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Priorities, challenges and strategies: a feminine perspective

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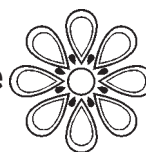
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**Priorities, challenges and strategies: a feminine perspective***Dr Mary Elmendorf, USA*

THE TITLE, REACHING the unreached-challenges for the 21st century spoke to my heart-or is it my soul? Unless all of us work together to "maximize the quality of life with more equitable sharing of shelter, clean air, water and food within a sustainable, safe and secure environment" there will be little for our children and grandchildren to look forward to. This quote was the theme of our Pre-Habitat II Town Meeting in April in Sarasota, Florida, where we as citizens and NGOs tried to act locally and think globally. Equality can never be reached, but more equitable sharing of resources can. The increasing gap, both in the developing and developed world, between the rich and poor is inexcusable. There are basic needs, especially safe water and environmental sanitation, which everyone in every human settlement should have. Hopefully, the Platform of Action coming out of Habitat II in June 1996 will accept strong recommendations for implementation and commitments for funding to follow up on the 1990 New Delhi Statement "Some for all instead of more for some."

When I was asked to review some of the changing policies and strategies related to water resources and environmental sanitation with an emphasis on gender issues, I could hardly wait to start. This is where my concerns have been for many years.

First, it seems fitting today to be reviewing the challenge of the New Delhi statement made six years ago at *Safe Water 2000*. Even though I was unable to attend, my review paper on "The Interrelationship of the DECADE OF WOMEN, 1975-1985, and the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade, 1981-1990", (Elmendorf 1990) was prepared for that meeting.

Over the years, somehow people from India (or in India) have played key roles in my relations to this sector. The rest of the world has much to learn from your innovative projects and ideas. I'll never forget Dr Pathak's presentation about Sulabh in Bangkok in 1983 at the first International Conference on the Management of Human Waste. Many taboos were broken. The panel on Community Participation was more than rhetoric... as were the discussions of women after my paper, "Women as Managers of Human Waste: Training for New Roles and Retraining for Old". Both issues were included for the first time in financing and management panels. I had just finished preparing, for the World Bank, a project proposal for UNDP originally called Promotion and Support for Women's Involvement in Water Supply and Sanitation, now PROWWESS. During the last thirteen years, many of

the training and research techniques developed and tested through PROWWESS, thanks in a large part to two women from India, Lyra Srinivasan and Deepa Narayan, are now a part of mainstream development in the World Bank, USAID and NGO's, with wide spread acceptance of the methodology described in *Participatory Development Tool Kit*, published here in India by UNDP/World Bank.

But I must concentrate my remarks to an overview of the last two decades... both the challenges and strategies.

Today, the whole world is more aware of water - as a basic need, a human right - something all human settlements depend on and without which civilizations fall. In 1972, Ester Boserup, suggested that the lowering water table was a possible cause of the collapse of the Mayan Civilization. Now, as population and demands for water grow, so does the potential for severe water shortages and violent conflict (Falkenmark et al, 1993). Daily, more than one-fifth of the world's people struggle to collect enough clean drinking water to survive, while it's estimated that up to 50 per cent of the water supply in many of our growing cities is wasted. In our Florida USA community, it is estimated that over half the potable water is used for irrigated landscapes, including large quantities on the proliferating golf courses, while numerous families drink from polluted wells and the fish in our bays are dying. We need to target better use of our limited resource.

First, a few quotes which are important to understand and accept if we hope to achieve the challenge of reaching the unreached by the 21st Century:

Just before her death in 1982, Barbara Ward wrote: "Many cultures share a profound belief that water is the basic sustenance of humankind. That most fearsome image of pollution, the deliberate poisoning of the wells, has always haunted people. It is not chance that this was the first form of warfare to be outlawed". Twenty years ago she said, "to give the world clean drinking water and decent sanitation might cost US\$ 80 million a day for the next 10 years. This is trifling compared with the continuing haemorrhage of resources to the instruments of death - on which we spend a shameful US\$ 1,400 million a day" (Ward, 1976).

In Beijing last summer, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, there were numerous panels on poverty and peace in which the consensus reached was that as long as there are millions of babies dying, people hungry and suffering in poverty, there will be wars. A Women's Peace Platform for the 21st Century presented the following statistics.

Each year the world spends US\$ 800 billion on the military, US\$ 400 billion on cigarettes, US\$ 250 billion on advertising, and US\$ 285 billion on beer, wine and golf - a total of US\$ 1,735 billion on unessentials! Something is wrong!! According to UNICEF, the world needs only US\$ 34 billion per year to provide basic needs - for safe water and sanitation, only US\$ 9 billion (See Figure 1).

Even if the needs are US\$ 50 billion, using conventional approaches, certainly it could be feasible to reach full coverage by the year 2000, as estimated in the New Delhi statements, if annual world military spending was reduced by 10 per cent, or US\$ 80 billion. The remaining US\$ 30 billion could then be applied in an integrated program for the related human security needs of US\$ 25 billion. Today, just as Barbara Ward said in 1982, "So far this insane scale of priorities remains acceptable to the rich - both to the rich nations of the North and to the rich minorities in the South." Priorities must change. Knowing how difficult it has been to reduce spending in the military industrial complex, we might focus instead on the advertising industry and request that one-fifth of their US\$ 250 billion yearly be allocated to solving the world-wide problems of poverty, water and sanitation. The advertising industry could help us with social marketing as we harness the "consumption gap" (Whyte, 1994). Increasing taxes by 10 per cent on cigarettes, beer and wine would yield US\$ 93.5 billion which could be used for social programs while, at the same time, improving the world's health.

As Noleen Heyzer, the Director of UNIFEM said: "It is unacceptable that as we go into the 21st century, women make up 70 per cent of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor".

But first we have to ask some questions... Where were we in 1975? How have we come this far?

To answer these questions I want to review the highlights from some of the major UN Conferences in the last two decades. First, back to 1976 at Habitat 1 in Vancouver, where Barbara Ward and Margaret Mead scandalized the official UN Conference by marching through the conference corridors with pails of water on their heads. "What in the world does water have to do with human settlements?", asked a shocked ambassador from a developing country. World consciousness was raised and the UN adopted the target of *Clean Water for All by 1990*: "To ensure to every village and city safe drinking water and reasonable sewage disposal... a need so basic and human that not even the most indifferent or arrogant of ruling groups could block it" (Ward, 1976).

An estimated 1 billion people are still without an adequate supply of water (Seragelden, 1994). Even cities where people had never thought about where their water comes from or if it is safe are beginning to worry. In fact, the American Association of Microbiologists announced on May 22, 1996, that U.S. cities should prepare for epidemics and deaths from unsafe drinking water unless something is done immediately (Pipeline 1996).

During the last twenty years, water and sanitation have been recurring themes at UN Conferences with increasing focus on the roles of women (See Figure 2). Lets take a quick look at the changes from 1975.

In 1975, when the women's movement in the USA was in full swing, many of the delegates to the First UN Conference on Women in Mexico were so engrossed with their own demands for equality in salary, political representation, etc. that they were surprised by the strident pleas for help in alleviating unnecessary suffering from hunger, illness and poverty and the deaths of 2 out of 3 babies born in many developing countries. The Plan of Action finally adopted said: "Improved, easily accessible,

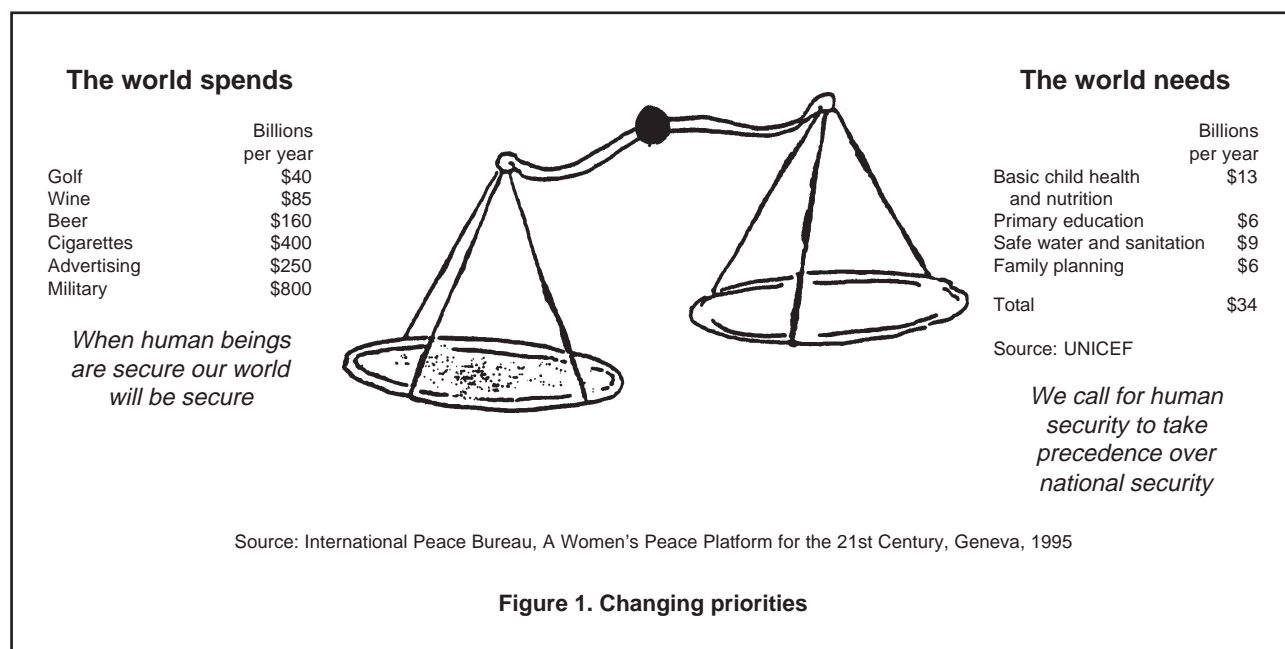


Figure 1. Changing priorities

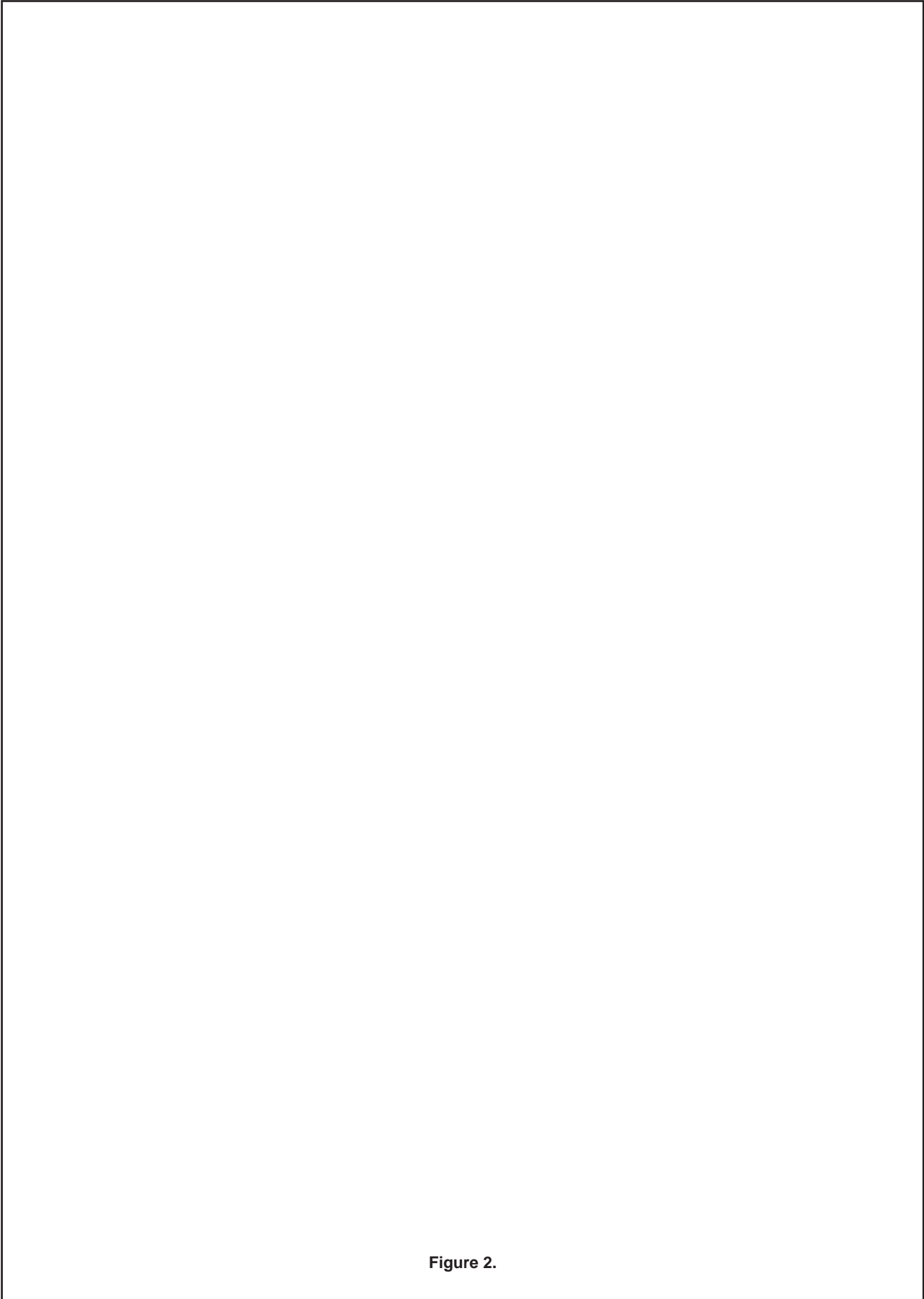


Figure 2.

safe water supplies, sewage disposal, and other sanitation measures *should be provided* both to improve health conditions of families and to reduce the burden of carrying water which falls mainly on women and children." By 1980, at the Mid-Decade Conference on Women in Copenhagen, a strong resolution was passed supporting the goals of the IDWSSD calling on: "Member States and UN agencies, including specialized agencies, to promote full participation of women in planning, implementation, and application of technology for water supply projects." By 1985, at the UN Conference in Nairobi, the *Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women* built on the growing realization during the Decade of Women that for the unserved populations to obtain access to water and use it effectively *women must participate*. "Govern-

ments should integrate women in the formulation of policies, programmes and projects for the provision of basic shelter and infrastructure" (Para. 207). "Efforts to improve sanitary conditions, including drinking water supplies, in all communities . . . should be extended with the participation of women at all levels in the planning and implementation process" (Para. 225) (See Figure 3).

By 1986 it was obvious that, "Water for irrigation, for crops, for food, for cattle, and for domestic purposes are treated as separate problems by outsiders - but it is all one problem, a single resource to people, especially the women, in the community. The linkages, the interrelationships, the recyclable quality of water itself - all combine to make separation impossible. Recent studies point out clearly that by relieving women of the time and energy spent or



Source: "Water, Waste and Women: The Hidden Dimension", M. Elmendorf, Seminar: Water and Wastewater Management, Singapore, 1986

Figure 3. Women, the focal point for the delivery of basic services

lost in the drudgery related to obtaining and using unsafe water, women can become more equal partners - or less unequal partners . . . in overall development activities. Women are the focal point for delivery of basic services with water the primary resource.” (Elmendorf, 1986).

By 1996, the Fourth World Conference of Women emphasized “the progress of whole societies is deeply linked with the empowerment of women” (Heyzer, 1996). But how do we get community involvement, women’s involvement and understanding gender issues?

The documentation is there to show that it is women - as mothers, wives, daughters and partners who, since 1975, have known clearly, and spoken out loudly, for water and environmental sanitation as keys of family and community health - and sustainable development (Elmendorf, 1990). Twenty years ago - even forty years ago - some of us believed that community participation with women’s involvement, combined with technical assistance and support at local, national and international levels could bring about lasting solutions to felt needs such as safe drinking water. The some of us who believed were few in the beginning but, over the years, the numbers have increased as strategies have been refined, new techniques have been developed to communicate, to encourage participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation. Forty years ago - even twenty years ago - the ideas that women’s involvement could make a significant difference were derided or laughed at, or just tolerated. Some of us remember as late as the early 1980’s how difficult it was to even get a Women’s Task Force on the Interagency Committee of International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. It wasn’t until the ninth meeting that acceptance was reached that women should be involved at every level and at all stages of the project cycle for sustainability and effective use.

When the environment and public health ministers from more than 80 countries gathered in the Netherlands with the Collaborative Council in 1994, they agreed that their goal was to provide water supplies and sanitation to everyone. However, as Deborah Moore said in the November 1994 *Environmental Defence Fund Bulletin*, “they tackled neither the issues of financing nor managing”. The water problem is exacerbated not by population growth alone, as many in the developed countries tend to believe. “There has been a threefold increase in world population this century . . . During the same period total global water withdrawal has risen by a factor of 10: from 500 cubic kilometres to 5,000 cubic kilometres” (Falkenmark and Lundqvist, 1993).

Even if all or some of the billions of dollars being wasted on “unessentials” were allocated to reach the unreached, we still must carefully examine the technologies we are using, eliminate unnecessary waste and pollution as well as the inequity of distribution of our water resources, and use “a truly gender-based participatory approach to in-

volve and empower women” (Wakeman, 1993). Once the unreached have safe drinking water, these women will then be able to work with us as together we build a more just, more equitable, more stable, more peaceful, sustainable society with an improved quality of life for all.

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- Additional information was obtained from various documents from official UN meetings and NGO Forums from 1975 through 1995. Also examined were various materials during and following the IDWSSD including the 1990 New Delhi Statement and 1992 Dublin Statement.