



Food for thought: making women visible

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I. INTRODUCTION⁽¹⁾

THIS PAPER OUTLINES the major contribution made by women (particularly poor women) to sustaining life and how this contribution is misunderstood or ignored. It suggests that the lack of investment in women's knowledge, skills and technologies contributes to the erosion of the resource base and makes impossible the achievement of sustainable development. Thus, a consideration of sustainable development demands a gendered analysis.

Women globally are more often expected to provide the daily food for communities and families than to provide food for thought on sustenance itself. This reflects a situation that must be addressed in order to achieve the continued existence of our species and all others on this finite earth. The message is quite straightforward: we must all (and I do mean all of us) understand and use a gendered analysis in addressing human settlements and global environments. Why am I insistent on this point? Leaving aside for the moment the essential demographic and political fact that although women are a majority of the world's population we hold title to only 1 per cent of the world's property, it is essential to realize that women and men have differing relationships to the environment. I will argue that women (and particularly women involved in the subsistence sector) have a great deal to teach us about human settlements and the possibility of "sustainable development".

First, I must address the term "sustainable development". This expression is now commonly used in contexts that render its two parts contradictory, with the contradictions built into organizations, households and countries. There is a simple way to express this contradiction: men develop it, women clean and sustain it.

Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive* illustrates the contradiction in the phrase "sustainable development" and what can happen when academic work fails to acknowledge a gendered bias.⁽²⁾ She writes:

"In December 1987, two prizes were awarded in Stockholm: the Nobel Prize for economics was given to Robert Solow of Massachusetts Institute of Technology for his theory of growth based on the dispensability of nature. In Solow's words, 'The world can, in effect, get along without natural resources, so exhaustion is just an event, not a catastrophe.' At the same time, the Alternative Nobel Prize (the popular name for the Right Livelihood Award), instituted 'for vision and work contributing to making life more whole, healing our planet and uplifting humanity' honoured the women of the Chipko movement who, as leaders and activists, had put the life of the forests above their

1. This paper was adapted from a presentation made on behalf of the Women and Shelter Group of the Habitat International Coalition to the International Colloquium on Urbanization and the Environment, Human Settlement and Sustainable Development, University of Toronto, June 22, 1990.

2. Shiva, Vandana (1989), *Staying Alive*, Zed Books Ltd, London.

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own and, with their actions, had stated that nature is indispensable to survival."

Shiva brings to our attention an eminent economist making the life-threatening suggestion that our world can get along without natural resources about as easily, and with as little consequence, as we can get along without food. We do not need to look very far to find the tragedies due to lack of natural resources or to go very long ourselves without food or water to know the impending results. Solow's approach does not sustain life. The acknowledgment of the contradiction at the heart of the phrase "sustainable development" is the beginning of a gendered analysis.

Many researchers, Vandana Shiva among them, have reported on the Chipko movement in northern India. In the forested Himalayan foothills that are their home, the Chipko women have taken a political initiative against the reductionist economic approach which views forests as tree producing facilities whose purpose is to generate capital and jobs for the development of a market economy. These women know that the forests directly provide a renewable source of fuel, shelter, fodder, food and medicines for the local human inhabitants and for the diversity of other life in the area. These women know that the earth's resources are indispensable to our health and survival, and that women are indispensable to our understanding of our earth. And we only need to be conscious of our own experience as living beings to understand this basic principle.

Women's knowledge and the specificity of women's role in sustaining life has all too often been peripheral to discourse on what has come to be called "sustainable development". Yet women are not, and cannot be, separable from a sustainable life, despite the dominance of Solow's world view. Nor are women's ways of knowing separable.

The Chipko women teach us that diversity must be strengthened, not isolated and questioned. They teach us that, by themselves, test tube solutions to environmental concerns are not appropriate. The wholeness and complexity of our environment must be acknowledged. The essential arrogance of the western scientific approach, exemplified in Solow's words, will only lead to more ignorance of the past and tyranny in the future, in the name of development.

Women, particularly poor women, continue to play the primary role in taking care of the planet and its inhabitants. This has been demonstrated throughout history as women have provided the sustainable subsistence living for their communities. Indigenous women in many parts of the globe still have knowledge about forest management, the medicinal use of plants, and an understanding of crop management that has been passed down through the centuries. Indigenous women have not only sustained their communities but have also done so with little environmental degradation to our planet. Ironically, this has been accomplished through what has now become, in the development industry, a problem to overcome: women have accomplished sustainable human settlements through the subsistence economy. A number of accounts demonstrate how an ecological balance between human settlements and natural resources was achieved, only to become unbalanced through insensitive, and ultimately unsustainable, "development".

This hindsight is only useful if one continues to be intent on (to use a metaphor) driving in reverse. Without the enhanced perception of a gendered analysis to guide us into the future, a crash is inevitable. In spite of women's central role for thousands of years in contributing to sound, ecologically sustainable development, men have dominated

the public discussion, data collection, and political agenda, rendering women silent, invisible, and valueless within the dominant global political economy. Women have been *so* invisible that some people, in the core of their hearts, may secretly believe that I am making this up. The lack of awareness of women's role in subsistence economies and the lack of documentation with which to locate women in demographic and urbanization patterns has left the role of women in sustaining communities invisible. Therefore, women's struggles for survival and quality of life are little understood or supported within dominant development strategies. Two examples can illustrate this.

Urban poor women in industrially overdeveloped countries struggle to produce subsistence, shelter and other basic services for themselves and their families. Their efforts, if they are recognized at all, often become merely a subsidiary concern of municipal planning policy. For instance, a number of homeless women in Toronto, forced to use emergency shelters because of domestic violence, have been struggling for over five years to get one small, permanent, non-profit housing project built. Meanwhile, they have witnessed massive corporate and governmental resources being allocated to the "development" of a domed stadium. Giving priority to such development projects is a very common scenario.

There are numerous examples from the Third World which show how women's traditional role in constructing housing is ignored, while young men are trained to build with costly, non-indigenous materials. Housing thus becomes inaccessible to women because of building codes which promote costly imported materials and western-style building technologies. The lack of investment in women's knowledge, skills and "technologies" contributes to the erosion of the resource base and defeats the goal of achieving sustainable communities. Women thereby begin to lose access to basic resources for survival, as have the women in industrialized countries. These are not isolated situations. Instead, there is a global trend toward viewing women, like natural resources, as ultimately dispensable to development.

Despite women's continuing invisibility, there are some things we do know about women. We know, for instance, that 30 to 50 per cent of the world's households are led by women, and that the number of women-led, single parent families is increasing both in the over-industrialized and the under-industrialized worlds, as is poverty for women and their dependent children. We know that female migration has increased due to poverty caused by drought, floods, environmental degradation, lack of access to land, wars, and other preventable disasters.

We know that there are few reliable statistics on women's economic activities because they are often subsistence activities and therefore not included in government statistics such as Gross Domestic Product. We know that poor health and starvation follow when women's subsistence crop production, which feeds their families, is changed to cash crop production for export. Hence, as the GDP of a country increases with cash crop production, increased ill health and malnourishment among women and children often result. Even though this is common knowledge, our political and economic will has not been strong enough to change a practice which is supported by the World Bank and other institutions of "development".

We also know that the lack of recognition and support of the subsistence sector is a major cause of both environmental degradation and increasing poverty. We know that women, as the main

producers in the subsistence sector, are directly and immediately faced with the consequences of the increasing pollution of the air, land and water, global warming, and the destruction of the earth's ability to support us. As once arable land became unusable, women and the families they support face worsening health and nutrition, increasing birth defects, and hunger.

Women also know that, as our non-renewable use of natural resources for energy increases each year, we must begin to ask fundamental questions such as by whom and in whose interests are these resources being depleted and destroyed.

II. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

WHAT CAN WE do to ensure that we have some prospects for the future, and that our children's children will inherit a world that can sustain them? Development must be measured in real terms of satisfied human need, not in false terms of the scale of a market economy (eg. GDP) which ignores the actual value of natural resources, women and life itself. As Marilyn Waring, a feminist economist, clearly illustrates, health must be measured by clean air and water, not by the amount of money spent to clean up polluted waters or to build air pollution control.⁽³⁾ Housing must be measured by those having secure and safe homes, not by the cost of construction or the number of dwellings built. Simply counting new dwellings built does not guarantee people secure and affordable homes in such dwellings. Construction costs do not reflect jobs or income generation for women, children, the elderly, the disabled, the sick and others who contribute to the community and are required to pay for homes.

The subsistence economy needs to be recognized, protected, planned for, and enabled. This requires changing legislation, women's access to land, women's management of resources and technological improvement of traditional, local building materials and other domestic technologies. And most important, as Gita Sen and Caren Grown clearly state, "The perspective of poor and oppressed women provides a unique and powerful vantage point from which we can examine the effects of development programmes and strategies."⁽⁴⁾

As Vananda Shiva documents, reductionist thinking underlies the basis of the market economy, and contributes to killing the diversity of life, our planet, and women.⁽⁵⁾ Yet very often it is women, the poorest of the poor, who have the knowledge to sustain our planet and human life. Political will must support women, and prevent the destruction of generations of knowledge, the evolution of planetary life and, eventually, humanity itself. A political will that insists on a system using a market economy that does not work in the best interest of sustaining life, will surely lead us to further destruction as a planet and as a life form. The indigenous knowledge of local communities in managing their ecosystems needs to be recognized and respected before it is lost. Gender based, community centred planning, and a celebration of diversity must be the way of the future and must be central to all discourse on human settlements.

This approach should be reflected in statistics through the disaggregation of data based on gender. Individual - not household - income, hours of work, production, and consumption (market and subsistence) must be understood as a means to measure the human condition. This would make visible how women's position has been weakened by rural to urban migration; woman's role has been

3. Waring, Marilyn (1988), *If Women Counted*, Harper and Row, New York.

4. Sen, Gita and C. Grown (1987), *Development, Crisis, and Alternative Visions*, Monthly Review Press, New York.

5. See note 2.

Additional reading

World Commission of Environment and Development (1987), *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Lewenhak, Sheila (1988), *The Revaluation of Women's Work*, Croom Helm, London.

Redclift, Michael (1987), *Sustainable Development*, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London.

Mies, Maria (1986), *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Zed Books Ltd., London.

Stichter, Sharon (1982), *Migrant Labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response, 1985 - 1975*, Longman Group Ltd., Essex, UK.

changed from producer to consumer, while she has lost access to resources and political strength, thereby becoming "dispensable" to "development". Women's and their communities' means of survival are clearly threatened by "development" as their relation to the land, shelter and community is changed.

Means must be provided for women to meet and exchange information about their specific role in society and how it is hindered or assisted by "development" programmes. Women engaged in subsistence production must be asked how we can protect what remains of the earth's resources for the benefit of all.

We must break down the barriers between academics, activists and practitioners and implement processes that clearly represent social, cultural and economic diversity, including gender. This is absolutely essential for the survival of our species and the living planet.

In conclusion, I hope this paper provides adequate food for thought. Some may consider this offering of food for thought to be more in the nature of bad tasting medicine! I'm trying to resist the urge to simply say that it's good for you, so urge instead that if you find the notion of gendered analysis to be indigestible, you should perhaps continue to ruminate. And for those of you, sisters and brothers, who already have seen the absolute necessity of incorporating a gendered analysis in your activities, then I say simply, "Keep up the Struggle".