



Patriarchy exploits women, nature

By SHERRY GALEY, MONA MARSHY and RITA PARIKH

Is it mere coincidence that in the process of personifying Earth, we have historically attributed to her female characteristics? Women and the environment do indeed bear much in common: both are the embodiment of delicate ecosystems, primordial energies engendering the creation, rebirth and sustenance of all life. And both are the victims, or alternatively survivors, of the patriarchal structures which have for centuries exploited them.

Vandana Shiva is an Indian

ecofeminist. In *Healing the Wounds*, a collection of articles by international ecofeminists, Vandana writes about the common exploitation of both women and the environment. She says men and their structures have consistently dominated over women and nature. "From being the creators and sustainers of life, nature and women are reduced to being 'resources'..."

Their gifts, their powers, their miracles of rebirth, have, in modern times, been consistently undervalued. And, this shift has been inherently violent, involving the disruption of life cycles and, ultimately, death.

For women who for centuries have had a very special relationship with the land, however, the exploitation of nature has only added to their oppression, poverty and loss of dignity.

In their traditional roles as food producer and family caretaker, women rely on the renewability of natural systems to meet basic needs for food, water and shelter. In much of Africa, for example, women are responsible for almost 80 per cent of the subsistence farming (men's work has been increasingly centered around the production of cash crops and the manufacturing of goods in urban centers). Women turn to their environment in search of medicine, building materials, fodder and fertilizer. And women are traditionally responsible for hauling water and finding fuelwood, and can spend hours in search of these resources.

It is no wonder then that women have

been affected disproportionately by the transformation of nature — what we commonly call development. The industrialization of cities has led to massive urbanization and the burgeoning cities have encroached on valuable farmland, intensive agriculture for the production of cash crops, one way in which Third World countries have been raising money to pay off their foreign debt, has eaten up the plots of many of the rural poor.

This agricultural industrialization has made land less fertile and, in some cases, even destroyed it. Widespread irrigation has caused waterlogging, salinization and a reduction in essential minerals in the soil. Irrigation systems and fertilizers have also drastically lowered water tables and contaminated local water supplies, reducing the amount of clean water available.

In *Women and Environment in the Third World*, Irene Dankelman and Joan Davidson write that such development strategies have displaced women to more distant, fragile and less fertile lands, compelling them to travel longer distances to their fields and to work harder to compensate for severe soil erosion and low fertility.

Even more serious, however, has been the tendency to devalue women's productivity in terms of sustenance and survival. In the face of grand development projects, women are turned off their land in return for cash and a few years

of paid labor. Vandana relates the story of one woman fighting displacement who says, "With my soil I can feed myself, my children, my grandchildren...with this money maybe we can eat for a few years. How can I trade a perennial future for a few notes of money which anyway get wet in the rain?"

And the cycle is viciously repeated. When women in the Ivory Coast, for example, were forced out of their fields to make room for commercial coconut and palm oil plantations, they had no choice but to move into an unsuitable forest area where their farming caused further environmental damage.

In the past decade, however, developers have become increasingly aware of the environmental impact of their projects. Some have come up with strategies to lessen this impact. Others have developed whole projects aimed specifically at regenerating resources. But with little or no input from women, few of these measures have met with success.

In India, for example, the Green Revolution was an attempt to raise subsistence crops for India's increasing population. Yet the seeds offered to farmers proved highly vulnerable to the less than ideal growing conditions in many parts of the country. And in Thailand the Isaan Green reforestation movement has led to the rapid depletion of nitrogen from soil

and left thousands of acres incapable of sustaining growth. So while the will to protect the environment exists, to many the means remain elusive.

Women's close and symbiotic relationship with the natural environment has clearly been established and there is little doubt that women have a direct interest in the careful use and preservation of ecosystems and species. Yet women are seldom consulted when environmental impact studies are prepared or when environmental projects and policies are developed. Indeed much of the wealth of women's knowledge of the environment has never been recorded and thus is rarely considered legitimate by mainstream developers. Yet one has only to consider the efforts of women to fight for the environment and the innovation of women in the creation of new ecosystems, to understand the extent of women's knowledge.

India's Chipko movement is one of the best known examples. Faced with the chainsaws of overambitious commercial loggers threatening to fell more than 2,500 trees, the women in one village of Uuar Pradesh surrounded the trees in

an embrace which could not be broken. "Brother," one of the women said to a logger, "this forest is our mother's home. Do not axe it. Landslides will ruin our homes and fields." The women stood firm and forced the men to leave. The government of the province subsequently declared the forest a sensitive area and banned tree-felling for 10 years.

And in the barrio of Jerusalem on the outskirts of Bogota, Colombian women have organized to develop the world's largest community vegetable-growing projects — an experiment in hydroponics by which water and added nutrients replace the need for soil in plant growth. In five months alone, the 130 families involved have produced more than five tons of vegetables and have big plans for expansion.

Projects like these exist all over the world. Their influence on development planners, however, is yet to be determined. In an effort to legitimize women's particular experience and knowledge as managers of resources and nurturers of nature, women have begun to compile a comprehensive database aimed at documenting women's strategies to both protect their environment and to bring about sustainable development.

Until women's expertise around environmental issues is considered, and until women's unique relationship with nature is understood, little movement will be made in the ecological struggle. Writes Vandana, "We need now to pause and think of other visions to guide us; otherwise our rush for practical success can only generate practical failures. There is despair among the victims but there is also a new confidence." Let us hope this confidence soon gains legitimacy.

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