

The Effect of Sudanese Women's Activities on The Environment

Dr. Amira Awad Muhammad Saleh
National Forestation Association - Sudan

Sudan is one of the biggest countries of Africa with an area of 2.5 million Sq. Kilometers (965,250 Sq. Miles). It borders Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Zaire, Central Africa, Tchad, Libya and Egypt from the North, and the Red Sea from the East. According to the 1993 statistics, the population of Sudan is 26 million, of which 25 percent are urban dwellers and 75 percent live in rural areas, and its population growth is 2.9 percent.

Agriculture is the backbone of the Sudanese economy and comprises 85 percent of the labor force. Agriculture and farming constitute 40 percent of the Gross Domestic Product and 95 percent of export revenues. Exports include cotton, oil grains, and Arab glue.

Forest area covers 18 percent of Sudan but should amount to 25 percent in order to maintain environmental and ecological equilibrium. The importance of forestry in the national economy is evident for it secures 12 percent of the national product and saves 72.7 percent of the energy needed in the form of wood. Sudan is also considered the largest producer of Arab Glue and saves 85 percent of world resources.

Vegetation in Sudan - largely related to rain fall, which ranges from zero in the North to more than 2,500 mm. in the South - consists of different levels of density ranging from desert in the North to tropical rain forests in the South.

Sudan is known to be rich in its resources and their variety but has experienced severe droughts, desertification and famines badly affecting its national product.

Women and the Environment

Women play a major role in the Sudanese economy because they have productive roles. The volume of work they perform within their basic roles as housekeepers, mothers, and teachers of future generations is large compared with that of men, although the opposite is projected by traditional society. Furthermore, they hold crucial responsibilities outside the house and carry out more than 75 percent of agricultural work. They also care for the animals and herds. All these efforts reflect directly or indirectly on the national economy but are not accounted for in economic statistics.

The relationship between women and the environment varies depending on socio-economic, demographic and cultural differences. Therefore, the bond between women and the environment is closer in rural areas, where it developed as a natural consequence of women's interaction with natural resources for daily survival. Thus, rural women's work is largely based on managing natural parameters such as rationing food, water, wood, herds, and manufacturing handmade products from available resources.

An economic and social survey conducted for the National Forestry League and FAO for a development project related to using wood as a source of energy, was the first study focusing on women. It investigated their understanding of forests and fire wood for heating, and surveyed women in eight villages of the Eastern region. The results reveal that despite the high rate of illiteracy, women are highly aware of the value and importance of forestation. Hereby is a review of the results.

Northern Sudan

Agricultural land in Northern Sudan is diminishing dramatically for two main reasons: first, because of desertification caused by low levels of rainfall and repeated droughts, and second because of erosion on the banks of the Nile. Consequently, agricultural land in Northern Sudan is narrow, no more than a few meters wide, because it lies between the Nile and the desert.

These conditions increased men's migration for better work opportunities which meant leaving women in charge of land and family. Hence, women in the North carry out all agricultural work in the available spots, in addition to managing water, energy, fuel which means having to travel long distances to secure these needs for the family. Their tasks also include building a new house every time erosion or quick sands destroy the old one.



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Eastern Sudan

Eastern Sudanese society is conservative compared to the other regions in the country. Therefore, women's movements are restricted, thus, limiting change in status and living conditions. They also suffer from a very high rate of illiteracy reaching 87 percent. Most of the inhabitants belong to the Hidnouda tribe whose women do not work outside the home, but are confined to household chores, and to raising their children. The environment is dry, arid and covered with desert winds which last most of the year. Women and children suffer from the spread of disease, malnutrition and severe unhygienic conditions.

Western Sudan

Agriculture and farming are the main economic activities of Western Sudan. Women are the primary providers of the family in these sectors and, thus, perform up to 80 percent of agricultural work. They work in family lots or as paid workers in addition to their domestic chores. The migration of men, because of drought and famine have also added to women's workload and responsibilities.

In many cases, the entire tribe or village migrated for supposedly better conditions in the suburbs of the city. However, their new homes exposed them to more severe environmental conditions, such as pollution from urban waste, burning of solid waste which attracted insects and disease, in addition to lack of family planning, healthcare for children, medical care. A study comparing women's lives in their native region with their new homes revealed that in the original habitat their labor included agriculture, farming, handicrafts in addition to family chores. However, in their new homes 60 percent worked as hired help in homes, 20 percent served tea, 10 percent performed miscellaneous jobs, 5 percent sold food products and the remaining 5 percent carried out unspecified tasks. One hundred percent of these women were illiterate.

The Sudanese women of the West bear most of the responsibilities for the family and perform most of the chores under difficult conditions and climate. These strenuous tasks are common cause for miscarriages or poor health causing the death of mothers during delivery.

Participation of Women in Projects for the Protection of the Environment

Most of the projects designed for forestation include women in their agenda and workshops. Many have a special women's committee. Projects in the North and the East of Sudan consisted of digging water-wells and making fenced agricultural lots. Groups composed of local women were trained in managing the lots. Some of their tasks included: 1) distribution of labor among the women; 2) supervising and administering the produce of income generating activities; 3) learning to use wood for heating economically, 4) working as teams which created a greater sense of responsibility among them.

Women's participation in protecting the environment is related to their direct relationship with natural parameters for survival. In most Sudanese districts, women's participation in environmental projects was successful.

For more information contact: Dr. Amira Awad Muhammad Saleh
National Forestation Association -
Khartoum, Sudan. Telex 24307
FORES SD.