

## **Access to Information and Knowledge: Enhancing Women's Capacities Millennia 2015**

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### **Introduction**

The building of Millennia 2015 and its first meeting constitute, in my view, a turning point in the work developed for many years by all of us present here on women's recognition by society at large. All those present, including those unable to attend, are involved in women's issues. We are women not only coming from different parts of the world but also having different involvements in life and in work, different approaches as well as belonging or living in different cultures which means with differences in behaviours, choices and values.

What is the novelty? It is the possibility and capacity to be in continuous contact between and among each other with the benefit offered by technological developments.

It is indeed difficult to coordinate the endeavour, as Marie-Anne and her team knows, but the help of all of us together with the new technologies, constitute a change related to the rapidity of communications as an instrument for the commitment of those involved. This is a change as well as great possibility of cooperating in consonant ways, to face the rapidity of changes in the social and cultural areas occurring all over the world.

### **Millennia 2015 and our tasks as a global operation,**

In this meeting, we have a great opportunity, being together, to clarify our most urgent tasks.

Our **first** task is, in my view, to be aware of present changes but most important, to identify the future challenges coming from overall past and present changes in society.

The motivation that brings us here these days and, specifically, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, is crucial for all of us and is the following: we know that women can make a difference in society. The awareness of what I have called for a long time the visibility to ourselves and of our capacities, means that we have to be more and more visible in society as a whole as we are able to make a change, at the same time, to be able to do so, we must develop the capacity of looking ahead.

In this context, I wish to recall the great work, stretched through the years, by Elise Boulding in her writings, actions, teaching and I think also in her being a woman with a large family. Her high professional capacity, joint with being an activist for women, peace and future thinking, are an important mandate for all of us and for what we must strive to do. These interlinked commitments made Elise visible at the international level. This is a clear guide for all of us. She is also an example of what I have always called one of women's capacities, that of being able to do many things and, at the same time, do them well. I think every woman experiences this in every day life as in work or professional responsibilities. One of her very concise phrases, very valid today, is the definition of "peace culture" as a culture that promotes peaceful diversity. Indeed this is a **second** task, at all levels of our lives, as women.

This is what many women, in this meeting, and in the world, are also doing: working as scholars, researchers, decision makers and at the same time activists and responsible people in view of the future. Not easy as we all well know. These multiple and often contemporary activities, help us to become mediators as well as capable of bearing different responsibilities at the same time. Once more this is not easy and mostly invisible or at least taken for granted by most people. This is how our next tasks emerge.

### **A few historical recollections useful to understand our present and future tasks**

The struggle of women to become visible, has been very long. We could consider, as starting points, the "Declaration of women and their rights" by O. de Gouges in 1791, as well as the many movements which were initiated by women in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in different countries, in England or in revolutionary movements in Germany, Austria and Italy as well as in many other parts of the world as North America and in Latin America.

Even if I cannot here recall all such movements in the world at that time, we should recognize that all these women had an anticipatory vision of themselves in the future society.

The actual struggle for the right to vote, as Millennia 2015 shows, is now one hundred years old. It is interesting to recall that New Zealand gained the right to vote in 1883, although women could not be candidates. Australia gained it between 1884 and 1906, south of Australia coming first. Finland gained the right to vote in 1906, at the same time as the recognition of its democracy, Norway in 1910, Denmark and Iceland in 1915, UK in 1918, US in 1920, France in 1945 and Italy in 1946, after the second world war. It is interesting to note the differences in time and location, in terms of historical contexts and developments, within each geographical area.

Hence the struggle to acquire rights has been long and differentiated. What is, important, at the same time, in my view, is the effort of these women to become visible, as shown by these activities, as well as to be aware of their efforts to be recognized as actors of change in society.

The struggle is certainly still on and the aims are far from being reached in many parts of the world. The efforts of many women preceding us in their anticipatory

vision of the future, is the basis of our task today, towards acquiring recognition of ourselves as well as being recognized by society as a social value or more, richness. In a few words: our **third** task is to recognize and be recognized in our capacities, as women, to be actors of change and not victims in society which is, unfortunately, still true in different manners, in many contexts.

Recognizing ourselves as actors of social change means also being builders of future alternatives. This is as, we all know, still an ongoing struggle, in all our different contexts but, at the same time, it is a strong hope.

The specificity of being able to be actors of change, is linked to the other capacity of women, that of identifying future challenges in the present and for the future which, as I have previously written, leads to women's first task. No woman whatever her age, location, culture or status, married or not, with children or not, has the capacity, with or without her awareness, to look at the future.

I base this statement on many years of empirical research in different parts of the world. The women working in tea plantations in the Rift Valley in Kenya, said they were doing such very hard work, because they did not want their children to have the same life. The women in China's factories said the same thing. Women in social movements, whether they accept or not having children, dedicate their work and life to facilitate a better future of the society in whatever context they have chosen to work. They work for less poverty, to alleviate illness and, most of all, to educating women and children. I could go on these lines but I am sure you all present here, have similar experiences. This is the main and unique capacity of women wherever they are: the awareness of what is needed for the future or of what is a danger for the future. Responsibility of, and for, future generations, even the unborn as well as looking ahead for many decades, is a specific capacity of women.

Women are hence social actors and in their capacity of looking ahead they are builders of alternative futures. This is exactly the opposite of women considered victims. I wish thought to stress, that this role is based on the above described, specific capacities such as being able to do many things at the same time, to be mediators and capable of bringing into being a peace culture. I am sure that many of you here are aware of this. As Vandana Shiva, Indian physicist, but even more important, someone who has called attention to the role of women involved in development all over the world, says: "destruction is violent and visible; balance and harmony are not seen but experimented". Also Alain Tourain, the French sociologist, has at the core of his thinking on democracy, the concept that women are helping their societies to live with their conflicts. Balance and harmony are achieved not by one act of heroism but by gradually building the future day by day.

At the same time, women are often the silent builders of alternative societies and this is very important, more than ever, because of rapid and interrelated changes. As a consequence, the need for women, to be visible, has to be stressed.

Alternatives in society usually emerge from people outside the present social structures which, once more, means also women, who are still not properly recognized as crucial to changes in social structures and hence still not seen as social

actors. It is possible for women in some countries to achieve high positions in economic, political or scientific spheres. Just to mention some of whom we are all, as women, very proud, I recall the presidents of Germany, Finland and Chile. These are great recent achievements, and in the three cases with incredible democratic consensus. In science there are many other extraordinary women who have made a significant contribution to society with their research also gaining Nobel prizes. Despite this the majority of women are not recognised for their social contribution.

### **The fourth task of women is that of networking based on women's capacities**

Empirical work carried among and with women's groups which have emerged, in a spontaneous manner among women to face emergency situations such as wars, conflicts and natural catastrophes by creating networks, emerged clearly in many parts of the world. Many cases were found in countries as Rwanda, Armenia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Colombia or El Salvador as well as many others.

This shows that the process of women as social actors is emerging all over the world. As a result a vision of the future by women emerges in terms of a future based on peace and safety for future generations, hence alternative futures to present trends. The process is on and as all social processes, it will not go back but it needs the support of other women all over the world.

Here the other capability emerges which leads to the **fourth task**, and most probably the main task, for all women is that of creating networks built by themselves for themselves: women's networks created by women.

This is the reason why Millennium 2015, as world network, is important as it encourages women's networks around the world to go on enlarging the participation and involvement of more women not only from different countries, but also from different paths of life, to join in an invisible world network.

This is a response to my dream or vision of the future: a world embraced in a great network which brings change, alternative societies, as well as shared responsibility for future generations. The vision needs to be depicted, in its seeds, in the past and the present, through indications of major developments in women's networking. It is with your presence here, as well as of those that share the commitment, but could not be present, and of other women who will join in the future, that a world network may emerge. If the process is on, it also needs continuous adaptation to on going and continuously more rapid social changes. It is important to stress here, the fact that their, our capacities, although not recognized, are specifically adapted to a changing, as well as a complex, society,

### **What do women have to do for the future?**

Within this context and over and beyond the capacities of women, previously outlined, such as to be visible to themselves, to be able to do different things at the same time, mediators and actors in society and not only victims, to be aware of future challenges and hence builders of alternative futures as well as being able to network with other women, all of which indicate our common tasks, we have to search for

tools to be able to make these capacities visible in an ever complex and interrelated society. The tools are here in communication tools, and will be developed further also in alternative terms, if we look at existing trends in technologies. We have to learn to use such tools in more creative manners. The possibilities offered by communication technologies are towards being in contact, knowing what other women are thinking and doing in other parts of the world as well as exchanging the knowledge of needs and efforts. These are the tools that women have to develop, so as to enhance their capacities towards networking by using, in a continuously creative way, the new tools offered by technologies with the final aim of gaining more and more visibility of their being strong social actors in the present as well as in future societies and as such able to indicate alternative futures to present trends.

We have hence the tools and may have many more in the future, to develop our capacities towards continuously realizing our tasks in society: this is our new challenge for the future.

#### Notes

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