

Women in Green

Voices of Sustainable Design

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The challenge is to give
back to our children a
world of beauty and wonder.

WANGARI MAATHAI

Another world is not only
possible, she is on her way.
I can hear her breathing.

ARUNDHATI ROY

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PREFACE

WHY WOMEN?

We began research for this book with little more than an instinct about how to answer that question. While we didn't yet understand all the important connections between women and sustainability, we were convinced that those connections exist. Still, there was the vague worry that this subject was either too broad to address effectively or too narrow to contribute to a wider dialogue about sustainable design. So we started asking questions. A lot of questions.

Some people told us the topic was passé. "Who talks about the sexes anymore?" (No matter that while we were writing, Celinda Lake and Kellyanne Conway's *What Women Really Want* and Maureen Dowd's *Are Men Necessary?* came out and sold big.) Others were amused. "What the heck does being female have to do with sustainable design?" asked a female architect in a respected sustainable design firm. "The topic makes me nervous. What comes to mind are images of mother earth goddesses dancing naked around a cauldron, waving T-squares in the air. Being a chick is irrelevant." Still, we asked more questions.

Some people we respect declined to discuss the book or said the topic had no interest for them. People close to people we respect said they should avoid us: "They want to marginalize you. What's more important? Your gender or your accomplishments?" An accomplished university professor put it this way: "I want to be known as a great educator in architecture, not a great *woman* educator." Nevertheless, she was generous with her time, and her input was invaluable. So we kept asking questions.

As it turned out, surprisingly few people challenged the subject, even if we didn't fully describe it. Most opened up immediately, and many told us this book should have been

written years ago. Though that sentiment was encouraging, no one completely explained it. (One successful woman told us this publication would “provide inspiration for young women,” while another said we should write it “so that young men read it.” Who was our audience?) We listened to everyone and read between the lines.

Along the way, we learned that there are profound links between women and the environment. Consider the results of recent surveys:

- Polls consistently show that women are up to 15 percent more likely than men to rate the environment a high priority.
- In political elections, women comprise up to two thirds of voters who cast their ballots around environmental issues.
- Women are more likely than men to volunteer for and give money to environmental causes, especially related to health and safety within their own communities.
- Women report both more support for environmental activists and more concern that government isn’t doing enough to protect the environment.
- More women than men support increased government spending for the environment, while more men favor spending cuts.
- Women tend to be less lenient toward business when it comes to environmental regulation.

Sources: Yale School of Forestry, American Progress Action Fund, Institute for Women’s Policy Research, and American National Election Study

What’s more, according to pollsters Lake and Conway, an estimated 68 percent of American consumers have gone green, choosing health-conscious and environmentally responsible lifestyles and products. Since 90 percent of women identify themselves as the primary shoppers for their households, and women sign 80 percent of all personal checks, it’s safe to say that women are leading a quiet revolution in green consumerism.

If there are links between women and the environment, what do these links suggest about the sustainable design movement? “My impression is that there is a greater percentage of women active within the green building field than in design generally,” says industry insider Bill Browning, formerly of the Rocky Mountain Institute. “There is a noticeable difference between going to Greenbuild [the U.S. Green Building Council’s annual conference] and the AIA [American Institute of Architects] convention.” Facts support the impression that women are drawn to green design. Currently, the percentage of women involved in the AIA Committee on the Environment (COTE) is nearly double the percentage of women

in the AIA overall. In COTE leadership roles at the national, regional, and local levels, the presence of women is even greater. And the percentage of women on the 2006 board of directors of the USGBC triples the percentage on the AIA's board.

A brief review of the history of environmentalism and sustainable design and development reveals that from the beginning many women—some heralded and some not—have had unique contributions to this field.

- The modern environmental movement began with a book by a woman (p. 19).
- The most popular definition of sustainability comes from a commission led by a woman who is also a strong advocate of gender equity (pp. 34,79).
- The first person to use the word “sustainability” with its current connotation was a woman (p. 34).
- Women were instrumental in the preservation and conservation movements in the U.S. as early as the mid-nineteenth century (p. 11).
- Some of the most important early proponents of systems thinking were women (pp. 139-140).
- The popular biomimicry movement was spawned by an influential book by a woman (p. 158).
- The first woman president of the American Institute of Architects was also the first to herald sustainable design as the primary mission of the organization during her tenure (p. 54).

Are these facts coincidental, or does sustainable design have some special appeal for women? Do they in turn have something unique to offer this field? These are the questions we set out to ask.

What of the worry that focusing on women as women could diminish their accomplishments? “That’s ridiculous,” says influential business writer Sally Helgesen. “When you shine the light on a population that has not been in the mainstream, you are met with this fear. But when similar books have been written about men, they’re not seen to marginalize them. The argument implicitly assumes that nothing about focusing on women will have wider applicability. Maybe there’s something here that everybody can learn from.”

Something everybody can learn from—that’s what we hope this book offers.

Why women? Keep reading.