on the subject “Gender and Environment” and I would like to welcome you most warmly to Berlin. Many of you have travelled a long way to discuss this important and interesting theme with us over the next few days, and I would like to thank you especially for making the effort to come.

I would also like to begin by extending my particular thanks to our co-organisers, the foundation **Heinrich Böll Stiftung**, for their work, and special thanks are also due to **UNED Forum**, who made the arrangements for this Conference. Without their commitment, professional approach and personal efforts, this conference would not have been possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The excellent attendance here confirms our view that considering the connection between women’s issues and ecological questions is an important political and social issue. The special role of women in the field of sustainable development was already acknowledged at the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. All over the world, women from various cultural and social backgrounds have **a long tradition of responsibility for the use of resources and for living together in a community**. They have indeed proved their capability of competent action and their creativity in securing their families’ survival.

In many countries, for example, women are traditionally responsible for agriculture. In Africa, they are responsible for **over 80% of agricultural production**. Over generations, they have acquired a profound knowledge regarding the quality and fertility of soils. In those very areas where desertification and over-harvesting have resulted in a decline in soil fertility, there are numerous women’s initiatives which, in networks and cooperatives, are exchanging know-how and providing each other with mutual support.

In both North and South, therefore, a key demand made by the sustainability debate is for the **increased involvement of women in the social and political decision-making processes** in the field of environment and sustainable development. There is here, however, as in many other aspects of AGENDA 21, a considerable gap between the goals and their implementation in practice. The fact that the **relations between environmental objectives and gender** are rather complex makes the situation even more difficult. We still lack the necessary thorough understanding of the connections in many fields, and this is certainly one reason why implementation is lagging behind. Studies in Belarus, for instance, show that, 14 years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, women appear to be suffering far greater psychological and physical stress, arising from only recently occurring diseases, than men. But there can be no question at all yet of any systematic investigation or any thorough understanding of the connections.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With this Conference, where so many experts have gathered to share their knowledge, we are making a first attempt to close some of the **gaps in our knowledge regarding the links between gender and environment**.

At the same time, however, we are pursuing more far-reaching goals. While the topic "Gender and Environment" has been, at least officially, on the agenda of international policy on environment and sustainability since Rio, specific negotiations have nevertheless often resulted in relatively unsubstantial decisions. Consideration of the problem is mostly limited to general calls on the Parties to relevant international Agreements to increase women's participation in the political process and to take women's interests more into account. Normally no specific projects or action plans are decided upon, and the decisions also largely ignore the real experience which has been gained throughout the world due to the commitment of women.

The results of the **follow-up process to Beijing** have also fallen far short of expectations. Five years after the 1995 World Women's Conference in Beijing, when the United Nations took stock of the situation in New York in June 2000, it was frighteningly clear what small progress we have made with regard to women and environmental issues. Significantly, the final document is particularly weak with regards to the chapter "Women and Environment". Nowhere does it mention such pressing and current issues as, for example, **environmental refugees**, the majority of which are women. This is due to the fact that the majority of adults in rural areas struck by natural disasters are women, because many male heads of family have migrated to towns, while women remain responsible for the agricultural production. Moreover, in military conflicts arising about the distribution of natural resources it is usually the men who are involved in fighting while women leave the conflict zones together with their children.

Other important issues are also neglected in the Beijing final document, such as the **effects long ways to the nearest market, to water sources or to social services have on the employment chances** of women, and the **education opportunities** for girls. There is, however, a direct link to environmental questions, because due to water shortage and pollution the distance covered to reach water sources rises. This makes it ever more difficult for women to take part in regular working processes.

My aim is not to describe women as the victims of environmental development. Our aim is to also give men a chance to profit from the experience women have. To ensure this, we need both known and new models to connect work in jobs with family work. Besides, it is about time to regard the presence of women in boards and leading positions as normal.

It is all the more important, therefore, to put the topic on the **political agenda** again, and to move forward with renewed energy. The **World Summit on Sustainable Development** which will take place in Johannesburg in the summer of 2002, ten years after Rio, is a great opportunity for us. This Conference in Berlin is taking place at a time when the international community is commencing preparations for the summit. It is the first international preliminary meeting where the preparations will be discussed from a gender perspective. This is an important opportunity for all of us to lay the foundation for the way this theme will be dealt with at the 2002 Summit.

The success or failure of the Summit will depend on whether we are able to make **specific action-oriented decisions** which can be implemented in practice. We must succeed throughout the world in viewing the solution of environmental problems within the **whole context** of economic and social development. This was and still is the vision of Rio: Environmental protection, healthy economic development, social justice. Taking the gender perspective into account when considering environmental issues supports this integrated approach; for the problems which affect women particularly, are not only those of environmental health or suitable public transport, but **also and especially, those of economic justice, training and education, and democracy.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to conclude by saying a few words about the players. Not only are numerous heads of state and government expected at the Summit, but up to 50 000 representatives from **non-governmental organisations**. The involvement of NGOs, enterprises, representatives of indigenous peoples, and of scientists from North and South is particularly significant for the Rio process. In the discussion on "gender and environment" the success of the process also depends on those players who are active in and for this process. Many people, both women and men, have done this issue a great service, and also in the future national and international NGOs will play a key role in the efforts to change existing structures and bring the other, the female view of environment, more to the fore. And we need to continue involving all the players in order to bring about significant changes in politics, trade and industry or society.

By setting up this conference, we wanted to indicate that governments too, have this issue in mind. We also are aware that the conference must be followed by specific projects which show that linking the question of gender with that of environment considerably advances both policy areas – women's as well as environmental issues. We really want to take up your visions generated by the debate of the next few days and hope to be able to implement them as **concrete projects** with our partners in the United Nations in the context of the World Summit. And for this reason too we will listen very attentively to your ideas and discussions.

With this in mind, I wish us all stimulating discussions and good cooperation in these beautiful surroundings.

Thank you for your attention.