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Global Environmental Crisis: Vulnerability of Women

The climate is changing. The earth is warming up, and there is now overwhelming scientific consensus that it is mostly human-induced. With the rise of global temperature the species and their habitats are in the crisis situation, chances of natural adaptability in the ecosystems are diminishing. Scientists are worried about the situation and researches are going on to tackle the situation. But as far as the Women's connection with the environment is concerned, the issue is yet to be addressed seriously.

In the early 1970s publication of a book, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, written by Ester Boserup showed an interest regarding the connection of women with environment; following this changes became visible regarding the understanding about the relationship between natural resources and women; environmental management with the specific role of women in mind started drawing increased attention. From the 1970s onwards, researchers and environmentalists began to concentrate more on the impact of women on the natural environment and the effects of environment on the health and well-being of women.

The factor that led to the emergence of the Women, Environment, and Development debate (WED) began in the early 1970s was the oil crisis. In this context the WED debate examined the correlation

between the degradation of the environment and the subordination of women. In 1975, Vandana Shiva introduced the issue of women and the environment in Mexico-City, at the First World Conference on Women. Debate was raised about the depletion of forestry resources and on women's role in agriculture and their role as wood fuel users.

Since 1980s, the connection between the environment and gender issues started gaining additional attention in public policy making. In 1991 the World Bank said that women play a very significant role in the management of natural resources, including soil, water, forests and energy and often they have a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them. It was soon realized that the gender-environment relations have valuable ramifications in regard to the understanding of natural differences between men and women, the management and distribution of resources and responsibilities and well being of the community.

Esther Boserup examined the farming systems of men and women in Africa and found that "in many African tribes, nearly all the tasks connected with food production continue to be left to women"(Agarwal, B. ,1998,pp A2). It was observed that consistent lack of access to credit, mobility, technological advancements, and land ownership further complicate women's roles vis a vis environment.

It is being found that women often participate in food production and family farming, yet they do not generally get any direct benefit from their labor. Their work is not considered as valuable as that of men, neither they have any access to ownership of land as their property. However, women still do not have the same access to technology as men and generally have smaller plots of land.

The dependence on nature and the environment for survival is common among women of Asia, Africa, Latin America. It has been argued by environmental feminists that this dependence creates a deeply rooted connection between women and their surroundings. The nature of dependency women have on natural resources, based on their responsibilities, creates a specific interest that may be different from the interests of men. Along with their concern for immediate survival, they are concerned for future generations, for which they don't simply look at the land as a resource with monetary value. With the development of newer technologies, there has been a shift to more non-farm activities. With increasing flow of men shifting to urban livelihoods, more and more women are getting dependant on land and nature to maintain the household by farming. Thus Issues such as climate change does have a greater impact on women.

Vandana Shiva claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions and this connection has been ignored. She explicitly talked about the connection between dominance of women and dominance of nature. Exploitation of women's labor and that of natural environment are interrelated as they are both marginalized within the economy. Both the environment and women have been viewed as exploitable resources that are significantly undervalued. This situation has been aggravated due to new developments in technology and along with this, due to the fact that equal access is denied to women, furthering their subordination and inequality, culminating in 'feminization of poverty'.

In most nations of the world inequality or imbalance arising out of the gap between the rich and the poor is quite alarming. High levels of inequality affect social cohesion and lead to increasing crime and violence, affecting women the most. Inequality is often a measure of relative poverty, where

women are again found doubly exploited, once as the members of their respective societies and further within their own families.

The situation becomes worse by the frequent environmental disasters, more specifically by the effects of global warming on indigenous people and particularly women and its effects on their cultural dynamics and relationships with their surroundings. Long-term damage generated through climate shocks has devastating impacts, especially on poor and rural communities. Poor and vulnerable households and communities are most severely exposed to climate shocks caused by global warming and other environmental disasters.

Impacts of climate change are expected to exacerbate poverty and inequalities. Social impacts will, however, vary, depending on factors like age, socio-economic class, occupation and gender. The world's poorest inhabitants will be worst affected. For example, the loss of life is expected to be 500 times greater in Africa. For women agricultural labourers, this insecurity is compounded by a comparative lack of assets, lack of the right to own the land. In many countries, less than 10 percent of women hold title to their land, which denies them to have access to resources and credit during crises.

Women are mostly responsible for their family nutrition. Women farmers grow more than half of all the food in developing countries generally in the form of small-scale crops for household consumption. Climate change affects agricultural production and, consequently, women's livelihoods and their ability to support their families' nutritional needs.

Deforestation and disasters compound these conditions, because many rural women depend on forest for income, traditional medicinal use, food supplements in times of food shortages and as a seed bank

for plant varieties needed for alternative crops under changing conditions. Thus, loss of biodiversity and Earth's warming challenge the nutrition, health, and livelihoods of women and their communities. In case of displacement and migration due to environmental disasters also women are found to be the worst sufferers. This trouble is compounded by their identity crisis in their new settlements.

Women die more than men in natural disasters. Poverty and poor access to health care exacerbate these risks. The increase of temperature as a consequence of global warming has contributed to the melting of snow peaks, rise in the water level and the change of agricultural cycles affecting not only the regular practices of people but also the social and individual relationships that women and men have with their territories and natural resources that are necessary for their physical and cultural survival.

Global warming generates not only changes in nature but also changes in the social dynamics increasing conflicts and social problems, leading women to be the worst sufferers. Women are also highly vulnerable to climate change-related natural disasters. Following the 2004 tsunami in Asia, Oxfam International reported that three-quarters of the fatalities in eight Indonesian villages were women and girls. In the second most affected district in India, Cuddalore, the proportion of female fatalities was nearly 90 percent. Therefore, women should be included in the development of climate change policies at the local, regional, and global levels. Women's expertise and knowledge should be used in developing climate change mitigation, disaster reduction, and adaptation strategies.

Women, however, often do not have access to information that would help them make better decisions about how to adapt to climate change. At the international, national and local initiatives

regarding the climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies the gender perspective has usually been neglected.

The first International Symposium on Indigenous Women and Biodiversity in the year 2005, the second Symposium in the year 2006, the third International Symposium in the year 2007 were conducted, with the objective of identifying the importance of the role of indigenous women on biodiversity issues and also identifying the importance of their role in fighting against the effects of global warming. The objective was to reflect on the complex relationships that indigenous women have with their surrounding and the social, cultural and political situations that affect them.

The need of the hour is to go for intercultural socialization through a gathering of indigenous and non indigenous women from around the world to discuss about policies, programmes and strategies for control and mitigation of global warming on the basis of the feedback received from indigenous women. It is also required to create and strengthen the alliances and networks of indigenous women for the exchange of experiences, and for their capacity building.

India is one of the most vulnerable countries to the effects of environmental disasters because of its vast coastal line. The rising sea levels caused by global warming will no doubt cause an ecological disaster. Bengal will suffer a lot along with the coastal areas of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Marashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat and some others. The Himalayan glaciers have started to melt rapidly. The melting glaciers will cause temperatures and sea-levels to rise. Worse – some islands are expected to vanish! In fact Kolkata's School of Oceanography Studies at Jadavpur University, have shown that two islands in the Sunderbans, Suparibhanga and Lohacharra, have already gone under the sea – an area which India shares with Bangladesh and a dozen more islands in the southern Bengal

are under threat. Temperatures in the group of islands have already gone up by one degree centigrade and what is alarming is the fact that Fifty-two of the islands are inhabited with a population of more than 1.8 million people.

Climate change affects women and men differently and affects women more directly leaving direct effect on the lives of families and communities. During the past three decades or more people in various regions of India have formed nonviolent action movements to protect their environment, their livelihood, and have tried to evolve strategies for sustainable existence. These environmental movements have emerged from the Himalayan regions of Uttar Pradesh and gradually spread to the tropical forests of Kerala and have extended from Gujarat to Tripura for the cause of ecological stability. They share certain features, such as democratic values, decentralised decision making and safeguarding the interests of the poor and the marginalized, specially the women, tribal groups, and peasants.

Among the main environmental movements are Chipko Andolan (Tree hugging movement), Save the Bhagirathi and Stop Tehri project in Uttar Pradesh; Save the Narmada Movement (Narmada Bachao Andolan) in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, the Appiko Movement in the Western Ghats, movement opposing the Kaiga nuclear power plant in Karnataka; the campaign against the Silent Valley project and the opposition to the Gumti Dam in Tripura. In addition, there are local movements against deforestation, water logging, and desertification and in all these movements women have always taken active part.

But the crude reality is that women still remain under-represented in the decision-making bodies that are working to develop a sustainable survival mechanism. Studies show that while women are responsible for managing household resources, they typically don't have a say in the use and

management of environmental resources integral to their households and communities. Global warming changes weather patterns causing more hunger, disasters and of course women and young girls will have to spend more hours for collecting food and water, whereas they will be deprived first of the minimum necessities of life. Women suffer the most for displacement caused due to the rise of sea level and others. Tsunami can be cited as the best example of this. Rehabilitation also affects women more than it does the men. The UNFPA *2001 State of the World Population Report* also states that sustainable development demands recognition and value for the multitude of ways in which women's live intertwine with environmental realities.

Climate change is just a much graver example of the complexity of environmental stress and how it affects women. Women have a multi-dimensional role as mothers, home makers and often natural resource managers. A lot of women act as the support factors for the family. Climate change would undoubtedly cause further environmental hazards that would mean loss of revenue for women in agricultural, industry, fisheries industries notably. Poverty, an acute problem amongst women population will further claim more victims especially among the rural and urban women of the developing world.

Therefore, it is high time to evolve strategies to include more women in the development of climate change policies at the local, regional, and global levels, both within and the governments. Women's expertise and knowledge should be used to mitigate climate change, to evolve mechanisms for disaster management in a sustainable manner. Climate change and environmental policies must be intrinsically linked with gender, as women are often the first to be affected by our changing environment, encompassing women's knowledge and contexts in climate negotiations.

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Links:

1. THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTER, Retrieved 4/10/2012,
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2. <http://www.unwomensouthasia.org/assets/Violence-Property-Rights2.pdf>