



DESFIL

Development Strategies for Fragile Lands

**WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT
THEMES FROM A LITERATURE REVIEW**

**A presentation for the Gender and Environment Network Series,
Washington, D.C.**

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Abstract

This review of literature was presented by the DESFIL gender specialist at a seminar in Washington, D.C. in February, 1994 as a part of the Gender and Environment Network Seminar Series, sponsored by The World Resources Institute, DESFIL and the USAID Office of Women in Development. At that time there was a request from the seminar participants that the presentation be disseminated through a written report. This is the report.

The review revealed three general categories: a) Women and the Environment from Within the International Development Community; b) The Concept of Gender; c) Women and the Environment from Outside the International Development Community. Several *themes* emerged within each of the categories which shed light on the often asked questions, "*Why Women and The Environment?*" "*What Does that Mean?*" This report of the review presents each category and the themes within the category. Each of the themes is illustrated by using representative examples from the literature. The literature reviewed appears in the appended bibliography of some one hundred citations.

WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT: THEMES FROM A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Introduction

Development Strategies for Fragile Lands, DESFIL, is a centrally funded project of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). DESFIL focuses on the effective participation of local resource users, both men and women, in sustainable natural resource management. Gender is a central variable in both DESFIL research and technical assistance, and gender analysis is one tool used by DESFIL to gather data on the interaction between the environment and people. Such data is critical in developing sound policy and in understanding and promoting the participation of local people in natural resource management.

In reconsidering the conceptual framework for the inclusion of gender and gender analysis in the project, the DESFIL social scientist and gender specialist conducted a review of the literature that linked women and the environment. The review revealed three general categories: a) Women and the Environment from Within the International Development Community; b) The Concept of Gender; c) Women and the Environment from Outside the International Development Community. Several *themes* emerged within each of the categories which shed light on the often asked questions, "*Why Women and The Environment?*" "*What Does that Mean?*" This report of the review presents each of the three categories and the themes within the category. Each of the themes is illustrated by using representative examples from the literature. The literature reviewed appears in the appended bibliography.

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The First Category: Women and the Environment from Within the International Development Community

Theme One: Rural Women of the Southern Hemisphere

Many international development agencies have discussed the relationship of women to the environment. These discussions have focused on primarily poor, rural women of the southern hemisphere, in the poorer regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America. There have been few references to urban women and the environment in the literature.

Theme Two: Women as Natural Resource Managers

The primary rationale in the literature for linking women and the environment is based on the roles and responsibilities of rural women: "All over the developing world, women play a crucial role in environmental management; as farmers, stockbreeders, suppliers of fuel and water, they interact most closely with the environment...." (Rodda, 1991: 6). They are seen as "the daily managers of the living environment." (Dankelman, 1988)

Theme Three: Women as Natural Conservers

In the literature women are not only *managers* of natural resources, but also are *conservers* of natural resources. Women have a special relationship with the environment as food producers, fuel and water gathers, but they are also seen as key actors in "primary environmental care ... maintaining and enhancing the quality and stock of natural resources." (Davidson, 1988:34) It is argued that they are "natural conservers" who, therefore, have a vital role to play in the preservation of the environment both because of their indigenous knowledge and because, as women, they are inherently nurturers. This poem from the Chipko Movement in India reflects this idea of women as nurturer:

Foresters:

What do the forests bear?
Profits, resin and timber.

Women:

What do the forests bear
Soil, water, and pure air. Soil, Water and pure air.
Sustain the earth and all she bears." (Agarwal, 1992:37)

Both the Chipko Movement in India and the Greenbelt Movement of Kenya are said to draw strength from the "inherent women/nature connection as a basis for political action because they have no problem endorsing the traditional notions of women as "natural" carers and nurturers in... the rural societies in which they originate." (Charkiewicz-Pluta, 1991:28)

Theme Four: Women as Victims of Environmental Degradation?

Women are often depicted in the literature as those among "the hardest hit by environmental devastation" and, in this sense, can be seen as "victims of resource *mismanagement*." (Davidson, 1988:34) Women are said to be the "hardest hit" for two basic reasons:

First, women, in general, have less access to training, credit, capital, land, political power and other resources. These constraints leave them with few tools to fight environmental degradation. "The ability of poor women in developing countries to overcome poverty, enhance productivity and use resources without depleting them is hampered by social and institutional factors that include lack of access to land, credit and education." (Young, 1993:

149) Land, in this regard, is a pervasive issue. The plight of women from Kenya is typical: "When property is subdivided and allocated to male heads of household, women are rendered legally landless and many become trespassers in their daily use of resources formerly allocated to them as users, based on membership in kin or community groups." (Rocheleau, 1992: 44)

Second, rural women are described in the literature as depending on natural resources to support their households, feed their children, and manage their lives in ways that men do not. Therefore, they may suffer from resource degradation more profoundly than do men. "...women's responsibilities for providing a significant share of household income and subsistence needs such as food, fodder, fuelwood, and water all have an impact on biological and natural resources. In areas of increasing natural resource scarcity, women may be forced to contribute to further resource depletion in order to ensure household survival." (Mehra, 1993:148)

However, there has been a reaction in the literature against considering women as the victims of environmental devastation: "Current wisdom is to see women not just as victims but as major local assets to be harnessed in the interests of better environmental management." (Charkiewicz-Pluta, 1991:26) There is a concern that writing of women as victims feeds the stereotype of women as passive and inactive. (Moser, 1990:15) Bina Agarwal argues that "women are both victims of the environmental crisis in gender specific ways as well as important actors in environmental recovery." As do many others, she sees the effects of the environmental crisis on women as embedded in the inequities of the current class and sex division of labor, in power relations and in poverty itself. (Charkiewicz-Pluta, 1991:30)

Theme Five: Women Empowered

The theme of empowerment acts as a counter balance to the theme of women as victims. In the literature international agencies have argued that if women are recognized and included in development efforts the experience will empower them by "improving their confidence, independence and status.... Enabling women to become better environmental managers in all these ways is fundamental for any durable improvements in their own position as well as for the wider goals of sustainable development." (Davidson, 1990:5) One common aspect of the empowerment theme is that women in caring for the environment are in turn empowered. The women who restored degraded land in West Bengal speak to this form of empowerment: "We have learnt that actually it is the land that owns the people. We have worked hard to give the land a green cover, and in return it has clothed us with authority. We are advancing together. The journey has begun." (Rodda, 1991:141)

Generally, the literature on empowerment describes the various roles of women in relation to their environment and considers women as agents of change. Field level case studies illustrating the effects of empowering women are common. (See, for example, H. Feldstein/S.Poats, and the ECOGEN Case Studies Series). However, increasingly in the literature, empowerment also means dealing with women's issues at institutional and policy

levels. An example from Tanzania is representative of institutional empowerment for women: "As forestry has been a predominantly male profession, faculty already in place often are men. In Tanzania there are only men on the teaching staff in forestry at Sokoine University. If under this project community forestry is being stressed, and if, as the project document says, it is important women should be recruited as students, then the faculty should discuss how better to include women on the faculty and staff of forestry colleges." (Rojas, 1992:13)

The theme of women's empowerment for the most part has meant increased self-esteem within "the traditional sexual division of labor and gender ideologies"(Charkiewicz-Pluta, 1991:28). However, in the literature, the concept of empowerment is increasingly incorporating an activism that goes beyond traditional divisions: "Women worldwide are united in a cross-cultural cry for action and personal participation in addressing the world's needs...The biodiversity of our planet depends on it." (Cameron-Porter, 1992:19) "Increasingly around the world, women's capacities as environmental activists are being born in contaminated rivers or destroyed forests; environmental activism is becoming her training ground for civic assertion." (Martin-Brown, 1992:25)

Theme Six: The Support of Other Disciplines

Much of the literature reviewed was based on the work of sociologists and anthropologists. However, three other disciplines consistently play a role in making the links between women and the environment. They are economics, population studies, and political science.

Economics: The economists linking women and the environment argue that "women's work as the 'daily managers of the living environment' is obscured by the invisibility of women and women's work in the currency of bureaucratic accounting: employment, income and landownership." (Rocheleau, 1992:46) Some, therefore, have begun to reconceptualize economics to include women and nature. For example, in If Women Counted, Marilyn Waring challenges an economic system that values neither women nor nature. She questions what the current economists do not measure, namely subsistence crops, women's work, and damage to the environment. (Charkiewicz-Pluta, 1991:39) Amaryta Sen, an economist at Harvard University, writes of the need to reform economics to include quality of life data, especially to measure the "100 million missing women," reflected by the imbalanced sex ratio in parts of Asia. (Sen,1993)

Population: The argument in the literature linking population, women and the environment is summed up by Jodi Jacobson: "Rapid population growth within subsistence economies... compounds ... environmental degradation - the unsustainable escalation of soil erosion, depletion and deforestation - first put in motion by the increasing separation of poor farmers from the assets that once sustained them. The health of women and girls, most affected by environmental degradation because of the roles they play, declines further. The cycle accelerates." (Jacobson, 1992:7)

Political Science: Political ecology analyzes "the interactions between resource use and social dynamics at a local level and the responses and influences of political-economic processes at the macro level." (Thrupp, 1993:1) It is derived from cultural ecology, which focuses on human/environmental relations and the resulting land-use practices, and political science. Increasingly political ecology includes gender. For example, the Ecology, Community Organizations and Gender project (ECOGEN), examines the links between women and the environment. It is a "gender-focused land user approach ... with emphasis on multiple uses of resources, multiple users, a sliding scale of analysis from individual to nation, recognition of indigenous knowledge as science and treatment of rural people as research partners." (ECOGEN, Thomas-Slayer, Rochleau and Shields, 1990:3)

Theme Seven: Reformers Not Revolutionaries

The literature on women and the environment from the international development community is based on the assumption that, "In an ideal world, where development is non-sexist, there should be no need to identify their [women] special position among poor people. As circumstances stand, their situation is not equivalent to that of other social groups." (Davidson, 1990:32) Therefore, reform is needed, but not revolution: "There is still much to do to persuade governments, aid and other development agencies that what happens to the environment is central, not marginal, to women's lives; that they are directly affected by environmental damage; that they have the right to participate in solutions and important contributions to make." (Davidson, 1990:5) There is a commitment to transforming institutions from within; therefore, in the literature it is repeatedly argued that, "...unless their (women's) multiple roles are explicitly recognized and valued, and their participation in decision-making increased, the earth's biotic wealth and human well-being will dwindle at an accelerating pace.." (Borkenhagen, 1992:vii)

The Second Category: The Concept of Gender

Theme One: Gender and Gender Analysis

Gender is the cultural definition given to being a man or being a woman. Sex refers to the physiological properties of men and women. Therefore, for example, the literature refers to gendered spaces and knowledge - the kitchen versus the workshop or the home garden versus the cornfield. (See for example, Rochleau, 1992: 45) Gender analysis grew out of the women in development movement as a tool to examine the division of labor between men and women; the access to, and control over, resources of men and women; and, in general, the benefits received by men and by women from development. (See for example, H. Feldstein and S. Poats, 1989) Such analysis is to assure both project efficiency, by including both men and women in development, and equity, by arguing for an end to discrimination against women. More recently gender analysis also is seen as a tool for those working with community participation and democratic initiatives, and, therefore, has become a part of broader development goals.

Theme Two: Women and Gender Analysis

Gender analysis can be primarily women-focused. For example, instead of examining women apart from the social structures they live in, gender analysis examines, "the nature of women's contribution inside and outside the household...sees women as agents of change rather than as passive recipients of development assistance...question[s] the underlying assumptions of current social, economic and political structures..and leads not only to the design of interventions and affirmative action strategies which will ensure that women are better integrated into on-going development efforts...[but] to a fundamental reexamination of social structures and institutions." (Rathgeber, 1989:3)

Theme Three: Women and Men and Gender Analysis

More frequently in the literature, gender analysis deals with both men and women, explicitly including men to understand "the cross-culturally variable social roles of men and women." (Feldstein and Poats,1989:3) Nevertheless, most people who use gender analysis acknowledge their debt to the women in development literature and they acknowledge that the analysis often uncovers discriminatory practices against women.

The Third Category: Women and the Environment from Outside the International Development Community

Theme One: The Ecofeminists

Ecofeminism, unlike the movement within the international development community, does not limit itself to poor, rural women of the southern hemisphere, but includes all women, north and south, rich and poor. One basic concept of ecofeminism is that patriarchy has led to the degradation of the environment and, therefore, there is a need to create cultures that stress prepatriarchal values. Many ecofeminists resurrect prehistoric traditions in which the earth was revered "and this reverence for the life-giving and life-sustained powers of the Earth [Gaia] was rooted in a social structure where women and "feminine" values such as caring, compassion and non-violence were not subordinate to men and the so-called masculine values of conquest and domination." (Eisler, 1990:23)

Feminists often have struggled against biological determinism which they viewed as keeping women from being "full and equal participants in the making of culture" with men. (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990:p.ix) However, ecofeminists are revaluing the "natural processes" of women. They hope to transform the patriarchy in order to eliminate the values that they view as having led to the "conquest"of nature. Ecofeminists "reject the dualisms and hierarchies of patriarchy which have oppressed both women and nature. They rather recognize that human life is dependent on the Earth." (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990:xii) Life on earth is thus seen as interconnected webs of "women's ways of knowing." (Charkiewicz-Pluta,1991: 52)

Theme Two: Shiva and The Feminine Principle

Vandana Shiva, winner of the United Nations Global 500 Award and the first International Earth Day award, critiques mainstream development while closely mirroring ecofeminism. She writes that development, which she calls 'maldevelopment', "was an extension of modern Western patriarchy's economic vision based on the exploitation or exclusion of women (West and non-West), on the exploitation and destruction of nature, and on the destruction of other cultures." (Shiva, 1990:189) "Maldevelopment is the violation of a living interconnected world, and it is simultaneously at the root of injustice, exploitation, inequality and violence. It involves the simultaneous subjugation of nature and women." (Shiva, 1990:193)

Maldevelopment "ruptures the cooperative unity of the masculine and the feminine, and puts men, deprived of the feminine principle, above and thus separated from nature and women." (Shiva, 1990:193) "Maldevelopment is thus development deprived of the creative force and power of the feminine principle." (Shiva, 1990:192) "The old assumption that with the development process the availability of goods and services would automatically increase and poverty would decrease is now under serious challenge from women's ecology movements in the Third World even while it continues to guide development-thinking in centers of patriarchal power. ... Recovery of the feminine principle would allow a transcendence and transformation of the patriarchal foundations of maldevelopment." (Shiva, 1990:200)

Theme Three: Women and The Environment as "The Other"

Woman as "other" was made famous in the 1940s by Simone de Beauvoir. Since then many have spoken of women as "other." In this literature patriarchy is accepted as a global social system which establishes the male as the norm and the superior. Therefore, women are not simply different from men but they are the "other." In this way women have been equated to the environment as the environment has also been seen as "the other" to be conquered and exploited. Similarly, women often have been linked to the natural and the intuitive and men to the logical and rational.

Many, however, agree with Z.T. Halpin that the "reasons for women's and nature's subordination may be similar, but not because they have an intrinsic connection...women have been oppressed, not so much because they have been equated to nature, but rather because both women and nature have been equated to the other." (Charkiewicz-Pluta, 1991:28) Vandana Shiva reflects this thinking as well, "In maldevelopment nature and women are viewed as the "other" as the the passive non-self....Nature and women are transformed into passive objects to be used and exploited." (Shiva, 1990:194.)

Conclusion

Increasingly within the international development community there is more accurate and compelling data in the literature on women. This has been particularly true where the

education of women has been shown empirically to correlate with lower fertility, healthier families and a higher family income. Also the empowerment of women, defined as increasing women's self determination, has been shown to "improve the health and wellbeing of women and their children, and to slow the pace of population growth." (US Dept. of State, 1994:7) The importance of women's education and self-determination has been linked to the environment: "This year's [World Bank] World Development Report concluded that investment in female education is one of the highest return investments in environmental protection that developing countries can undertake, and included it in its package of environmental imperatives for the 1990s." (Summers, 1994:13) Therefore, it is supposed that advocacy of women's education will be a central strategy in sustainably managing the environment.

Outside of the international development community, within the industrialized countries, the arguments for linking women and the environment, except for ecofeminism, hold little sway. There may be several reasons why this is true: a) Women traditionally have been a part of the administrative, decision-making bodies of environmental groups and a crucial part of the grass roots environmental movement. They do not see a need for institutional reform to be included; b) The movement for equity in land tenure, credit, training and education for women in developing countries is not an issue in the more industrialized countries; c) The differences between the roles, rights and responsibilities of women and men in natural resource management in the urban, industrialized nations are not as clear as in most rural, developing countries.

Clearly, however, women are better organized throughout the world than ever before and their voices are being heard internationally on a variety of issues including the sustainable management of the environment.

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