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AFFORDABLE WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION



Women in environmental protection

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QUALITY OF LIFE has become an important concern of all people. Environmental quality is considered as an important parameter in assessing the quality of life. Women share the environment as much as the men share. There are many areas where women are directly connected with the environmental quality. Women in India, spend a major part of their time in indoor conditions. Cooking in the kitchen, washing clothes, cleaning the house and its surroundings are the important duties which the women perform. Women are exposed to environmental pollution while performing these duties. This is the environment to which women are exposed in particular, however, the general environmental quality affects them equally.

Women are victims of environmental pollution. Women, forming 50 per cent of the population can be a very important human resource to combat environmental pollution.

Role of women in increasing the awareness of the requirement of environmental protection is important. Individual and mass movements of women organisations in India have paid rich dividends. Legal battles fought by women in India to protect the environment are worth noting.

The present paper covers the role of women in environmental protection. Legal battles fought by women and achievements made by women organisations in India are also incorporated in the paper.

Rural women

The denudation of forests, pollution and environmental destruction have adversely affected women in rural areas. The life of a rural woman begins with a long march in search of water, fuel and fodder. Irrespective of her age or physical ability the curcial needs of household have to be met every day. This is becoming more and more arduous with the depletion of natural resources. Thus women are caught in the intricate web of poverty and environmental degradation (Gupta, 1993).

Women in rural areas do not have proper place for answering nature calls. In the absence of private and public latrines, women avoid to attend to nature calls during day time due to shyness and suffer from stomach upset. Further, women hide in bushes or plants during dark early mornings or late evenings to attend to nature calls. Women are vulnerable to snakes and poisonous insects. Rainy season is most dreaded in this regard.

Provision of public latrines in rural areas can help to solve this problem and also protect the environment.

Women in urban area

Women living in urban areas find themselves in an unfriendly environment. They face problems associated with housing, noise and air pollution. Lack of accommodation makes them to adjust with small dwellings. In many cases there is no moving place in the cooking area. They spend 3 to 4 hours in the kitchen for cooking purpose. Inefficient fuel and improper ventilation make them disease prone. It is observed that the concentrations of respirable fraction of the suspended particulate matter were beyond the permissible level in indoor conditions (Mohan et al., 1992). Factors such as traffic density, ventilation, surrounding environment and type of fuel used for cooking seem to alter the indoor air quality. Use of smokeless ovens can help to some extent in such cases.

Another activity which makes women prone to diseases is the washing of clothes in closed rooms, Moisture laden closed conditions cause women to suffer from respiratory diseases.

Many women in urban areas cannot afford vacuum cleaners for cleaning the floors. The conventional broomstick cleaning requires the woman to bend and this makes the particulate matter enter the respiratory tract easily. Women feel very weak even at the age of 35 because of these problems.

Smoking indoors makes women passive smokers. Although the smokers themselves are exposed to mainstream smoke, non-smokers in space are also exposed to considerable increases in respirable particulates and carbon monoxide (WHO, 1979). It is reported that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has found that as many as 3000 non-smokers may die a year from lung cancer because they inhale the smoke of people they live or work with (The Hindu, 1993).

Pregnant women and old women, generally not moving outside are exposed to constant elevated noise in urban areas. While attempts are being made to control industrial noise, community noise is assuming alarming proportions. Steady exposure to loud noise results in dizziness, headache, fatigue, inefficiency in work, rise in blood pressure, hypertension and even heart rhythms. Women in urban areas suffer from these complications but fail to identify that excessive noise is the culprit. Further, continued noise stress on pregnant women re-

sults in abortions and other congenital defects in unborn children (Ali, 1992).

Crusade against pollution

The Rio declaration on general rights and obligations says that women have a vital role in environmental management and development. The declaration finds that full participation of women is essential to achieve sustainable development (Rio, 1992).

Women have the advantage of increasing the awareness about environmental protection. They can educate their children and the neighbours. It is interesting to note that Indian women have contributed their share in spreading environmental literacy and awareness. In 1977, when Chipko movement had acquired a large base among the rural population, especially among women, the most dramatic event took place when Bachni Devi of Adwani led a resistance against her own husband who had obtained a local contract to cut the trees (Mishra, 1993).

A mass movement led by a woman environmentalist Medha Patkar in connection with the Narmada Valley Development Project has created awareness among the public regarding the project's social and environmental impact on local population. She has been fighting for what she terms it as 'environmental socialism' (Enadu, 1992). Her crusade for environment is known as 'Save Narmada Agitation'.

Legal battles

Women in India have not satisfied with mass movements against environmental degradation. They also knocked at the doors of legal courts for justice to protect the environment.

In Krishna Gopal Vs. State of Madhya Pradesh (Krishna Gopal, 1986), Mrs. Sarla Tripathi filed a complaint with the District Magistrate of Indore against a glucose saline factory, alleging that the factory was emitting ash and smoke all the time and vibrations from the boiler disturbed the sleep at night and therefore, this 'public nuisance' be removed from the residential area. Before filing this case, she had lodged complaints to the concerned authorities, but no action was taken. The factory claimed that all concerned authorities had given no objection certificate to its establishment. Rejecting the argument of

the factory owner, the Madhya Pradesh High Court ordered the closure of the factory. Justice Gyani of the High Court appreciated the woman's relentless prosecution of the case.

Another example of woman's fight for environmental protection is available in the case of Kinkari Devi Vs. State of Himachal Pradesh (1988). This case was argued by a lady advocate Ms. Kamlesh Sharma. The petition was filed by Kinkari Devi against the excavation of lime stone in Sirmour District in Himachal Pradesh. Her contention was that the excavation had posed a danger to the adjoining lands, water resources, forests, wildlife, ecology and environment of the area. The court felt that if indiscriminate mining poses danger to the environment, the court will be left with no other alternative but to intervene effectively by issuing appropriate orders and directions including the direction to the closure of the mines.

These legal battles are only examples of the determination of Indian women fighting for the protection of environment.

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