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A Role for Women in Sustainable Development Panel

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ABSTRACT

This panel examines the role women can play in bringing about sustainable development. We look at women's positions in sustainable companies, university programs on sustainable development, government sustainability initiatives and NGOs. While numerous women are leaders in the sustainability movement, they are rarely the top decision makers, and usually less visible than men. Yet, women bring to the table many unique assets that can help forge a sustainable society. Led by members of the nascent Women's Sustainability Network, an international forum that encourages women to actively participate in shaping a sustainable future, the panel reviews women's achievements in the sustainability movement to date; examines why women aren't as prominent as they probably should be within this movement; highlights the particular qualities women can bring to sustainable development; suggests ways of engaging and supporting more women, on a global scale, in participating in sustainable initiatives; and encourages conference goers to join the WSN.

Increasing numbers of the participants at the building-sustainability table are women. Yet, there should probably be far more women involved--and in more prominent positions--in a movement that aims for social fairness, along with economic progress and environmental health. To be sure, throughout governments, companies and communities, women are taking lead roles on questions of sustainability and the environment. But women are most visible in the realms of outreach, public relations, public affairs, journalism, teaching and marketing--or what is broadly called "communications."

Why? There are surely many reasons. One reason is probably that women tend to be more sensitive, aware, outspoken and even activist about what is good for health and

safety for themselves and loved others. It's easy to argue that what's good for women is good for the community as a whole. In addition, women have also long been quietly involved in the environment professions. And traditionally women have been characterised as wanting to talk and socialize more freely than men and as openly demonstrating more care about public concerns such as health and human welfare. Indeed, all these qualities, and others, should make women "natural" proponents of sustainability and "natural" leaders in this women. Yet, as in most realms, men dominate.

That is why a group of women, initially working with US President's Council on Sustainable Development and the European Commission--including a journalist, a communications professor, a public affairs professional, a marketer, a lawyer and a communications technology specialist--have launched the Women's sustainability Network, an international networking tool for shaping a sustainable society. Our goal is to serve as a forum for dialogue and a vehicle for outreach to women who want to shape a sustainable society. WSN was first announced at the European Commission's 1998 conference on the Information Society in Vienna and has since made presentations at the Plato Seminar, organized in France by the EC, UNESCO, and the Club of Rome, at the PCSD's National Town Meeting in Detroit and at other international events.

The WSN's primary mission is to gather together professional women--across industries, countries and generations--to assure that they take a pro-active part in shaping the emerging sustainable society; to encourage women in all professions to incorporate sustainable practices in their work and private lives; and to encourage these already "empowered" women to use their new-found status to help others (including men) take a constructive role in building a sustainable future. Because our network aims for international scope, and because information technologies are changing our society as rapidly as are the goals of sustainable development, those technologies will play an integral role in the Network.

The WSN welcomes other interested parties--including men--to become actively involved in the Network.