

WOMEN AND FAMILY, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

It is important to see women and family as being closely related. The tendency to separate the two has increased difficulties in recent history for the situation of women and the family is closely connected to the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, to environmental issues, and therefore to sustainable development. The article mainly develops this hypothesis on the basis of “Human Development” reports of the UNDP. Since 1995 these reports have underlined the connection between women, family, poverty, and damage to the environment. Numerous visible trends of women and of poverty that are related to the environment have been studied in depth and reported. The article tends mainly to underline that which is not visible and therefore little known. The tendency has been to overlook the invisible contribution of women to the environment and to preservation of natural resources and how women have gone about creating ways to reach sustainable development, in silence and unobtrusively. Stress tends to be placed on the fact that women are often victims of men and situations. It is important to also underline the active role of women in facing poverty and environmental problems. The article cites several examples based on research conducted on behalf of UNESCO, which show that in many parts of the world women, are not only contributing in an invisible way to sustainable development but also creating groups that actively work for the prevention of environmental disaster. The article suggests that the suffering of families resulting from environmental disasters enhances their capability to react and build alternatives. The conclusion is that women and families are crucial for the building of real sustainable development, as actors; and not only as victims in the social environment.

1. Introduction

In a society prevalently geared to economic growth and exploitation of resources, the experience of women, their capacity to go beyond poverty, and search for environmental alternatives in ways that are hardly understood in society, remains unheeded. The fact that women, especially poor women, are without voice does not mean they lack ideas or initiative. As the strength of economic, political, and technological forces increases, women all over the world are acting on a hidden agenda that is being developed in an invisible way.

I believe that this hidden agenda is where we shall find solutions that go beyond poverty and environmental destruction. In this paper I shall attempt to give a voice to women who are invisible, to pay special homage to the women of so-called developing countries. Though considered among the poorest of the world, these women are among the most resourceful. The presence, courage, and activity of Wangari Mathai in Africa, of Vandana Shiva in Asia, and the less well-known Matilde Cechin, are surely a tangible example of the qualities to which I am referring.

1.1 Women and Poverty in Recent United Nations Documents

Many documents, including the *1996 Report on Human Development*, indicate that the UN system's approach to development, and therefore poverty is changing, thus implicitly acknowledging the inadequacy of the development policies of recent decades. Interestingly, the UNDP Human Development reports now place more emphasis on human factors and the importance of measuring human development through indicators such as life expectancy, educational attainment and income, as comprehensive socio-economic measures.

The *1994 UNDP Report* states at the outset “behind the blaring headlines of the world's many conflicts and emergencies, there lies a silent crisis—a crisis of underdevelopment, of global poverty, of ever mounting population pressure, and of thoughtless degradation of environment. It requires a long, quiet process of sustainable human development”. It is obvious that the poor should have priority and actions are pro-people, pro-women, and pro-nature.

Another important point raised in the UNDP report is that people and their lives are important for what they are, not for what they produce. This represents a truly radical change, especially in relation to women. Up until now, essentially they have been valued essentially for their capacity to contribute to the economic or technological progress of society, and the massive contribution of the women who have nurtured children, worked in agriculture, in the informal economy, has been ignored. Not to mention the creativity and innovativeness developed in the social area in day-to-day survival. At last, what counts is not so much ever increasing economic production, but social integration, in our case supported by women, meaning equality before the law, minority rights, anti-discrimination, education, employment, governance.

In the Human Development Index (HDI) women score worst on almost all socio-economic indicators, except life expectancy. For biological and social reasons, women tend to live longer than men (though not in regions with high maternal mortality rates such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia). Unlike education and life expectancy that are always calculated by gender with income there is no way of showing the share

by gender. Distribution would of course be affected not only by different earning capacities, but also by the distribution of resources within the household. In many countries, wage rates are available by gender for industrial work, but not for agricultural labor, which is where female labor is higher, especially in developing countries. A quick run through HDI indicators shows that education, in terms of women's achievement, is always much lower for women in developing countries (and, by the way, also nutritional support and health care).

The Copenhagen Social Development Summit of March 1995 (led by Juan Somavia from Chile) stressed that poverty is the crucial issue in the world today. In the words of the President of Burkina-Faso "the mass poverty currently blighting African countries is a crucial fact". The final document contains a 20–20 proposal, calling on developing countries to devote 20% of GDP to social spending, and on developed countries to earmark 20% of aid funds for social development. Although the proposal is optional (priorities are not defined and so on), the fact that it exists is in itself important.

The Alternative Declaration adopted by more than six hundred NGOs on the eve of the conclusion of the Copenhagen Summit stresses that "in rejecting the prevailing global economic model, we do not suggest the imposition of another universal model. Rather, it is a question of innovating and devising local answers to community needs, promoting the skills and energy of women in full equality with men, and benefiting from valuable traditions, as well as new technologies". NGOs are recognized as being closer to local needs than governments and intergovernmental organizations. They have fewer vested interests than the former and are the indicators, as well as the capturers, of possible solutions to poverty. They of course have less power but, as is well known in political science, those that have power do not foster change. The Declaration is an important document in the framework of social development, raising many points for, and on behalf of, women and their equal participation in decision-making.

There has been a tendency of late to undermine UN conferences. This is unfair: indeed, the UN system has been responsible for fostering a step by step increase in the attention of governments to issues related to social (rather than economic) development, the environment, women, and has had a perhaps even more important impact on public opinion. Global poverty, environmental damage, and women's role in society are all issues on which awareness has increased greatly at all levels. This trend will surely continue, as awareness is always an irreversible process.

The 185 UN member states made ten commitments in Copenhagen: "We commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind" (Commitment 2); "We commit ourselves to promoting full respect for human dignity and to achieving equality and equity between women and men, and to recognizing and enhancing the participation and leadership roles of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life and in development" (Commitment 5). Much remains to be done—the document contains no real recognition of the actual contribution of women around the world, but is a simple statement of the right to equality and equity (that will take decades to achieve, depending on different various cultural contexts). There should be greater recognition of what women are already doing for society as a whole in the various contexts.

These preliminary remarks about women's situation at the global level, and the possibilities of going beyond poverty, will be followed by a more detailed description of the situation of women mainly in developing countries, the empirical indications made by women around the world and their contribution and visions.

1.2 Women and Poverty in Developing Countries: Visible Trends

In most countries of Africa, the fertility rates are still high, although for the first time in decades, there are now signs of the start of an apparent fertility transition in a number of countries of sub-Saharan Africa. "Recent demographic surveys have uncovered fertility declines which the UN has now built in projections: in Madagascar average fertility has fallen from 6.6 children per woman in 1980–1985 to 5.8 in 2001, in Tanzania from 6.7 to 5.6, and in Namibia from 5.8 to 5. Few data also suggest faster than expected fertility decline in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Gambia. In Kenya and in Botswana, fertility decline has already been documented. These are the results of three combined factors: fertility decline, rising age in marriage, and contraceptive use". These are indications of changes that will have an effect only in the very long term, as the overall population of Africa is still rising.

In looking at these overall demographic changes, we have to realize that women in Africa typically have their first child at 19 and their last at 37, for a childbearing span of 18 years. Women in some African countries, for example Nigeria, Sudan, and Mauritania, have their first child at 15 years. Childbearing exposes women to many health diseases and is still a major cause of death for women. In Africa, maternal mortality is still very high, about 700 deaths for 100 000 live births. In some cases in Africa, the situation has deteriorated even further in recent years. An African woman's lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes is estimated 1 in 23, that of a North American woman 1 in 4000.

Throughout the 90s, with a special emphasis in the Beijing 1995 U.N conference on Women, the UN system devoted special attention to girls in Africa. All too often they are considered a burden, despite their contribution to the family and the fact that they work a seven-hour day or more (their mothers reach a 18-hour day in some cases). Teen-age mothers are at a higher risk than older women in childbearing. Malnutrition is high: almost 60% of women in Africa have anemia from malnutrition and almost 70% of girls below 15, who represent 45% of all women.

I cite these figures because they show that in Africa the feminization of poverty is unfortunately very true. Data on education and work offer an even better understanding of the situation of women in Africa. Although illiteracy has been decreasing among young women, due to the efforts of UNESCO and other inter-governmental institutions and governments, it is still higher for young women than for young men. In countries with high illiteracy overall, the illiterate rate among women aged 15–24 is at least 25% higher than that of young men. Illiteracy of women over 25 is usually twice or more that of women in the age cohort 15–24.

Illiteracy of women over 45 years of age was as high as 50% or even over 70% in most countries of Africa and Asia in 1998. This disadvantage is difficult to revert and as a consequence it is possible that women over 60 years of age or older, in developing

countries, will be illiterate for some decades to come, due also to the higher life expectancy of women.

Reference should also be made to the situation of women refugees, although it is difficult to obtain reliable data on this phenomenon. Refugees and asylum seekers are people who, due to war, discrimination or natural disaster, cannot return to their own countries (unlike displaced persons). According to the data of the Red Cross Report, in 1998 Africa had 2 872 000 million refugees (decreased in relation to 1994: 5 879 700). At the time, the majority was from Mozambique. Rwanda had as many as 30 000 refugees in 1998. South and Central Asia had 1 690 000 refugees in 1998. The Middle East had in 1998, 5 880 400 and Europe 1 790 200. That makes a total of approximately 13 million people, which is close to the population of Australia. There is no exact data on the number of women and children refugees, but presumably they are a high percentage of the total, especially in Africa. All refugee data vary according to the sources specially in recent dramatic situations data are not always reliable.

As to poverty and women, it should be stressed that the highest percentage of women of the world live in Asia; and that Asian women represent more than half the women in the active labor force. It is of course sufficient to look at China and to Southeast Asia to understand this. The situation of Asian women obviously differs greatly within the continent. In Southern Asia, the level of education and health is similar to that in South Saharan Africa and women have a very low level of life expectancy. In East and Southeast Asia the indicators of development increase, alphabetization is higher, and there is a better health situation for women.

In Latin America, alphabetization has increased and the health situation has improved, but poverty has also increased especially among the women who have migrated to the cities following the urbanization process of the last twenty years. The consequences of increased poverty will become more evident in the near future; and unfortunately we should expect deterioration in the education and health sectors, as a result of the financial cuts introduced following the debt crisis in many countries in Latin America.

In relation to women, we have also to recall the so-called “new poverties” among women as heads of households and older women, often alone (as a result of higher life expectancy of women). Another factor that contributes to the poverty situation of women is in the labor sphere. Very often women are engaged in the informal economy, where they are temporary, liable to change, and have no social security.

Health is another issue. In many countries girls are undernourished for cultural reasons and are often the last to have access to food. They pay for this in terms of anemia and bad health in pregnancy and when they migrate to other countries in search of work. This in turn has an impact on their children. Women, young women especially, are liable to HIV and AIDS. Data in 1998 tell us that, of affected by AIDS, 68% are in Sub Sahara Africa and 20% in South and South East Asia, and the remaining in the rest of the world. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), by the year 2000 a further 15–16 million people will have contracted AIDS (divided equally between men and woman). The countries most affected are Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Thailand, and Malawi. The groups most affected live in urban areas and they are usually young women.

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Biographical Sketch

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Main Activities:

Professor of Futures Studies for Human and Social Development at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Pontifical Gregorian University (since 1976).

Member of the Club of Rome (since 1976).

Coordinator of the project “The Futures of Cultures” for UNESCO (1991–1994).

Chairperson of the Futures Research Committee of the International Sociological Association (1978–1997).

Coordinator for UNESCO for the project WIN Women’s International Network, Emergency and Solidarity (1994–1999).

Doctor Honoris Causa from The Economics University of Budapest (1998).

1980–1990 President World Futures Studies Federation.

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1982–1990 Coordinator of the Project “Household, Gender, and Age” for the United Nations University developed in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, and Sri Lanka.

1985–1986 Full bright Professor in Minnesota at the St. Cloud University, Futures Studies and Women and Development.

1980–1995 Member of the Editorial Board of the professional journal: *Technological Forecasting And Social Change*.

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