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## Environmental Justice and Women's Rights: A Tribute to Wangari Maathai

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## **Environmental Justice and Women's Rights: A Tribute to Wangari Maathai**

**by Mechthild Nagel, SUNY Cortland and IAD fellow, Cornell University**

### **Abstract:**

The United Nations Millenium Development Goals (MDG) focus on key social, economic and political issues; gender and environment are just some of the areas noted. What are the lessons learnt from Kenya's Green Belt Movement (GBM), spearheaded by Wangari Maathai? MDG analysts might benefit from understanding an NGO's strategies, like GBM. It will be argued that GBM's consensus movement mobilized urban and rural women around tree planting income-generating activities, consciousness raising, women's rights, and political empowerment. GBM's harambee spirit has the potential of replication across the continent.

### **Introduction**

The occasion of Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 sent joyous waves across the world. This time an African woman was honored for her environmental justice engagement. Wangari Maathai has become accustomed to be the first in a few matters: she is the first woman PhD from Kenya, the first woman biology professor and department chair at a Kenyan university, and now the first woman from Africa to receive the prestigious prize, the first central African person (the others were Egyptian and South African men), and importantly, the first peace prize given to an activist who has made tremendous strives in raising awareness about environmental degradation.

It's interesting to note that several famous environmental causes have been associated with the symbol of tree as life: from the Chipko tree-huggers of northern India, to Maathai's tree-planting Green Belt Movement in Kenya, and finally the North American Earth First! Activists, who would even climb on old growth trees and remain there for over a year to protest indiscriminate logging of ancient forests (Julia 'Butterfly' being the most prominent woman among white radical environmentalists). More attention has been paid to the symbolism of tree hugging than to tree planting, especially in ecofeminist circles (Sturgeon 1997, 125). Many indigenous cultures associate the tree, or specific trees, as a symbol of peace. Maathai makes reference to those traditions in her acceptance speech of the Nobel prize:

In time, the tree also became a symbol for peace and conflict resolution, especially during ethnic conflicts in Kenya when the Green Belt Movement used peace trees to reconcile disputing communities. During the ongoing re-writing of the Kenyan constitution, similar trees of peace were planted in many parts of the country to promote a culture of peace. Using trees as a symbol of peace is in keeping with a widespread African tradition. For example, the elders of the Kikuyu carried a staff from the thigi tree that, when placed between two disputing sides, caused them to

stop fighting and seek reconciliation. Many communities in Africa have these traditions. (Maathai, official website, 2004a)

Maathai also notes that during the pro-democracy campaigns of the late 1980s, trees of peace were planted to draw attention to the plight of political prisoners. In her own protracted struggle with Moi's government over, democratization, land grabbing and privatization schemes, Maathai was maltreated and imprisoned. Her recent involvements have been with the Jubilee 2000 campaign (Maathai 2004b), and in a recent speech at the Beijing plus ten UN conference in New York City (2005), she reiterated the need for a cancellation of unpayable foreign debt of countries in the Global South.

### **What are some of the lessons for environmentalists and women's rights activists?**

I think we may be able to retire talk about Afropessimism, when such good news as GBM come out of Africa. In fact, we have to code a term like American nihilism, when it comes to the George Bush era, threatening the globe with perpetual war and with an environmental policy reaching total impunity: The 'Clear skies' initiative is a snub to the Kyoto Agreement. Gone are the long-term commitments to 'clean air' and water; chemical trails continue poisoning our atmosphere with mercury and other heavy metals; and fossil fuel proponents are celebrating the end of EPA regulations. A Brave New World indeed. Enter the activist Wangari Maathai, who already received the alternative nobel prize years ago. Her 2004 peace prize ruffled a few feathers, especially among those human rights stalwarts, who questioned why a 'peace prize' was given for non-political causes; after all, what does the environment have to do with peace and justice? In her response (to critics, perhaps), Maathai says the following:

In this year's prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has placed the critical issue of environment and its linkage to democracy and peace before the world. For their visionary action, I am profoundly grateful. Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come. Our work over the past 30 years has always appreciated and engaged these linkages (Maathai 2004a).

One might also wonder why celebrate an African initiative when the major players of greening the earth sit in Europe and the US? This Nobel recognition then strikes at two issues—the marginalization of African women and the marginalization of (women led) eco-justice movements in Africa. (Of course, I should hasten to say that Green Belt has become the most visible NGO on ecological issues in Africa.) It seems to me that the Nobel committee has also elevated women's rights on the continent—as Maathai's organization is clearly women identified (lost on her husband who accused her of being 'too male' and therefore had to divorce her). Other recent women Nobel winners, such as Aung San Suu Kyi, Rigoberta Menchu, and Shireen Ebadi, 2003 recipient, were honored for their advocacy for human rights, while Maathai's commitment to women's rights specifically was acknowledged by the Nobel selections committee. The importance of women's social and economic standing in Africa—even while politically

marginalized—has been recognized in many international forums. From a discourse of blaming the victim (for being an AIDS vector, for irresponsible foraging and reproduction), the tenor has shifted to a discourse of strengthening the girl child, fostering her education, increasing maternal health, as reflected in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) which adopted key language from the Dakar Platform, and in the latest round of the UN Millennium Goals, where many of the goals focus on fostering the well being of women and girls in the global South. We will turn next to the movement to see how some of these noble ideas are implemented by the people for themselves. Maathai notes

The Green Belt Movement is an example of a successful development project by the people rather than for the people. It was structured to avoid the urge to work for rather than with them. This approach is empowering the local people (2004b, 72).

### **History of the Green Belt Movement**

The Green Belt Movement has had a sustained lifespan and has become one of the most recognizable non-governmental organizations in Africa. GBM has planted over 30 million trees in Kenya since 1977 and has successfully stemmed the tide of deforestation and land erosion in many parts of rural Kenya. By 1999, the organization had established 6,000 tree nurseries in 26 districts (2004b, 30). Over 100,000 women and thousands of students have been involved in GBMs educational activities, and over 200,000 peace trees have been planted during GBMs advocacy trainings or conferences (GBM 2003). GBM has longstanding plans to contribute to the global greens movement and has set up GBM ‘satellites’ in 30 African countries, the US and Haiti. It is also one of the few NGOs which, thanks to Maathai’s ingenuity and foresight, has been able to bridge the gap of the rural and urban in Kenya. GBMs humble beginnings, curiously, began in Kenya’s women’s movement. Maathai was asked to join the board of National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) and its standing committee on Environment and Habitat. She proposed to the committee to work on tree planting initiatives as a community response to deforestation and lack of available firewood. Skeptics noted that tree planting should be left to the experts and such conservation scheme was outside the organizational scope of NCWK. Maathai states candidly that her idea was accepted anyway, because no other proposals were generated at the time (2004b, 20).

The new found project was called “Save the land harambee”—harambee invokes Kenyatta’s clarion call for self-help, ‘pulling together’); in Maathai’s ‘practical’ vision, this would mean “One person-One tree”, i.e. 15 million trees for 15 million Kenyans (at the time) (2004b, 25). A few years earlier, Maathai started a tree planting project as part of a plan to combat poverty in her region, but it was only in her work with NCWK that she realized that women can have a tremendous role in the treeplanting campaign; after all it is women who look for wood and cook and feed their children. Why not plant indigenous fruit trees to supplement the diet and reeducate women about nutritional benefits of indigenous plants? So early on, it became clear that the environmentalist had to branch out into the social areas of women’s poverty alleviation and

empowerment. In an interview in 1992 she explains: “Once you start making these linkages, you can no longer do just tree planting. When you start working with the environment seriously, the whole arena comes: human rights, women’s rights, environmental rights, children’s rights...everybody’s rights” (Ndegwa, 94).

The campaign asked foresters to educate the women about starting a tree nursery; yet most of that was unsuccessful because the foresters spoke academically and didn’t communicate well enough (Maathai 2004b, 27). Other measures had to be taken. As Maathai reminisces:

The women quickly became very innovative and used techniques that would have been completely unacceptable to professional foresters. Indeed at one point, the foresters complained that the women were adulterating their profession! Women substituted broken pots for seedbeds, used granaries ...to keep seeds and seedlings away from domestic animals and learned to observe the flowering cycle of plants so they could harvest seeds (28).

In effect the women became “foresters without diplomas.” Professional male foresters now work in unison with these self-reliant tree nursery specialists. The name “Green Belt” came to replace the harambee concept, because in community planting ceremonies rows of at least one thousand seedlings were planted. This tree “belt” would provide ample shade, windbreak, soil conservation and bird sanctuary (28).

Maathai’s description of working with mostly rural women farmers who are semi-literate is telling. Ever aware of her privileged education, she sought out measures to facilitate women’s empowerment and avoid paternalistic attitudes. She notes with apprehension being catapulted into a leadership position in the National Council of Women of Kenya, when she had only limited and elite involvement with women in her university circles (16), whereas the Council served mostly rural women. As the example with the women foresters shows, the tree campaign had to be re-tooled to work for the women, instead of forcing academic and correct programming onto the farmer-apprentices (27).

The women decided to do away with the professional approach to forestry and instead use their common sense! After all, they had for a long time successfully cultivated various crops on their farms. What was so difficult about applying this knowledge to tree planting? The campaign encouraged them to use their traditional skills, wisdom and plan common—and perhaps women—sense (27).

Indeed women’s sense adulterates diploma-certified knowledge. This is quite similar to the afrocentric, feminist epistemology which validates wisdom over knowledge. As Patricia Hill Collins explains:

African-American women need wisdom to know how to deal with the ‘educated fools’ who would ‘take a shotgun to a roach.’...Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful,

but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate (208).

Criticisms of the movement, and Maathai specifically, started to abound after a successful start. First, it came from the forestry department which found itself in competition with these untrained professionals who actually ended up doing a more effective job than the civil servants. Maathai ran into trouble with the government by the mid-eighties, even though she sought more cooperation with the politicians (Ndegwa 95)

In her Nobel Laureate speech, she notes:

Although initially the Green Belt Movement's tree planting activities did not address issues of democracy and peace, it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space. Therefore, the tree became a symbol for the democratic struggle in Kenya. Citizens were mobilised to challenge widespread abuses of power, corruption and environmental mismanagement. In Nairobi's Uhuru Park, at Freedom Corner, and in many parts of the country, trees of peace were planted to demand the release of prisoners of conscience and a peaceful transition to democracy (Maathai 2004a).

Even women's organizations, most prominently Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO) were coopted to join the bandwagon of eager critics of Maathai. Maendeleo, which draws mostly a Kikuyu constituency, labeled her disrespectful of the national elders (e.g. the president) with her Uhuru Park intervention. This women's group benefited, as did Green Belt, from government housing in Nairobi (Ndegwa 96). Due to its attack of "the white elephant" GBM lost its government housing and was threatened with losing its NGO status, if it wasn't for the international donor community who intermittently intervened to protect Maathai and GBM (Ndegwa 52). It is highly unusual for a NGO to foment opposition to government, and many NGOs indeed avoided such confrontation with Moi (Ndegwa 28). Maathai went further and banded with opposition lawyers and churches to form a political opposition (FORD) to the single party state, in 1990 (29). Finally, by 1992, after democratic elections, a multi-party system was adopted.

What is unique about Maathai's approach is that she created a national environmental agenda and attaches to that prodemocracy, if not liberatory, struggles. In the past, liberation movements in Africa tended to define themselves in terms of identity (ethnic, clan, religion, region) and ideology (e.g. African socialist) (cf. Markakis 1999). African environmental politics have remained in the "realm of the relationship between ethnicity and the state mediated by modern political elites" where resource conflicts turn quickly into political conflicts, e.g. the Horn of Africa (Salih 1999, 1). Maathai, on the other hand, downplays social identities in order to favor the common cause of an environmental justice movement. Yet, her movement became trivialized as a Kikuyu organization, and she counters such allegations in the following way:

It was truly coincidental that I was a woman and a Kikuyu from Nyeri. For that reason, when I

would later be dismissed on account of my tribe and marital status, I knew that much of the malice was due to jealousy and political expediency (Maathai 2004b, 12-13).

During the 1990s she would be discredited as a mad woman, not only by President Moi but also by the media, running around with tree seedlings, being beaten up by police or security guards (Omar).

### **Ecology Meets Feminism**

Women have been in the forefront of the environmental struggle, from New York's Love Canal to Kenya's Green Belt, ecological concerns have often be merged with politics/identity issues of motherhood. Bearing the brunt of water shortages and environmental degradation and pollution, women have become politicized (or conscientized) to take back the land and connect it with land claims, human rights, and peace issues. Within the global South, "ecofeminist" struggles have not been held up by the worries of having a correct set of theoretical positions, rather ecofeminism in development discourse is "not so much an immutable set of theoretical positions as it is a political intervention that continually shifts its discourse in relation to its negotiation with dominant forces in development politics" (Sturgeon 1997, 139). This fits very much Maathai's own intellectual and political development. She has recognized that a treeplanting campaign on public lands has had potential to grow into a grander vision, not only for civil society, but also for governance and public stewardship of resources. As she embarked Green Belt into this grander scheme, inevitably she ran into multiple roadblocks, especially with the Moi government. Today, Green Belt is engaged in training women and girls in health education; pupils in organic, sustainable agriculture; and green belt safaris for Northern tourists and students (GBM 2003).

Feminist activists in the global South have had to contend with various theoretical presuppositions. In the 1970s, development discourse added a gender component, which came to be known as the "women in development" paradigm. The western development model was kept in tact but complemented by the following theory. Women are fuel gatherers, consumers of firewood and therefore responsible for environmental degradation, population explosion, malnutrition and poverty. (Sturgeon, 143) By the 1970s Southern (rural) women were seen by development planners as 'having too many children and destroying their habitat.' They became convenient scapegoats for northern industrial elites and nations, consuming most of the world's fossil fuels and other natural resources. (144) Of course, here it is noteworthy to bring in Betsy Hartmann's economic analysis that in fact, Africa is seriously underdeveloped and underpopulated; and she argued this long before the AIDS pandemic. (1987, 17-25) Maathai confirms her view:

The three issues of population, agriculture and environmental degradation are reported to be feeding on each other. But as some of our observations seem to indicate there are other factors whose impact on the people of Africa is more devastating than the population pressure [such as economic under-development and poverty]. ...*A depopulated Africa would still be poor and*

*marginalized* (1995, emphasis mine).

However, it seems that a subtle shift in responsibility has occurred some ten years later. Now, the preferred blame is cast by using the more polite passive voice, as exemplified by UN Environment Programme, with whom Maathai has a longstanding, positive working relationship, since they have headquarters in Nairobi:

Unep says [pandemics are] caused by degradation of the environment, widespread deforestation, biodiversity loss, rising consumption of unsafe water, emission of greenhouse gases and the loss of balance between species that potentially cause infectious diseases and their predators (Mbaria 2005).

However, nowhere in its annual report does UNEP indict the Northern elites and its conspicuous consumption nor does it explicitly condemn capitalist encroachment on public lands, e.g. irresponsible logging and planting of fast growing, non-indigenous trees. Yet, activists-scholars, such as Vandana Shiva and Maathai would use an active voice and attribute environmental ills and lack of subsistence living on the 'green revolution' of agrobusiness (Shiva), and also on petro/chemical/pharmaceutical and logging multinational corporations which foster bottleneck development in the global South (Maathai 1995).

### **UN Millennium Goals and GBM**

Most of the eight goals focus actually on women's issues, which should be seen as an encouraging sign. They address women's health, the girl child's education, environmental and housing concerns, among other things. If dealt with effectively, they would indeed raise standards of living, lower maternal death rates and infant mortality and secure housing for the millions of slum dwellers around the world. Yet, to Maathai and other activists in the global South, these goals are not presented in a holistic way. They do little to address the wealth gap between North and South, they are silent on the harms of the 'green revolution' and thus, arguably, they give formal rights to girls and women, but not substantive human rights to poor people around the globe.

Civil society, non-profit organizations, such as the Green Belt, whose harambee spirit doesn't easily fit into a pro-capitalist ideology, have done us a great service to rethink our human and environmental priorities. It is indeed exciting that a new social justice agenda for our millennium is forged by the World's Social Forum (based in the South) and a global Greens Movement has potential to take its cue from a women's led organization based in Kenya. The Green Belt Movement has taught us to see women as partners for change in a global environment.

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