

INDIGENOUS WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

By Victoria Tauli-Corpuz



Photo: F. Mattioli



The historical and present roles of indigenous women in developing sustainable agriculture and protecting the environment have been ignored or made invisible. Most historians and development planners are gender-blind. In the frantic search for sustainable development models and effective programs to save what is left of the environment indigenous women have a lot to say.

In spite of or maybe because they were left out in main-

stream development programs, many of them held on to their sustainable development practices.

A serious look into history shows us how indigenous women all over the world struggled against logging concessionaires, mining companies and governments to save their ancestral lands. Their roles as food producers, water-fetchers, fuel providers, child bearers and rearers impelled them to defend their land which has been their partner in doing all these. They are the

ones who are in the best position to understand the value of nature and land. Since they have been working in close partnership with nature through thousands of years to sustain life, they have developed ecological consciousness which should be sustained and propagated.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND NATURE IN ACTIVE PARTNERSHIP

Indigenous people regard their territories as their ancestral homelands, a concept which has historical, cultural and ecological implications. The defense of the ancestral homeland from forces of destruction is not just defending a territory but defending a whole lifestyle which is in close communion with nature.

In indigenous communities, it is the woman who is the primary food producer and her

awareness of nature is that of a living force which is her partner in the production of sustenance. Her productivity is directly proportional to the continuing capacity of nature to renew its forests, soils, and rivers. It is impossible for her to see food production as distinct from the forests, water and animal systems.

Indigenous women and men have maintained a deep reverence for nature. They worship the sun, mother earth, the trees, the forests, and the rivers. Their religious and cultural rituals are held to ask blessings from the spirits of their ancestors and goddesses and gods to protect these. These rituals are done to ask for a good harvest and to call the rains. Many of these practices still linger even if the Christian colonizers branded such as pagan and barbaric.

Indigenous women and men also have knowledge of tree

species which are water-conserving and those which are highly water-consuming. Water-conserving trees are regarded as sacred and should not be cut. Their knowledge of agriculture and forestry is very basic. The land and forest should not be abused. These should be allowed to rest for them to be able to regenerate.

COLONIZATION, MARKET ECONOMY: IMPACT ON INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

With the industrial revolution, capitalist development and subsequent colonization, the prominent role of indigenous women as resource managers and protectors of the environment changed. Subsistence economies which relied on nature, on women for the satisfaction of basic needs had to be transformed into a market economy. Colonization was necessary to ensure the continuous supply of raw materials and develop markets to absorb the surplus products of rich nations.

The framework of industrialization and capitalist accumulation has rendered the wealth created by nature and women invisible. Economic growth and productivity is measured with generation of cash, profit and surplus. Therefore, nature and indigenous peasant women who are engaged in subsistence food production and do not generate cash or surplus



Source: Chaneg Vol. III No. 1 Jan-April 1992

are not considered productive. They are simply resource base, raw materials, labor power and inputs.

Development from the perspective of the western development experts and multinational corporations ensured the perpetuation of the economic and political domination of the developed nations over the Third World; the domination of man over nature and over women. The green revolution of "scientific agriculture" hastened the erosion of subsistence economies to be subsumed into the market or cash economy. Cash crop production took precedence over production for sustenance.

The symbiotic relationship of nature and women for the production of sustenance was disrupted. The management of food systems, forests and rivers were shifted from women to food and agri-business multinational corporations, and international lending institutions. The integrated functions of agriculture, forestry, animal raising, and water management were dichotomized and fragmented.

Forestry was treated independently of agriculture and the multiple functions and outputs of the forests were reduced into one - lumber for cash and profit. Oppressive forestry laws were enacted by colonial governments to facilitate the logging of the forests. Forests which are communally cared for by tribes and clans were declared government or public



Photo: World Council of Churches

lands and reservations. The military apparatus was used if the indigenous people defended their forests. The imposition of the western brand of commercial forestry in the Third World and in indigenous peoples ancestral homelands led to the massive destruction of forests which resulted to permanent destruction of the environment.

Forestry which propagated single species, single commodity production plantations destroyed the biological diversity and integrity of living resources in the forests. This biological diversity is crucial for soil and water conservation. It also meant deprivation of the traditional land use rights of indig-

enous women over the forests. While logging corporations and governments benefitted from this arrangement, the women became marginalized. The men in the villages became lumberjacks who were paid measly sums which went into buying alcohol and tobacco.

The green revolution has undermined the roles played by nature and indigenous women in sustainable agriculture. While before, the women were the ones who selected, stored and sowed varied indigenous rice varieties, this role was systematically removed from them. The control of seeds and crops, access to land use, forests and waters have shifted

from women, to multinational corporations, governments and international lending agencies. Renewable inputs from farms, forests and rivers are replaced by non-renewable inputs from multinational corporations producing fertilizers, pesticides, seeds and chemical animal feeds.

Irrigation water which originally came from natural rivers, streams and springs, had to come from man-made diversion dams. The indigenous irrigation systems which maintained sophisticated rice terraces and which were communally cared for was taken over by national irrigation agencies set up by the government, under pressure from the IBRD (International Bank for Rural Development) and the IMF-WB (International Monetary Fund-

World Bank). Flooding, drought, topsoil erosion and desertification has resulted from implementing development programs which violate the cycles of life in rivers, soils, mountains and forests. Cash cropping, logging, mining, and damming rivers have resulted in rivers and groundwaters drying up, and also in water and air pollution. Water-logging and salinization developed because of the diversion of water from its natural routes.

Commercial mining which is highly destructive to the land and the environment was imposed also through legislation and outright landgrabbing. Mining laws rode roughshod over ancestral land laws. Sustainable small-scale mining activities of women and men were prohibited through laws

and harassment by government and mining officials. The men were herded to mining camps leaving the women and the children to continue subsistence food production. Later the women were brought to mining camps to become housewives.

MILITARIZATION AS A PARTNER OF "DEVELOPMENT"

Militarization came along with all these attempts to wrest control over the land from the indigenous women and men. All throughout history, indigenous peoples were subjected to the worst forms of militarization for them to surrender their lands to colonizers and business corporations. The symbiotic existences of indigenous



Source : And She Said No! - Norman Buena

women with the land was destroyed all in the name of development.

The worst forms of destruction to the ancestral domain and environment were done by multinational corporations and government agencies. Open pit mining, indiscriminate logging, short-lived big-dam projects, and other destructive infrastructure were pushed through with the help of oppressive laws and militarization.

Several indigenous people's communities in the Cordillera have been subjected to severe aerial bombings and strafing. Marag Valley in Apayao where the last remaining tropical rain forests within the Cordillera are located is one of these places. It was learned that logging concessionaires supported these military operations because they would like to pursue their logging operations which were stopped by Aggays and Isnegs (indigenous people living in this area).

RESPONSE OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Indigenous women in the Third World did not take all these lying down. While their roles in written history remained invisible, the women were in the forefront in many of the struggles launched against efforts of government or multinational corporations to dislocate them from their beloved ancestral homelands. The struggle against the World



Photo: Carlos Sanchez

Bank-sponsored Chico River Dam Project in the Cordillera region in the Philippines is just one of the many fine examples. The Chipko movement in India is another.

In the Chico Dam struggle, the indigenous women in the Cordillera organized themselves and trekked to the site where the surveyors set camp. They dismantled the tents of the men and carried these to the town capital. Together with men, they were detained several times in the military barracks because of their stiff opposition to the government project.

However, they did not allow themselves to be cowed and continued resisting until the World Bank and the Philippine government were forced to cancel the whole project. This experience was cited by Walden Bello in his book "Development Debacle" as one of the worst setbacks suffered by

one of the most sophisticated international financial institutions. This defeat was offered by pre-industrial tribal people.

The resistance offered by the Mainit women in the Cordillera against the biggest mining corporation in the Philippines, Benguet Corporation, is another. When they were offered cash by the company, the women and men discussed among themselves how to react to the offer. The women said that if they get the cash they may be able to buy what they immediately need. However, this will mean that their ricefields will be gone forever. Where will they get the next supply of rice when the cash runs out? They decided to stick it out with their fields and forests and fought the mining corporation. This also happened in the mid-70s. Up to now the mining corporation is still trying to convince them to have their land mined.

CHALLENGE TO FEMINISTS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS AND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVISTS

The conventional analysis of women and environment has always stressed women as victims of the degradation of the environment. Women have to walk further for fuel and water because of deforestation. The deterioration of their health multiplied several times over because of the increased burdens of having to carry heavy loads over long distances, and because of the increasing scarcity of food.

While it is important to put stress on this, it is more dynamic to show the central role that women will play in the environmental movement. The indigenous women who have been involved in struggles

against the destruction of their ancestral lands are speaking not only as victims but also as liberators. Their comprehensive knowledge and experience in the production and defense of life in the face of anti-nature and anti-women programs of government and other vested interests are very valuable.

The ongoing struggles which they are still waging up to the present need the support of those who are concerned for the environment and those who are against the increasing marginalization and oppression of indigenous women. By linking and identifying with their struggles, social activists in the First World and in the Third World will have the strength to resist the moves of vested interests to co-opt their movements. Presently, multinational corporations and the IMF-WB are trying very hard

to present themselves as equally concerned with the environment. While this attempt to posture themselves as such is an effect of the growing strength of environmental movement, we should never be deluded.

The dangers of being co-opted can be avoided if we do not fall into the trap of handling the issues of environment, development or women in a dichotomized or fragmented manner. The focus of movements working for radical change should be in finding common grounds among their seemingly disparate struggles and seeking strength from the most marginalized and oppressed sectors of people in the world: the indigenous women in the Third World.

The formulation of an alternative framework for development, in the face of the failures of the mainstream development model, should seriously look into what the indigenous women can offer. Those who have fought and struggled to maintain their ancestral domain and their environment at the expense of their lives are the environmental and development experts. Their roles in history should be made visible and their efforts to strengthen subsistence economies should be supported.



Photo: ILO

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