

INTEGRATED ECOLOGY AND WOMEN

Ainise Sevele
WUCWO Board Member
CWL, Tonga

I was born to a closely knit extended family system where culture and traditions have a deep and profound respect for Mother Earth which had sustained us as a people over centuries and still continues to do so as subsistence agriculture and traditional fishing continue to form the backbone of the Tongan economy.

Tongan women had never been “traditional gatherers”. It was our men who had the dual role to hunt and gather as women’s roles were confined to the home and taking care of the children. Yet our female ancestors were able to acquire invaluable knowledge from their fathers and husbands about the ecological cycle of life and how it played a vital role in ensuring good harvests through the year. Our women still continue to benefit from this invaluable knowledge today.

However, and sadly to say, over the last four decades with the coming of progress in the form of development to our part of the world, many local farmers now are turning to pesticides and chemicals and planting hybrids and genetically modified seedlings which are very harmful to the environment and to human health, to increase yields and productions. I pray that traditional farming which produces wholesome and organically grown foodstuff and environmentally friendly, will still continue to be highly valued and appreciated in Tonga in years to come despite the coming of change.

Of course the growing environmental abuse that is becoming evident in Tonga now are multiplied a thousand folds when one sees what’s happening everywhere else in the world where we have taken so much and give back so little to Mother Nature, and all in the name of PROGRESS!! We are now desperately trying to escape the dangerous effects of this folly by spending billions in our search for answers and solutions to help solve the irreparable damage we have done to NATURE!

Here in the Pacific we have just woken up to realize that with our greed to overfish our waters for financial gain we are leaving our future generations at risk of having very little for themselves and their families. We have just discovered to our horror that in our greed to obtain more from the land, we have over exposed our lands to pesticides and chemicals which not only adversely affect the fertility of the soil but the threat of chemical seepage to our shallow water table is imminent. We are now watching helplessly as many parts of the Pacific islands are fast sinking through no fault of ours but the onus falls on us to seek for funds to help repair the damage done to our island countries. We watch in fear as pollution related illnesses, some still with no known cures, sweep across the globe!

In this rat race for globalization with modern technologies taking over farming especially in Third world countries, the displacement of women farmers as a result is a sad reality.

For centuries, women in these regions have kept the world sustained through their innovative knowledge in agriculture which had always been based on a deep appreciation and awareness of the vital importance of conserving nature's life and understanding it's renewable methods in relation to food production. And now ,as the green revolution takes over food production with it's self renewing food system and high tech-machineries, it bulldozes down both the ecologically sound technologies invented and used by women and the ecological balance of Nature. And what do you get as a result? Rural women to whom poverty is a daily companion and to whom their families depend on for food, are being sidelined and left destitute and forgotten in the development process. Increased poverty and furthering of inequalities between men and women continue to haunt our world.

So what shall we do as women to save the planet? Women in any society and culture are embedded in Nature. We were both created by God to nurture and grow Life. This common bond has automatically led women to a most intimate relationship with Nature. Whether it's the environment or our children, we are the prime caretakers of the Earth. As such, we are duty bound to our Creator whose endless love is manifested in His creation of Mother Earth from which mankind can draw life from, to ensure that Mother Earth is well guarded against degradation. We have an obligation to rise above our differences and stand together to define our roles in protecting and nurturing our world. We are the voice of today after all it's us women, who are at the very heart of the ecological crisis.

It is heartening to see so many ecological movements springing up everywhere in the world and led by women who are passionate and deeply committed to making a difference to the lives of millions of voiceless women who are marginalized through poverty and social exclusion. Because ecological breakdown and social inequality are intrinsically linked, one would find at the heart of these ecological movements the pressure for change against social injustices done against women. Also at the heart of these movements is a call for a culture of peace. As women were endowed with the Godly gift of growing and nurturing Life, we were also endowed with a strong yearning for a peaceful environment in which to bring up our children. It is no small wonder that the feminine humanity embodies the promise of peace and non violence.

I am grateful to God that we, as members of WUCWO under the competent leadership of our President General, are blessed with a listening and sensitized heart and an ever increasing awareness of the woes of women around the world. True to our evangelical mission, we stand together and make our collective voices be heard at every decision making level about social injustices done to our sisters in Christ. If the voices of 5 million women cannot be heard, then what can? In our General Assembly 2006,the theme was "Women as Peacemakers". One of the resolutions adopted at this conference was 'The Woman Saves the Environment' which urged women to be better equipped and more committed to taking care of creation. The GA2006 clearly illustrated WUCWO's

commitment to pursuing a culture of peace, a world where the ecological balance is respected and to be a beacon of hope to the oppressed.

As solutions to the ecological crisis, I suggest that we start by continuing to teach our young about the value of life and the environment we live in, after all they are our investment for a more prosperous and healthier future. Too often at times, and I am speaking here from my own experience, we can be so caught up trying to create a better future for our children that we overlook to teach them about the simplicity of that wonderful gift given to us by our Creator...Life. It never ceases to annoy me when I see some of our beautiful beaches here being littered with empty cans, dirty diapers and dirty plastic containers by people who have no respect for a clean environment nor the wellbeing of others. The onus is on us as the first teachers for our children to continue to set good examples and to live by what we preach.

Secondly, as ecological degradation affects mostly women in developing countries, greater access to land which is being taken over by large corporations for development, will give women more power and financial freedom to utilize the land with informed knowledge and skills to increase productivity of food supplies for their families. In many places women cannot legally own land and often find themselves at the mercy of landowners. If women were given the opportunity to own land, it will certainly make it easier for them when it comes to applying for a loan to cultivate their land. It will also be a greater source of empowerment to women in reducing their fear of social and financial insecurities.

Thirdly, women's informed knowledge in agriculture must be recognized and included in the decision making process. .

Lastly, women's knowledge and presence in environmental development process must be sought and be heard on the political level.

May the Holy Spirit continue to touch the life of WUCWO in our efforts to attain peace for humanity and may Mary, Queen of Peace with Her intercession keep us on the right path.....

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