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Violence, Gender and Environmental Justice in India: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: The paper explores the real links between environmental and gender justice which has now become a key justice issue because of socially constructed roles and responsibilities that continue to affect women in households, communities and ecosystems throughout the world. In recent decades, countries that have expanded opportunities for women in education and work, have largely achieved greater prosperity and social progress. However, like many other developing countries of the world, India remains behind in achieving gender justice in many sectors. India is surrounded by many gender related issues including an imbalanced gender ratio, active and passive violence, sex selective abortion, maternal mortality, illiteracy etc. Nevertheless many gender oriented policies have already been implemented which are definitely an outcome of the women’s movement. Despite implementing all these policies, the environmental movement in India cannot be merged with women’s movement. The paper highlights some key areas where environmental justice becomes a gender issue because of the disproportionate environmental burden that women have to bear. The paper is predominately based on secondary data which is supported by some empirical case stories indentified in various primary data based articles, books and online publications. The paper concludes with some policy suggestions that may help solve the current environmental and gender crisis prevailing in India. The policy suggestions could be applicable to other countries that share a similar socio economic and political context.

Keywords: Gender Justice, Environmental justice, Gender equality, equity, Power relations

INTRODUCTION

Women are primarily responsible for doing all reproductive work that involves the care and maintenance of the households and its members including bearing and caring of children, preparing food, collecting water and fuel, shopping and housekeeping and family health care. In poor communities reproductive work for the most part is labor-intensive and time consuming. It is always the responsibility of women and girls [8].

In the rural areas of developing countries, women are the main managers of essential household resources like clean water, fuel for cooking and heating and fodder for livestock. Women grow vegetables, fruit and grain for home consumption and sometimes for sale in rural areas. In South-east Asia, women provide 90 % of the labor for rice cultivation. Women make up more than half (51%) of the world’s agricultural work force. As economic opportunities open up, women in developing countries are growing, processing and marketing non-food products made from natural resources, for consumption at home and increasingly overseas.

Women bear the responsibility for managing household resources, but they typically do not have managerial control. Given the variety of women’s daily

interactions with the environment, they are the most keenly affected by its degradation. Soil erosion, water shortage and crop failures reduce harvest yields; soil exhausted from overuse reduces the productivity of household gardens. Toxic chemicals and pesticides in the air, water and earth are responsible for a variety of women’s health risks. They enter body tissues and breast milk, through which they are passed on to infants. In a village in China’s Gansu province, discharges from a state-run fertilizer factory have been linked to a high number of stillbirths and miscarriages [11].

Water pollution in three Russian rivers is a factor in the doubling of bladder and kidney disorders in pregnant women, and in Sudan a link has been established between exposure to pesticides and perinatal mortality—with the risk higher among women farmers. In urban settings in particular, air and water pollution can be extreme, and sanitation and waste treatment poor or non-existent, presenting new threats to health, particularly for women who have the highest levels of exposure. In the Indian cities of Delhi and Agra, for example, drinking water comes from rivers heavily polluted by pesticides. Degraded environments mean that women must spend more time and effort to find fuel or produce food, but their other responsibilities for meeting household needs and ensuring family health, do

not diminish. Gendered divisions of labor have so far resisted real change. In many countries, women already work 12 hours or more a day in and out of the home; in Africa and Asia, women work an average of 13 hours more each week than do men [11]. Thus, environmental issues need to be focused through gender perspectives because the harsh environmental impact that only women experience, occurs through socially created roles and responsibilities imposed on them in particular.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The key objective of the paper is to demonstrate the nexus between environmental and gender justice in the context of India. The paper highlights that environmental factors do not impact women and men equally and there are some key areas where environmental justice seriously becomes a gender issue. The rationale for writing this paper is to demonstrate some real cases where environment and gender justice needs to be integrated. It also reveals some policy suggestions for stimulating a paradigm shift to help resolve problems both in policy and practice.

The article offers an analysis of secondary sources. These sources include a variety of books written by scholars, research reports, journals, theses, relevant publications, daily newspapers and relevant websites. They have all been analyzed to demonstrate the real link between environmental and gender justice.

Theoretical Key Concepts

Gender Justice

Gender justice is a process that aims to eradicate the socially constructed differences between men and women. Its intent is to end the elimination, exclusion, oppression and exploitation against women. Gender justice is the process that focuses on the transformation of both genders and set of social relation that interact between men and women. Gender justice includes both gender equality and gender equity, meaning that although men and women are different, there should be no distinction between the genders when it comes to rights based issues such as voting rights for example. According to the constitution of India, every citizen of India has the right to vote regardless of cast, religion, income, color, race and gender. Here, difference is not negated but it transcends in the eyes of the constitution. All citizens are valued equally in relation to these voting rights. Sameness does not say men and women are same while it talks about giving men and women the same right.

Gender justice means women will have more control over their lives. Their lives are more likely to be free from violence due to the changes in attitudes in gender relationships; and through increased involvement and leadership roles in institutions, decision-making and change processes [9]. In the voice of Sen [11] “Advancing gender equality, through

reversing the various social and economic handicaps that make women voiceless and powerless, may also be one of the best ways of saving the environment, and countering the dangers of overcrowding and other adversities associated with population pressure. The voice of women is critically important for the world’s future—not just for women’s future.”

Environmental Justice:

The term environmental justice emerged as a concept in the United States in the early 1980s. The term has two distinct uses. The first and more common usage describes a social movement in the United States whose focus is on the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Secondly, it is used to define an interdisciplinary body of social science literature that includes (but is not limited to) theories of the environment, theories of justice, environmental law and governance, environmental policy and planning, development, sustainability, and political ecology [10]. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice, as fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin or income with respect to development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. *Fair treatment* means that no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental, or commercial operations, or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies. *Meaningful involvement* means that potentially affected community residents have an appropriate opportunity to participate in the decision-making process about a proposed activity that will affect their environment and/or health [3].

Environmental justice refers to eradicating the inequitable and unsustainable exploitation and use of natural resources leading to degradation to earth’s natural environment. It actually involves prioritizing the voices of those who have born into communities that shoulder the greatest burden of environmental change. It is ensuring that all people have a say in the management of the environment and its resources.

Environmental and gender Justice

Justice should be viewed in the context of structure and relations of power in any society. Gender and Environmental justice is rooted in social power relations that determine the ability to access, assert and realize rights to both gender equality and environmental justice. Gender justice also ensures the woman’s voice is heard at the environmental decision making table. Third World women play the major role in managing natural resources. They are also the first and hardest hit by environmental mismanagement, yet they are neither consulted nor their views taken into account by development strategists. With the help of well-documented case studies, this paper describes ways in which women can organize themselves to meet

environmental, social, and economic challenges by providing a clear account of the problems faced by women in the management of land, water, forests, energy, and human settlements. The paper also reveals the lack of response from international organizations [2].

Social power relations

Gender justice is deeply rooted in social power relations that determine how the different capacities of individuals and social groups decides who gets what (How the resources are distributed). Who does what? (Division of labor), who decides what? Who influences the decisions? Who is streaming the agenda? Who is framing the agenda? Gender analysis is basically rooted in the answers to these questions. The analysis also deals with issues relating to access and control over all resources. Who has control over human resources? In households, the labor contribution by women is controlled by the head of the household. In agricultural labor it is controlled by the land lord. Furthermore, it's also important that women's rights to have control over their bodies focuses on their freedom to have a voice in relation to their reproductive health, decision making choice, sexual rights/violence, physical assaults [8].

Further it is also noteworthy to analyze women's control over their own intellect and their ability to impart their knowledge, education, ideas, and key resources to determine their social hierarchy. There is another resource known as intangible resources which include networks, relationships with local people, health officials, local Government, officials, local police [5].

Batliwala [1] defines social power as power that includes direct, indirect and gender divisions of power. According to her direct Power means the ability to make others do what you want. She defines this as the power that oneself can controls. She defines Indirect power as the power that influences others actions without having to give direct orders. For example nobody forces women to wash the dishes but if they don't wash the dishes, they would never get washed. Therefore the gender division of labor operates through indirect power. The third dimension of power according to Batiwala is Gender setting power: It is operated through the context of race, culture, location etc. For example my privilege is different from that of the domestic worker in my house because she is poor, from a rural background, uneducated and lower class.

She also argues that additional factors such as age and marital status also play a part in determining the social power of women. For example, older women experience more social power even within the household and location has an influence not only between rural and urban populations but also between northern and southern India and northern and southern global populations.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Gender ratio in India

The gender ratio is generally 1070 females for every 1,000 males. In India however the ratio is generally 919 femalesto1, 000 males. However with the availability of sex selective technology over the last 10/15 years, the gender ratio in some parts of India has declined to 450 to 500 females to 1000 males [1]. Arguments against gender selection reproductive technology can be complicated as they could be interpreted as interfering with women's reproductive rights. It's important to recognize the predominance and perpetuation of son preference as a root cause of this phenomena.. Despite modern enlightened government/social policies son preference still exists to a greater extent in some communities. This results in not only in an imbalance in the male/female ratio but also contributes to low grade persistent deprivation of access to food, water, education and health.

How power operates in creating environmental injustice?

A classic example of environmental injustice is the Indian forest Act (1850) that was initiated by British Colonial Rule and strengthened after post independence. This Act promoted Government or state power control over forests. This was achieved by disempowering tribal forest communities [12]. Although some forest trade dwelling tribal people had good methods for utilizing forest resources in a very sustainable way they were largely driven out of the forests with many of them migrating to the cities to work as laborers.

Women lack ownership and property Rights:

Even though there has been legal reform, by and large even when a woman is the formal owner holding title to the land, she still has little control over decisions relating to the use of land. Therefore, women are unable to make decisions relating to organic farming because they don't own the land. The lack of decision making power means women are unable to switch to more organic methods of farming because they don't own the land. Poor women also pay the price because access to natural resources has been greatly reduced by all these processes. It has now become much harder to find common lands on which to graze because of the privatization of land. For example, whereas previously Indian citizenship or state residency was a necessary prerequisite for buying land Karnataka of India has repealed the laws that prevented foreign companies from buying land [6].

Anti Golf Course Movement in India:

India will soon have an anti golf course movement as a result of huge tracks of land in rural India being bought by private companies for setting up golf courses, resorts and so on. The water usage and decreased availability of land for farming will create enormous social friction. Women have no voice when

such decisions are made at the policy level, nor is their consultation in such issues given consideration despite them suffering the environmental effects [11]. For example, in Somalia and many other places in the world displaced women have to travel from their refugee camps to gather firewood for cooking and have been raped or killed doing so.

Case of Gujarat in India

In Gujarat state of India young women were questioned about the time they and their mothers spent collecting firewood. The findings revealed that respondents' mothers previously spent two or three hours, every three to four days collecting firewood but this has now increased to every day. They also have to travel further and further and the quality of the wood is also inferior. Deforestation or contamination increases the time women must spend seeking wood for fuel or safe, clean water and increases their risk of water-borne disease. In the state of Gujarat, India, women now spend four or five hours a day collecting wood for fuel, where previously they would have done so once every four to five days [11].

Case of Banaskantha

Fetching and carrying water is women's work in rural India. In the villages of the desert district of Banaskantha, women spend up to 6 hours a day bringing water from distant sources to their homes. They carry up to 15 liters on their heads on each trip, often walking barefoot. Banaskantha, which is in the country's western state of Gujarat, receives less than 7 inches of rainfall each year. The water table has dropped by 6.5 feet a year, as withdrawals exceed natural replenishment. Over 75% of the district's villages no longer have reliable, year-round sources of fresh water [7].

Case of Pune in India

A very passive form of violence is seen in Pune in India. The study suggests that a large number of males of the village don't do any work, with the reason being given that they were sick. An interesting story was revealed from this study. While the men were sick their wives were obliged to do all the productive activities on their behalf. The men enjoyed the freedom this gave them and even when they recovered they continued to expect their wives to undertake all reproductive and productive work, this left many women burdened with over work. This type of violence is a less visible form of violence.

This is a key example of where environmental justice becomes a gender issue. The disproportionate burden that women bear gives rise to their lack of access to information, new ideas, and technology. Although India's literacy levels have improved according to official statistics, there remain many districts in India where the literacy level among women is still only 12-15%. The fact is that women are

invisible when it comes to environmental justice. They are invisible as potential agents for change in the eyes of the environmental movement. It's time for climate change groups to recognize gender inequality as a key issue area of focus. Climate change does not impact equally on men and women, yet this issue is usually not taken seriously.

Furthermore, women are not protected when handling pesticides or fertilizer and this can lead to a very high chance of sterility. Should this occur the chance of domestic violence also increases and husbands remarry due to their wife's incapability of producing children. The occurrence of this cycle is significant and apart from gender selective abortions; this type of environmental impact is also responsible for gender imbalance. Gender selective abortion is now legally banned in India.

Women's views are not considered when exploring possible solutions to problems. They are the delivery system for any intervention. When we look at the environmental justice discourse we don't find very clear gendered analysis coming through it.

The reason poor women are paying most the price is actually related to how widely major environmental and gender justice movements consult on their issues. It's important for them to consider possible alliances when working on gender and climate change campaigns. It is very unfortunate that very few international women's organizations have focused on the environment as this gives the impression that they don't consider such issues their concern. Gender and environment issues affecting women remain at the bottom of the hierarchy. Whilst poverty may be higher up on the list it too cannot be tackled even in a gendered way without considering environmental justice. Consequently there is a high chance that interventions that are introduced will result in further degradation.

For Example: In South Africa women are trying to support their families through cultivation where the soil is already severely degraded and there is a high dependency on the use of chemicals and pesticides. They are not informed about planting Nitrogen producing plants for instance to regenerate soil quality. They are also not informed about organic methods of cultivating because they need a more immediate income source. Therefore antipoverty interventions such as this negatively affect the environment, creating harmful future impacts on women. Apart from the women's movement, other social movements such as environmental justice movements, labor movements and land rights movements are often led by men. They are unable to see these issues from a woman's perspective.. They are also resistant to giving women a voice at the agenda setting table. Only one movement can be found in India

where the women's perspective was taken into consideration.

Small and Marginal Farmers Movement in India

There is only one movement in India that shifted their paradigm from the outset and this transpired because the wife of the person who began this movement is a feminist. They brought women's leadership into the process from day one. Other movements largely ignore women, especially poor women's perspectives. There are very few movements who apply an alternate paradigm for considering issues through women's eyes.

Can women always make a difference? In certain extreme situations women may sometimes make decisions that are not ecologically sound or environment friendly because they are driven by poverty and lack of choices. But usually women will make sound environmental decisions when necessary. For example: In coastal Orissa, women turned down shrimp farming which was an extremely lucrative business because they recognized the rice fields would become saline and would never be able to be used for rice cultivation again. Women possess significant ecological knowledge and skills but there are no validated and legitimated spaces where they can be recognized and acknowledged.

Real links between Gender Justice and Environmental Justice

It is important to present the case that explains why poor women are paying the price for environmental injustice. With degradation of environments there are now new forms of division of labor that have emerged. For example, in the rural areas of India and many other areas of the world, women are still responsible for using biomass cooking fuel because they cannot afford kerosene and there is no other alternative. They are also primarily responsible for finding fodder and grazing lands for livestock as well as for finding an adequate water supply not only for drinking but also for other basic household needs. In many countries women are responsible for growing and gathering certain kinds of food like vegetables, fruits and so on. With growing deforestation and desertification, all these tasks still remain the responsibility of women, however they are becoming harder and harder to do with no shift in sight to indicate a change in this division of labor.

Moreover, girls are subsidizing the boy's capacity to remain at school for longer by taking responsibility for laboring work on the farms. In many parts of India, girl's participation in farming work has increased so, there is not only son preference syndrome but also a culture that provides boys with greater opportunities to be higher educated to ensure they get a very good job.

There is also a phenomenon of ecological refugees who can no longer survive in rural environments because of the desertification and degradation of the land and soil. Even when rural people own land, they do not have access to water. There has been an interesting shift in India over the last few years whereby in a rural setting it is no longer land ownership that determines people's economic power, but rather it is water. For example if a person own 10 acres of land, unless he/she has access to water, they cannot cultivate in a secured way and are just as impoverished as non land owners.

There are also very serious health hazards and health impacts on women in particular as a result of environmental changes. For example women have to carry huge loads of firewood on their heads, as they have no other alternative fuel for cooking. Some studies suggest that they carry their body weight, or sometimes even little more than that leading to high rates of uterine prolapse caused by carrying disproportionate loads over their head. There are many other dangerous diseases that women and girls are contracting as result of using biogas. Cooking with biogas in indoor cooking spaces creates harmful indoor air pollution. Toxic indoor home environments are possibly the most hazardous of all chemical pollution.

Furthermore, environmental injustice has resulted in new emerging harmful health impacts. The necessity to travel further and spend more time collecting firewood means women often are hungry and they go out with an empty stomach. The necessity to carry heavier loads on their heads leads to health issues such as cracked feet and injuries to their bodies.

Environmental decision making: Power to make decisions that affect the environment

Optimist Feminist View

If gender justice enables women's voices to be heard, creates equal opportunities for women, breaks down deeply rooted socially created gender discrimination; creates a more equal division of labor between genders, liberates women and gives them more equal access, power and control over resources and decision making powers, they will be in a position to achieve advances in environmental regeneration and sustainable management and use of natural resources. Environmental justice will hopefully ensure the inclusion of women's voices and perspectives not just as delivery systems but also in policy, planning, designing, implementing and assessing initiatives that can actually help to create a sustainable world.

If we look at initiatives to improve gender justice, we can see some strengths and weaknesses. The Women's movement has been instrumental in changing laws that give women rights, ensure punishment for sexual violence, changing rape laws so that burden of proof is not on the victim but on the perpetrators, giving

women inheritance rights and changing divorce laws, There are countless global gender policies such as the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW etc.

The problem areas remain in the informal domain which is predominantly seen in the rural areas of India. This is where gender inequality continues to persist and individual rights still have to be negotiated. For example in rural areas women still struggle to get access to health care support.

Some Policy Suggestions

There is a need to develop a non instrumentalist approach. Women's views need to be listened to and valued and the priorities they identify acted upon. It's also important to make environmental and gender in much more central part of political agenda. Feminists do have to reframe and redesign violence issues by including violence driven out by ecological displacement and struggle for natural resources which very few groups currently do and raise. The state has an enforcement and resource provider role. Social change organizations have an awareness raising, mobilization and training providing role. However, the most critical role has to be performed from women and their communities' side. There needs to be a paradigm shift, whereby women are appreciated as stakeholders, rather than victims, initiators of change and not just benefactors. Moreover, the Government, media and NGOs need to work together with a shared aim of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in all sectors of the country. A comprehensive and holistic approach is required in order to transform the gender biased attitudes and mind sets of people at all levels.

CONCLUSION

This paper reveals how environmental justice issues are linked to gender issues and how environmental problems can be improved by ensuring gender justice. Because women can be very efficient in multiple contexts to protect environment and solve the problems driven out of climate change. As women are exclusively related with some environmental issues and are massively affected by environmental degradation due to their socially created roles and responsibilities, the women need to be seriously considered at the policy and practice level.

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