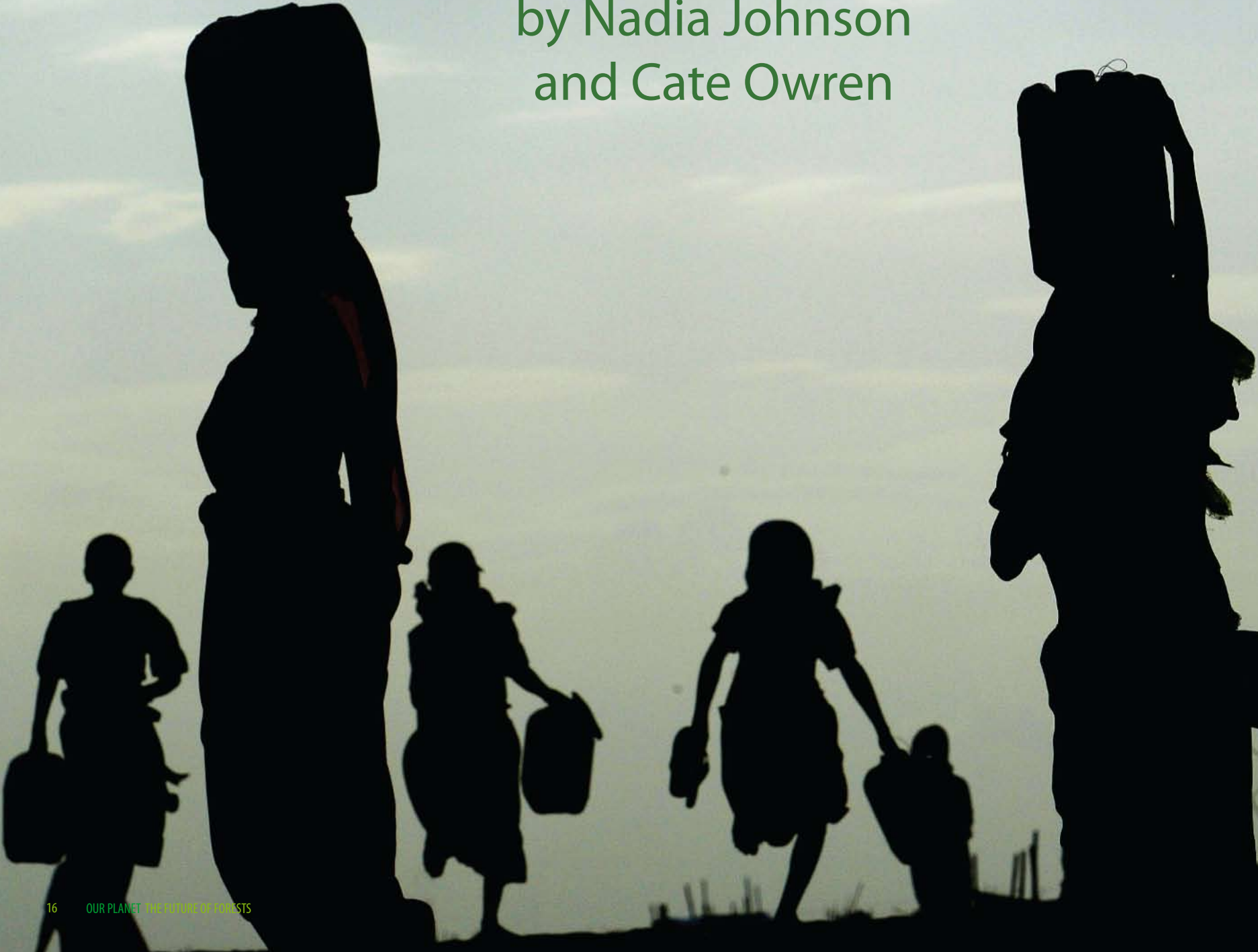


countless champions

by Nadia Johnson
and Cate Owren



The Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) was named a UNEP Champion of the Earth in 2006. The award is given annually to seven outstanding environmental leaders who have significantly influenced the protection and sustainable management of the planet's environment.

Each issue of Our Planet features the views of one of UNEP's Champions. For more information on the UNEP Champions of the Earth award see <http://www.unep.org/champions/>



Women have long been champions of the earth — managing natural resources and caring for their families and communities. So when the Women's Environment and Development Organization, (WEDO) was given UNEP's prestigious award two years ago, it accepted it on behalf of the millions of women worldwide who spend countless hours a day searching for water, growing and preparing food, and fetching firewood. Now their jobs have been made even more difficult by the interlinked crises of rising food prices and insecurity, exorbitant fuel costs, and climate instability.

Forests play a critical role in these issues, supplying the food, fuel and oxygen on which communities and ecosystems depend. And they must be seen from a gender perspective. Women, in most cases, are not woodlot owners, nor do they even have the right to own land, and therefore have little say over how forests or other lands are used. This results in discriminatory policies that are doing more harm than good to the most vulnerable populations.

Women, it is well known, are the primary stewards of natural resource management for their households and communities. When food and its markets become scarce, when climatic disaster strikes, or when land is converted to accommodate large-scale biofuel production, women are the most significantly hit, both because of their unique dependence on environmental resources and through their central role in their management. As the World Rainforest Movement proclaimed, "Forests provide the vital three F's for women: food, fuel and fodder."

Let Satou Diouf, from the Village of Gadiag, Senegal give some idea of what is happening on the ground. "We the women are responsible for feeding our families," she says. "The bush has now become desert in my area and there is nowhere to go to fetch wood. It is prohibited to cut acacia trees. If caught, one has to pay a fine... One day, unable to find enough wood after a long search, I used some branches to cook. Since the wood was not enough, I cut my plastic bassinette in pieces to fuel the fire... Then I took the wooden bench where I was seated and cut it to feed the fire..."

Climate change is happening now. Its impacts are being felt most acutely by those who have contributed least to it, those who are least able to cope with it, and those who have been left out of policy making aimed at solving it. Women — the majority of the global population living in poverty — are among those most at risk and as the climate changes they suffer exacerbated feminized poverty, homelessness and starvation, threats to health with increased infectious and vector-borne diseases, and gender-specific violence. Yet their experiences and expertise have so far not been included in official negotiations to address the climate crisis. They should be.

Women are often the majority of farmers in developing countries. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) points out that, worldwide, they "produce more than 50 per cent of the food that is grown" and comprise nearly half of the world's agricultural labor force, but remain disproportionately landless. Women are also often the main purveyors of food to their families and are most significantly hit by rising food prices, caused in part by large-scale biofuel production. And while women bear the burden of land conversion, they will not reap whatever socioeconomic benefits biofuels promise. In the words of WEDO founding Board member Vandana Shiva: "Industrial biofuels

are not the fuels of the poor; they are the foods of the poor transformed into heat, electricity and transport."

The FAO recently showed that the connection between food security and climate change is directly related to the different roles of women and men, and that policy making should specifically address gender equality and gender differentiated divisions of labour. Gender equality is now widely considered a prerequisite for sustainable development, and gender must urgently be incorporated into food, fuel and climate discussions. So far, these talks have portrayed women as victims of these global problems, but women have valuable expertise to contribute.

Rare is the community that is not experiencing the effects of the food, fuel and climate crisis, and for many, deforestation is a major factor. The rural Senegalese women's group, the Regroupement des Femmes de Popenguine, living between the mangroves of the Atlantic coast and a region of stony soils inland saw the problems resulting from deforestation and exploited resources in their communities. As Gender, Climate Change and Human Security, a recent report by WEDO with a chapter on Senegal by ENDA, described, they set out to control the degradation of natural resources and to protect their environment, to regenerate the mangroves and replant part of the felled forest. Their achievements contribute to combating desertification, protecting biodiversity and mitigating the effects of climate change, even only on a small scale.

Women are finding ways to cope with their changing environments so as to feed their families, care for their communities and nurture the Earth. WEDO founding Board member Wangari Maathai led by example in beginning the Greenbelt Movement, a grassroots tree planting programme to address deforestation, soil erosion and lack of water, which has become a worldwide environmental network and a vehicle for empowering women. Rural women's groups continue to take up the task of reforestation — not just to mitigate climate change, but in common sense response to their communities' needs.

Such action, on both small and large scales, should be directly influencing national, regional and global policy making. Women's groups are authorities on these issues and must be directly consulted — and heralded and supported as leaders, and action must be taken now to reduce the threats of greater and graver impacts.

WEDO is working to bring these local lessons to the global level, to contribute to gender-responsive and rights-based climate change policy making. It is documenting best practices and lessons learned, and advocating national policies that reflect the vulnerabilities and expertise of the population. Its project MisFortune 500 is producing a series of issue briefs — starting with one on biofuels — on the corporate role in the food, fuel and climate crises from a gender perspective.

Immediate action to mitigate the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming is a vital to address the climate crisis that is bringing devastation to the forests and the communities that depend on them in developing and developed countries alike, especially women and other vulnerable groups. But women have to be a part of the equation. 