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**by**

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## WOMEN'S ISSUES IN ENVIRONMENT

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*(Paper presented during the Seminar on Participatory Communication in Environmental Management, organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 30 March-2 April 1993)*

JUST before this seminar, I was in Iligan, a city in northern Mindanao, in southern Philippines.

Iligan is a coastal city bounded on one side by mountains. It is known as the "city of waterfalls," but ironically, the most famous and loveliest of these, known as Maria Cristina Falls, no longer exists. Its graceful cascade has been harnessed to produce electricity, the water diverted to huge pipes that direct the powerful current to run turbines in the power plant.

Indeed, according to my friends in the city, Iligan provides most of the power that runs the industries of Mindanao. Much of its abundant water was harnessed, in a construction frenzy in the '70s, to serve a string of hydroelectric plants, the falls, lakes, and rivers diverted, dammed, and sometimes made to disappear in the name of progress and industrialization.

And yet, despite the high technology that surrounds local communities, everywhere I went, I would spot clumps of women at the banks of lakes and streams, or at the foot of scenic waterfalls, doing their laundry and bathing their

children. At one district famous for a complex of natural spring-fed swimming pools, women wash clothes with the water running off from the pools, hanging their laundry up to dry in a communal laundry line that, said a friend half-seriously, could be the world's longest.

So if you ask the women of Iligan about "women's issues in the environment," they will reply with the example of their own lives. The city's most abundant natural resource, the water that flows down the mountains, powers billion-peso complexes that feed the hunger for electricity of voracious factories. But the women's most basic need -- a reliable and safe supply of running water -- remains unmet, apparently unseen, if not ignored, by officials, planners and funders.

It is easy to romanticize the unique and special link between women and nature, women and the environment. In referring to our common home, we talk of "Mother Nature" and "Mother Earth." Women live in much greater harmony with nature simply by virtue of being women (1), it is believed, their nurturing skills and their historic status as subordinate to men in most cultures and societies giving them a unique perspective that is more sensitive and responsive to their natural environment (2).

A complementary view places this special relationship within the context of women's roles in the family and society. As producers of food, gatherers of firewood and water, homemakers and mothers, women are supposed to have an

almost instinctive familiarity with the principles of sustainability, being wholly dependent upon the renewability of natural systems to provide food, fuel, water and shelter, and being their children's "first teacher" on earth-friendly practices (3).

Women are also the first to see, feel and suffer from the effects of environmental degradation. When nearby water sources dry up, they are forced to walk farther, and make more trips, to fetch water for their family's cooking, bathing and other needs. Exhausted by hard work, weakened by poor nutrition, and, by virtue of their domestic functions, in constant touch with water which is often polluted, women are particularly vulnerable to water-related diseases (4). When land normally planted to food crops is given over to cash crops, the nutritional status of women and children, already poor, is further compromised, so too when fish, crabs, snails and other protein sources can no longer be harvested from polluted rivers, streams, swamps and coasts (5). As basic needs like water, fuel and fodder become scarcer and more difficult to find, women find themselves spending most of each day scrounging around for these resources, giving up the little rest and leisure time available simply to meet their domestic responsibilities.

So while women, by virtue of their reproductive function and nurturing abilities have a unique and "privileged" knowledge and relationship to nature, it is precisely this role that, while it confers on them a special

status within the privacy of home and family, also tends to exclude them from more public professional activities (6).

Feminist theory, in fact, sees a direct connection between the male domination of nature and the domination of women (7).

Writes ecofeminist Vron Ware: "(T)o people living outside the over-developed world as a whole it is becoming clear that the principal victims of environmental degradation are underprivileged people, and the majority of these are women. The politics of ecology is about societies organizing themselves to reproduce themselves in harmony with their environments. Protecting the environment from destructive human activity and conserving finite natural resources are fundamental to an ecological society, which means thinking about how people live together in local, regional and global communities. This has enormous implications for exploitative social relationships based upon race, class and gender -- and obviously for feminism as well.'" (8)

The increasingly prominent role that women play in the global environmental movement has been likened to "mopping up" after the mistakes that men have made, "a public version of what most women already do in the domestic sphere (9)." H. Patricia Hynes, an American environmental activist, declares that women must ensure that all their activity to preserve life on Earth "does not reduce to global housekeeping after men -- their governments and their

companies -- who do not know how, and *do not want to know how*, to clean up after themselves. (10)

If women are to make a real difference in the way the earth is managed, it is necessary "to empower the victims to become the agents for urgently needed change." The importance of women's participation as equals in the process of development, in all its phases and at all levels, cannot be overestimated. As full partners, women would be crucial to its success; without them, development policies would be doomed to failure. (11)

But before women can become full partners in development, they must first become visible to researchers, organizers, community extension workers, planners, and officials. The roles they play in the community and economy must be acknowledged, their needs identified, and their own ideas, plans and dreams integrated into the project design.

A resource guide on "Women in Community Forestry," (12) offers some guidelines on how to "see women" in development planning.

First, it says, the local systems and responsibilities and benefits for women and men within those systems will need to be understood. Only then can one be aware of motives for and constraints to participation by different community members. A planner must know who makes up the household, which can be made difficult by the extended family tradition. Female heads of household need to be counted, though in many parts of the world it is a matter of honour

that a man be counted as head of household even though he may be absent because of death, divorce, migration or abandonment.

Beyond the definition of family, planners would also need to know how and by whom are household tasks performed. Men, perceived as heads of household, are often interviewed for projects. In Haiti, many men identified no household problem in obtaining water or fodder. Only by interviewing their wives was it learned that women walked five kilometers in search of both. In the hill areas of Nepal, men are responsible for house and furniture construction that depended on one species of tree. But women collecting fuelwood for cook stoves and fires depend on two other species.

Consulting women would also prevent the formulation of development programs ostensibly meant to benefit them, but which may end up adding to their present burdens.

Explains the guide: Women frequently care for small livestock -- calves, chickens, rabbits -- while men care for large animals. One reason is that women may manage animals that stay close to home while men may be more mobile, going greater distances with the herds for fodder and water.

When projects suggest stall feeding instead of free ranging animals in order to protect the environment, someone must add fodder and water collecting as well as stall cleaning to existing daily tasks. In many cases, cattle herding is the work of men or boys but these new chores are

in the woman's domain and must be added to other daily chores.

Planners must likewise be conscious of the manner by which they talk to women, and the setting for such talks. When questions are asked in public meetings, for instance, men may respond even when the questions are addressed to women. It is often inappropriate for a male outsider to talk alone with women. But there are a number of ways to help strengthen communications with local women. Often older women can speak freely with men from outside the community. Sometimes wives of school teachers or women social or health workers can act as intermediaries between the project staff and shy women.

These are just some of the strategies that may be employed to draw women out of the anonymity in which their historic and cultural roles have consigned them, and into the mainstream of development and environmental management.

Women are often viewed as a "special interest group" in all phases of social activity, including environment concerns. But women are central to the use, exploitation and preservation of natural resources and the environment, being primary users, producers, beneficiaries and agents of change. While women may have gender-specific concerns about the environment, they are concerns that touch us all and affect the fate of our common home.

Sources:

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- (4) *Women and Water*, Women's International Tribune
- (5) *Environment*, op. cit.
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- (7) Ibid.
- (8) Vron Ware, "'Nature, Nature, Who is the Nearest of Us All?,"' *Green Globalism: Perspectives on Environment and Development*, Third World First, Oxford, UK, 1990.
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- (11) *Women, Environment and Sustainable Development*, op.cit.
- (12) *Women in Community Forestry*, FAO, Rome, 1989

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