

**Statement by June Zeitlin,
Women's Environment and Development Organization
at the
Informal Thematic Debate: Climate Change as a Global Challenge

General Assembly
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Chair, Excellencies and distinguished delegates, thank you for the opportunity to address this informal thematic debate on climate change. My name is June Zeitlin and I am the Executive Director of WEDO, Women's Environment and Development Organization.

Climate change is indeed a global challenge. I would like to take a moment to put a human face on the impact of climate change—particularly a woman's face—and highlight how women have been adapting to climate change in their communities before scientists gave this problem a name.

Here are some statistics you didn't hear from the panel: Women and children are fourteen times more likely to die than men are during a disaster. In the 2004 Asian Tsunami, 70-80% of overall deaths were women. In the 1991 cyclone disasters that killed 140,000 in Bangladesh, 90% of victims were women. Similarly in industrialized countries, more women than men died during the 2003 European heat wave. And following Hurricane Katrina in the US, African-American women who were the poorest population in that part of the country faced the greatest obstacles to survival. Women make up the majority of the world's poor, and in particular the world's rural poor, and are largely responsible for securing food, water and energy for cooking and heating. These statistics beg the question: Why? And what can we learn from this to fashion more effective solutions to the climate change crisis.

Last year a study at the London School of Economics analyzing disasters in 141 countries provided the decisive evidence that gender differences in deaths from natural disasters are directly linked to women's economic and social rights. That is, gender inequalities are magnified in disaster situations. So when women lack basic rights, more women than men will die from natural disasters. The study also found the opposite to be true: in societies where women and men enjoy equal rights, natural disasters kill the same number of women and men. These discrepancies are the result of existing inequalities – for example, boys are likely to receive preferential treatment in rescue efforts and both women and girls suffer more from the shortages of food and economic resources in the aftermath of disasters.

At the same time, women have always been leaders in community revitalization and natural resource management. Yet women are so often barred from the public sphere and thus absent from local, national and international decision-making related to natural disasters and adaptation. There are plenty of examples where women's participation has been critical to community survival. In Honduras, La Masica was the only community to register no deaths in the wake of Hurricane Mitch due to an early warning system operated by women in the community.

Women's empowerment is now being paired with climate change solutions. In November 2006, Kenya's Greenbelt Movement, founded by Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai, and the World Bank's Community Development Carbon Fund, signed an emissions reductions purchase agreement to reforest two mountain areas in Kenya. Women's groups will plant thousands of trees, an activity that will also provide poor rural women with a small income and some economic independence. But

women's empowerment through this process will also capture 350,000 tons of carbon dioxide, restore soil lost to erosion, and support regular rainfall essential to Kenya's farmers and hydro-electric power plants.

Madam President, the global community has yet to recognize that existing gender inequalities are a critical determinant as to who is impacted by natural disasters and climate change. Under your Presidency, there has previously been an informal thematic debate on the empowerment of women. I would submit that today's debate and this General Assembly is an unprecedented opportunity to raise the link to gender equality to the level of attention it deserves in the United Nations system, and to identify avenues that will achieve more equitable approaches to adaptation. As a long-time partner of the UN system, WEDO along with many women's groups around the world are ready to collaborate with you.

Thank you.