

Women: Building Sustainable Futures

In November IFUW held an online discussion on 'Women: Building Sustainable Futures, for us and the generations to come', moderated by Pete van der Loo from the Netherlands. The first week defined sustainable futures. The contributions showed that sustainability is more than just an ecological issue. It links ecological, social AND economic interests. The goal of sustainability is to reach "a good balance between the 3 p's: people, planet and profit".

The second week identified barriers and looked at whether these differ between countries and societies. Contributors showed great concern about the future and the fact that mankind has failed to take care of the earth in recent centuries due to consumerism, political, social and religious beliefs and short-term interests. This, in turn, has led to ecological, economic and social disasters and to an unsustainable balance between people, planet and profit. Barriers were seen to be much the same all over the world, but specifics vary greatly due to differences in wealth, politics, social and religious beliefs and habits.

The third week discussed the driving forces for a more sustainable future. In general, contributors agreed that it is very important to understand and to be aware of the consequences of our actions, to understand the link between marketing, consumerism, and overpopulation and the way people respond to these. Short-term need or greed is the problem. If we overuse the resources of our earth, nothing will be left for the generations to come. We have to focus more on long term needs. Solidarity is important in reaching this, but we also need vision, good leadership and peace.

Most contributors agreed that education is very important if we are to reach a more sustainable life on earth. Children are the future, so it is necessary that they learn the importance of sustainability from the beginning. However, the situation is so urgent, that we cannot wait until our children become adults. We have to 'educate' all adults, politicians and other decision makers, including the media, who, in return, have a responsibility to 'educate' society.

As defined in the IFUW Programme for Action and in Our Common Future (the Brundtland report), sustainability is built on a good balance between economic development, social justice and human rights and the protection of and respect for the environment. Education helps us to reach such a balance. IFUW can play an important part in the education aspect as a driver or vehicle for sustainability.

The discussion looked at ways individuals can promote and practice sustainable futures. Someone quoted Gandhi: 'Be the change you want to see in the world', and added that she practices the R's: Reduce, Re-use, Recycle and Refuse. Most contributors gave examples of these R's in their daily lives, reducing their ecological footprint with small actions such as saving energy, water and paper, buying local products, travelling by public transport, etc. Many try to generate awareness and enthusiasm for a sustainable lifestyle among colleagues, students, neighbours, friends, children and grandchildren. "Waste not and want not" is the motto for the life style one member practices and promotes. We need a change in mindset and attitude and should adopt a sustainable lifestyle moving away from our current "throw-away" culture.

An international campaign to raise awareness of political ecology through education is needed. As education has an impact at every age, sustainable futures should be part of civic education. Some contributors wrote that they advocate for sustainability among politicians and decision-makers, who need this pressure to even consider sustainability. It was suggested that developing economies could

adopt responsible approaches in their development efforts, using the information on the mistakes made by the more 'developed' countries. Further, scientists and experts should use their knowledge to come up with real green technologies, integrating nature into the planning and designing of buildings, communities and cities worldwide, and building environmental costs into the prices of products.

The final week asked for suggestions on what IFUW and NFAs can do for a sustainable future. IFUW and NFAs can raise and promote the issue of sustainability through international, national, regional and local meetings and discussions. IFUW can also promote education on sustainability and help to raise the profile of this issue, for example at the next conference in Mexico. It was also suggested that IFUW make greater use of its connections and share and stimulate best practices by providing a platform (for instance the website) so that this discussion can continue and members can share successes and failures on practicing and promoting sustainability.

IFUW can draw attention to the subject when advocating at UN organizations. NFAs can do the same at national level. IFUW and NFAs should liaise more with other groups working on sustainability (co-operate on presentations, send representatives to meetings, etc). More women should get involved in raising these issues with governments and more use should be made out of the knowledge, power and strength of individual members. IFUW should encourage research and innovation by women to promote peace, good governance and policy on environmental stewardship and poverty alleviation in general.

This discussion showed that sustainability is a worldwide issue and that it needs a worldwide approach. We all have to make take the first step. We hope that this discussion will encourage all members to bring a sustainable future closer.

Peet van der Loo
Discussion Moderator

The complete report on the Sustainable Futures Discussion can be downloaded from
www.ifuw.org/docs/sustainable-future.pdf

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
Our Common Future
(The Brundtland Report)