



Viewpoint

When Nature Needs Nurture: The role of women in the environment

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Abstract

To the disinterested observer, the distinctive links between the environment, and women's experience of it, are not immediately obvious. Particularly in developing countries, however, this interface is both intimate and immediate. After a brief survey of the importance of reproductive rights for containing population growth, and the international environmental policy context vis-à-vis gender, this article explores a few aspects of women's relationship with the environment. Women are seen as critical to environmental education in that they tend to exercise a formative influence over the attitudes of the very young. Women's relationship with the land they work is compromised by their poorly institutionalised property rights throughout much of the Third World, and where 'environmental injustice' is concerned, it tends to be the poorer women who experience the fallout most tangibly. Development practitioners, bureaucrats and policy makers need to be sensitised to this state of affairs.

Introduction

'If you want a message to go out to the whole world there are three ways of telling it, that is TELEVISION, TELEPHONE AND TELEVOMAN!' – Kenya Water for Health Organisation (Rodda, 1991:6)

At first sight, the bracketing of 'gender' with 'environment' might strike many people as being a kind of category mistake. 'Why not gender and weather-forecasting?' they might ask. 'Or French cuisine and the environment if it comes to that?' Their perplexity is entirely understandable. Both 'gender' and 'environment' are relatively recent claimants upon the public's attention, each having been virtually unknown as a discrete discipline just 40 years ago. Even as recently as 25 years ago, feminist writing was employing 'environment' matter-of-factly in the sense of general contextual surrounds, with no reference to any ecological dimension (Richards, 1980). It takes time for new ideas to establish themselves in the public consciousness. It is not surprising then that the links between these novel issue-areas are still opaque to the casual observer. This is perhaps especially so in developing societies where, on the whole, neither the natural environment nor gender can be regarded as being fully 'mainstreamed' yet (UNDP, 2002:22–23).

After some preliminary background has been provided, this Viewpoint paper will seek to elucidate some points of contact between gender and environment in order to show how important it is that environmental concerns are rendered 'gender sensitive'.

International Conventions and Agreements

The inclusion of gendered considerations into international agreements can be dated from the United Nations (UN) landmark declaration of 1975 as 'International Women's Year'. This was when the first UN World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City. Although this was immediately followed by the 'UN Decade for Women' (1976–1985) (Rodda, 1991:4–5), it was to be some time still before the need for women's participation in *environmental* matters was overtly recognised in international deliberations. Rodda points out that even the landmark Brundtland report of 1987 (*Our Common Future*) made only passing reference to women, and that it was not until UNEP's 1988 State of the Environment report that women's role was highlighted – a mere 18 years ago. Slowly the momentum gathered. Among the principles that informed the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity were, 'women's roles in the sustainable use and conservation of natural resources and the need for women to participate fully in policymaking and program delivery' (MacDonald & Nierenberg, 2003:40).

'Agenda 21', which emerged from the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, clearly signalled that women were to be valued partners in the environmental sphere, and the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo posited women as the main protagonists in the containment of population growth (MacDonald & Nierenberg, 2003:48). The following two sections will look more closely at the key policy areas of population control and Agenda 21.

Population and Reproductive Rights

It is often claimed that the rise of 'women's liberation' was a direct consequence of the 'reproductive control' the advent of the contraceptive pill, in the early 1960s, gave to women. Crucial to any discussion of gender and the environment is the question of population increase. Much of the developed world (apart from America) is experiencing shrinking populations, notwithstanding immigration. But population growth is proceeding apace in those countries that can least afford it environmentally and economically. Ethiopia, Niger, Chad, Angola, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) still have average childbirths in excess of six per woman. Sub-Saharan Africa, with the sole exceptions of South Africa and Zimbabwe, is far and away the most affected region in this regard (Seager, 2003:32–33).

The empirical evidence for the notion that better educated women have fewer children, who are better cared for and in turn often better educated than their parents, appears to be so overwhelming that it has taken on the status of a developmental truism (Dankelman & Davidson, 1988a:123). The virtuous circle, which a sound education sets in motion, appears to be central to discussions on what effective sustainable development is all about. Although the situation has improved markedly in recent years, there is still major resistance to education for girls from the Muslim world although significantly less so from Algeria, Libya and Egypt (Seager, 2003: 76–81). One wonders at the strength of the cultural stranglehold that leads states to act against their own enlightened self-interest by effectively neutralising half of their human capital.

Amartya Sen has stressed the importance for the environment of women's having control over the number of children they really want, as follows:

The population problem is integrally linked with justice for women in particular ... Advancing gender equity, through reversing the various social and economic handicaps that make women voiceless and powerless, may also be one of the best ways of saving the environment, working against global warming and countering the dangers of overcrowding and other adversities associated with population pressure. The voice of women is critically important for the world's future – not just for women's future. (quoted in MacDonald & Nierenberg, 2003:41)

Agenda 21

Chapter 24 of Agenda 21 is given over to the relationship between women and natural resources. As Agenda 21 is the one environmental initiative that the general public might have heard of (more usually as *Local Agenda 21* or *Local Action 21*, in the municipal sphere), it is particularly significant in the current context. Many cities in South Africa have committed themselves to giving effect to its principles. What then is Agenda 21?

Agenda 21 is a detailed plan of action to ensure a sustainable future for humanity – 'sustainable' here understood with its environmental connotations. The initiative was conceived in such a way that it could be 'cascaded down' via local authorities to each and every individual human being. Its intention is to make environmental awareness second nature. Agenda 21 is a 'gender friendly' programme in that it explicitly recognises that the role of women is critical for its success, and that women have distinctive strengths in certain areas that must be nurtured and capitalised upon.

The action plan urges greater representivity of women in decision-making structures so that distinctively female perspectives on the environment are not trampled underfoot. It advocates the elimination of illiteracy and the improvement of women's access to post-graduate science and technology studies. It pushes for the reduction of women's workload and for facilitating their 'getting out into the world' through the provision of affordable kindergartens. Agenda 21 supports the use of new labour-saving technologies (provided they are not detrimental to the environment) and encourages a much more equitable division of labour as regards household chores. It supports the direct provision of credit facilities to rural women, and equal access to land and other natural resources. The programme encourages research into the impacts, on the domestic sphere, of policy decisions regarding services, and into the actual monetary value of unpaid domestic work. It also requires that gender impact assessments make up an integral part of environmental and developmental projects (Sitarz, 1993:264–266).

Environmental Social Impact Assessments

It is within the context of gendered social impact assessments that much is made explicit concerning environmental impacts on women that might otherwise have remained implicit. For example, as Frank Vanclay (2000:128) points out (*apropos* of a natural resource-based management project with the potential for generating tourist income):

Gender-blindness is a condition that has afflicted many development projects and impact assessments ... If entrepreneurial activities are promoted to allow villagers to earn additional cash income, it is often the women who experience an increased workload to earn this income. Thus it can be argued that many development projects have worsened the position of women ... Some of the biggest impacts relate to increasing the distance to collect firewood or to collect fresh water.

An extreme example of this is the system of gender quotas in certain 'job creation' projects. These place intense pressures on women to make themselves available for hard manual labour in the building of bulk infrastructure or roads. Much of the time their husbands could be doing the job, but due to the quota system, they sit idle at home and, where the gendered division of labour is absolute, get up to no good while the women have to cope with a double burden. Bureaucrats must realise that good intentions on their own, in the absence of properly *thinking through implications*, are no guarantee of equitable or satisfactory outcomes.

Mothers as Environmental Educators

Practitioners in the field of sanitation awareness training (such as Environmental Health Officers) have long realised that the most vital constituency they need to reach is that of mothers – prized for their high 'multiplier effect' in the dissemination of knowledge, and for the lasting impressions exerted by their example upon the very young.

Women have a privileged position as an instiller of values in very young children. Even with environmental imperatives as basic as the need not to litter, or to wash one's hands before meals or after using the toilet, an *informed* cohort of mothers makes a difference that information campaigns later in life can never fully emulate. As Rodda (1991:104&108) says, 'Women influence the entire family circle ... in their environmental perceptions, values and attitudes, and in ethical considerations, as well as in the use of natural resources ...' but they in turn need training in soil and land assessment in order to identify and remedy soil degradation and desertification.

Access to Land

At the 1995 Beijing UN World Conference, women demanded the right 'to have equal access to land and housing' (Serote, Mager & Budlender, 2001:159). According to Dankelman and Davidson (1988b:3):

Land, particularly healthy soil, is the foundation on which life depends. If the land is healthy, then agriculture and pasturage will yield food in plenty. If it is not, the ecosystem will show signs of strain and food production will become more difficult. Because women are at the centre of world food production ... any analysis of land resources must include an appreciation of their central role.

Granted that land is about as elemental a component of the environment as can be imagined, what Dankelman & Davidson say is not altogether accurate. For one thing 'healthy land' does not obligingly translate into 'food in plenty' except in rural fantasy. While women may well be central to food production in developing countries, this is hardly the case in the developed world. Be that as it may, there is a more pointed objection. While healthy land is arguably a necessary condition for 'food in plenty', it is very far from being a sufficient condition. There are many other factors at play, not the least of which is *who owns the land* and *who says what must happen on it*.

Dankelman and Davidson (1988b:5&9) go on to say that 'Women have title to only 1 per cent of the world's land ... without land, women have no access to credit ...'. As demonstrated by Hernando de Soto in his influential *The Mystery of Capital* (2000), not having access to credit is by no means the end of the matter. Not having title means women are denied status, security of tenure, capital appreciation and a whole host of other important determinants of what it is to be a person with *options* in the world.

Drawing on data produced by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2001, Seager (2003:84–85) is especially illuminating on the matter of 'women as a percentage of agricultural landowners'. One reads of India, in Seager, that 'widespread discrimination exists against women inheriting, owning or controlling property, land and wealth; in most cases this discrimination is supported by civil, customary or religious laws'.

What obtains in India *vis-à-vis* the institutionalised subjugation of women also typifies huge swathes of the Muslim world, as well as a number of sub-Saharan states. Interestingly enough, however, Namibia has the *highest* percentage of women landowners in the world at 57 percent (ahead of Barbados at 51 percent), while South Africa comes in at a not unrespectable 34 percent (Seager, 2003). It should be borne in mind though that these figures could be misleading, being as they are a percentage of an absolute number of landowners without regard being had to the *value, size or productivity* of the landownings in question. Nonetheless, they do suggest significant differences in attitude between different governments.

Unfortunately, South Africa has, since these figures were produced, rather blotted its copybook insofar as extending land title to women is concerned. According to Ntsebeza (2004:59):

After years of ambivalence and prevarication, the ANC-led government [has] passed two bills through Parliament – the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act and the Communal Land Rights Bill – which make concessions to traditional authorities, effectively resuscitating the powers they enjoyed under the notorious Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 ... this raises critical questions concerning citizenship and the nature of democracy in South Africa.

As Serote *et al.* (2001:165&169-172), drawing on Walker, so perceptively pointed out in 2001, there is a 'contradiction between Government's commitment to gender equality and its persistent engagement with the politics of traditionalism'.

Environmental Injustice

The poor tend to bear the brunt of the externalities occasioned by activities which stress the environment. Because, in the developing world, women engage very directly with the elements (water, soil, vegetation and so on), and lack the means to distance or insulate themselves from the effects of desertification or poisoned water, an argument can be made that such people are unjustly prejudiced by the fallout from other people's activities. Poor women are, for instance, grievously affected by waterborne diseases, not only in their own persons, but in the persons of their many children (UNDP, 1998:85).

'When land and water are depleted, much more labour – usually women's labour – is required to maintain the same output. The workload of children also rises for girls more than boys' (UNDP, 1995:92–93). The UN reports that in the Sudan the time spent gathering fuelwood has increased fourfold in a decade. What took no more than two hours in the Himalayas a generation ago now takes an entire day.

Bureaucrats and policy makers need to be educated to anticipate, and ameliorate, the ill-effects that environmental abuse and pollution visit upon vulnerable poverty stricken women. As MacDonald and Nierenberg (2003:52) point out, 'In most of the industrial world, the relationship between women and the environment is perhaps more subtle than elsewhere, partly because women tend to be more removed from the natural resources they depend on'. These women have the means to insulate themselves from the grosser manifestations of environmental abuse in a way that is not open to rural women in developing countries, and perhaps even less so to their counterparts in the sprawling Third World urban slums (Dankelman & Davidson, 1988a:87–90).

Conclusion

This short survey of gender and the natural environment has endeavoured to draw out some of the many ways in which women are affected by developments or policies that impinge on the natural environment and, more especially, to show how undesirable it is for women's perspectives not to be factored into the planning of these matters. Development practitioners need to be sensitised to the fact that their actions may have negative environmental consequences that impact directly upon those least in a position to take evasive action – namely poor women.

It has been implied here that women's equal standing with men is a *sine qua non* for genuine development. In short, and this subsumes the single aspects of gender or environment, if people cannot treat one another with the dignity, consideration and respect that the fact of their *humanity* demands, then this will manifest itself in all manner of social and environmental dysfunction.

Notes on the Contributor

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