

WUCWO GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Dakar 2018

16/10/2018

What's happening to our common home?

***Women and garbage management in sub-Saharan cities:
tradition, reality and urgency.***

SISTER THERESE SAMAKE, FCIM-MALI
HEWLETT-PACKARD

Dear Maria Giovanna, WUCWO's President,

Dear participants of this WUCWO General Assembly,

I am proud and honoured by the possibility of being here sharing with you, reflections on the motto of this Assembly: women of WUCWO, carriers of "living water" to a world thirsting for peace. May our reflections and debates these days help us to respond better and in accordance with the main objective that WUCWO has set since 1910: "to promote the presence, participation and co-responsibility of women in society and in the Church".

To a world thirsting for peace...

Dear members of WUCWO, after the reflections made on the themes: "Our world that thirsts for peace", "Family and migration", we are presented with a relevant question: ***What is happening to our common home?*** Here, questions of the past, the present and the future are manifested; here, our responsibility for the use of our Mother, the earth, is challenged in the same way. But I have a doubt... Do women have a greater propensity, even an imperative, to safeguard our common home? What is the use of celebrating days of reflection around this theme, if not, I believe, to invite women to become more aware of the challenges of peace and situations of land degradation?

As part of this reflection, I decided to put together a list of general environmental challenges to examine a specific, small-scale (the domestic-daily scale) reality of land degradation in Africa, which affects the duty of African women to be: ***Women and garbage management in sub-Saharan cities: tradition, reality and urgency.*** How can we, women, be living water carriers and promoters of peace in the middle of the filth of the world? The justification for this theme can be found in points 21 and 13 of the Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis on the care of our common home: *"The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish."* *"The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change."*

The essence of this communication will be synthesized in three points:

- ✓ Reflect on the main sources (causes) of waste production
- ✓ Identify women's household activities that generate garbage and wastewater¹
- ✓ To recover certain symbols for the development of the feminine role in the fight against environmental degradation and for a spirituality of living water.

¹This reflection was based on various documents, on articles and especially on surveys carried out with different target groups: inhabitants of high-income neighbourhoods, old and precarious neighbourhoods, intellectuals, illiterates, street vendors, domestic workers, female civil servants. The random sampling method was chosen, given the lack of reliable and up-to-date statistical data to conduct a logical survey

I- Tradition and realities of the care common house in Africa: paradise in perdition...

In the first chapter of Genesis we can read the following: “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. (...); “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.” God marvels at his creation. Not only he wanted it good, but he also wanted it beautiful, and he entrusted it to the man so that he would be master. *But what did the man do with it?*

The second paragraph of Pope Francis' exhortation on “*the care of the common house*” answers this question: “(the earth) This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her”. To desire, to buy, to consume, to throw away and to renew, this is our daily life without even realizing it. Indeed, human activity always generates waste. Therefore, the problem does not lie in the amount of waste produced, but in its accumulation and management, which show the impact of our contribution to environmental degradation. The production of these wastes varies from one village to another, from one neighbourhood to another, and from one house to another, within the same city. Three major causes of this phenomenon can be identified in sub-Saharan Africa:

➤ **The strength of tradition**

In the traditional sub-Saharan societies, I know of, household waste is stored in the inner courtyard of homes, and then incinerated in the open air, according to an appropriate ritual. According to this conception, garbage and wastewater generated from domestic activities are closely linked to those who produce them as a vital expression of the family. Thus, each family has its own landfill. The degradation and management of the environment are closely linked, in this case, to the illiteracy of the population and the culture that constitutes it, as Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out.²

➤ **Urbanization and demography**

One of the main causes of the accumulation of domestic waste and wastewater in sub-Saharan Africa is certainly the problem of urbanization. With successive waves of mainly rural migrants motivated by immediate survival needs, we are witnessing the creation of spontaneous, unplanned and uncontrolled neighbourhoods. Consequently, and adding to population growth, the production and management of garbage and wastewater in large quantities prevail. The number of inhabitants is proportional to the amount of garbage and the mixture of cultures explains the various behaviours in relation to waste management. This creates an ecosystem that is unhealthy for humans.

➤ **Poverty and lack of civic culture**

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt in his paper titled *Mr. Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran* stated: “When you want to know if you are in a rich or poor place, you look at the garbage. If you don't see garbage, it is very rich. If you see garbage cans and not garbage, it is rich. If you see garbage next to garbage cans, it is neither rich nor poor; it is tourist. If you see garbage without garbage, it is poor. And if people live in the garbage, they are very poor.”³ A priori, one might think that

² Pope Benedicto XVI, Encyclical, *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009) ; n.51,

³ Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, *Sr. Ibrahim y las flores del Corán*

the poor are those who have few means, therefore, they buy little, consume little and throw little. But, paradoxically, in sub-Saharan Africa it is in the poorest neighbourhoods where we find the most garbage and domestic wastewater.

Here, concern for protecting the environment is ignored or secondary to an immediate need for sanitation. Women are the centrepiece. Early in the morning, they go to public landfills to sort waste for resale. So, instead of contributing to the reduction of garbage, these women multiply it. These practices hinder waste management and coexistence.

II- Women and the environment in Africa⁴: generator of waste or actress of its management?

The problem of insalubrity and environmental degradation is one of the sad realities of today's African people. Women, because of their identity and their domestic role in society, are the most involved and affected in this phenomenon. They are seen as the main generators of waste and are responsible for its management. We can analyse three models of women in this aspect:

➤ **Housewife: *Well-being and insalubrity***

One of the characteristics of African community anthropology is the maintenance of the link between the woman and the care of the home: everything related to the order and cleanliness of the house is in the hands of the woman. This social conception, linked to certain cultural stereotypes, seems to remain firm in our societies and in the same way at the level of intellectuals. Functional simply housewife, almost all the activities that generate waste are carried out by her: cooking, washing dishes and clothes... all the occasions of daily garbage production, and its subsequent management depends on the standard of living of each home.

➤ **Dyers: *beauty and degradation***

Beautiful dresses that beautify women but at the same time make them sick and pollute their environment.

The first negative impact of dyeing on the environment is the use of wood to heat water. The second environmental impact has to do with the contamination of water and soil through rinsing water. For example, in Bamako, 11% of the dyers work on the banks of the Niger River and dump their polluted water directly into its flow. The other women work in their homes or gather in surrounding neighbourhoods. The dye waters are dumped directly into the streets. These liquids, which contain toxic and hazardous health products, penetrate the soil and contaminate groundwater. It is this groundwater that then feeds the layers and wells. As a result, this contaminated groundwater can no longer be used. The lack of a water collection system leads to the stagnation of wastewater that damages the streets and hampers traffic.

➤ **Saleswomen: *survival and illness***

Most women, both at home and in the market, are modest. More concerned about the survival of their families, the saleswomen, do not care about the environment: all places are good for carrying out their activities. So, they don't hesitate to throw their rotten products or other waste

⁴ While the so-called developed countries have made sanitation an environmental, political and economic priority in sub-Saharan countries, progress in these sectors remains very negligible and cities are collapsing under mountains of waste of all kinds (picture 8).

and sewage in the streets, public places or gutters, etc. They get along well with plastics and flies ...which are generally the cause of the rapid spread of parasites, the source of a large number of diseases.

The analysis of these different models and activities reveals that the management of domestic waste will continue to be a fundamental problem in African villages as long as the population does not adopt a change of mentality and standard of living. This population will continue to throw the garbage, solid and liquid, into the streets and gutters. Faced with these attitudes, an urgent call arises: change. But what commitment for what change?

III- Femininity committed to a healthy and holy environment: things can change...

Pope Francis is right to say this: "Many things have to reorient their course, but above all humanity needs to change."⁵ The obligatory lesson is that today African women are called to the recognition of an existential truth: change; change of mentality, change of behaviour for the care of the environment, development and peace. It is true that the causes of garbage and wastewater production can be directly linked to poverty, illiteracy, urbanization, population growth... but it is important to emphasize that it is not strange to find African women, intellectuals and women of high economic level, who also generate and badly manage domestic waste. Then, isn't the root of the problem somewhere else?

It is also true that informal sectors and associative structures are multiplying in many African cities with the aim of "managing garbage and domestic wastewater". The essential thing, however, is to commit oneself to safeguarding the moral conditions of a human ecology.⁶ A commitment from women is required so human life can take place in a healthy and sacred environment. To this end, I propose the re-appropriation of three symbols⁷ that are fundamental to the life of Saharan women:

➤ The symbolism of the broom: protection

It is true that the broom in the hands of an African does not have the same meaning as when it is used by another in another place. Made up of several branches, the broom is a sacred and pure instrument for use by African women. It is the first working instrument when one wakes up: it serves to separate garbage from what is useful and important. Beyond its utilitarian nature, the broom symbolises cleanliness, protection, unity and non-violence. Like the broom, the woman is invited to protect and clean her environment. Her beauty or her other name is "cleanliness".

➤ Pumpkin Symbolism: Purification and Reception

The pumpkin is an instrument of women's work throughout Africa. From one cultural environment to another, it is invested with a spiritual power according to its tradition. Fragile but precious, the pumpkin is used to carry water as well as food. Another of its external qualities is that it symbolizes the spring as an instrument for purification and sanitation.

Like a pumpkin, a woman can let herself be emptied, surrendered, giving the best of herself. In spite of her physical fragility, she remains in her vocation as a water carrier; "Impermeable" to

⁵Pope Francis, Encyclical about the care of the common house

⁶ Idem, §5.

⁷ Idem, §5.

all external forces, she remains "containing" and communicative. Her feminine greatness is measured in the welcome of the other and in her capacity to make her environment healthy and holy.

➤ **The symbolism of the well: interiority and desire for God**

The well has a sacred character in all African traditions. It represents the synthesis of the three cosmic orders: heaven, earth, hell, and also of the three elements: water, earth, air. By its vaginal and deep form, by its humid appearance, the well is a feminine symbol of abundance and life. Although it is easy to see and measure the circumference of the well, its depth is still difficult to determine at first sight; it symbolizes life, secret, concealment, interiority, desire. The truth is at the bottom of the well. But what well? I propose to think here of one of the most enriching stories in the Bible that encourages our reflections: the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn 4:1-42). This well has the meaning of source of living water, spring, place of life, truth, encounter and teaching. Like the Samaritan woman, we are invited to become water wells and well-carers; to move from the material well to the spiritual well, source of spring water, to be carriers of living water and not producers of waste water.

The objective of these three symbols is summed up in this: the audacity of change. Change to protect our environment, for harmonious coexistence and for a spiritual culture that humanizes our network of relationships in space, all constitutive elements of sustainable development and lasting peace. Didn't Margaret Mead say that we should never doubt that a small group of thoughtful and committed citizens can change the world? Things can and must change because of women. Domestic and spiritual waste can be well managed in the common home of Africa. To make this desire for change a reality, it is important to develop a new consciousness, to commit ourselves to a cultural revolution, a new way of being, acting and living in which God, the source of all good and peace, is truly desired and appreciated at all times and in all places in our common home.

This final reflection in analysing the known text, "Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well," has allowed us to understand that the degradation suffered by our common home is not only external. The thirst of the world is not only material. What is it that we express, but this idea: to work for the liberation of the feminine genius in the dynamic of spirituality of living water that purifies, quenches thirst and restores? Therefore, the woman will see in the simplest of her actions (management of garbage and wastewater) the human lives that will be affected accordingly.