

Sustainable Development and Women Issues

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The concept of 'sustainable development' was introduced in 1983 by the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations, when it was decided that, in order to be considered 'sustainable', human development had to guarantee the needs of the current generation without compromising those of successive generations. Development is not, therefore, simply defined in economic terms but also includes a substantial improvement in the health of a population and a general increase in its educational level. As a consequence, development is tied to the progress made by women and there can be said to be a strong link between development and the status of women. Thinking about development leads us to examine our ideas about the role of women and thinking about this encourages us to think about women issues.

As income was held to be an insufficient indicator with which to explain the living conditions of a population, in 1990 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defined the *human development index*. This index has improved our understanding of the living conditions of the world's population and enabled us to understand the effective well-being of the inhabitants of each single country. It is multi-dimensional, considering three fundamental aspects of everyday life:

- 1) health (measured by life expectancy at birth);
- 2) education (measured by the rate of adult literacy and the number of pupils attending school);
- 3) and wealth (measured by income/head).

However, the data must be examined in a critical way in order to evaluate its meaning and relevance. Based on average results, one such indicator may conceal differences in development between men and women and it may be insufficient, if used in isolation, to reveal changes in the female condition. For this reason, a *gender index* has been proposed.

The Conferences in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and Beijing in 1995, spaced out as they were by a long series of forums and conferences of international importance, highlighted the role of women in important development issues. As fundamental elements of development (as regards reproduction, demographic processes and economic production), women are generally the first victims of underdevelopment; poverty and illiteracy are particularly evident.

The necessity of empowering women (or *giving them power*) was confirmed for the first time at the Beijing Conference, particularly from the viewpoint of a global strategy (*mainstreaming*). The term 'empowerment' was coined by feminists in the south but it has been recognised and applied all over the world, with various exceptions which depend on the context. It makes sense in Italy (and Europe) to speak of 'empowerment', the main aim being to recognise the autonomy of women, their participation on social and political levels and full access to the world of work and positions of power. Such objectives are key elements in pursuing a more 'correct', participatory and democratic development, that is, the current definition of 'sustained development'. Development is not only attributable to economic growth but it should include the pursuit of social objectives, one example of which is 'equal opportunities'.

Five years on from the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, the New York Summit +5 in 2000 stressed that, from a practical point of view, little progress had been made; yet again the importance of increasing the empowerment of women was confirmed. As included in the Report on Women in 2000, the data shows

that women are making progress but there still persists inequalities between the sexes. We can observe that:

- 1) the difference between the sexes regarding basic school education is diminishing but it will probably not be eliminated by the agreed date of 2005;
- 2) the difference in economic terms is also decreasing but women must still reconcile their family responsibilities with work outside the home;
- 3) the recent reduction in marriages and youth pregnancy is being translated into a substantial change in the quality of the life of many women.

One of the aims of further research should be to analyse the recent trends of the most important indicators in Italy and throughout the world, emphasising the varying socio-economic contexts under consideration and the different obstacles to the full participation of women in the labour market. This would facilitate any assessment of the situation, which may only become evident within the next ten years.

Another aim of research should also be to analyse the direct relationship between economic growth and an increase in employment, which until recently characterised the development of more industrialised countries and which is progressively weakening. The factors of so-called 'jobless growth' and 'growth without employment' are leaving their mark in an alarming way on the systems of production in the majority of advanced European countries; they are also significantly influencing the economies of overseas countries. Since a large part of the unexpressed potential workforce is represented by women, an analysis at least on a European level would be more than useful in highlighting those regions where the problem of unemployment is present.

As regards the situation in Italy, promoting female employment is still a necessity because it is a way of maintaining an elevated rate of employment notwithstanding current demographic processes in Italy. Bearing in mind this demographic dynamic, a further reason for encouraging female employment is the possibility of a twofold income and increased levels of employment, both of which are necessary components of our economic and social organisation.

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RESUME

Le développement ne se limite pas à la simple croissance économique; il consiste aussi en l'amélioration de la santé des populations et en l'élévation du niveau d'instruction: il apparaît donc comme le moyen privilégié du progrès de la condition féminine. Réfléchir sur le développement mène à s'interroger sur le rôle des femmes et la réflexion sur ce rôle mène à s'interroger sur la condition féminine.

A Pékin en 1995 on a averti l'exigence de donner davantage de pouvoir aux femmes, dans le cadre de stratégies globales. Malgré cela, au "Summit +5" de New York on a souligné combien peu de progrès ont été réalisés et que de très fortes inégalités subsistent entre les sexes. Le but de ce travail est celui de mettre en évidence les obstacles qui empêchent la pleine participation des femmes à la vie économique, sociale et politique.