

Press Release



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Women Environmental Ministers join UNEP Executive Director and Grassroots Women Leaders in Support of a Women's Agenda for the Right to a Healthy Environment at UNECE "Environment for Europe" Conference in Belgrade, Serbia

Belgrade, SERBIA: At a standing room only luncheon attended by nearly one hundred (100) government delegates, citizen organizations and the international press sponsored by **Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF)**, **Women as a Voice for the Environment (WAVE)** and the **Environmental Ambassadors** (from Serbia), three women environmental ministers – two former and one present, were joined by the Executive Director of the United Nations Environmental Program in support of including grassroots women's concerns in the UNECE -- Environment for Europe -- deliberations.

Women Environmental Professionals and United Nations' Officials Speak out on Women's Experience and Contribution to the Creation of a Healthy Environment

Helen Bjornoy, the Minister of Environment from Norway gave clear credit to the women's movement for her rise not only to being the most prominent woman in environmental advocacy in Norway, but also to the realization of her earlier career as a Lutheran minister, saying that without the encouragement of women's activism, it is doubtful that she would have had the ability to create such a strong public life. She said that women have an important role to play in Europe's environment – bringing together a community that she believes is often needlessly splintered into small, separate groups working, for example, on climate, biodiversity, toxics, and energy policy.

"Women have some expertise about how to do more than give small solutions," Bjornoy stated. "There are three answers on how women can build bridges to the future – continuing the struggle for women's rights, networking, and making the connections on the issues."

Achim Steiner, Executive Director of UNEP and former Director General of the World Conservation Union praised the organizers of the event:

"I am particularly pleased with the way that you have chosen to link the environment with gender and with health."

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Steiner announced that he was launching a new, five- person strategic implementation team, essentially, the “Blue Berets” of UNEP and that he had specifically named Janet Macharia as a member of the team to serve as a strategic advisor on gender. **Steiner stated:**

“I would like to have gender issues become more and more part of how [UNEP] breathes, thinks and acts.” **He continued:** *“What you are doing is very important. We will continue to work with you, and with the networks – WEDO (the Women’s Environment and Development Organization) the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and WECF – together, we can make a difference.”*

Sascha Gabizon, Executive Director of Women in Europe for a Common Future (and former associate at the Wuppertal Institute in Germany), responded:

“Be assured that we will work with you [Steiner and UNEP] especially to bring the voices of grassroots women up to the decision making level.” noting that in contrast to the leaders in the room, Gabizon displayed a photo from the recent meeting of the G-8 where only one woman was present.

“We want to ensure more participation in decision making by women and other groups who are less well represented at the policy negotiation tables.”

Andjelka Mihajlov, former Environmental Minister for Serbia, currently representing **Environmental Ambassadors**, one of the co-sponsors of the event told the group:

“In the Eastern European countries, women are the most affected by both environmental and energy insecurity, and as a result, we are often more motivated than men for our future.” Mihajlov, who holds a PhD in chemical engineering, continued:

“We are working very hard to promote sustainable consumption patterns, advocating for green procurement at the governmental level and promoting partnerships between women and men, NGO’s and governments. Only if we work together can we make real change.”

Other presenters included **Professor Tamara Steger, of the Center for Environmental Policy and Law** who spoke on environmental rights and environmental justice in the European region;

Sabine Bruckman from the group **Unser Land** (“our land”) in Bavaria, Germany who spoke on the need to protect biodiversity at our doorsteps, not only in far away natural parks, giving the example of agrobiodiversity through promotion of apple juice from traditional apple orchards;

Anna Tsetkova of Mama 86 in Kiev in the Ukraine who discussed the extreme crisis of the lack of clean water and adequate sanitation facilities in Ukrainian rural areas where 11 million rural residents use water from wells, many of which are contaminated from latrines and septic tanks. and who also addressed the new global problem of privatization and increased costs of water for basic human needs;

Svitlana Slesarenok, representing **Mama 86’s chapter in Odessa, Ukraine** who covered the ongoing serious situation of Ukrainians who are still suffering from the effects of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, and who also addressed the lack of access to renewable energy choices for individual Ukrainians and her efforts to make non-nuclear energy choices more affordable; and

Marie Kranendonk of the Netherlands, President of Women in Europe for a Common Future, who shared the case study of the WECF colleague – **Nadezda Kutepova**, who is a human rights lawyer from the Mayak region of Russia where one of the world’s worst nuclear accidents took place in secret in 1957

and where the extremely negative health affects of radiation contamination continue to devastate the local communities.

“This is a clear case of the abuse of environmental rights and, indeed, environmental justice” exclaimed **Kranendonk**, *“the most affected are poor people in villages who were not evacuated after the accident and are from indigenous populations.”* **Kutepova** lost her parents at a very early age to cancer – both of whom were engineers assigned to participate in Mayak’s “clean up.”

Kutepova herself, is also quite sick, as are her children, nevertheless, she remains very active in the global movement to defend the rights of nuclear victims in general and in particular, to protest the ongoing “reprocessing” – misleadingly called “recycling” of high level nuclear waste in the Mayak region. This reprocessing is not really “recycling” at all since it also produces even more radioactive waste, that is still contaminating the local rivers and essentially making Mayak a dumping ground for Europe’s and even America’s nuclear waste due to the billions in revenue it is bringing to Russia.

Kranendonk closed emphatically and passionately stating that

“Nuclear power is not an acceptable answer to the problem of climate change.”

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A global plea by Armenian environmentalists for no US military intervention in Iran

The final speaker of the luncheon was **Karine Danielyan, former Minister of Environment of Armenia** and currently serving as a professor at Yerevan State University and an independent expert to the European Parliament.

Ms. Danielyan spoke of her experience in environmental issues, but saved her most impassioned remarks for the potential devastating environmental and health affects posed by recent threats of attacks by the United States on Armenia’s neighbor, the Republic of Iran.

“It is now time to say that indeed, the entire planet is at risk,” **Danielyan** said, *“I would like to stress that if there are bombing attacks, our region is facing huge dangers.”*

She continued:

“It is clear that attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities could cause radioactive contamination and repeated conventional bombing raids could trigger another earthquake in our geologically unstable region.”

Danielyan brought a petition signed by many Armenian environmental and human rights NGO’s and addressed to the governments of countries neighboring Armenia and the governments of the United States and Iran urging them to come to Yerevan, Armenia’s capital, and join in a round table discussion to find other solutions to their conflict and to prevent what could be an “ecological and economic catastrophe of major proportions” in the region. In circulating the petition amongst those gathered in the room, **Danielyan** implored the group to endorse their effort:

“I ask all of you to join with us to prevent this catastrophe.”

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Women in Europe for a Common Future will continue their activities at the UNECE Environment for Europe Conference with the following events:

- **October 11th: 10 am:** Visit from Dutch Minister on the Environment Ms. Jacqueline Cramer to WECF Info stand – Press Pictures can be taken
- **October 12th: 8am till 9.30:** Official Side Event on Eco-sanitation
- **October 13th: 9am till 7pm:** WAVE Conference at the Sava Center – press conference at 13.00 during lunch

Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF)

WECF is a network of organisations and individuals in Western and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia working for sustainable development, protection of human health and environment and poverty reduction. WECF strives for a Healthy Environment for All. We work to maximise women's potential in balancing the environment, our health and the economy. WECF's activities are based on its grassroots partners' individual visions and needs. Therefore WECF implements solutions locally and influences policy internationally.

Environmental Ambassadors:

Environmental Ambassadors (EA) is a non-profit project-oriented consulting group of leading experts in sustainable development and environment related issues based in Belgrade, Serbia.

UNECE Environment for Europe Conference

The "Environment for Europe" process is a unique partnership of the member States within the UNECE region, organizations of the United Nations system represented in the region, other intergovernmental organizations, regional environment centers, non-governmental organizations and other major groups that take a part in improving environmental protection and sustainable development issues in Europe.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, OR FOR INTERVIEWS ON SITE IN BELGRADE:

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