

Famke Janssen addresses Women for Water Partnership

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Green Cross International Water for Life and Peace Ambassador, Famke Janssen, spoke at a packed event dedicated to women and water issues at the World Water Forum 6 in Marseille, France.

The full text follows:

Dear friends and distinguished members of the World Water Forum and this special session on Women and Water. I am honored to be here today to draw attention to the vital role women play in responding to the water crisis and the perils associated with failing to engage "us" in solutions to the challenge.

This is my first official role as a supporter and ambassador for Green Cross International, the nongovernmental organization founded by Mikhail Gorbachev. As president of the Soviet Union, he tackled what was one of the greatest challenges – if not the greatest – of his era, bringing an end to the Cold War.

President Gorbachev, who spoke at the opening of the World Water Forum just two days ago, believes in the power of all people, particularly women, to make change aimed at protecting the environment. Women have a vital role to play to ensure all people can live free of poverty and insecurity, and enjoy a world that conserves – not exploits – its many natural wonders.

I'm here today because both President Gorbachev and I agree on two extremely important points: first, women and children are the people who are most vulnerable to the water crisis; and second, sustainable solutions to the global water crisis will not be found without engaging and understanding women's unique relationship to water.

We can all agree that billions of people lacking access to clean water and sanitation is one of the colossal failures of the modern era; and that millions of people dying each year because of a lack of clean water is a Human Rights tragedy and is absolutely unacceptable.

Sadly, our agreements on these atrocities seem not to have generated the desperately needed solutions. The problem, it seems, is not merely a lack of aid, technology or infrastructure. Instead it is a failure of vision and will. It is the vision and will to put aside the paralyzing debates over privatization versus government ownership and instead embrace the notion of water as a Human Right and focus on community scale infrastructure, efficiency and conservation -- solutions that women hold the key to because of their critical role in delivering water supply and hygiene to their families and communities.

I firmly believe that the failure to engage women at a local level is the key to unlocking the door to sustainable solutions that are unique to each community and the roadmap to dealing with the savage injustices experienced by more than a billion people.

Women know the solutions because they are the first to experience the problems. It is primarily women who gather water, irrigate crops, ensure good hygiene and help stop the spread of water-related diseases. It is mothers, aunts and sisters who often are the ones who care for those who become sick from poor quality water.

Because of limited water and the absence of hygiene facilities far too many young women have to drop out of school when they reach puberty -- an unacceptable problem that discriminates specifically against women. In far too many places around the globe it is women who literally must carry the burden of supplying water as they walk an average of fifteen kilometers a day, spending up to 8 hours collecting water that might not even be safe to drink.

In short, women are at ground zero of the world's water problems. Therefore, communities that do not empower women when it comes to water do so at their own peril.

Exclusion of women from decision-making and management of water resources ensures poor results. Women know that not every water problem needs a large dam, billions of dollars of

investment or grand engineering solutions; instead they are the first to recognize that sustainable solutions come in many shapes and sizes.

As women are disproportionately distressed by the lack of adequate, clean, and safe water, their thoughts, input and observations are critical to achieving success. When women are ignored or shut out of the process then the solutions may not help and can even worsen the situation. As a result, when the right to water is not maintained, women suffer disproportionately, compromising their and their children's health and future.

Women must be empowered, trained and recognized as great agents of change within their families and communities, particularly when it comes to water. Empowering women, therefore, will help ensure children can be protected from diarrheal diseases, the second leading cause of death in children, and provided a better chance to realize their Right to Education.

One of the key reasons – if not the main – that President Gorbachev founded Green Cross International in 1993 was to protect the world from conflicts, especially those fought over natural resources. He long ago saw that nations would be fighting over shared water resources for control and survival, calling water the “new oil.”

Darfur and the Horn of Africa are modern day examples of how lack of water can cause conflicts. Women around the world, as great peace brokers, must be more and more empowered to take charge of water issues in their communities, with a view to promoting peace.

Let us follow in the footsteps of the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and let us fight to achieve the simple dream that many people around the world take for granted; access to clean and safe drinking water.

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity to speak with you today, and I wish you the best of luck for the remainder of the conference.

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