



Role of mountain women in the management of sustainable eco-systems

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Summary

This paper from India by Chaya Kunwar begins with a statement from the World Rio Conference in Environmental Development in 1992. "Women have a vital role in environmental management and development."

Their full participation is therefore essential to achieving sustainable development and the author puts forward that women are at the forefront when it comes to protection and preservation of resources. The paper itself concentrates on forest management and forest movements in which women were the major movers. Reasons for this are well known in the literature: they are closer to nature than men and ergo they are better managers of the ecosystem. Much of the first part tells us what we already know about the closeness of mountain women to the forests that provide fodder, fuelwood, and food. An example is given of a woman giving birth in the forest (Chamoli) and naming her daughter Boni Devi- Ban Devi- and this, of course is common for Hindus in the HKH region and dates back to the time of the Upanishads when forests were thought to be inhabited by goddesses. Of course, this is romanticised today because not all supernatural forest dwellers were thought to be good.

The striking part of this story from Chamoli of course is that it pinpoints the sad reality that many mountain women are carrying out arduous and laborious work right up to the time before delivery.

It is argued that the impact of environmental degradation is greater on women than on men: it increases the distances they have to travel to gather the resources they need, and, of course, increases the burden since the loads

have to be carried further and for longer before reaching home. The author estimates that on average a mountain woman will walk 3-4,000km a year to gather the essentials of fuel, fodder, and water.

What is the answer to this complex dependency pattern in which women know what is needed, but also realise how mismanagement is making it less possible to gather what is needed?

It is argued that women's intricate knowledge of natural resources and their uses make them the best managers, if given the opportunity to manage. In this respect, the author discusses the role of the Chipko movement and Mahila Mandals in India in bringing village women into the forefront of forest management.

Examples of successful forest management from the villages are given and one of these examples is given in Box 1.

Box 1

Here is an example of the collective strength of the Mahila Mandal Dal of Bachhair village. The women of Bachhair were concerned about the dwindling forest because they realised that once the forest was destroyed they would be the worst sufferers. The Sarpanch (Head of the Forest) was a corrupt man who would encourage outsiders to fell the trees for his own private gain. One day the Sarpanch sold off a large tract of forest to an outside contractor who lost no time in felling the trees, hence the women became determined to remove the Sarpanch. They filed a complaint against him with the Sub-Divisional Magistrate. The village women created so much pressure that the Sarpanch had to resign. A woman Sarpanch was elected for the first time in the history of Uttarakhand. The women of Bacchair then framed their own rules and regulations to protect the forest and share the benefits among members. A guard was hired to keep watch over the forest. The women themselves also kept watch the whole night on occasions when illegal tree fellers were in the area. An annual afforestation drive was launched and soon the whole area was covered with dense forest. In addition to protecting their community forest, the women of Bachhair protected the government-owned forest. When a fire broke out in the government forest the women rushed to the spot and fearlessly brought the fire under control. Due to the remarkable work of the Mahila Manga Dal of Bachhair in the field of Natural Resource Management, it was one of the recipients of the Indira Priya Darshini Vriksh Mitra award given by the late Prime Minister, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, in 1984. Inspired by the Mahila Mangal Dal of Bachhair, women in other villages also began to follow in their footsteps.

Conclusion

The author calls for recognition of these women's groups, for their legal status as managers of natural resources within their own communities. The logic for this argument is that it gives women the right to be heard in terms of policy formulation. The author questions the need for government to establish different mechanisms for forest management when women are taking care of them well. Two further examples are given from Uttarakhand- the maiti tree-



a sapling raised in the woman's home village and replanted at the time of marriage in the husband's village, and raksha bandhan or tying a traditional protective bracelet around each tree as a raksha sutra, a sign that it is under women's protection. As awareness-raising techniques these are excellent examples, but the author is quite right to argue for legal status of women's forest management groups and their access to policy-making fora.

Other suggestions are that women should be recognised as 'main workers'. This concept is a call to translate the contributions of women, who often do not work for cash, into monetary terms so that their contributions are recognised. Another call is for leadership training in ecosystem management for women. In this respect women's lack of access to information about policies and technical information is stressed. This is a real challenge for communications at village level.

The author concludes by stating that *"there is also a need to establish a Mountain Women's Forum at International Level which will provide a common platform for women from every region of the world to exchange and share views, ideas, issues, problems, and priorities and to learn from others' experiences."*



