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Women's leadership for the environment as a human right in Europe, Eastern Europe and Beyond

Madame Chairs, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor for me to be here in Belgrade for this important event.

We are here today because we know that the great environmental challenges of our time cannot be addressed, without the leadership and the participation of women.

Gender equality is a matter of social justice, and a matter of political necessity.

We must join forces to empower women and make women visible.

It is almost exactly three years since the The United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) first Global Women's Assembly on the Environment was held in Nairobi.

To me, this meeting in Nairobi was one of the highlights of my career as Minister for the Environment, with Nobel Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai as our most honored guest.

Her knowledge and her spirit are precious resources in our joint mission for a better future.

Today, I will share with you some of my personal views on women's leadership and strategies for female empowerment.

I will do this on the basis of my experience as the former Swedish Minister for the Environment and former co-chair of the Network of Women Ministers for the Environment.

But I will do it also as a former professor of economic history, with gender as a main interest.

The key topic on the agenda for our conference today is environmental human rights.

This approach has great potential.

As stated in the Rio Declaration, human beings are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

Currently, a rights-based approach to environmental protection is gaining ground, worldwide. I am deeply convinced that a rights-based approach will contribute in important ways to women's struggle for a healthy environment and sustainable development.

However, as a policymaker, involved in everyday political struggles, I also think that we need accompanying strategies, built on complementary lines of reasoning.

Human rights constitute the basis of our national societies and our global community.

But in everyday politics, progress often depends on more pragmatic approaches.

In my view, the key challenge for the women's movement of today is to identify the most successful strategies to be used by women in their struggle for equality, empowerment and sustainable development.

In this endeavor, there are wide-ranging lessons to be learnt from earlier experience in various countries.

These lessons from history supply some basic insights, but they also make clear that strategies must differ, according to circumstances.

A strategy that is successful in one country might well fail in another.

Even within Europe, countries differ tremendously as regards political traditions, legal institutions, and gender regimes.

To illustrate what diverse feminist strategies are available to us, let me tell you a bit about my own country, Sweden.

A research colleague of mine has labeled Sweden "The different country".

He has done so, because in World Values Surveys, Sweden is always an outlier.

"It is important for Swedish people to understand that we are the ones who are different", my colleague says. "Because if Swedes do not understand that they are the ones who are different, they cannot communicate well with others, and they cannot make use of their distinctiveness as a cultural resource".

My colleague points out that Swedish people have different values from most other people as regards for example gender relations, religion, and children's rights.

Swedes are often radical as regards life styles. At the same time, Swedish people strongly support the welfare state, with its strong demands for tax payments and solidarity with others. I can add that Sweden is also a country with strong public institutions – but with no strong constitutional court. In consequence, legal tools matter little in Swedish politics.

As you know, Sweden stands out as one of the most successful countries in the world as regards both gender equality and environmental protection.

This strong emphasis on women and environment is, no doubt, part of the distinctiveness of Swedish political culture.

How did this happen?

Are there lessons to be learnt from the Swedish case, in spite of its uniqueness?

I think that there are lessons to be learnt, for Europe and beyond, in particular as regards political discourse and strategy.

So let us have a closer look: what political discourses and strategies have been instrumental in Sweden in promoting gender equality and early measures to ensure environmental protection?

A decisive factor, in my view, is the long-standing Swedish discourse on population and health as drivers of economic development.

From the 1930s and onwards, the population issue was on the top political agenda in Sweden, due to rapidly declining birth rates.

But in contrast to most other countries in Europe at the time, where population issues were tied to reactionary movements, Swedish social democrats turned the population issue into a basis for radical reform.

In view of declining birth rates, they argued that the only way to stop population ageing - and thereby secure continued economic prosperity - was to improve the social conditions of parents and their children.

In particular, social democrats focused on public health measures.

This great interest from social democrats in public health measures helped to make women and children more visible.

This interest in public health also contributed – some decades later –to trigger an interest in environmental protection.

Although few social democrats, to be honest, were dedicated environmentalists, policies for environmental protection were easily reconciled with the long tradition of preventive public health policies.

A healthy environment was regarded as an investment, paying off in human capital.

For feminists, the Swedish population debate in the 1930s opened a window of opportunity. The most prominent Swedish feminist of the 20th century, Alva Myrdal, took the lead in shaping an entirely new discourse to empower women – a discourse based on economic arguments and the common interest.

According to this discourse, birth rates could only be raised if women were able to combine work and family.

To make this possible, benefits to mothers and children should be improved and married women gain new rights.

One of the greatest achievements in Swedish women's history was attained in 1939, when a law was passed that prohibited employers to dismiss women due to marriage or confinement. If women were allowed to stay on the labor market when married, they would be less reluctant to have babies, the argument went.

An American historian, Barbara Hobson, has noted that this law was passed in Sweden because Swedish feminists succeeded in arguing that such a law would be beneficial to society as a whole.

In the US, by contrast, where feminists in the 1930s tried to attain a similar law by referring to women's needs, they failed.

What the Sweden and US examples show, according to Barbara Hobson, is that strategies, that seemingly put women's rights and needs in the second place, nevertheless can have greater impact than strategies that more explicitly built on feminist arguments.

We must make women visible, by bringing women's issues into the mainstream political debate.

In Sweden, Alva Myrdal's strategy – to link women's issues to mainstream debates – has remained important..

The voice of the women's movement grew much stronger from the 1960s, but key achievements were still intimately linked to political battles fought without explicit feminist arguments.

Social democratic strategies to address class inequality, in particular, were instrumental in improving women's position on the labor market.

Demand for women's labor, in the wake of population ageing, also helped to empower women.

As in the 1930s, leading women observed the window of opportunity that had opened, and used it to trigger radical reform.

In parallel to this progress in women's position in Sweden, explicit policies for environmental protection were established from the 1960s, for the first time in Swedish history.

Like Swedish feminists, Swedish environmentalists did build on the political discourse on population, health and economic development, that were established in the 1930s.

In particular, environmentalists used the traditionally strong tradition of Swedish public health policies to push for stronger regulations, above all with regard to chemicals. Mercury was at the centre of political debates in Sweden at the time, linking – from the very beginning – environmental politics to women's health.

All in all, the basic idea of Swedish political culture, that population is a key resource in national economic development, contributed to make women and the environment visible.

In 1972, the first UN conference on the Environment took place in Stockholm.

Through this event, Swedish policies for women and the environment were eventually placed within a much larger, global agenda.

“Regarding the human environment”, Swedish prime minister Olof Palme stated in his key note address, “there is no individual future, neither for people, nor for nations. The future is common. We must share it in fellowship, We must create it together.”

Looking ahead, what are the challenges and possibilities for women working for development and environment, in Europe and beyond??

What are the most powerful arguments and strategies?

How can we succeed in placing our issues on top of the political agenda?

If I could decide myself, I would propose that women's organizations for the environment focus on two topics: health and climate change.

I am convinced that strategies based on health will remain key to our endeavor today, as they were in Sweden in the early 20th century.

As shown by the WHO, in their path-breaking report on Macro-Economics and Health, a healthy environment is a main driver of economic growth.

By emphasizing the human right to a healthy environment, we can contribute to making economic growth fair and sustainable.

I am deeply convinced that as long as we believe that economic progress depends on what's being done in business and politics only,

women and the environment will remain marginal.

But as soon as we understand that economic progress depends on the careful management of the most precious resources of our economy,

people and the environment,

we will recognize health as the key issue for the future, and women as the leaders.

The second topic I would like women's organizations to focus on, climate change, demands that we are able to renew our political agenda.

To succeed is critical at this stage of human development, when climate change stands out as the major environmental challenge of our time.

Women must take on a major responsibility in fighting climate change, to save the planet, but also to improve the position of women in a world where climate change will amplify social and gender inequalities.

If women's organizations take the lead, we can make the threat of climate change into a possibility for progress,

to challenge the current situation of global poverty and environmental degradation.

Climate change policy should be part of a broader effort to eradicate poverty and secure sustainable development.

In the Network for Women Ministers of the Environment, where I served as co-chair for three years, we worked, systematically, to draw attention to women's perspectives on health and climate change.

At every important ministerial meeting, we organized seminars open to everyone, to discuss issues related to the ministerial agenda.

Topics discussed included climate and energy, water management, sanitation, and chemicals. A major achievement was attained at the UNEP Governing Council in 2005, when a Council Decision was taken on Women and Environment, in view of intensifying the work of UNEP on these important issues.

In my work as co-chair, I tried to make use of my Swedish experience.

As the Swedish feminist Alva Myrdal once did when fighting for married women's right to employment,

I worked systematically to make women's issues a matter of common interest, for all ministers.

I did so, by showing why our political aspirations as ministers for the environment can only be fulfilled by addressing the concerns of women and by promoting female leadership for the environment.

To begin with most male ministers responded to our initiative on women and environment with disinterest.

Some of them even openly expressed that they regarded women's perspectives as highly irrelevant to environmental governance.

I never forget the introductory comment of my male co-chair at the Ministerial Roundtable Discussion on Gender and Environment, when we met to prepare the session.

"What is this!" he exclaimed. "I cannot see why environment has *anything at all* to do with women!"

After the session, however, when male and female ministers from all parts of the world had shared their views and experiences of women's leadership in environmental management and the urgent need to address the impacts of environmental politics on women, he closed the seminar in a quite different spirit.

“In fact” he said. “I did not believe at all in this idea of discussing women and environment. However, after this roundtable, I am on the edge of conversion...”.

In my view, all professional women, including ministers, have a duty to contribute to women’s liberation and a better future, for all.

We noticed, in the Network for Women Ministers for the Environment, that we could make our male colleagues listen to us in a way that they would not have done on the request of women’s organizations.

On the other hand, as women ministers we would never have succeeded as we did, without the support from you – activists and professional women from WEDO, from the WECF, from the UNIFEM, the UNDP, e tc.

Co-operation is the key.

I wish you good luck, and I urge you to continue to support women ministers, worldwide. Together, we can make a difference.