

Pollution and Women in an Age of Technology

Abridged from a paper by Dr. Indrani Michael (*)

At the outset it may seem irrelevant to talk about pollution in relation to women and children, especially when environmental issues and relevant crises are global and affect all life forms on earth. However, in reality, these issues and problems do not affect men, women, children and other life forms in the same way. The reasons vary because of the multiplicity of accepted social equality, religious beliefs, role definitions and role expectations of the sexes.

Women, especially those living in the rural areas of Third World countries, play a major role in managing natural resources, such as soil, water, forests and energy. Their (women's) task is largely concentrated in agriculture and animal husbandry in addition to household duties, which makes them the daily managers of the living environment around them. They have profound knowledge of plants, animals and the ecological processes. Consequently, if exploitation of nature is directly related to increase in pollution, then women become the victims of that pollution.

Furthermore, women are the primary victims of any irregularity — socio-economic, political, cultural and others — which affects underprivileged and marginal groups of any society, of which women form a majority. Women's problems and those of the environment are very much interrelated, for both women and the environment are marginalized by existing development policies.

Because of the complex cycles of inappropriate development resulting in environmental degradation, poverty and increase in pollution, the poorest of the poor women and children are

worse hit. They are forced into ways of living which induce further deterioration. It is a double tragedy. The so-called "Third World Women" often have no choice but to exploit natural resources for sustenance and survival. Thereby, they increase pollution, and become, one more time, victims in this vicious cycle.

For instance, Dr. Michael reports a few self-explanatory cases across the world:

1. **Deforestation:** Deforestation is highest in Africa and Asia. Hence, in Togo, West Africa, women gather Dama Dama Mustard seeds from a tree in order to prepare a scarce and expensive sauce. This produce is a major source of income for a significant number of families. However, willful deforestation and environmental pollution affecting the forests in Togo, have reduced the supply of seeds. The consequences are a decrease in family income in addition to high levels of malnutrition among Togolese women and children (1).

2. **Human migration:** Rural-urban migration is a very common phenomenon in Third World countries. Poor, rural families generally move to the city for work and income. Being originally poor they settle in slum areas, which are smelly, infested, short of drinking water, and have unsanitary sewage systems. The women, who migrate with their husbands, are the ones who have to work in these deplorable conditions and become subject to infections, diseases and other health problems.

Such cases are endless. In reality they illustrate how women shape and are being shaped by the environment in the Third World. A healthy environment is, therefore,

fundamental for their survival and for pollution control. Basically, the relationship between women and the environment is cyclical. They are the managers of the environment, from which they expect to replenish their food, water, shelter, fuel, building material, medicines, ingredients and income generating activities. Men enjoy the products of nature prepared by women. This tends to push women towards a more marginal position and to contribute to pollution and destructive factors resulting from intentional and profit oriented technological abuse of the environment.

For Third World women poverty remains at the very core of the problem. Unless poverty of women and families, especially in Third World countries, is dealt with, environmental degradation, increase in pollution and consequent health problems will not be curtailed. "Transfer of equal power to women, to enable them to take control over their own development, both at the top and at grassroot levels, is crucial. Unless an attempt is made to restore their dignity and confidence, allowing them to work as partners, the situation will never change. All other attempts to improve the environment will be futile." (2) •

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(1) Dr. Indrani, source: OXFAM, UK.

(2) Ibid.