

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH NATURAL AND SOCIAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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For people who live in fragile eco-regions such as forests, hills, arid and semi-arid plains, agriculture and animal husbandry are the main sources of income. Besides, they depend heavily on natural resources for their survival. For example, they collect fire wood for cooking, fodder for cattle feed, roots, tubers and wild fruits for human consumption. In addition to this collection and selling of bamboo, gum, mahau flowers, tamarind, honey, beedy leaves, palm leaves, sal leaves, black jamoons, spices, broom sticks and herbs forms an important source of income to these people. In all these, women play a central role. Gathering, processing and storing, utilization and management and marketing the forest products is mainly the job of a woman. *They contribute 70 percent of the work and the rest only by men. Even if there is no male member in the family the woman does everything but rarely we find a man doing the work of a woman.*

Women and Natural Resources

The linkage between women, natural resources and the domestic economies of poor rural households in India are fairly clear and they can be categorized into three patterns.

First, natural resources are central to the livelihoods in India. Many studies have documented that poor households are dependent on free bio-mass goods and common property resources than better off households.

Second, women are the primary gatherers and managers of biomass goods in poor rural households. As mentioned above, women perform key roles not only in the gathering but also in the processing, storing, utilization and marketing of free biomass goods.

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And **third**, women's roles and responsibilities are pivotal not only to the management of natural resources but also to the management of domestic economy. Studies have shown that women work longer hours, pool more of their income to the household budgets, manage the day today consumption and cash flow needs. Thus, natural resources provide both subsistence needs and cash incomes, particularly to poor rural households.

Effects of Degradation of Natural Resources on Women

- Decrease in quantity and quality of land, water resources and biomass resulting in decline of farm and animal husbandry activities.
- Change in access to natural resources due to increased competition.
- Migration of men to urban areas in search of alternate sources of income.
- Increased family responsibility on women.
- More time spent in collection of forest products, often leads to less time for other activities, such as agriculture, which results in lower levels of income or subsistence.
- Decline in the availability of the forest products, cutting down the women's primary source of income which used to come from the sale of products from cottage industries such as beedies, honey, bamboo-baskets, leaf plates, gum and brooms etc.
- Food insecurity – Basic needs of the family are not met.
- Stretched walking and working hours to fetch fuel wood, fodder and water causing drudgery and poor nutrition to women.
- Deprivation of basic social services such as education, particularly to girls, nutrition, sanitation, health which finally leads to severe poverty.

In fragile-eco regions the gradual degradation of natural resources will deplete the social resources of people such as nutrition, health (particularly of women and children), education, housing etc. With the migration of men to urban areas and increase in the responsibility and work load of women,

the girl child of the family becomes victim of degradation. She has to discontinue her education in order to take care of her younger siblings and becomes their foster mother at a very young age of eleven or twelve, sometimes even at much lesser age. These girl children also attend to all domestic chores and feeds the animals while the mother is miles away in the jungles to collect fuel wood and forest produces or in the field attending to some farm activities. In many rural and tribal communities particularly among the resource poor some common social features / phenomena are observed such as 1) drop-out of girl from formal schools, 2) early child marriage, 3) early and frequent child births, 4) malnutrition and poor health, 5) maternal mortality, 6) infant morbidity and mortality, 7) large family size, 8) poor sanitation, 9) debts and 10) poverty. This social phenomenon is a clear picture of vulnerability of women to poverty.

The root cause of these problems is poverty caused due to the degradation of soil, water resources and the scarcity of biomass resources to meet daily needs. In addition to this ignorance of people also plays an important role in deteriorating the social conditions of the people leading to poor quality of life. The parents in resource poor families would like to shrug away with the responsibility of daughters by getting them married at a very young age with minimum expenses. But they are ignorant of the fact that early child marriage would not only spoil the future of their daughter but also becomes a fragile basis for future generations. What can be done to change this situation? Are there any measures to improve the quality of these social conditions and resources? Is there any way to save the future generation of girl children, women and the resource poor families from the vicious cycle of poverty caused due to the depletion and degeneration of the natural resources which in turn caused the depletion of social resources and poor quality of life.

Social regeneration is possible with regeneration of natural resources along with few other essential inputs from the service sectors/governments. But one can not think of successful social regeneration or social resource management in the absence of natural resource management. At this juncture it is worth remembering the historical “CHIPKO” movement in

Uttarakhand of Himalayas during early 70's to save the forest. This was a great movement lead by a few dynamic women leaders namely **Gauri Devi, Gunga Devi, Hema Devi and Sarala Behan** who could mobilize hundreds of women in the villages around '**Reni Gaon**' which was the centre for "**Save the Forest Movement**". These women with the slogan of "**CHIPKO**" movement and collective action could make the Government change the policy regarding forests.

Efforts for conservation of natural resources

Last two decades various efforts are being made by both state and central governments, international donors and NGOs to conserve the natural resources by implementing various projects. To mention some of them, Drought Prone Area Development Programme (DPAP) focussed on *non-arable lands, drainage lines for in-situ moisture conservation, agro-forestry, and pasture development and horticulture development*. Integrated Wasteland Development Projects (IWDPs) concentrated on *silvi pasture and soil and moisture conservation activities*. Desert Development Programme (DDP) focussed on *reforestation* and the National Watershed Development Programme for Rainfed Areas (NWDPA) combines the features of all these three programmes with additional dimension of improving *arable lands* through better *crop management technologies*. The Watershed Programme under the Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment aims to promote the economic development through *optimum utilization of natural resources* and to encourage *restoration of ecological balance* in the village through sustained *community action* and further *development of natural resources* in the watershed. It lays special emphasis on improving the *economic and social conditions of the resource poor* and the disadvantaged sections of the community namely *assetless and women*.

Efforts for provision of social sector services to women

During the International Women's Year (1975) and the decade of women (1975-1985) and later many schemes have been initiated for the upliftment of women. The following are some of the important initiatives taken for

providing access to basic social sector services and the development of women and children in the country.

Equal Remuneration Act (1976), Dowry Prohibition Act (1984), National Plan of Legal Literacy, National Policy of Education (1986), Non-Formal Education (NFE), Early Childhood Education Scheme (1986), National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000), Integrated Child Development Scheme, Maternal and Child Health, Universal Immunization Programme, Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme and Minimum Needs Programme, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, Denmark and Dutch assisted Programmes and Central Sector Schemes on Women in Agriculture, National Commission for Women (1991), National Centre for Women in Agriculture, Indira Mahila Yojana and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh.

In addition to these, various seminars and workshops, both at national and international level were conducted to discuss the issues of women. Several low cost technologies have been developed for use and management of water resources, sanitation, housing and drudgery relief. Besides, the NGOs efforts for mobilizing women, organizing them into groups for the purposes of education, savings and thrift, income generation activities, environmental protection, legal literacy and health are being encouraged.

During the World Conference on Women conducted at Beijing in 1995, the specific commitments made by our country were –

- Formulation of a National Policy on Women
- Universalization of mother and child care programmes through ICDS and
- Setting up of Commissioner for women's rights.

In order to translate these commitments into action, a National Policy for Empowerment of Women has been finalized. The primary objective of Ninth Five Year Plan is Empowerment of Women and is committed to creation of an enabling environment where women can freely exercise their rights both within and outside home as equal partners along with men.

Gender issues in management and sharing of common resources

Environmental degradation is not the only process that deprives women of natural resources. Ironically, afforestation can also have some of the same negative effects on women as deforestation has. In afforestation, often, the species are chosen primarily for men's enterprises and choice of species required by women either for subsistence needs or market oriented activities is always ignored. In addition to this, conversion of common lands into woodlots, monoculture plantations on private or common lands will restrict access and decrease the variety of available biomass goods to women.

A recent study conducted in Maharashtra revealed that the imposition of access restrictions on common and forestland has led to successful regeneration of the resources in watershed development. Women, however, rarely benefited from this regeneration, mainly because they are unable to access these resources, cut and carry fuel and fodder. As a result, many women have been forced to reduce or sell their livestock or resort to stealing of resources from restricted areas or others fields. Watershed projects are, therefore, taking away livelihood options from women and increasing the drudgery involved in accessing fuel, fodder and water. Hence, it is important that the planners develop a mechanism to enable a wider sharing of benefits.

Regeneration of Natural Resources

For regeneration of natural resources in order to enhance the bio-mass base, a variety of approaches can be adopted such as protection and plantation schemes to establish trees, grasses or bush cover on degraded grazing and forest lands, stabilization of bunds, watersheds, agro-forestry or tree crop production on fields and field boundaries and improved management of common property resources.

Following are some of the action points that can help in regenerating and managing the natural resources for enhancing economic and social status of women

1. Conservation measures should be taken up using the holistic approach of watershed to conserve soil and moisture and regenerate biomass.

2. While planning project strategies for regeneration, ensure continued access to common resources women need for their livelihood. The project can set up systems such as social fencing – Ban on free grazing, cutting trees and encouraging rational grazing and stall feeding with rights on user-fruits for the people dependent on these for their survival, particularly women
3. Strict measures should be taken to prevent encroachment and denudation of forests.
4. Plantation of new trees should be done in the forests for regeneration.
5. Plantation in government wasteland, private land, field boundaries etc. will develop green fund to the community. Preference of the local people, particularly the specific needs of women in terms of fuel, fodder, fruits etc., to be kept in mind while choosing the species for plantation. This needs a through understanding of the livelihood strategies of the resource poor women.
6. As the future lies in the hands of children they should be introduced to the why, the how and what of environmental regeneration and conservation. Encouraging plantation in school compounds, homesteads and roadsides by children could be a small step to make a beginning in this regard.
7. Knowledge and understanding is the key to motivated action and efficiency. Training modules need to be specially designed for women to impart technical knowledge and skills. This will enable women to gain more information and knowledge to manage natural resources and improve their managerial skills, increase efficiency, reduce drudgery and save themselves from exploitation.
8. Making women as members in Joint Forest Management Committee, Watershed Committee and involving them in decision making related to planning, implementation, control and management of resources in the village would ensure sustainable livelihood for women and more equitable distribution of benefits between men and women.

9. *Tree Patta Scheme:* Userfruct rights on trees grown on revenue lands, forest lands, degraded Government lands and on trees planted on the sides of roads, canals and railways to individual households or group of households particularly belonging to SC, STs and women should be given.

Regeneration of Social Resources

For empowerment of women education, health, economic independency, decision-making ability and self-confidence are some of the essential social ingredients. Following are some of the action points for empowering women through regeneration of social ingredients or social resources.

1. In a resource poor farm family the health and nutrition of women and female children are the last priority. Hence, efforts along the lines of “Action-Oriented Learning” sessions concerning health, hygiene, sanitation, family planning and nutrition are important. Establishment of soak pits will help drain water as well as improve the hygiene of surroundings. Developing kitchen gardens around these pits may give the women a nutritious supplement to the household diet. A group of female community health volunteers/workers at each block could be developed with proper training to reach the women in their domestic setting and serve their health needs.
2. All the adolescent girls and women in reproductive age should be educated thoroughly about the adverse effects of early marriage, early pregnancy and frequent deliveries on the health of both mother and child. They should be given all the required information about safe motherhood to empower them to decide freely about their education, age of marriage, timing of their children, number, spacing and means to do so. Preventing early marriage and providing education or vocational training during adolescence can redirect the course of a girl’s life. Education to all the eligible couple and elders in the family is also necessary in this regard for changing their attitudes.

Studies have proved that mother’s primary education brings infant mortality down. The fertility of illiterate women in different age groups

is between 30 per cent and 50 per cent higher than that of literate women.

3. To encourage the young girl's education, a special support service is required. That is a day care facility at or near the school compound, so that girls can be relieved from childcare during school hours. In this regard, efforts can also be made to link the local pre-school child centres of ICDS with schools by sharing a compound and coordinating the timings.
4. Women spend considerable amount of time and energy to gather fuel. Besides, they have to work in smoke-filled kitchen for a long time that causes many respiratory diseases for them and small children who are usually with the mother while cooking. (*According to 1991 census, in rural India 71.69 percent use wood, 19.6 percent use cowdung cakes and 1.95 percent use coal as fuel for cooking*). In order to overcome this situation, efforts should be made to promote smokeless chullahs, solar cooker, biogas plants and community gas plants and also train some local youth in maintaining them for sustainability.
5. Provide wage employment for women and their families in conservation measures and ensure equal wage rates to men and women for equal work.
6. Empowerment of women can be ascertained by credit group formation and so far, in the last one decade the experiences with these groups have been very successful in terms of women's economic empowerment. Therefore, support women groups and encourage new ones that will help women gain access to decision-making, credit and common property resource. Consult with these women groups before introducing any new interventions for regeneration of both social and natural resources.
7. Many of the agricultural operations carried out by the farmwomen involve a lot of physical strain and health hazards like fatigue, injury and exhaustion. While performing plant protection operations such as spraying, dusting and seed treatment the farm women get exposed to

harmful chemicals, which might lead to various ill effects on health. Keeping in view the ergonomics of farm women the agricultural tools and implements have to be designed and developed. Efforts also should be made to create awareness among the women on the alternate methods, particularly organic farming and biological methods of pest and disease control to reduce health hazards.

8. Efforts should be made to transfer land or lease to the name of women's groups for growing food grains, fuel, fodder, fruit trees etc., depending on their needs in order to help women overcome the scarcity of these products, to some extent.

Benefits

Ecological Benefits

Conservation of Natural Resources will control soil and water erosion, improve the soil fertility, increases ground water levels and the availability of biomass, controls flood etc., as a result of all these the overall ecological balance improves.

Economic Benefits

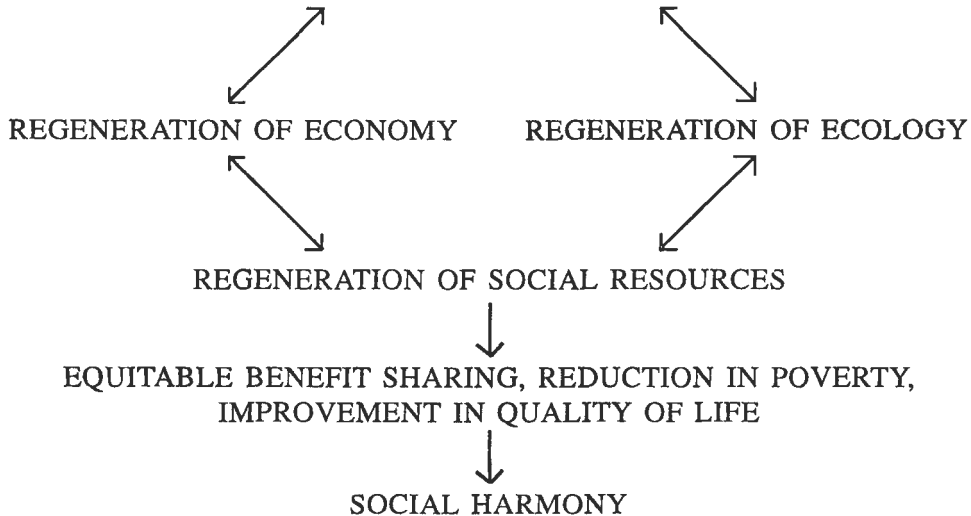
As a result of regeneration there will be an increase in forest cover and general improvement in the availability of water, fuel wood, fodder and all the locally available forest products. In addition to this increase in employment opportunities through conservation works will minimize the economic and physical strain of the poor women.

Social Benefits

Regeneration of natural resources will reduce the migration of men. This will relieve women from workload and mental pressure to some extent. As a result of increase in biomass the economic status of the family will improve which in turn may reduce the pressure for girl child's labour to the family and help her to continue her education. Girl child's education may reduce the chances of early marriages, reproduction and incidences of maternal

mortality and poor health. Besides these benefits, women when organized into groups, will enhance their ability to fight for their rights on common properties and clearly articulate their demands.

BENEFITS OF REGENERATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES



Conclusion

Productivity and efficiency, distribution and equity, conservation, and environmental quality are the main goals of natural resource management. Productive activities of household are crucially affected by decrease in natural resources availability. The poorest of the poor of the society suffer first from loss of access to natural resources like women with their primary responsibilities for household maintenance and food security. To overcome this crisis and restore the balance between women's needs and natural resources available to them education to develop awareness, knowledge and skill in natural resource management is essential. Also it is important to recognize the fact that sustainable development would be illusory without empowering interventions such as education, health care, increase in user friendly and labour saving technology, employment opportunities, social security and enhancement of women's status.

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