

“ROLE OF MOUNTAIN WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENT GOVERNANCE IN INDIA”

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ABSTRACT

Environmental governance may be distinguished from environmental management by the implication that, in the former, some form of participatory process is involved. Here, the focus is upon the potential for women's movements and networks to influence the principles and practices of global environmental governance (GEG). It is contended that, in principle, women are uniquely placed to oppose the dominant norms informing GEG; and that women's participation would, in consequence, be crucial to the achievement of equitable and environmentally sound forms of governance. In practice, however, a number of factors combine to create divisions between women, and hence to impede transnational mobilization by women around environmental issues. Women always play a vital role in participatory forest management. Women particularly living in rural areas or mountain areas have special relationship with the environment. The first objective of this paper is to highlight the importance of mountain women in the management of sustainable ecosystem. Secondly to increase the role of women in decision making process. Thirdly there is also a need to establish a Mountain Women Forum at International Level which will provide a common platform to women from every region of the world to exchange and share their views, ideas, issues, problems, priorities and learn from others experiences.

KEYWORDS: Environment governance, sustainable development, mountain women

INTRODUCTION

... mountains possess biophysical and cultural characteristics which merit special consideration and treatment- in the matter of preservation and conservation. These include their three-dimensional nature involving steep slopes, altitudinal belts of varying ecosystem in a short distance, their different exposures or aspects and climates, and their frequent characteristics of spirituality, remoteness, inaccessibility, and great cultural diversity-islands in a sea of tamed and transformed environment.

- IUCN Guidelines for Mountain Protected Areas, 1992

Today we are witnessing a remarkable convergence of policy objectives between themes of sustainability, environmental conservation, and the advancement of women. This paper explores the growing convergence of these themes in relation to one ecosystem group-the diverse and fragile environments of mountains. It identifies current challenges, constraints, and opportunities to advance women in mountain ecosystem management. Some of the ideas presented here apply broadly across gender or ecosystem lines. Many, however, are either specific or particularly relevant to mountain environments, and women's roles in managing them.

Both mountains and women have begun to receive more global attention in the last two decades, but they are not yet firmly on the conservation agenda. Tropical forests, wetlands, and marine environments are still the focus of most conservation action worldwide (Thorsell and Harrison, 1993). Women's roles and concerns in environmental conservation remain poorly understood and incompletely acknowledged.

The recent upsurge of interest in mountains began in the 1970s with the establishment of Unesco's Man and the Biosphere Programme and the IUCN (World Conservation Union) initiatives (Unesco, 1974; Dasmann and Poore, 1979). It was expanded with the development of the United Nations University-International Mountain Society program on mountain ecology and sustainable development. Since 1990, that interest has been heightened with the establishment of the IUCN Commission on Mountain Protected Areas and the inclusion of Chapter 13 (Fragile Mountain Environments) of Agenda 21 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992; Mountain Agenda, 1992; Stone, 1992).

Women's environmental concerns were first highlighted in 1975, the International Women's Year, which was declared in honor of the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (Tinker and Jaquette, 1987). The "Decade of Women" also began at this time. At end of the decade, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) sponsored a major conference in Nairobi, Kenya. One outcome of the conference was a synthesis of policies to advance women, the *Forward Looking Strategies to the Year 2000*. Many of these policies were subsequently adopted into Agenda 21 at UNCED as Chapter 24, *Global action for women towards sustainable and equitable development*.

This discussion seeks to illustrate that the "lens" through which women's involvement in environmental action is viewed needs to be re-focused, to bring women in from the periphery to a central, vital role. In recognizing the importance of women as grassroots natural resource managers and conservationists, governments and international agencies stand to gain valuable allies in their efforts to conserve mountain environments.

While all the "ways forward" are not clear, this paper offers a starting point for the development of policy and implementation guidelines appropriate to mountain environments. It is hoped that each agency will use these guidelines to raise awareness and stimulate positive action within their own organization.

GENDER ROLES IN MOUNTAIN ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT

“Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieving sustainable development”.

If we talk of natural resource management from a global perspective, whom do we find in the forefront of the race for protection and preservation of the resources. The answer comes very naturally, it is the women. Women particularly those living in rural areas or mountain areas have special relationship with the environment. They are more close to the nature than men and this very close relationship makes them perfect managers of an eco-system. The life of mountain women is so much intertwined with the environment that whole ecosystem revolves around her and she can't even think of her survival without it. For her forest is her mother's home as she is entirely dependent on the forest to meet her daily needs such as - water, fodder, fuels, minor forest produce etc.

TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

Traditionally, mountain women are accustomed to a significant level of resource control, and a clear voice in the affairs of the household and community. Sexual division of labor tends to be less strict than in lowland areas, and caste or class distinctions play a comparatively less important role in defining women's work. It is conceivable that lower reproduction rates of traditional highland women are also linked to their higher status in the community. In Nepal, women of the Tibeto-Burman cultures, who have traditionally inhabited high mountains, exhibit a greater freedom of action, more participation in the market economy, and are more immediately responsive to extension proposals than are women of the Indo-Aryan groups, who have migrated to the hills much more recently (Acharya and Bennett, 1983).

Mountain Women and Eco-system Management

Women have vital role in conservation and management of sustainable eco-system. Since time immemorial women are traditionally involved in protecting and conserving their natural resources in mountain areas. With their extraordinary skills and traditional knowledge women have proved how land, water, forest and other natural resources can be used and managed. They have their own devised system and ways to sustain and manage the resources which are the basis of survival for their families and communities. Through their practical experiences and managerial skills they have acquired immense knowledge of the various types of plants, grass, medicinal plants, kind of fuel wood and various species of fodder plants. They know better than any scientist that what grass, herbs, shrubs, trees are best for them and should be planted to maintain a balanced eco-system and well being of their families and communities. They always prefer a mixed forest which can meet their demands of fuel, fodder fruits and food as well as maintains the bio-diversity of the mountains. They are perfect in making an optimum use and conservation of natural resources.

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS AND NATURAL RESOURCE USE

Mountain women have traditionally engaged in small scale entrepreneurial activities based on the use of natural resources (Baer, 1990). This non-domestic forest economy can be critical to meeting household subsistence needs.

Many traditional income-generating activities involving mountain women depend on ample supplies of energy or biomass. In addition to direct sale of firewood or fodder, income is acquired through livestock products (requiring fodder), cheese and butter processing, beer and liquor brewing, processing of agricultural products, raw materials for crafts, charcoal making, and the collection and processing of many non-timber forest products.

Non-timber forest products include many essential subsistence items such as fodder, fertilizer, and soil. Both subsistence and small-scale commercial use is made of honey and wax, flowers, seeds, leaves, wild fruits, fibers and flosses, bamboo, rattan, cane and grasses, oil seeds, tans and dyes, gums and resins, pine oleoresins, rubber, drugs, spices, aromatics and insecticides, lac, sandalwood, and seeds for propagation. Sustainable harvesting and processing of these resources can generate significant income for women and community cooperatives.

Impact of Environmental Degradation on Mountain Women

Environmental degradation and destruction has increased the problems of woman who is known as the backbone of mountain economy and the main subsistence provider in the hills. Due to fast depletion of forest cover she has to walk 8 to 10 Kms. every day in search of water, fuel, fodder and minor forest produce etc. And if we calculate the distance covered by her in a year, we will find that she covers 3000 to 4000 Kms distance in a year only in search of fodder, fuel and water. The principal victims of this environmental degradation are women whose lives are intrinsically related to land, water, forest which is the main components and integral parts of an Eco-system. Adverse effect on any one of these components will definitely disturb the other components due to the strong linkages and inter-relationship with each other and create havoc on the life of people, especially women, living in and around the Mountains

Village Level Women Groups and Institutions

There are plenty of examples in India especially in the mountain areas where women have actively been involved in maintaining and managing their eco-system. In spite of being illiterate they have become environmental educators. Their traditional knowledge, practical experiences and managerial skill has proved the fact that sustainable development cannot be achieved without full integration of women in resource management. The world famous Forest movement “Chipko Andolan” of the hill women, against the destruction of forest in Himalayas has proved that it is the women only who can protect, conserve and manage their environment. After Chipko Movement in many villages of the central Himalayas Mahila Mangal Dals (village level women groups) have taken initiative to regenerate the forest by planting trees and protecting them. All Women Forest Panchayat (authorized community institution for the management of forest) of Bachhair village has set an example of successful management of forest.

CONSTRAINTS TO WOMEN'S INTEGRATION INTO ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES

Environmental initiatives will be significantly strengthened as women are increasingly integrated at all levels. Many organizations have made a policy commitment to do this, but have had limited success. There are a number of commonly encountered constraints to be considered in planning for greater participation by women in environmental programs.

- **ACCESS TO INFORMATION, RESOURCES, AND DECISION MAKING**

Effective planning and decision-making processes in environmental management require input from those who use and depend on the natural resources and these are often women. Women have limited access to information, education, and training, yet they have pressing needs for technical and ecological information, and for training in leadership skills. They also require access to extension resources and markets.

Ownership and tenure rights to land, trees, water, and other natural resources are seldom held by women or women's groups, and this severely limits their ability to control the benefits produced through their own labor. Due to their lack of legal rights to property, women often experience great difficulty in obtaining credit, material inputs, or funding for environmental or development initiatives. Yet, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that loan use and repayment by women, in mountain areas and elsewhere, is reliable and is superior to that of men; this should encourage banks to support women's initiatives (ADB/N, 1986).

- **GENDER AWARENESS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT**

There is a general lack of appreciation of the remarkable environmental management skills of women in mountain communities (Dunsmore, 1988). When planners and project staff recognize this and integrate women's concerns at many levels, it will lead to greater project success. Standard training and academic curricula in the natural resource studies seldom include women's concerns or contributions. Subsistence needs are generally relegated to a brief discussion of "minor forest products" or home economics. Graduates of such programs may need to be re-educated about small-scale, diverse production systems (largely managed by women) which are suited to the fragile ecosystems of mountains.

AVAILABILITY OF TRAINED OR PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

The number of women who are trained or available for training, in the natural resource or environmental disciplines is very limited. There is also a scarcity of female accountants, bankers, and policy makers. Once a core group of women is established in an organization or project, however, it is easier to recruit other qualified women through existing staff networks and the "safe" culture that is propagated. For women to participate in any development or conservation intervention, they must be able to make time in a much burdened work day. It is important to address household subsistence needs and reduce women's unpaid labor burden, for example through the installation of water taps, to enable them to become involved.

Mountain Women should be given the Status of Main Worker

In mountain eco- system women have very important role to play. They meet their daily household needs through bio-mass or biomass related products, which are mostly collected freely from the immediate environment. In short they live within nothing other than a biomass based subsistence economy. The bio-mass based economy has a delicately woven net of different components of eco- system. But due to the globalization we are moving fast towards the cash economy which recognizes as a main worker only to those who are working in organized sector and earning their livelihood in cash. Mountain women who is the main subsistence provider in the mountain and known as the back bone of the hill economy works for 15-16 hours a day , yet she has not been recognized or given the status of main worker, like other organized sector, as she is not getting the returns in the form of cash. All the countries should raise the issue of Mountain Woman in all the big conferences and build a pressure to get her the status of main worker in every mountain region of the world. One more and very important point stress upon is that in the mountain economy women have very significant role to play, but the economic condition of the women in developing countries is very grim as they do not have the control of cash in their hands. Through this conference we demand that the collecting of all the minor forest produce should be the right of women and mountain women, who are associated with resource management all over the world, should be given priority in all economic activities related to M.F.P. On one hand it will raise the economic status of women on the other it will inculcate the feeling of ownership within the women groups and they will take enough interest to protect and conserve them.

Strategies to Empower and Enhance the Leadership Qualities of Mountain Women in the Management of Eco-system

The role of Mountain women in all environmental protection activities has been the strongest because it was only they who could perceive and feel it. Gradually the contribution of women in natural resource management is being recognized but there is still a need to give special attention to making them an equal partner in the policy framing or in program implementation. Our efforts should be focused on empowering and strengthening these institutions that have come up in their own process of evolution. These Women Groups should be empowered to get an access to and control over the natural resources. Women's knowledge, skill, their traditional values and experiences

must be recognized. Today various major forest act and environment policies are being formulated but hardly any attention and recognition has been given to these women groups who are engaged in forest protection and created a worldwide awareness. We should accelerate our efforts not only at policy level to pressurize the Government to include women's participation in decision making but also promote environmental education and activism at local level. Environmental education and activism are the priority areas where women should be given opportunities to enhance their capabilities. Women have less opportunities of exposure to new ideas and technologies, thus a movement to empower women must become a major focus of any policy and developments program every where. Women's views, opinion, their needs, problems and priorities must be addressed in the national and international agenda. The successful and innovative efforts of women in every region must be high lighted to sensitize the planners and policy makers. The learning's of these successful case studies, indigenous knowledge of women must be incorporated in the sustainable development. As women have deep relationship with all the components of ecosystem they should be given opportunity to participate in the **VILLAGE ECO-SYSTEM PLANNING** trainings. The perfect eco-system can be maintained only when women will be recognized as the best manager of eco-system. The inter-relationship of land, water, forest, animals with each other can be understood only by women in a broader and more holistic way than any one else. **Especial efforts are needed to strengthen and promotion of women groups at grassroots level. Women have potential of taking leadership, so their capacities must be enhanced by providing them education, training, new technologies to reduce their work load and exposure to outside world. Lack of access to legal, technical, developmental and financial information is the major stumbling block in the path of women development and in achieving sustainable development. A cadre of women motivators should be developed who will act as a resource person, awareness generator facilitator in the village. This trained group of women will create awareness among other women of village.** This program will help in development of local leadership among women and develop self reliant and self sustaining women. This trained group of women will educate, inspire, motivate and encourage the other women of their area to come into mainstream.

There is also a need to establish a Mountain Women Forum at International Level which will provide a common platform to women from every region of the world to exchange and share their views, ideas, issues, problems, priorities and learn from others experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY GUIDELINES TO ADVANCE WOMEN AND MOUNTAIN ENVIRONMENTS

The benefits of integrating the advancement of women with environmental protection to mountain communities are diverse and fundamental. They include strengthening resource use and subsistence rights, maintaining cultural integrity, reducing poverty and marginalization, and conserving overall environmental quality.

A major convergence of policy agendas can be recognized regarding conservation of mountain ecosystems, sustainable development, and the advancement of women. A focus on women is a pivotal part of the establishment of sustainable development and food security, the fight against marginalization, and biodiversity conservation and ecosystem management. Integration of women must be specified at the policy level in order to institutionalize women's traditional roles as environmental managers (Pradhan and Rankin, 1990). While the need to incorporate gender-sensitive perspectives has become a litany in development policy rhetoric, there has been little if any success in transforming this rhetoric into action.

- **INTERNAL AGENCY CONSIDERATIONS**

The decentralization of planning and administration within agencies can contribute substantially to effective conservation and sustainable development in mountain regions. Field offices should be allowed flexibility to plan for locally changing conditions, rather than pressured to achieve predetermined targets within fixed budget cycles.

Donor agencies have achieved very limited success in integrating women into their own institutions (Yudelman, 1987). Gender issues cannot be effectively addressed if they are of concern only in the "target" community. In-house training is needed to increase staff and management awareness of gender issues, and women need to be integrated into decision-making positions at all levels.

The lengthening of funding cycles to provide more stable financial support would promote long-term project success, particularly in the inaccessible, tradition-rich, and diverse ecosystems of mountains. Flexible allocation at the field office level can help to avoid "locking in" nonproductive programs. Donors could also play a more supportive role in the transition of good programs from one funding cycle or theme to another.

- **PRESSURE POINTS FOR CHANGE IN NATIONAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES**

National governments should enhance decentralized decision making (UNCED, 1992). A commitment by national governments to decentralize is critical at all levels, and across all sectors. In other words, political liberalization should be accompanied by similar progress in the economic and social service sectors. As efforts are made to delegate decision making and resource control, accountability and responsibility must be strengthened at the most local level.

Given favorable policy support at the national level, communities can have the freedom to organize and take collective decisions. Locally-derived management strategies and integrated program approaches are most effective in controlling environmental

degradation. Such approaches should inform, and be supported by, government policy and program design (Pradhan and Rankin, 1990).

As the main users of natural resources, women make daily decisions regarding the management of land, water, forests, and livestock. Women's activities and knowledge should be recognized as directly relevant to national level policies, and as valuable assets in meeting national and project goals for environmental protection.

National economic and political interests need to be balanced with basic needs of mountain populations. These interests may conflict directly with a rhetorical commitment to participatory management and promotion of women.

- **ROLE OF NGOs AND NGO/GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS**

Experience has shown that many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have been successful in initiating dialogues with local residents, and in overcoming the problems associated with factionalism and the hurdles posed by locally influential individuals. Success has been based on long-term commitment, flexibility, motivation, an integrated (non-sectoral) approach, and an emphasis on organizing and facilitating rather than technical promotion. The role of NGOs as catalysts and intermediaries therefore needs to be encouraged, and the support of the government to this end is very important. The complementarity's in the functioning of NGOs and government agencies needs to be identified and acted upon (Cecelski and Bajracharya, 1993).

NGOs play a critical research and development role, in undertaking innovative programs which are frequently both high-risk and resource-intensive. Once proven, successful approaches are taken up by larger agencies and donors. The cross-subsidy of NGOs to large agencies includes not only tested ideas but, perhaps even more important, trained and talented personnel. NGOs provide a critical training forum for local personnel. The best-trained staff of NGOs continually move on to higher paying and higher profile jobs, typically with larger organizations or donors. This valuable contribution builds sustainability and innovation across many sectors.

CONCLUSION

Mountain ecosystems and the pivotal role of women in managing them merit special consideration in development and conservation policy. Primary emphasis needs to be placed on understanding the tremendous diversity, limited scale of production, and fragility of mountain environments. Women's integration into environmental initiatives builds sustainability across many sectors, and may be strengthened through community organizations, secure access to resources, and recognition of their vital role in mountain resource management.

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