

Keynote Speech of Monique Barbut
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YVES Rocher Foundation Side Event on
Femmes et Climat: La Singularité de l'action des Femmes

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Good afternoon!

Let me start by thanking the Yves Rocher Foundation for the invitation to speak about an issue that requires urgent action. Let me also thank each one of you for making it here because it demonstrates a belief and commitment to enable women to live better lives. And it is not an easy problem to address.

We have seen or heard what women are doing against all odds. They are keeping ecosystem services working in India. In Africa, they are collecting up to 90% of the fuelwood and water for household use.

We also know the potential impact changing the status quo would have, but that change will not come quickly enough. In the Middle East and North Africa region, for instance, the economy could grow by up to 2.7 trillion dollars over the next 50 years. Given the same productive resources as men, women could increase the continent's food production from 20 to 30%. But it will not be until 2086 that every girl in Africa can be assured of a secondary education.

It sounds hopeless. So why are we here?

Change! Because we still believe change can happen. It does not have to take a lot of people to change the world. We can each do it.

So let me share with you three insights about change that I hope will inspire you to listen, learn and act.

First, we are living at a critical moment in history. We are in the middle of major systemic change. Wherever you turn, there is turbulence on a global scale: in politics; in our social relations; in the economy; on the technology front; and even in our physical environment. Political scientists call these moments “critical junctures.”

Industrialization. The great depression. The wars of liberation. In hindsight, each of these were critical junctures, but few at the time realized it. Critical, because each opened up vast opportunities for major transformation in society. Junctures, because the change happens at about the same time on many fronts.

The scope and reach of the turbulence around us suggests we are at a critical moment of change. The recent global focus and interest in gender equality makes this a particularly favorable moment to improve women’s statuses.

If we seize the moment and embrace the opportunities that are opening up to us, we can bridge the gender inequality gap swiftly. But if we remain ignorant of the opportunities, women will instead remain victims of the change that is coming. This is the moment for activists and policy-makers to act and turn around women's situations.

Second, we must change how we think about gender.

Albert Einstein once said. **“The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.”**

Albert Einstein made quite a few scientific discoveries, but most of us only know one – the theory of relativity. But Einstein's discoveries were not accepted outrightly, even by scientists. Some were contested for up to 15 years. That is how he gained this insight.

If we want to achieve gender equality in order to build women's resilience to climate change, we have to change our thinking; for instance, about how we view the roles of males or females in the face of climate change.

Earlier this year, I went to Agadez and Dirkou, two towns in the Sahara desert in Northern Niger. These are major transit points for migrants leaving the Sahel in West Africa for the long journey to North Africa or Europe. 9 out of every 10 migrants I met were men – young, middle-aged and old men. So were the returnees – all male.

As climate change beats on Sahel's fragile lands, the lives of both women and men are changing in profound ways. I saw men risking their lives in new ways in order to support their wives back home or to be able to afford their journey to the north. Today, men are accepting stigmatizing social jobs to make ends meet. They were working in open mines without any protective clothing. One of them told me he has three wives and 17 children.

The fertility of the women in the Sahel is one of the highest in the world, and for a good reason. They are betting on having more children so that some can survive these crises. The impact on the lives of the women is alarming. Poor nutrition and health. They are overworked and overburdened, as they take over the roles of herding or tilling from their husbands. They are spending longer walking, working and waking hours to find potable water.

If men's roles are changing, we can expect women and children to be impacted too. The impacts on men produce feedback on women's roles, and the cycle continues. Therefore, to understand the impact of climate change on women, we also have to also understand its impacts on the people women care about and care for.

The challenges women face seem overwhelming but they are not unchangeable because although we are products of our past, we don't have to be prisoners of it. If we can change our minds and how we think, we can change anything.

But once you change your thinking, what next?

This is my third point.

“Stop fighting the existing reality. Instead, build a new model that will make the existing model obsolete.”

This principle inspired Richard Buckminster Fuller and made him one of America's most celebrated architects. Fuller was also an engineer, designer

and systems theorist. He was awarded the Nobel prize for a dome design he did not invent, but because he popularized.

Fuller was searching for architectural designs that reflected his new thinking: to do more with less. He found that circular buildings carry the most volume compared to the area they occupy. They are very stable and extremely strong for the weight they carry. That model had been sitting around for 20 years when Fuller came along and made it indispensable in architecture.

Today, we will hear about new models that are helping women to adapt to climate change. Find a model that works in your sphere of work and popularize it.

If you live in a country where married women have rights to use their matrimonial land, but they cannot to own it, there are models that have worked in India, Morocco, Senegal or Uganda. Use them.

In Uganda and India, modest local government efforts to increase the participation of women in meetings to discuss how to restore degraded land and increase food security have led to spectacular success. Households that were food insecure in Uganda are producing surplus food. Now they are asking

their government for help to build their organizational capacities to set up, run and manage women's groups and cooperatives. The women want to become key players in the formal market. They still do not own land titles, but that's not stopping them from setting up what we, economists, call companies.

Here in the oases areas of Southern Morocco, you have developed models that have helped women to break into the tourist industry. Women own restaurants, guest houses and travel agencies, and are selling a branded local food product.

These models don't mark a break from women's traditional roles. But they are changing society profoundly by moving women into more equal positions in life. They are making women more resilient to environmental degradation. Our impact on gender equality need not be defined by fighting the old, but by building the new.

We are living at a critical moment in our history, when even small actions can have big impacts on society. But for change to happen, we have to change our thinking. We also have to choose models that will achieve gender equality, and popularize them now.

Will we dare to believe that we may have been born into a world of gender inequality, but we do not have to remain prisoners of that past?

Thank you! I wish you all a transformative afternoon!