

WOMEN,  
WASTE  
AND  
PLANET  
SAFETY -  
PROPOSAL  
FOR A  
NORTH  
SOUTH  
ALLIANCE

By Devaki Jain  
Development Alternatives with Women for a  
New Era (DAWN)

**D**evaki Jain suggests that the understanding of gender in economic and social transformation indicates the importance of linkages, proximity, accessible accountability and self-determined development. She suggests that North and South can have a common agenda if it is built around waste (rather than energy), a respect for the territories of the poor, and for the wisdom of women.

**WASTE - NON-WASTE**

The world's nations and societies can be divided into three categories associated with waste.

★ *Waste-generating societies*: these are usually associated with affluence, with high-tech production, and until recently, with ignorance of processes of recycling material into consumable goods.



Kay Bishop



# ...industrialized societies are going back to low waste generating practices as well as rational distribution of waste.

★ *Waste-recycling societies:* where waste utilization becomes an art, a craft, a source of income and wealth creation. By and large these societies have low access to trade, to exchange. They have dispersed isolated populations.

★ *Waste-avoidance societies:* these are not dissimilar from waste recycling societies but they are usually at another economic and cultural plane. For example, in acute poverty, there is a perception of wasting as sinful. Scarce resources have to be stretched. Thus choices of both production and consumption are made that do not allow waste.

There is an associated, but not necessarily associated, culture of barring wastefulness as sinful, and taboos which bar people from use of certain materials and so on.

Non-wasting human habits are a part of a culture and built around nature. Every product of nature: water, soil, as well as what grows on the soil is used so that every part of the output is consumed leaving nothing to degenerate. This package can be called the culture of not wasting or waste minimizing and is embedded

in most of the early societies or civilizations. Some of these cultural mores continue to exist in the "less civilized" parts of the globe.

What is interesting to note is at this time, on the brink of the 21st century, most advanced, industrialized and wealthy societies are going back to low waste generating practices as well as rational distribution of waste.

For example, a woman in a village in India would divide her garbage to what could be fed to the animals, what could go into compost and what could go into her fireplace as fuel. A woman in Oxford in the United Kingdom separates her garbage into three or four garbage bins. One for organic waste in which she puts degradable organic material, another for glass and non-biodegradable plastics, a third where she puts bottles for recycling and a fourth where she keeps her newspapers for being recycled.

In the Bronx in New York, Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs - the American equivalent of NGOs) are pulverizing and processing household waste and refeeding this into production as an environment

friendly, income generating project. This is a long established business and income generating project in the South, except it is usually hazardous, and uses child labor.

It is interesting to observe that the old and the new have become one mode due to the alarm raised by environmentalists. At the same time, this similarity gives legitimacy to those old practices and perhaps the "new societies" can look deeper into the traditions of the old societies. They may want to examine, assess and perhaps emulate not merely the waste disposal techniques, but the techniques of lifestyles which *avoid or minimize waste*.

Thus we see that North and South can have similar agenda *if it is built around waste*.

## CONSUMPTION

The other side of the coin of waste making or waste avoiding habits is consumerism. A low waste society is often a low consumerist society - but again not necessarily. The habits may be designed to waste avoidance as unethical in a situation of pressure on resources. A desert camp may not want to follow water consumption prac-



tices which waste water. Nor, for example, would a dry farming settlement wish to consume grains carelessly.

Apart from restrained or careful consumption, there is also the choice of consumer products. Societies may choose to consume goods which are suited to their resource base, e.g. choose grains which are not only water minimizing, but also fodder or straw-generating, or they may choose products which give a package of by-products. For example, coconut trees give leaves and trunks for housing, coir for ropes, oil for cooking and body use, kernel for food and coconut water for drink. Banana trees gives fruit for eating, leaves for packaging, a trunk which is edible.

The culture of a society may demand not polluting sources of water, not polluting soil, not destroying trees. So consumption and through it, production choices may be geared to these cultural preferences. Thus consumption restraint, consumer preference leading to choice of production - both product and process or technology use in production - is another side of the issue of waste.

Today, one of the recognitions in the advanced countries is that "over consumption" is a major pollutant. There is a move to tone down lifestyles so that resources are saved and "waste" not generated in such large volumes. Green movements have quite naturally converged with the peace move-

ment as well as lifestyle change movements. The giant mouth and belly of consumerism - especially when it expresses itself in a plethora of accoutrements associated with comfort - gobbles up forests of trees, oceans of water-based species, and of course mountains of earth and wells of energy.

The techniques by which these resources are used often alienate them from nature. Too much is harvested and what is consumed adds to pollution, thus perpetuating a double crime.

There is a voice in affluent societies to simplify lifestyles - to eat less, to have less clothes, to consume less energy, less paper, a million things. But this is still a *nibble* - not even a bite. In the affluent North, the whole culture is based on consumption. The economy has spawned the culture even though its earlier Anglo-Saxon, and Judeo-Christian roots cultures extolled austerity and simplicity. St. Francis of Assisi is often recalled in environmental conferences.

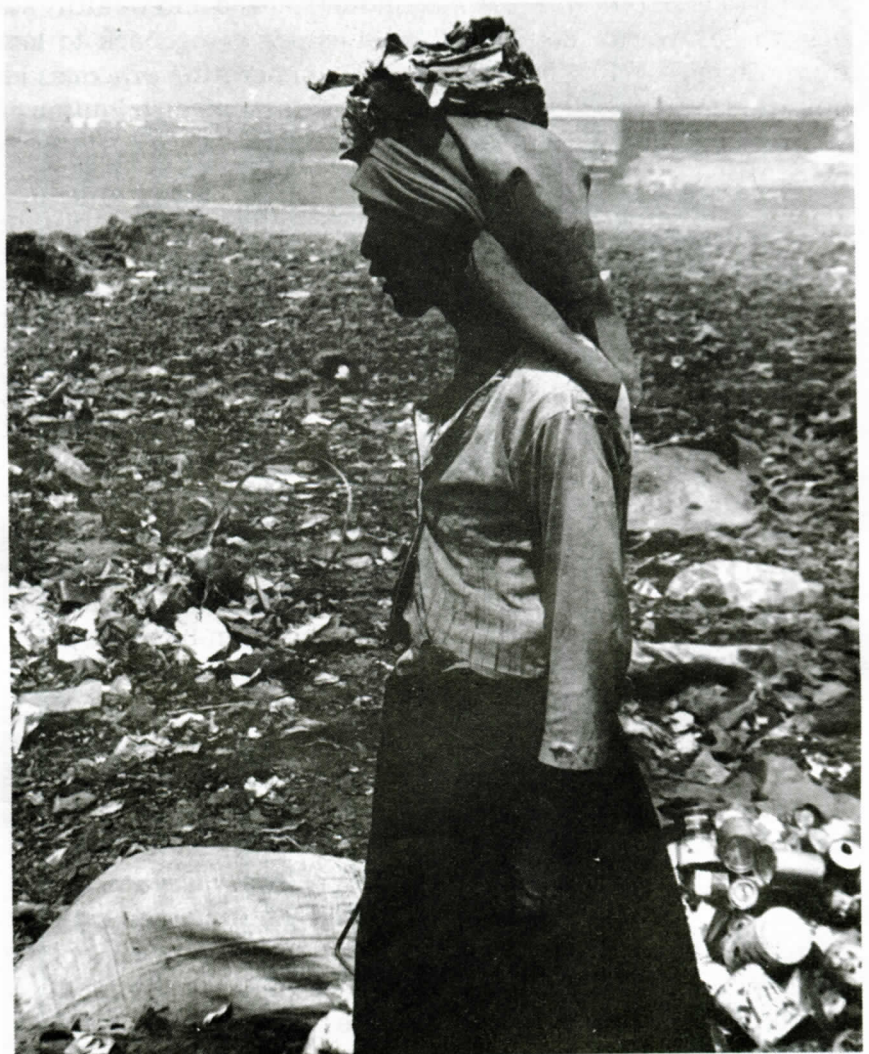


Photo: CWR



# Women are the predominant repositories of oral traditions...

In the old societies austerity, i.e. maintaining a strict discipline on consumption, was a common practice. Part of this restraint was imposed by the pressures of living in a less resource developed situation. Part of it was the social ethic of sharing of community resources. Thus it is not unusual to find very severe lifestyles in old societies.

Today, however, in the South, poverty imposes simplicity - or low consumption on the one hand and "exhaustion," over exploitation on the other. Low consumption is a hardship for the people - the "human resource" if you like. *The over utilization is of the rich material resources to deal with the poverty.* Caught between the two blades of the scissors of history, these countries are catapulting into disaster.

But attempts to inculcate low consumption lifestyles in the "poor" countries meet with many obstacles. Questions arise, such as are you asking the poor to tighten their belts on an empty stomach? Asking the less poor to become poor? Are you for miserabilization? Gandhi may be recalled, as St. Francis in the North, but the drums beat the other way.

Old-fashioned socialism, as was propounded in the former Soviet Union and China, "imposed" a certain type of austerity by reducing consumer choice by mass production and standardization of wage goods for all. But apart from many other reasons, the "new" wave towards a "market economy" knocks out that old orthodox pressure on consumption restraint.

Hence the prospect of voluntary lifestyle simplification whether in the South or the North seems dim. Yet this thick growth of resistance to "give up" a particular lifestyle has to be eroded, pruned, whittled away.

## TIDY - UNTIDY

A second type of categorization which seems relevant is of "visibly tidy" and "visibly untidy" societies, or organized or unorganized socio-economic patterns of behavior.

Some societies have activities well compartmentalized and separated. Production is a Box, which is quite distant from the Box of Consumption. Cooking is separate from eating. Waste is another Box not related either to production or consump-

tion, to cooking or eating. Garbage is another Box, and is thrown away to be bundled and incinerated, or buried. The garbage creator and the garbage disposer are not "connected." The abattoir (slaughterhouse) or the farm is invisible to the meat or grain eater: the origin is effaced. So the consumer has no responsibility for the origin or the process through which she/he consumes or disposes.

Tidy societies are usually the advanced societies and untidy, the developing. In untidy societies garbage is left on streets for people and animals and birds to recycle until it vanishes. Excreta is allowed to rot into the earth, simultaneously, polluting and enriching it. Every grain of material is visible from its inception to its disposal, to confront the community with its lifestyle.

This brings us to the basis of responsibility. Usually physical proximity is a troubling reminder, which generates a need for responsibility. When the producer is confronted and faced by the consumer, the waster by wastage, the resource user by resource, she/he feels a sense of accountability, which in turn can be used to





Photo: ILO

develop an active ethic of responsibility. In tidy societies this advantage is effaced.

But the politics of culture is such that the culture of the South is isolated into either the performing arts, or the ancient traditions including language and revered/worshipped for its antiquity and strangeness. The scientific and technological culture of the South is in museum archives and tourist spots, while the current idiom, or reference point for progress lies in North-based scientific and technological language, source and power. This flow of "Scientific

and Technological" knowledge comes with the cultures in which it is bred - which means compartmentalized "tidy", high energy consuming, wasting societies, distanced from responsibility for actions.

The counter culture is weak. The desert people of Rajasthan, China and Tunisia used similar water storage methods - we see and extol their intelligence. But when we are designing a water harvesting system for the desert today in Rajasthan we turn to the scientific North, to steel and cement and modern sources of energy. We drill and pump and it that is not

possible, we bend rivers away from their other roles of providing water, fish, livelihoods - and even if that does not work or is not possible, we let the populace migrate out of the deserts.

Everywhere people used to store rain water in homes sometimes in the basement, through a gutter running from the roof to a catchment under the house, sometimes in other holes drained from roofs. While these methods are extolled, when a new housing colony is built, say in the city of Delhi or in Madras which suffers from water shortage but has intense



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seasons of rain, this simple technique of storing water is not "drawn into" the architect's design.

Grain storage, food processing, pest control - in so many areas tradition has found effective ways of efficient scientific management using local materials which are non-toxic and degradable. These have yet to be brought into modern currency.

But there is need to generate this filtered revival or sustenance of belief and practice systems where they still linger, as they are not only earth-sustaining but they also build confidence in politically devastated societies. They reveal to these societies their own cultural heritage with special reference to their scientific and technological heritage. Thus one important endeavor that needs to be undertaken in a systematic manner is the collection, collation, assessment, re-writing, of scientific and technological knowledge that is embedded in old societies. This knowledge needs to re-enter text books, training manuals.

At the end of this quest, lies a rich reservoir of practices which are planet-enriching in the fields of health, agriculture and

industry, of institutions and human relations, and of human psychology.

The discourse in this area should move from incantations, invocations romanticizing even glamorizing ancient hymns and rituals: it should move from the anthropologists paradise to a hard headed *utility* oriented educational renaissance of indigenous *scientific* and technological practices.

The women's movement has a significant role to play in making this knowledge available to the new societies. They would then in one stroke be empowering the large mass of women, and at the same time quenching the environment dried by "new" knowledge. Women are the predominant repositories of oral traditions as much because of their deep interest in efficient management of resources as because they are left out of *modern* educational processes. They are the catchment then for this stream of knowledge.

It is my view that in the global level discussion on environment, categorizing the globe in terms of waste, and its obverse, consumer-styles would give a more tangible *lever* to nudge societies into action. It is in

waste and consumption that alliance for just action can be developed.

These are also familiar areas for women, whatever the class or region. There is need to re-write the agenda of the North-South negotiations on environment. To shift it from talking of regulations and conditionalities, of energy and funds, from what "others" have to do, to what *we*, "self" have to do.

The women's movement can initiate this approach and even enact it. When we can use the Boycott against Apartheid, we can use the boycott against earth destruction. But as in the case of the earlier Boycott against South Africa it is of no value unless it is *massive, wide-spread* and *total*.

In evolving an Agenda for Environmental protection, the women's agenda can be more powerful than all the controls and conditionalities. But only if it becomes the global women's agenda.

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