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Item Type	Article
Authors	Wirsing, Anja
Publisher	World Association for Christian Communication
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Download date	2026-07-12 06:18:40
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/181492

Climate messages from women

Anja Wirsing

'Stop climate change – new values are needed now', 'With or without children – we take responsibility', 'We demand a say – climate protection is everyone's concern!' On International Women's Day 2007 messages like these were displayed at Hackescher Markt in the central Berlin district of Mitte. Women had themselves photographed with these messages as part of a photo shoot entitled 'Women protect the climate – women demand climate protection. Our message to politicians'.

genanet – focal point gender, environment, sustainability – carried out this event¹ in conjunction with the photographer Hannah Förster of TheCompensators.² Within four hours over a hundred women's portraits were completed – a remarkable number, which clearly shows that women have definite views on climate protection, that they are willing to voice them in public and that they demand to be heard.

Women with children let themselves be photographed with their message just as readily as young Spanish tourists, students, a grandma with her little grandchild crying in its pram, as well as 'just ordinary' women whose attention was attracted to the event while they were busy buying their vegetables at the weekly farmers' market.

The success of this photo-shoot is encouraging, even though it leaves behind a bitter aftertaste – for in current decision making on environmental and climate policy women play a very marginal role. This is all the more surprising since women have long been recognised as an important group of players in international development. They are considered to have great foresight and the ability to think in the long term – and are frequently to be found in the vanguard of their country's developments in the fields of environmental and climate protection.

Even if conditions of life are different in developing countries, this does not explain why in industrial societies the effort is rarely made to look at the sexes and take account of their different needs, perspectives and interests. In fact, many people are astonished that gender equity might be an issue in environment and sustainability policy. Yet things are no different in this area than in, for example, family or employment policy.

Equality between the sexes – just as much between the generations or between rich and poor – is a fundamental principle in every area of society. It is neither triviality nor luxury. It is purely and simply a matter of social justice. In Germany, too, the English term 'gender' is frequently used in debates on equality between the sexes. It emphasises that the relationship between the sexes is not attributable to biology but is based on social – and thus alterable – processes.

Visual communication

The photo shoot was carried out as part of **genanet**'s current communication project, funded by the German Federal Environment Ministry and the Federal Environment Agency. Its aim is to give greater publicity, for example in the media, to the links between aspects of gender and the environment. **genanet** wishes to target women in particular since studies have shown that women often feel poorly informed about environment issues even though they have a high degree of environmental awareness (Grunenberg/Kuckartz 2003).

The better informed they are and the greater their motivation, the more effectively will women be able to contribute towards shaping and implementing environmental policy measures. This is crucial since global environmental changes are growing in intensity and there is an increasing demand for solutions which take the needs and interests of all social groups into account and include them in decision making.

genanet decided on a photo-shoot as a PR activity in order, just for once, not to present the issue of gender and climate protection in texts but in aesthetic photos. Gender equality, the environment and sustainability are complex issues which put many people off – often just because of the cumbersome terms. Photos of women with a personal message on climate protection makes this formidable topic more tangible for the general public and provides the opportunity to give the whole issue a visual angle.

Moreover, the photos give the topic of gender and climate protection a very personal and individual touch, illustrating women's perspectives on climate protection and lending them expression and immediacy. The faces behind the messages take away the topic's abstractness and give it an emotional aura. The photo-shoot was also a response to journalists' wishes: time and again journalists have complained about the lack of occasions or events with which to link their reports, as well as a lack of pictures with which to attract attention.

An ideal occasion

Both the time and place of an event have to be right in order to attract public and media attention. International Women's Day provided the ideal occasion to reach the target group and also give the media a backdrop for their coverage. The venue, too – the weekly farmers' market at *Hackescher Markt* in Berlin's *Mitte* district held every Thursday – was just the right place to catch women going about their everyday business.

However, the organisers were aware of the fact that Berlin's *Hackescher Markt* is a place where tourists like to go and is also frequented by young, hip and well-educated Berliners. Thus there was a great risk of stereotyping – a one-sided depiction of well-to-do women. Consequently, great care was taken at the photo-shoot to take pictures of as great a variety of women as possible – young and old, of different nationalities and with different biographies and life styles.

genanet isn't a well-established 'brand'. In order to gain more attention and underline the seriousness and respectability of the event, the organizers asked Astrid Klug, Parliamentary Secretary at the Federal Environment Ministry, if she could support the event by paying a visit – which she did. The photo-shoot was announced in a press release in which women were invited to take part: 'Women sought for personal climate messages.' The public was also informed of the exact time when Astrid Klug was going to be present at the stand.

In order to ensure that there was enough advance publicity for the event, **genanet** produced an info postcard in cooperation with the photographer Hannah Förster and women employed at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. This was distributed at conferences, in women's and environmental associations as well as in Berlin cafes. The postcard was designed in the style of the photos planned to be taken at the event itself.

Different degrees of concern

That environment (problems) and gender (roles) are related was a fact that was never really identified over the years – neither in the women's movement nor in environmental groups. And it was only in 1986, with the Chernobyl reactor disaster, that this changed (Katz, 2006). The 'Mothers against Nuclear Power' in particular made it clear how greatly women, as the carers in the family, suffered from the consequences of the catastrophe for health and nutrition (genanet/Röhr, 2006).³

In southern countries, however, the different effects of environmental problems on men and women have long been discussed, not least because living conditions are afflicted by hunger and poverty, because action is urgently needed and because it has been realised that women suffer particularly from environmental changes – since securing an existence directly depends on the state of the environment. Droughts and flooding, for instance, frequently mean that increasing amounts of time have to be

spent on getting hold of food and energy – a task that, as a rule, is assigned to women and that they must fulfil without the benefits of modern infrastructure.

One consequence is that they must walk further and further in search of firewood. Apart from the great physical exertion, this means that, as a result, they have less time to secure any additional income, to educate themselves or to take part in the social life of the community.

At the 12th UN Climate Change Conference in Kenya in November 2006 the dire situation of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa was briefly brought into focus again. The Belgian Minister of the Environment, Bruno Tobback, even waived his right to speak in order to let Margaretha Guidone, Belgian housewife, give an impressive account of how she experienced the debate on climate change in her daily life and how much she was concerned, as a mother, about the children in the world.⁴

Accompanied by a Belgian television station she paid a visit to an African woman with whom she exchanged thoughts on how changes to the environment had an impact on their own personal lives – a sign of progress that social aspects of climate change have finally received media attention.

Women as pioneers?

An awareness about climate and environmental protection has now spread to large parts of our society. Many people already realise that it is better, for example, to use buses and trains than private cars or to open windows briefly to let in fresh air rather than keeping the windows open while the central heating is turned on full. This is revealed by the messages compiled at the photo shoot, as well as by studies such as 'Environmental Awareness in Germany' (BMU, 2006).

Compared with men, women are thought to lead the way as far as changes in everyday behaviour are concerned with regard to climate and environmental protection. They are also more hesitant about risk-taking in matters concerning environmental changes, like climate change, and about using technologies like atomic energy (Grunenberg/Kuckartz, 2003). In politics and the economy, however, women's views and knowledge have always led a backstage existence, so that it is impossible to give a full account of views on climate protection.

Whether having more women in decision-making positions in the area of climate protection would lead to a different climate policy is a moot question – as shown for example by the discussions in the project 'Climate for change – gender equality and climate policy'⁵ undertaken by the Climate Alliance. Nevertheless, there is general consensus that if both sexes had equal say, this would lead to a more comprehensive view of climate protection since it would include more fully the great diversity of social groups – such as children and adolescents, as well as senior citizens and migrants of both sexes – with their personal circumstances and their everyday activities.

This is also underlined by Andreas Troge, President of the German Federal Environment Agency, who remarked: 'We would be able to draw on a larger pool of ideas if we were to integrate both perspectives – feminine and masculine – when debating environmental threats such as climate change or the degradation of biodiversity. Ignoring one perspective, we lose out not only on ideas, visions and potential solutions, but also on support for strong environmental policies' (genanet, 2007: 3).

To be continued

The photo-shoot was a success. Lots of women, lots more than expected, had themselves photographed with a personal message, and several women who couldn't be in Berlin at the time sent photos to **genanet**. The women enjoyed taking part in the event, and no great persuasion was needed. For many, it was important to take part. This is a clear sign that climate protection has grown out of its 'eco' niche.

Almost all the women who were approached were able to relate to the aims of the photo-shoot, and the topic conjured up a great variety of associations in them, as the photos show. Even if the photo-shoot depicts only small cross-section of reality, this

cross-section is highly interesting and expressive since the women photographed and their messages exhibit a broad spectrum of wit, creativity and intellect.

The photo-shoot received a great deal of attention from the German media. Even the public broadcasting station *Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (rbb)* came to visit the stand for its evening TV news programme *Abendschau*. Obviously it thought that a photo-shoot held the promise of good pictures. At any rate, a short report of the event was televised in the evening.

Photos are also an important means of communication on the internet: *brigitte.de*, for instance, the website of Germany's largest selling women's magazine, published a report of the event, including a selection of the photos taken. EMMA, Germany's best-known feminist magazine, used photos of the event to illustrate the main topic of its May/June 2007 edition on climate change, entitled 'After us, the deluge?' There were reports in other media, too, for example in the national daily newspaper *taz* and the bi-weekly news agency on women's politics *zwd – Zweiwochendienst Frau und Politik*.⁶

It was a great success to have caught the attention of the 'big names' in women's media since it increases the number of women who know about the link between gender and climate protection. It also means that the event's design, i.e. employing more visual techniques to publicise **genanet's** issues, has proved effective.

genanet has sent the women's messages collected at the photo-shoot to the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and to the German Environment Minister, Sigmar Gabriel. They must be given emphasis as long as women are not adequately represented in political decision-making. And the photo-shoots will be continued so that many more women will be able to formulate their own messages.⁷

For 'only under equal conditions with regard to speaking, being heard and decision-making in negotiating and implementing sustainable development might there potentially be an equitable competition of ideas' (Thorn, 2002: 45).

Notes

1. The photos can be found at: <http://www.genanet.de/index.php?id=588&L=1> (accessed 16.02.2009)
2. Websites: <http://www.thecompensators.org/photoshoot>, <http://www.mnmlsm.de/> (accessed 16.02.2009)
3. The **genanet**-brochure 'Women active against nuclear energy – from rage to visions. 20 years Chernobyl' can be downloaded at: http://www.genanet.de/fileadmin/downloads/themen/Themen_en/Chernobyl_en.pdf (accessed 16.02.2009)
4. iisd Reporting Services / UNFCCC COP 12: <http://www.iisd.ca/climate/COP12/nov15.html>
5. Margaretha Guidone: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaretha_Guidone (accessed 16.02.2009)
6. Information can be found at: <http://www.climateforchange.net>. The project was carried out by the Climate Alliance of European Cities with Indigenous Rainforest Peoples e. V. See: <http://www.klimabuendnis.org> (accessed 16.02.2009)
7. rbb/Abendschau 8 March 2007, <http://www.brigitte.de/frau/gesellschaft/klimaschutz-genanet/index.html> (accessed 16.02.2009), EMMA 3/2007, *taz* Berlin 8./9. March 2007, *zwd – Zweiwochendienst Frau und Politik* 26 March 2007
7. Photo shoot by **genanet** and 'Working Group Women in the German NGO Forum on Environment & Development' on the occasion of the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany: <http://www.gendercc.net/campaigns.html> and <http://www.genanet.de/fotoaktion-g8.html?&L=1> (accessed 16.02.2009)

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- Katz, Christine (2006): Gender und Nachhaltigkeit – neue Forschungsperspektiven. In: GAIA 3/2006: 206-214
- Thorn, Christiane (2002): Nachhaltigkeit hat (k)ein Geschlecht. Perspektiven einer gendersensiblen zukunftsfähigen Entwicklung. In: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte. B 33-34/2002: 38-46

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