

UNITED NATIONS WORLD OCEANS DAY 2019 EVENT – KEYNOTE OPENING ADDRESS

GENDER AND OCEANS

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Our planet is not as green as it once was, or as blue as it should be.

This was evident at the first Oceans Day in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro. On that day, the opening address was given by Dr. Roberta Bondar, the first female Canadian astronaut, who showed photos of the Blue Planet that she had taken from the space shuttle Discovery. She spoke of the disturbing vision: “We saw the wounds of the oceans. The streams of effluent, the oil slicks”.

And that was just on the surface.

Today, thanks to the rapid development of technologies for satellites, ships, submersibles and communications, we all can be armchair astronauts with abundant opportunities to better understand the mysteries of outer space and the ocean depths.

Our eye on the world has changed, but not our relationship or our responsibilities to our blue planet.

We can now see, more clearly than ever before, the urgency of the theme of the first Oceans Day – “Conquerors to caretakers”. As global citizens, we must ensure the transformation of humanity’s role as conquerors of the ocean to the role of ocean caretakers. We need the planet more than the planet needs us.

How have events in the intervening years – almost three decades - contributed to this year’s theme of World Oceans Day 2019, Gender and the Oceans? How can we understand better the role of gender equality in both reaping the benefits from, and protecting, our blue planet?

The 1992 Earth Summit was attended by the highest number of heads of government and State ever assembled. It adopted Agenda 21, which evolved into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and today’s Sustainable Development Goals. During this period, both oceans and gender have been continuously in the spotlight, incentivizing the international community to better define and address challenges in achieving sustainability in these realms.

But, in parallel, dramatic transformations have taken place in the natural world and in the development of technology.

Whole expanses of the natural world are disappearing, massive extinctions of species are reported and climate change has had devastating effects on lives and on the health and levels of our oceans.

Technology has delivered a revolutionary new world – including through the introduction of the smart phone only 12 years ago – as well as artificial intelligence, artificial life, big data and the acceleration of globalization.

Our planet is being reshaped by these changes and we must continuously integrate them into our strategies to attain the Sustainable Development Goals.

We need clear, immediate and long-lasting solutions. A world of gender equal ocean caretakers has a better chance to create and implement solutions that will address these changes and benefit humankind and the planet.

We need to make the impossible possible for women and girls; to open their pathways, ignite their interest and ensure their equal opportunities and conditions for leadership in all areas of ocean stewardship, including the advancement of ocean-related resource and environmental management, laws, policies, science, culture, technology, exploration, industries and communications. They must be empowered to take leading roles in piloting institutional and stakeholder support for and participation in ocean stewardship worldwide.

The aim of achieving gender equality has been taking root at many levels and in many countries. Although the concept of “equality” is somewhat elastic in its application to different circumstances, cultures, legal systems and sectors, there is increasing activity to attain universal understanding of this goal.

The storytellers and panellists at today’s World Oceans Day event will broaden and deepen our understanding of the challenges and pathways for developing gender balanced solutions as they contribute their knowledge, experiences – which are heroic and heartbreaking - and their commitment to a sustainable future.

For now, I will introduce some recent examples of collective efforts and inspirational personal achievements that indicate the growing global momentum to achieve gender equality for ocean caretakers.

In the **maritime** sector, the theme for this year’s World Maritime Day on September 26th is "Empowering Women in the Maritime Community". In April 2019 the World Maritime University hosted its 3rd International Women’s Conference on the same theme. It identified opportunities to encourage women to pursue careers in the maritime and ocean sectors and called for action in support of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 5.

In the **fisheries** sector, the 2018 *International Conference of Women and Fisheries*, held in Santiago, Chile, identified issues relating to: the role of women in fisheries and aquaculture; female associations and leadership; working conditions constraining professionalism; and blue growth and sustainability. An outcome was the Santiago de Compostela Declaration for Equal Opportunities in the Fisheries and Aquaculture Sectors.

The International Collective in support of Fishworkers, based in Chennai India, works worldwide to promote the role of women in fisheries. One of its achievements was to facilitate an international agreement, the “Shared Gender Agenda for Sustaining Life and Livelihoods in Fishing Communities” which was adopted by a broad network of concerned persons and organizations and contributed to the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on Small-Scale Fisheries.

An underlying concern in the fisheries sector is that, although women represent nearly half of the global fisheries workforce, it is said that their contributions to the industry remain about as visible — particularly to researchers and policymakers — as the buried clams they dig up from the seabed’s muddy bottom. Limited information on womens’ fishing activities has been a major impediment to developing gender-sensitive policies and programs and must be overcome.

Concerning the ocean **environment**, global attention is increasing on the plastics entering the oceans - over eight million tonnes of it each year - and plastic has now been discovered at the very

bottom of the Mariana trench. In March, at the Fourth United Nations Environment Assembly, a Ministerial Declaration was adopted that commits to significantly reduce single-use plastic products by 2030. Many women have already been pioneers in tackling this problem, including as sailors at sea and through spearheading land-based campaigns.

Concerning **international law**, a 2017 international conference and a book on gender and the law of the sea were organized by one of our distinguished panellists. Areas addressed included exploitation of marine resources, human rights at sea, empowerment, navigation, migration, navies and climate change.

Achievement of gender equality depends not only on the aims and outcomes of collective action, but also on the inspiration and determination of women and men who pioneer and lead. Many women may have struggled for their own empowerment, then gone on to serve as role models and thereby empower others. A few examples:

Elisabeth Mann Borgese was an initiator and organizer of the first conference on the law of the Sea in Malta in 1970 with the title of "Pacem in Maribus" ("Peace in the Oceans"). She established the International Ocean Institute in 1972 which grew into a network of 35 centers and focal points around the world.

Dr. Sylvia Earle was responsible for leading the first all-women team to live in an underwater habitat for two weeks on the Tektite Project and was named by Time Magazine as its first Hero for the Planet.

Marie Tharp mapped the ocean floor in the 1950s disproving the theories promoting an entirely flat seafloor.

Dr. Cindy Lee Van Dover piloted a deep-diving submersible known as Alvin, and hit a biological breakthrough in discovering the largest deep-sea hydrothermal-vent area along the Galápagos Rift.

Dr. Manu Tupou-Roosen is the first female Director General of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) which serves 17 member countries. She had been the Agency's Legal Counsel for 13 years before her appointment in 2018, a position in which I was also privileged to have served many years ago.

Also in the Pacific, Senior Constable **Sepola Tataa Niulakita** was the first female Chief of Staff chosen to lead a joint fisheries and maritime operation between FFA member countries and partners (Operation Kurukuru) to combat illegal fishing in the region.

High tribute must also be paid to the men who support all efforts towards achieving gender equality in relation to the oceans, many of whom are also affected by desperate situations, such as forced labour at sea.

This generation of ocean caretakers, and those that follow, must continue in this spirit and develop cutting edge gender balanced solutions that cater to the evolving natural and technological changes from communities to cyberspace, from the ocean depths to our eyes in the sky.

I have had the good fortune of being able to devote my life's work to the oceans. From a three year old girl jigging for cod in the Northwest Atlantic until today, I have served in over sixty countries, six continents and major oceanic regions to draft legislation, treaties and policies and to strengthen institutions relating to fisheries and the ocean environment.

My personal and professional aims are to present the most robust and forward-looking outcomes to countries for their consideration. For example, I firmly believe that national fisheries legislation should set high standards to combat illegal fishing, prevent adverse effects on the marine environment, ensure fair labour conditions on fishing vessels and combat transnational criminal

groups that use fishing vessels for purposes such as smuggling people, arms and drugs. At their core, legislation and international law must also encapsulate global standards for ensuring gender equality and equity.

In anticipation of today's storytelling, I would like to contribute a story from the first Oceans Day on June 8th 1992. It had been officially declared Oceans Day at the Earth Summit in recognition of the event which I had the privilege of organizing and leading in my capacity as Executive Director of the Oceans Institute of Canada and Director of Oceans Day. With the support of the Canadian Government, I arranged for a follow-up meeting on June 9th where NGOs could meet in a "shirtsleeves session" and commit to priority actions they would take in implementing Agenda 21. Working together, over 100 people issued a "Call for Commitment" on that day.

During that meeting, the Brazilian NGOs made an historic intervention. They asked if we could please ensure worldwide celebration of Oceans Day every year on June 8th. Why June 8th?

They had three reasons. First, it was declared as such at the Earth Summit. Second, the circular ocean currents in the north and south Atlantic oceans together form the number 8. Third, 8 on its side is infinity.

Today, thinking about gender and the oceans, I would add that the number 8 is also made up of two equal circles, and everything in between, because the oceans need all of our help.

In the ensuing years I did my best to make this happen, and the rest is history thanks to the support and commitment of all global ocean caretakers.

Our planet is not as green as it once was, or as blue as it should be. Working together, and by achieving gender equality, we must make it so. Considering the dedication and commitment of everyone here, I know that we will make it so. It is an honour to be among you, thank you all very much for giving us reason to celebrate World Oceans Day.