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22 ENVIRONMENT AND WOMEN: THE GENDERED SYNERGY

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Abstract:

The idea that there is a positive synergy between women's interests and environmental conservation is examined in this paper. women have a special and close relationship with nature, and that women are particularly altruistic and caring in their environmental management. Gender analysis provides an apt framework for understanding women's and men's environmental relations and a potentially contrary view of the synergy between gender interests and environmental conservation.

Keywords*: Women, Environemnt relations, conservation, ecofeminism*

Introduction:

The dominant discourses on women and environ- ment — i.e. ecofeminist and Women, Development and Environment' (WDE) literatures — emphasize the affinity of women with their environments, yet gender analysis offers a preferable alternative con- ceptual framework as the basis for understanding, and intervening in, the local specificities of men's and women's environmental relations.

Ecofeminism takes different forms, characterized broadly as cultural ecofeminism and social ecofemi- nism (Plumwood, 1992, p. 10)"A basic assumption common to all ecofeminist positions is therejectionoftheassumedinferiority ofwomenand nature and of the superiority of reason, humanity and culture" (Plumwood, 1992, *p.* 13). Both are ecocen- tri*c,* in that nonhuman life is seen as morally consid- erable (Eckersley, 1992) and both bracket women with nature. Our concentration on cultural ecofemi- nism here is justified by the apparent ascendancy of thiselement,especiallyamongactivistenvironmental groups in the West, as well as by the influence (acknowledged by Rodda, 1991, p. 4) ofcultural ecofeminism upon literatura pertaining to women, development and evnironment, primarily through Vandana Shiva. Critiques of ecofeminism from a development perspective (Agarwal, 1991; Rao 1991, Jackson, 1993) have drawn attention to its biological determinism and essentialism, and the absence of social, material or historical context.

Women and environment – The Linkages

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Women as a group do not experience environ- mental degradation in a uniform manner — these effects are mediated by the *livelihood system.* Some women may have remittances from migrant males, or more diverse livelihoods, or assets that may be liquidated, or kin-based entitlements which amelio- rate the effects of environmental degradation. For example, the effects of logging in Malaysia upon rainforest inhabitants is varied. Hunter-gatherer Penan men have resisted assimilation into wage work with the logging companies and the negative effects on their livelihood system are felt equally by men and women since "property" rights and divi- sions of labor are barely differentiated. Both men and women have been involved in the protests and road blockades against logging. The absence of males makes it difficult to fell new lands, in order to fallow old ones, and women therefore are driven to continue repeatedly cultivating the same plots, with negative effects on soil fertility and crop yields. Neither Iban men or women have become involved in the protests against logging — the addition of wages to livelihood port- folios compensates for the absence of male labor and buffers the potentially negative experience by women of en vironmental degradation (Heyzer, 1992).

Environmental relations of particular women also depend upon a class-gender system. As Agarwal documents for South Asia (1991, pp. 38—44) the adverse effects of environmental degradation fall particularly upon poor women, and Hobley **(1991)** shows how gender and class intersect in the use of forest resources in Nepal. The latter instance demonstrates that dependence on forest resources and participation in decision making bywomenregarding forest use is variable — low caste men and in particular low caste women were dominated in meetings.

In addition to the class-gender effects there are other distinctions between women which are signifi- cant. Inequalities among women exist even at the household level where seniority frequently patterns divisions of labor, access to and control of resources and decision-making powers. For example, in Zimbabwe, older women within households can, and do, send junior wives, son's wives or daughters to collect fuel wood (McGregor, 1991, p. 206). In 65 households randomly sampled in the Chivi Communal Area of Zimbabwe* 429c were house- holds with only one adult woman. Of the whole sam- ple 319c collected water alone and 36'7o collected wood alone, 279c did not collect water at all them- selves and 149c did not collect wood themselves. Thus a considerable number of women are seen to share and delegate these tasks. Since there are power relations between women within the same house- hold, a younger woman in Chivi is frequently domi- nated by more senior household women, and carries a disproportionate burden of wood and water collec- tion. Thus the division of labor may allocate wood collection to wives but if a wife can delegate the means by which she meets that responsibility then the incentive toward replanting (increased time in collection) may not be felt equally by all women of a household. Life-cycle processes intervene in various ways to pattern the incentives to positive environ- mental management. But age is not only significant in that women of different seniority have differently structured constraints and opportunities with regard to environmental relations. Societies are not socially reproduced without change and younger women have experienced a different history from older women and their attitudes and expectations differ as a result. The aspirations of young

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women in rural Zimbabwe today are different from those of their mothers as young women. To posit a special rela- tionship between women and their environments which ignores such multiple sources of difference is problematic, because women bear socially formed gender, as well as other,identities.

A further problem with the "special relationship" between women and environments is that it ignores the context within which environmental relations are nested — women relate to natural resources as part of their livelihood strategies, which reflect multiple objectives, powerful wider political forces and, cru- cially, gender relations, i.e. social relations which systematically differentiate men and women in processes of production and reproduction. Microstudies of resource use reveal that the relations of women to environments "cannot be understood outside the context of gender relations in resource management and use" (Leach, 1991, p. 14).

WOMEN - The CARERS COMMUNITY

The idea that women "naturally" care for the envi- ron ment as an extension of their caring roles i s expressed by Bernadette Vallely of' the Women's Environment Network — "Women's priorities are usually oriented towards the good of the community thus placing more emphasis on the protection of the en vironment and the resources within it" (WEN, 1989). This is perhaps as untenable a generalization as that which assumes altruism within the household (Folbre, 1986). The suggestion that "women are involved in *c'omitiiinify managing* work undertaken at a local community settlement level in hoth urban and rural contexts" (Moser, **1959,** p. 1801) is not unique to WDE discourse and is generally problem- atic and inadequately theorized.' Collective action with regard to the environment has been "natural- ized" for women, but not for men, on the basis of implied altruism and with a failure to scrutinize the private interests of women adequately. In the WDE context, the view of Vandana Shiva that women are responsible for community and forest management is questionable — for most forests in India are managed not by women but by *yan‹'ha) nt.s* which notably lack women members (DN. 1990. p. 795). Here,WDEwritersfailtodistinguishclearly between working and managing, and employ a crude and simplistic understanding ot' gender divisions ot' labor.

Women's reproductive work does bring theminto frequent contact with common property resources but the nature of this contact is generally misunder- stood by WDE writers who assume that those who work with the resource ma nage that resource. "Manage" is a polysemic word — but in develop- ment discourses it predominantly implies control over decision making and planning in accordance with objectives. Common property users act in the conteht of rules and conventions devised by a range of institutions — unlike farm laborers, wood collec- tors are not working under the farm managers' direc- tion and supervision but their actions (e.g. to cut live or dead wood), have to be situated within these insti- tutional frameworks. In Kenya, the provision of fire- wood is a woman's task, but tree growing is not and women were found to have minimal involvement in tree regenerative activities (Bradley, 1991, p. 149).In this instance tree planting by women is a subversive

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activity since adjudication in land disputes is done on the bas is of tree ownership (Bradley, 199I.

p. 283)." Without a gendered analysis of common property institutions women as users cannot be directly equated with common property rights man- agers. Even the gendered planning frameworks devised for project planners the distinction between access to resources and control of resources is rou- tine (Overholt ci n/, 1985). This distinction reflects not only the difference between use and management but also the differentials in property rights which make the access by women to resources more deeply conditional upon social relations than those of men. More ofi this is pursued below, but the point being made with regard to community welfare is that the high visibility of women in the use of communally held resources cannot be taken as either indicating a greater commitment to "community" than that ct' men or as imparting a community management role to women. We return below to the problem of the reductionist understandings of gender di v is ions of labor which cannot be represented as descriptions ot work allocatio n — they in vol ve di fferential social relations. ot pruducti on, including power relations and differential resource access, culturally specific understandings of gender identities and capabilities. Gender divisions o1' labor also necessi- tate exchange and cooperation between men and women.

In India, as elsewhere in the Third World, many women do indeed c ut wood t'or sale. Refus al to accept that women are agents of en vi ron mental degradation and the determined attempt to construct a positive image of women as custodians of, and carers fior. the environment is to obscure and prevent a more useful analysis. In addition, the policy impli- cations of accepting the "community management" role ofi women often means extending unpaid work done by women.

The instance often cited to support both the view of women as both community spirited and of their willingness to mobilize collectively in defense of the environment is the Chipko movement which developed in mid—late 1970s in Garhwal division of Uttar Pradesh out of a Gandhian social development movement. This movement emerged in a context where there was anger over government forest policy which denied local use of trees while giving logging rights to large companies. Floods during the 1970s and land slips were perceived by these soci at workers as caused by deforestation (Jain, 1984,p. 1788). The initial involvement of women was acci- dental, but they then became the mainstay of a movement which spread widely and focused on demonstrations, in which trees were hugged, to pre- vent logging.

Chipko is usually represented as demonstrating women's concern for conservation, and taken as an example of spontaneous environmental and commu- nity commitment by women." Recently, questionshave been raised as to how we are to understand Chipko:

Locating Chipko culturally and historically provides a long overdue corrective to the popular conception of Chipko, which is that of a romantic reunion of humans, especially women, with nature (Guha, 1989, p. 173).

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Guha sees Chipko as essentially conservative and anti-change and locates Chipko within a local history of peasant protest based on charismatic, populist leadership, asceticism and religious imagery, and the charismatic Chipko leader Sunderlal Bahuguna's fol- lowers "look to him to restore a pristine state of har- mony" [Guha, 1989, p. 171]. Further both Guha and Jain (1984, p. 1789) deny that Chipko is a feminist movement. Women of the region supported the cam- paign for prohibition,' organized by the Ghandian social deve I opment organization that spaw ned Chipko, during the 1960s. Later women became involved in large numbers in tree hugging, but the leadership has been predominantly male. It has been claimed that as the Chipko movement developed it took on more of a feminist quality as women came to oppose, for the first time, not only men from beyond their community but also local men, including their husbands. Guha points out, however, that this is not new, for the anti-alcohol demonstrations were also such. The shortcomings of essentialist interpretations of Chipko which ignore history become apparent, for the image of a woman hugging a tree in front of a bulldozer has a context which contributes to its meaning.

For Guha Chipko isonly one in a series of protest movements against com- mercial forestry dating from the earliest days of state intervention. the peasantry was protesting against thedenial of subsistence ri ghts which state policy has wrought. Essentially the movement was a response to a perceived breach of the informal code between the ruler and the ruled known as the "moral economy" of the peasant (1989, p. 174).

In this light the Chipko movement appears more as a conservative affirmation of the moral economy, a contract which sustains power structures, including that of the subordination of women. ' ' Women may be more susceptible to mobilization on the basis of breaches in the moral economy since the weight of subsistence work has fallen on them following male outmigration in the region. Hill women are also cul- turally and historically less subordinated than plains women and the Chipko women should not be taken out of this context and projected as submissive and obedient wives who, through their veneration of nature and instinctive understanding of ecological principles, rose up spontaneously and risked life and limb for their forests. Community action by women

in the Chipko case does not seem to support a view of rural women as profoundly altruistic but rather shows them as responding to wider political and eco- nomic change (principally commercialization) within the context of specific genderrelations.

The focus of attention on Chipko tends to obscure the fact that in many villages where environmental degradation has occurred this has not led to women's protest movements. A legitimate counterargument may be made that the documentation of women's protest is lacking both because of gender blindness in historical records and because the "everyday forms of resistance," in struggles by women are by nature invisible. It seems inappropriate, at

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this stage, to make any generalizations about the likelihood of political action by women in defense of the environ- ment.

Perspectives on conservation:

Women act as agents in both environmentally positive and negative ways but until we begin to approach such agency free of essentialist presupposi- tions about women's predisposition to conservation and of reductionist understanding of gender divisions of labor, and with improved gender analytical frame- works, we have little prospect of identifying either points where gender equity and environmental con- servation can be simultaneously addressed by devel- opment interventions or where they cannot.

It is frequently asserted that women are more severely affected by environmental degradation and that they will be the "natural" constituency for con- servation activities. The combination of this with the women/nature linkage sustained by ecofemini st influenced discourse leads to the assumption that they can be mobilized in defense of the environment. In examining the question of how far women may be mobilized for environmental conservation we will consider, with African examples, the centrality of gender relations (rather than women) to environmen- tal degradation. It will be argued, against the essen- tialist ecofeminist position, that women have no inherent closeness to nature, but a socially construct- ed relationship with natural resources which varies for different groups of women and for individual women during the course of a lifetime. There is a need to recognize that many women are frequently agents of environmental degradation because of gen- der and class relations and that the alleviation of poverty will not necessarily change this. It is sug- gested that a gender analysis leads to a very different perspective from that of synergism or the "win-win" policies which the World Bank defines as "actions which promote income growth, poverty alleviation, and environmental improvement" (1992, p. 2). Thissection examines a range of incentives and disincentives toward environment friendly behavior by women (e.g. the adoption of conservation technolo- gies or the practice of regenerative resource use), illustrates the potential for conflicting gender and environmental interests and draws out some of the development policy conclusions.

The severity of environmental degradation has been seen to have a greater impact on women because of the overrepresentation of female headed households among the poor (who depend more criti- cally upon common pool resources) and because of the gender divisions of labor within households which allocates work such as firewood and water collection to women — precisely the tasks which have become much more difficult with environmen- tal change such as deforestation and falling water tables. From a gender analysis standpoint, however, the costs of degradation cannot be seen as accruing predominantly to women without an enquiry into how gender divisions of labor are contested and change under envi ronmental stress, without an account of men's environmental relations and with- out an investigation of the context within which degradation occurs.

Environmentalknowledge Base:

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It is often held that women know more than men about the environment because of gender divi- sions of labor which assign women to many of the reproductive tasks which bring them into daily con- tact with fields, forests and rivers. "[Women] have a profound knowledge of the plants, animals and eco- logical processes around them" (Dankelman and Davidson, **1989, p. xi). This view** leads to the asser- tion that women's knowledge equips them for effec- tive conservation and justifies the identification of women as the relevant target group for conservation projects. Women's knowledges, however, cannot be considered in isolation from men's for there are vari- ations in who acquires what knowledge. In Chivi Communal Area of Zimbabwe women knew more than men about some crop varieties, men knew more about local soil classification and there was variation in knowledges between research sites. The lived experience of women's land relations, characterized by relative mobility and insecurity, means that women are more usefully seen as having differently constituted environmental knowledges (possibly greater understanding of spatial and lesser of tempo- ral variation) rather than as knowing more, or less, than men.

*More significantly, the problem of accessing women's knowledge is unrecognized. Knowledgesare manufactured and expressed through social processes and therefore reflect gender relations.*Particular women (low caste and younger women) were particularly inhibited

The implications of the problem of mutedness (the social and ideological domination which leaves groups, such as women, inhibited in vocabulary and voice) for development practice are wide ranging. In particular, it leads one to question the expectations of "participation" in development — consultation with women may not unproblemaucally reveal gen- der interests. For example, how would a participato- ry development approach respond to women's wide- spread support for dowry in Maharashtra (Vlassoff, **1991)** or for sex determination tests both of which can be seen as contrary to the gender interests of women? We cannot assume that women have a monopoly upon environmental knowledge, that their knowledges can necessarily be expressed in order to be accessed and validated by development agencies or that views aniculated by women are free from the imprint of gender relations.a strong emotional bond exists between individuals andtheterritoryoftheirancestors.Thedesiretolivethere is equalled only by the desire to be buried there. An important notion in the organising of political and moral *ex9cnence*istheideaofliving *"at*home".

Intrahausehold d ynamics andrelations

The crude and universalized conception of a sin- gular gender division of labor leads to an overem- phasis of the "closeness" between women and their environments, and obscures the lifecycle differences in the way the genders relate to environments. Household development cycles mediate gendered resource relations in locally specific ways, but they are an important part of understanding the processes of environmental degradation and regeneration. For example, the impact of male outmigration upon rural women can bring about changing domestic develop- ment cycles which alters resource use. Domestic development cycles interact with differentiation in complex ways and rural house holds do not all progress upon a single trajectory of household for- mation, growth and decline

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How far do relations within households influence environmental behavior? Intergenerational relations may be argued to influence women, as mothers, toward concern to conserve environments in order to secure future benefits for children. As Shiva puts it "Women naturally think of the next generation" (Shiva,1989a, p.5).Thisargumentwouldonlyapply to sons as daughters would, like their mothers, find that patriliny and patrilocality intervene between them and their environmental relations. But for a number of reasons this may not be a significant fac- tor for mothers — partly because the implicit con- tract of trusteeship and inheritance excludes them, and panly because of wider economic and political changes.

Intrahousehold relations between genders are critical to the decision-making processes which pat- tern resource management. Adoption of a conserva- tion technology will depend on intrahousehold nego- tiations yet the WDE literature shows no awareness of the debates over the nature of the household, the characterizations of altruism and self-interest of household members or of attempts to model intra- household relations and decision making. While the flaws of models of households as unitary bodies with joint utility are well known, the problems with methodological individualism, on the other hand, seem to have been forgotten. It is problematic to assume male household heads to be altruistic as in New Household Economics, but it is also unsatisfac- tory to assume individual women are altruistic with- in the community or household.°' At least a focus upon the household allows scrutiny of intrahouse- hold relations, which an individualized treatment of women obscures. The gross generalizations in **WDE** literature are innocent of the strictures in this earlier gender scholarship against ethnocentrism and the problem of generalizing domestic group functions across widely differing societies.

There is a need to unpack the idea that women's "responsibilities" make them environment friendlythe responsibility to provide firewood for cooking a meal may lead a woman, when faced with a fire- wood shortage, to plant a tree but it may also lead her to pull up a wooden fence and burn it, to argue for the purchase of a fuel efficient stove, to insist on the purchase of charcoal, to delegate fuelwood col- lection to a younger woman in the household or any number of alternative responses. As well as the issues of time preferences and livelihood strategies, these responses depend on the bargaining position, within the household, of individual women. Sen (1987) models intrahousehold relations in terms of cooperative conflict, i.e. both "the coexistence of extensive conflicts and pervasive cooperation in household arrangements" (Sen, 1987, p. 5). He sug- gests that individuals within households have vari- able perceptions of self-interest and variable percep- tions of the value of the contributions to household welfare by themselves and others and that the bar- gaining strength of individuals within a household depends not so much on the objective quantity of labor or incomes contributed but on the value that is attributed to those contributions to household wel- fare. Outcomes of intrahousehold negotiations over resource management, where men and women have differing preferences, will be affected by the bar- gaining strength of parties which in turn reflects their breakdown positions (i.e. their situations in the event of the breakdown of cooperation — such as divorce). Where divorce for women is difficult and remarriage rare, as in northern India, then a woman may be less able to bargain strongly and outcomes are more like- ly to reflect male preferences. Where an individual has

a low sense of their self-worth (perceived inter- est response), and where they perceive the claims of others as having greater legitimacy (perceived con- tribution response) they are also likely to concede to the priorities of other parties. With such a model decision making is understood with a primary focus upon power within households which refract wider societal gender relations. The quality of "altruism" attributed to women, which is "revalued" by WDE discourse, can be seen as symptomatic of powerless- ness, the inability to exercise self-interest (despite objective evidence for di scri minati on against women) and ideological domination. We could also question whether environmental altrui sm is not therefore profoundly at odds with the project of gen- derequality.

Divisions of rights and responsibilities within households are therefore not static but mutable, con- tested and responsive to changes in societal level gender relations. They also change under stress. While in Chivi it is broadly seen as women's respon- sibility to provide household staples in normal years, there are stages in food-shortage coping strategies

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