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Women and environmental management in third world countries: A comparative study

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ABSTRACT

With the changing times, most of the third world women were dependent on the land for their survival. Debates on the role of women in environmental sustainability classically focus on women's current role as users and managers of natural resources like hewers of wood and haulers of water, food producers and guardians of genetic resources. The association between women and the environment is becoming an important field of research, developmental policy and practice. Although, there is a lot of focus over recent years in understanding this relationship, all intercessions are focussed towards a common objective of initiating a process of change that could bring up the women and environmental concerns from the limits to a more consolidated limitless position in sustainable development policies.

Introduction:

The management of natural resources and the sustainability of the environment in current scenario for the development of any nation, especially in third world countries is unquestionable. In order to manage the resources and protect the environment everyone has a responsibility and the role. The present study discusses the role of women and their access to decision-making when it comes to transformation of a current state of the environment to the next sustainable level. All these decision making processes need to understand the environmental issues and problem and a dedicated vision to enforce different activities. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) which was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992; focus on the environment with a main theme on natural resource issues and the intergenerational equity concerns of global warming, the ozone layer and acid rain, collectively dubbed the 'green agenda'. The environment was therefore defined predominantly in biophysical terms. However, since UNCED, there has been a growing awareness of the 'brown agenda' which takes into account the environmental

problems that are directly linked to the development process including:

- The lack of drinking water, sanitation and drainage around the urban as well as rural areas including scanty hazardous waste management system
- Degradation of environmentally sensitive lands
- Uncontrolled emissions from motor vehicles, factories, and low-grade domestic fuels including paraffin and wood
- Inadequate and insufficient provision of housing for the poor

So far as the protection of this environment is concerned women in the third world countries are taking great challenges and are among the most passionate activists for protecting the planet and the lives of its inhabitants. The examples include afforestation activities of the Green belt Movement of Kenya and the Chipko Movement of India. Similarly, the actions of women for saving Love Canal, Bhopal and Chernobyl are significant. In addition, some lesser known examples of female environmental activism include Filipino women stopping the building of an environmentally threatening dam; Malaysian

women halting the felling of trees; women of the pacific region objecting against nuclear testing; Guyanese women initiating a biogas program to save fuel; the women in Sarawak, Malaysia, protesting against commercial logging when they learned that their trees were being cut down to make 20 billion disposable chopsticks for Japan (Women's Feature Service 1992; World Women's Congress 1991; UNEP 1991). The Earth Summit held in Rio (1992) has highlighted the fundamental role of women in promoting ecologically sound and sustainable development. Since then, feminists all over the world have encompassed the environmental challenges and are among the most fanatical activists working towards protecting the planet and its occupants.

Developing countries and Women:

It has been demonstrated that a greater fraction of world women population lives in developing countries. Numerous reports have found their significant role in sustaining the lives and managing their surroundings (United Nations 1989, 1995; Rose 1992). Women's in the third world work for enormous hours daily ranging an average from 1-18 hours towards household

tasks and fetching water and fuel in extreme conditions. In rural areas women's play an important role in basic food production, processing and transport. They are busy most of their time working in fields maintaining their produce and thereby helping in balancing the environmental processes. On the other hand, a huge number of women's work in the informal sector of the economy and are paid extremely low. Besides they are often working without associating with the union or associations which results in the denial of their basic rights and are working sometimes without benefits of health care and social services. One of the main reasons could be the basic education, as majority of them are illiterate or lacking essential qualifications for a basic job. Majority of these women's lack access to credit and are without their personal assets. Working the odd jobs, they are constantly exposed to health hazards, have a high maternal morbidity and mortality rate, low life-expectancy and suffer child loss as a result of high infant-mortality rates. In general, women in developing countries are inexplicably affected by poverty because of the unequal distribution of resources and the predominance of an unequal division of labor at national and international levels so

far as the third world countries are concerned. In addition, although they spend most of their time for fulfilling basic human needs still they have limited access to strategic resources such as land, capital and technology (United Nations 1989, 1995; Dankleman and Davidson 1988; Steady 1993). Moreover, due to rise in male migration towards developed nations from many countries, women's are bound to do all the work supporting and raising a family (Momsen 1991).

Environmental degradation, poverty and women:

There is well recognised link between environmental degradation, poverty and role of women (Shiva 1988, UNCED 1992, Steady 1993). Reports have demonstrated that the poorest 20% of the world's population lives in ecologically fragile and vulnerable areas. Furthermore, among these 80% of the individuals in Latin America, 60% in Asia and 51 % in Africa are reportedly living in the areas of very low productivity with a high degree of susceptibility to environmental degradation. According to 1992 Human Development reports "poverty has a gender bias" and women's are more sufferers. Environmental

degradation is the problem of the developed nations as well. As the societies are moving forward towards the industrialised nations, the environmental pollution and degradation becomes an obvious process and escalates day by day making a nation poor when it comes to the environmental sustainability.

Reports from United States census has revealed that the rural and urban poverty is persistently continuing and that poverty is in fact increasing for the inner cities where poor living conditions, lead poisoning and pollution carry serious threat to health (Wilson 1987, Devine and Wright 1993, Massey and Denton 1993). It has been estimated that between four and five million children in the United States mostly children of colour are routinely exposed to lead in sufficient quantities to be considered dangerous to their health (Phoenix 1993). According to The Centre for Disease Control "Childhood lead poisoning is one of the most common paediatric health problems in the United States today, and it is entirely preventable" (Center For Disease Control 1991). Besides children's, the pesticide poisoning with catastrophic damage to women's reproductive organs occurs routinely among migrant farm

workers in California. (Huerta 1993). Most of the landfills and dump sites for hazardous wastes are loathed in poor neighbourhoods often inhabited by people of color (Cole 1990, Bullard 1993). Women in developing countries are among the primary victims of the synergistic effects of environmental degradation and poverty (Steady 1993). Agricultural inputs such as pesticides handled by women have shown to have negative effects on human genetic structure and affect women's reproductive system, pregnancy outcomes and fetal development. Now-a-days, the environment is degraded by the developed nations in the developing and low income countries by promoting the commercial trade and ties for cultivation of cash crops, dumping hazardous wastes in developing countries like African areas. International economic policies such as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS) and liberalization are creating gross disparities between and within nations, social groups and the sexes and are among the root causes of poverty, ecosystem imbalance and environmental degradation (United Nations 1995a). Environmental degradation processes have always led to food scarcity and mal-nutrition conditions especially in children's.

Women and household management:

In rural areas, it has been found that women's perform most of the daily duties related to procuring water and fuel, farming, animal husbandry, food processing, waste disposal and overall household management playing an essential role in food security for the family. However, due to gender bias and discrimination, women's in some societies are underestimated and never considered as the part when it comes to decision making. In some African countries, for example, women contribute as much as 75% of household production which includes obtaining food, fuel, fiber, fertilizer fodder, medicinal herbs and like for the daily sustaining life activities (Daakleman and Davidson, 1988, Steady, 1985). At times, a rural woman in some parts of Africa spends an average of 3 hours walking 6-8 kilometers for getting drinking water. In parts of Asia, particularly in India, the rural woman works 12 to 15 hours a day gathering firewood and water, growing food, collecting fodder, tending domestic animals, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, the sick and the elderly (Agarwal 1992). Caribbean women are responsible for 80%

of domestic food production and distribution (Wiltshire 1993).

Major contributions by women's and their problems:

As women's in the rural societies and third world countries spend most of their time in the activities that expose them to various hazards and real life problems; voices were raised to find out a solution and various summits for a sustainable solutions took place at different places nationally and internationally. The first African Women's Assembly on Sustainable Development held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in February 1989, recognized that African women spent a significant portion of the day engaged in agro-forestry, animal husbandry, water supply and energy management. In certain parts of Africa, women's were providing 60-90% of the labor in survival agriculture and contributed a substantial amount of the paid labor required in male-run commercial agricultural schemes. Similarly, at the Arab Women's Assembly on the role of Arab Women in the Protection of the Environment held in Tunis, Tunisia in February 1990, the participants noted there is a major lack of focus on the important interplay between women's activities and

sustainable development. The fact that women contributed significantly to the economic development of their countries, especially in agriculture, forestry, education and health were often ignored. Women of the Caribbean and Latin American regions held a regional assembly in Quito, Ecuador in March 1991. They noted that the deterioration of the environment accentuated the increase in social marginality which has affected the female population. The principal environmental problems from the human perspective were seen as the lack of housing and basic services, unhealthy work environments, lack of security, industrial and domestic contamination and threat of accidents and natural disasters. The Asia-Pacific Women's Regional Assembly in Bangkok, Thailand in March 1991 examined the root causes of underdevelopment and environmental degradation. The assembly stressed that strategies aimed at promoting the partnership between women and the environment must take into account a range of causative factors. These include poverty, population pressure, family and social breakdown.

Views from women's: Women's believe that they are better conservationists of nature

than men. Eco-feminists postulate that women are biologically more agreed to nature than men and highlight the need for incorporating the feminine principle in our relations with the Earth so that it can be cherished rather than destroyed (Shiva 1988, Diamond and Orenstein 1990, Meis and Shiva 1993). Feminist environmentalists claim that women's interaction with the environment has a materialistic basis and are rooted in their life experience with nature and the proximity of the crisis of their lives. Although, it a broad area of discussion if we start diving the environmental conservation issues based on gender bias, the point is to make sustainable environment and it could be done with the positive approach of the both genders together. Since in rural areas and in most of the third world countries women's are mostly working for the basic necessities of life that are in fact directly connected with environmental conservation, women's must be given a chance to be involved in policy making decisions and all other related issues for sustainable environmental plans. Strengthening women's legal capacity would require the enforcement of legislation guaranteeing their rights and access to land and other natural resources. The ratification, implementation,

enforcement and monitoring of domestic legislation relating to the "Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women" should be a priority. Equally important is the promotion of legal literacy relating to this convention and to international environmental conventions. Attention should be paid to strengthening indigenous efforts aimed at providing women with access to productive resource and credit.

Training opportunities for women:

Since women's are able to work immensely for long hours directly involving different environmental processes; every effort must be taken to train them with latest scientific methods so that the barrier of access due to lack of knowledge could be removed. Feminists have criticized that a huge mass of women and people of color would lead to 'a transformation of the culture of science to one that is more inclusive (Subramanian, 1997). It could be done by making equal access to scientific and technological education advanced post-graduate training and professional careers in these fields a priority. Such efforts should also integrate the contributions of the natural, engineering and social sciences into the formulation of

environment and development policy, taking due account of the responsibility of women in their role as educators and transmitters of social norms and values and in shaping the social and ethical context in which science is performed. Special efforts must be taken to accelerate the education and training of women through scholarships and fellowships.

Conclusion:

Every nation in this world wants to have a sustainable future and off course that needs sustainable environment. One of the prerequisite to have sustainable environment is to provide equal rights and to have division of labour. In order to promote sustainable development, policies must ensure gender equality in all aspects of society, including the promotion of women's literacy, education, training, nutrition and health, and their participation in key decision-making positions and in the management of the environment. Since women's are most of the times in direct contact with the environment and managing natural resources at their level. It could be expected that they may be the good advisors when it comes to making policies for natural resource management, sustainable

development and environmental protection. However, the irony is they are being alienated in most of the cases since they have no official training and earlier experience in decision making. In order to provide them a chance and involve them in decision making, it is necessary to establish and strengthen the institutional arrangements which provide channels for women to express their concerns and guard their entitlements. Men and women in developing countries interact with their environments differently as a result of the gender division of labor and women's structural disadvantages regarding access to natural resources. The majority of women in developing countries experience poverty and the effects of environmental degradation in ways that are more powerful and shocking than their counterpart in many industrialized countries.

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