
Women take action in their environment

By Peggy Knapp

The Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario (FWIO) is an organization of over 19,000 members throughout the province, whose focus is centred on the environment.

In 1991, the Recycling Council of Ontario granted their coveted award to the FWIO as exemplifying "the organization which has done the most to influence public action with regard to waste management and recycling."

The Women's Institute, however, considers environmental responsibility to include much more than reducing, reusing and recycling. After hours of thoughtful discussion, "Women and Their Environment" was chosen as the theme and focal point for the '90s.

"But what," they asked, "does environment mean to us, as women?" Consensus, when reached, envisioned three areas of concern for what surrounds them and is most important in the lives of women:

First, – **the personal environment** – the development of a woman's potential

to become what she is capable of becoming. It includes the fine-tuning of her senses, the honing of her intellect, the wholesome nutrition and fitness of her own body, a healthy mind open to new ideas, and the setting aside of time to know and experience the inner spirit that makes up her own personality.

Second, once she has "her own house in order," a woman can more capably be involved with her second environment – **her family and the community**. The Women's Institute was built on two premises – Personal Development and Community Action. This program allowed women to meet, share ideas and learn, together, from speakers and from each other. Through their actions, women have "made a difference" in communities across Ontario, Canada, and the World.

As we witness a shrinking planet, this organization offers a sense of community, a sense of belonging! whether the neighbourhood is down the village street, on the next rural concession, or in our global village. But always, the centre of the second environment is the enhancement of the family and the

strengthening of the family unit.

Third – **global ecology**. Believing that nourishing her family is her most important role, today's woman is concerned that her children and her grandchildren can breathe pure air, experience clear sunsets, smell wildflowers in the meadows and splash in sparkling, unpolluted streams and lakes. She is also concerned that an abundance of clean, safe food from the fields and gardens of Ontario may continue to fill our tables, build strong bodies, and fulfill our needs. Her commitment to global ecology and its careful preservation, therefore, is her third environment.

The three environments of women – **personal development, family and community, and global ecology** – offer a challenging opportunity to make a difference. With almost a hundred years of experience, the Women's Institutes of Ontario commit themselves to the future.

"Women and the Environment – It's In Our Hands."

Peggy Knapp
President, FWIO

Enviro-Tips: An update on the diaper debate

Today, disposable diapers are still favoured for convenience, but it is significant that consumers are actively making a choice. Those parents who choose reusable cloth diapers are making a statement against the manufacture, use and "disposability" of single-use diapers. And some hospitals and daycare centres are making the switch back to cloth.

Some advertisers argue that cloth and disposable diapers are equally harsh on the environment. Disposable manufacturers are happy to find (and fund) studies showing that production and use of cloth diapers produce more sewage for treatment, use more energy and water, and generate more air emissions than the production of disposables.

But, it can be argued, the use of cloth diapers at least keeps sewage in its proper place, as well as reducing

manufacturing waste. Diaper services are the most efficient way to launder cloth diapers since the pollution they create per capita lessens as more people use the service. However, parents who wash cloth diapers at home are saving at least \$1000 over the cost of disposables, and they can choose to use soaps that are safe for the environment.

Advertisements also imply that disposables can be composted into "food for the earth." The truth is that disposable manufacturers are spending a lot of money **trying** to compost diapers. Composting and recycling of diapers is being tested in two cities only, but it is considered too expensive for widespread implementation and would require consumer co-operation and handling of dirty diapers.

The consensus is that biodegradable diapers are not a suitable alternative.

They are made of photo-degradable plastics that when buried permit neither a fast rate of nor complete decomposition to take place. And they still allow human waste to enter landfill sites. Although the race is on to produce a bacteria-based plastic that will fully degrade, natural resources are still depleted in their manufacture.

Really, can the convenience of or arguments for disposable, single-use diapers be worth it? When considering that each cloth diaper is used 50 to 200 times, the comparison becomes laughable.

This information was synthesized from an article by Helene Meurer that appeared in the September 1991 Canadian Journal of Health and Nutrition.