

Environmental Degradation in Developing Countries: The Plight and Potential Role of Women

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The past two decades have witnessed a growing awareness of and concern with the ever-increasing magnitude of environmental problems, laying bare the societies and government's incomplete understanding of these problems and their inability to deal with them effectively. Amongst the more familiar manifestations of serious environmental degradation are high concentrations of pollutants, large scale build-up of Co₂, desertification, and the depletion of non-renewable as well as renewable resources⁽¹⁾.

The presence of such symptoms in a developing Third World country would directly imply a tenfold dimension to the problem of environmental degradation. One aspect of this multifaceted problem is the fact that women play critical economic roles that have lasting environmental degradation, especially if they are living in rural areas: It is there that women are the main procurers, users and managers of natural resources, and as such they are especially affected by the deterioration of the physical environment. This particularly applies to the women of the more awkward of the developing countries where

it is they who have to walk further and further each year to fetch firewood from the dwindling woodlands; they who must search for hours for a stretch of unpolluted water; they who must cope with the effects of environmental degradation and pollution on their own and their family's health⁽²⁾.

However it is in both rural and urban

areas that women use water and other resources more than men. In Third World societies, women are actively trained to acquire basic resource management skills and hence are in more direct contact with changes in the environment⁽³⁾.

The two biggest environmental problems that face women living in rural areas are (1) resource depletion and (2) pollution. Women rarely have any say in major decisions or development projects that directly affect their environment and their resource needs: some projects, whether commercial or developmental, have depleted important resource bases on which many essential productive activities depend. For example, women are affected by deforestation since they are the primary gatherers of fuelwood⁽⁴⁾. Moreover, women are exposed to different health threats than men because of their separate daily responsibilities: smoke emitted from burning fuelwood, charcoal or dung for cooking can cause serious eye and respiratory diseases. In the later case, the smoke inhaled has, in some case studies, been estimated to have the same effects as smoking several packs of cigarettes a day. Apart from these specific health threats, women are generally more physiologically sensitive to pollutants than men because of their child bearing role⁽⁵⁾.

The interaction between women living in rural areas of developing countries and the environmental problems facing them can neatly be summed up in the following formula: The worsening plight of these women is directly proportional to the rate of environmental

degradation. Hence, improving the lot of such women would necessarily involve the alleviation and eventual solution of environmental problems.

What is needed, then, is "environmental management": scientifically speaking, the term refers to conscious, strategic decisions as opposed to habitual, unconscious actions, which guide the exploitation, development, conservation or protection of environmental resources⁽⁶⁾. However, if environmental management is to be a workable solution in the present context, then it would have to go beyond the realm of this definition to include the human aspect of the problem i.e the female aspect in our case. Tackling such a task would, therefore, require not merely careful planning and concerted action by both government bodies and the rural people, but also the involvement (and recognition) of women as key agents for the "primary environmental care"⁽⁷⁾ that is needed for sustained development •

(1) Sally Macgill, "Environmental Questions and Human Geography", *Environmental Awareness*, 38 (#3, 1986), pg. 357-368.

(2) Nafis Sadck (ed.), "New Sources of Insecurity: Environmental Instability," *Investing In Women: The Focus of the 90's*, New York: UNFPA Publications, 1991, P.11.

(3) *World Economic Survey, 1991*, New York: UN Publications, 1991, p.195.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) *The World's Women: Trends and Statistics, 1979-1990*, New York: UN Publications, 1991, p.75.

(6) Macgill, *Ibid.*, p.370.

(7) *World Economic Survey, Ibid.*