

WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
THE SHRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE

BY

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*FIRST LADY OF THE
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WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT THE SHRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE

The role of Shri Lankan women in the crucial environment–development equation can only be assessed against a backdrop of the contemporary developmental and environmental trends and conditions. The first part of this paper attempts to look at the development scenario and the resulting environmental concerns in Shri Lanka, while the second part addresses the women's role and concerns in this matrix of issues.

I. SHRI LANKA'S DEVELOPMENTAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

1. Introduction

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Shri Lanka is an independent island nation in the Indian Ocean. It has a land extent of 65,610 square kilometres. Lying in the northern tropical zone in close proximity to India, it is separated from the subcontinent by a narrow strip of sea.



1.1 *Physical features and climate*

Shri Lanka's development has been largely determined by the natural and economic attributes of its physical features. Topographically, three quarters of the land consists of a broad lowland peneplain at an average elevation of 75 metres above sea level. Towards to the south-central part of the island, the land rises steeply to form a mountain massif which goes up to an elevation of 2,500 metres. The mean annual temperature of the lowlands ranges from 27 degrees Centigrade in the west to 30 degrees Centigrade in the dry northern and eastern regions. In the hill country, temperature is appreciably lower than in the lowlands, with a drop of 1 degree C for every 150 metre rise in elevation.

As determined by physical features, the surface drainage of the country is characterized by a system of rivers and streams originating in the hills and flowing into the coastal periphery. There are 102 rivers in all, some of them forming waterfalls as they traverse the rocky ground over escarpments. The coast, 1,700 kilometres long, is endowed with numerous bays, beaches, lagoons, sandbars, dunes and wetlands.

1.2. *Water Resources*

Water, provided by rainfall, is one of the country's most vital natural resources. There are sharp differences in the rainfall regimes of the different parts of the island and based on this, and on the temperature, several bio-climatic regions have been identified.

The low and mid-elevation area in the southwest receives a heavy and well distributed rainfall. In this region, called the wet zone, the annual rainfall varies from 2,500 millirneters (mm) to over 5,000 mm.

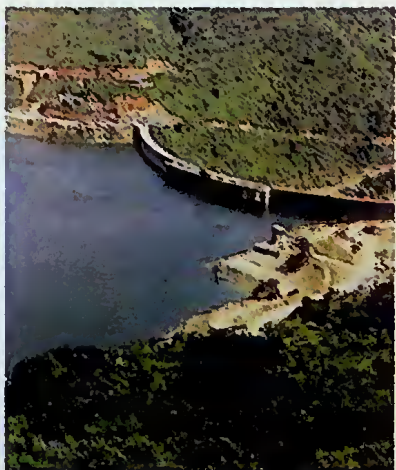
The broad plains in the north and east fall into what is called the dry zone. This region, although it receives an annual rainfall of 1,250– 1,900 mm, is characterized as dry because the rainfall is seasonal: during a five-month stretch in the year, very dry conditions prevail. Between the dry and wet zones is the intermediate zone, with an annual rainfall of 1,900 to 2,500 mm.

Shri Lanka's great hydraulic civilization, dating back to over two thousand years, was based on the construction of reservoirs in the dry zone for storing water for agriculture. Around the small irrigation reservoirs (tanks) which collected water during the three-month rainy season, sprang up villages which were models of sustainable land use.





The irrigation tank (Wewa) has been an integral part of Shri Lankan culture



Victoria: one of the major reservoirs under the Mahaweli

In the gently undulating landscape of the dry zone, the low-lying areas were converted into rice fields irrigated off-season by the village tank and the high land was either left in forest or used for cultivating less water-demanding crop trees. As time went on, larger reservoirs were built, tapping the perennial rivers originating in the wet mountainous region. The skill involved in tapping the rivers through weirs, building large dams and constructing intricate systems of distribution canals was unsurpassed anywhere in the world at the time.

These irrigation networks went into disuse after several centuries and were neglected until the early twentieth century. With increasing population and a growing demand for food, action was taken to revive some of these tanks and to irrigate the dry zone once again for agriculture.

In modern times, around 12,000 village tanks have been restored and they irrigate some 260,000 hectares of agricultural land. Of the large irrigation systems to be built or restored, the most impressive is the Mahaweli river diversion project, commenced in the late 1960s, and now largely complete. Up to now, nearly 100,000 families have been settled in the project area, and irrigation water has been supplied for 135,000 hectares of cultivable land.

In addition to the Mahaweli diversion project, a number of other major irrigation schemes have ensured that a significant proportion of the land area of the island is now irrigated. However, providing an adequate and uninterrupted supply of water is still a challenging task.

Ground water is another important source of water for agricultural development in the dry zone. While a significant proportion of the available surface water is used through irrigation systems, much of the ground water resources is still unutilized or underutilized.

Water is also the main source of power generation in Shri Lanka. Many of the larger reservoirs serve a dual purpose, i.e. that of irrigation and electricity generation. The reservoirs of the Mahaweli system more than doubled the hydropower generation capacity in Shri Lanka, from 400 Mega Watts (MW) to 900 MW. In a year with good rainfall, hydropower can provide as much as 90 per cent of the island's total electricity generation needs.

1.3 Geological Resources

Shri Lanka has no known fossil fuel (coal and oil) resources. Offshore investigations in the northwest and northeast, where

the nature of the underlying rocks would not rule out the possibility of existence of oil deposits, have been made from time to time, but so far without success. The main mineral deposits found in the country are graphite, limestone, apatite phosphate, clays and mineral sands.

Shri Lanka also has many varieties of gemstones, for which the island has been famous for centuries. These have become a source of foreign exchange today.

1.4 *Biological Resources*

The island of Shri Lanka is blessed with numerous biological resources, most of it contained in the different types of natural forest and vegetation.

Before man's intervention, much of the country was covered by forest: dry mixed evergreen forest in the dry zone, tropical rainforest in the low and mid elevations of the wet zone, and montane forest in the montane wet zone. The dry zone forests are what developed after the decline of the hydraulic civilization between the eighth and fourteenth century. In the past 100 years or so, and more particularly in the past few decades, these forests have been heavily exploited for timber.

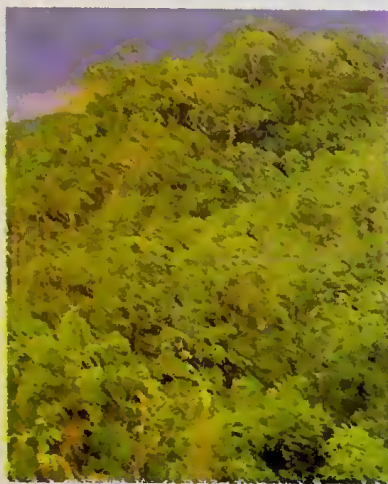
In addition, there is widespread shifting cultivation (or "chena" cultivation) done on increasingly short rotations. This leaves degraded land in its wake. The result has been the degradation of several hundreds of thousands of natural forest.

In the wet southwest of the country, much of the forest was cleared for raising plantations of tea, rubber, coconut, spice crops and for human settlements. This is the most highly populated part of the country, and deforestation has been severe. The wet zone natural forests at the low and middle elevations were the country's richest timber resources, and most of what remains of these forests has been subjected to heavy over-exploitation. Today, there are only 47,500 hectares of well-stocked natural forests in the wet zone, and these have been spared due to inaccessibility. The wet zone forests are rich in plant and animal diversity, and have a very high level of endemic species.

Besides the forests, there are inland wetland ecosystems. They occur in the flood plains of rivers and in shallow depressions where run-off water collects over an impenetrable soil. They are found mainly in the plains of the dry zone, and the largest is found in the flood plains of the Mahaweli. The vegetation consists of grass, with scattered shrubs and bushy



Gemstones of Shri Lanka





Inside Sinharaja: Shri Lanka's tropical rainforest



Scenic beauty of the beach

vegetation. The Mahaweli floodplains carry the greatest animal biomass diversity of all ecosystems in Shri Lanka. Over 600 elephants (one fifth of the total elephant population) frequent the Mahaweli flood plains. The habitat is also the temporary home of many species of migratory birds.

A large number of animals inhabit the remaining forests and the protected areas such as National Parks and wildlife sanctuaries. A number of species which are believed to be endangered have been given legal protection. However, expanding human settlements and development projects have had an adverse effect on wildlife, and today most of these creatures are confined to a few jungle pockets or protected areas.

1.5 Coastal Resources

Shri Lanka's marine and coastal ecosystems and their natural resources play an important role in the economy of the country. The island has a coastline of 1,700 kilometers, and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending to 200 miles beyond the coast, covers an area of over six times the island's land area. Shri Lanka's maritime jurisdiction in fact extends well beyond the EEZ, right up to the continental margin. The offshore and deep-sea resources, including ocean bed minerals, have yet to be assessed.

The main coastal resources are fisheries and industrial sands (ilmenite, rutile, zircon and monazite). In addition, an asset of considerable importance is the scenic beauty of the island's beaches, coral reefs and other coastal ecosystems, which is a major attraction for tourists. Preserving the coastal environment is important for sustaining this valuable source of income.

The near-shore fishing resources are being exploited almost to the full, and in some locations, over-exploited. On the other hand, the off-shore and deep sea fisheries resources are largely under-utilized. The coastal habitats include the long stretches of sandy beaches, lagoons, estuaries and salt marshes. The lagoons and estuaries with their mangrove and sea grass ecosystems are important habitats for the marine food chains.

1.6 Human Resources

The rapid growth in population is the key to understanding many of Shri Lanka's socio-economic trends. On the one hand, the growing population exerts mounting pressures on the island's natural resources and the environment. On the other hand, the people constitute one of Shri Lanka's most valuable

resources which, when properly channeled, can be a massive force for environmental conservation and sustainable development.

At the last census (1981), Shri Lanka had a population of 14.9 million, and at present it is estimated to be nearing the 17 million mark. The population density is 260 persons per square kilometre. However, much of the population is concentrated in the Southern, Central and Western parts of the country. Over 47.7 per cent of the total population comprises of women.

The population has increased from 2.76 million in 1881 to the present 17 million, recording a sharp increase particularly after independence. It is projected to reach about 20 million by the end of the century, and to level off at about 25 million by the year 2046.

Between 1946 and 1990, the labour force has increased from 2.6 million to 6.8 million owing to the rapid increase in persons of working age, as well as an increase in the labour force participation rate, particularly for women. The female labour force participation was estimated to be about 45 per cent in 1985-86.



The rural-urban drift, which has characterized the development process in many countries, has taken place only on a very modest scale in Shri Lanka. The 1981 census showed the population in the urban sector to be 21.5 per cent of the country's population. Making allowances for the changes since then, it would be fair to estimate that, at present, over 75 per cent of Shri Lankans live in villages. These trends are expected to change with industrialization and scarcity of available rural land.

The rural-urban drift has been contained by several reasons. The land settlement schemes of the twentieth century have shifted persons from densely populated rural areas to sparsely populated areas in the dry zone. These schemes also provided new employment opportunities connected with the provision of goods and services to the growing population. Other factors are the availability of cheap, subsidized means of public transport (which enable people to travel to the urban areas on a daily basis without living there) the provision of amenities like schooling, medical care and roads in the rural areas.

1.7 *Setbacks and Constraints*

A number of social, economic and political constraints are operative in Shri Lanka's efforts to conserve the environment and build a future based on sustainable development.

The natural resources are finite; they do not expand or regenerate at the rate the population and the demand on resources continue to grow. Shri Lanka's population of 17 million lives on a land area of 6.5 million hectares. Its population density (260 persons per square kilometre) places Shri Lanka among the most densely populated countries in the world. Leaving out non-arable land, forest and wildlife areas, the land/man ratio is only 0.2 hectare per person. In the future, this amount will decrease further.

The management of the finite natural resources has been hampered by a highly compartmentalized civil administration structure left behind by the colonial rulers. Although many adjustments have been made, the remnants of the British system can still be seen. An effort is being made to decentralize public administration and to devolve power to the provinces, districts and ultimately to the villages. When these decentralization and devolution schemes are firmly in place, there is hope for a grassroots level, integrated approach towards sustainable natural resources management and conservation. Civic disturbances since 1983 in the north and east, and from 1987-1989 in other parts of the country, have also affected natural resources and their management in many ways. One consequence has been an inability to carry out essential data gathering and field studies, including analyses of coastal, wildlife, forestry and water resources. Other impacts include significant restrictions on resource management and enforcement.

2. The Economy:

Shri Lanka's Gross National Product (GNP) in 1990 was an estimated Rs. 285 billion (approximately US Dollars 7.1 billion). The per capita income was US Dollars 418. This places Shri Lanka among the poorer countries of the world. However, in spite of this low per capita income, the country has had impressive achievements in social and human development, as evidenced by a very high rate of adult literacy, a high life expectancy, a low infant mortality rate, a high rate of participation in primary schooling and extensive health facilities.

Since independence in 1948, Shri Lanka has pursued policies of welfare which provided basic needs such as health, free education, the distribution of essential items of food at subsidized prices and, more recently, a scheme of food stamps and the Janasaviya (Poverty Alleviation) Programme. These policy measures have resulted in the country achieving a high physical quality of life, measured at 83 on the PQLI index. The

recently computed Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations has placed Shri Lanka among the first 15 countries that have achieved the highest HDI rates.

These social welfare programmes can be sustained only if the economy is vibrant and growing. Shri Lanka's economic performance until recently has been characterized by low output and poor employment growth in contrast to other Asian countries that have grown rapidly. The liberalization of the economy in 1977 and the economic reforms introduced in the subsequent years have ensured an accelerated rate of economic growth, although the civic disturbances have retarded the rate of growth to some extent.

The real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at 2.9 per cent per year from 1971 to 1977. From 1978 to 1986, however, it grew at 5.6 per cent per year under the liberalized economy and with substantial new foreign assistance and investment, including support for the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project. After the disruptions caused by civic unrest in 1987-1989, the economy has picked up again, and is showing positive signs of revitalization and revival.

In spite of sweeping changes that have taken place since the late 1970s, Shri Lanka remains primarily an agricultural country. Agriculture accounts for over 25 per cent of the GDP, nearly half the total employment and export earnings, and about 40 per cent of government revenues. Over 90 per cent of the rural population depends on agriculture. Traditionally, agriculture has consisted of the export-oriented plantation sector – primarily tea, rubber and coconut – and the household farmer sector, growing mainly paddy and subsidiary food crops for domestic consumption. Many varieties of fruits, vegetables and tubers are grown in the hill country areas.



Available information indicates that 27 per cent of rural households are landless, and 42 per cent of the holdings are less than half a hectare. These statistics paint a distressing picture of the rural scene, and indicate some of the pressures that are exerted on the natural resources.

The industrial base in Shri Lanka is still narrow. Major manufacturing industries include cement, steel, paper, tyres and ceramics. With the launching of the Investment Promotion Zones or Free Trade Zones, in Katunayake, Biyagama and most recently at Koggala, the garment industry has gained prominence through private investment.

Although foreign investment and external collaborations have given Shri Lanka access to important export markets, particularly for garments, other industries have not yet expanded sufficiently to provide solutions to the twin problems of poverty and unemployment. Shri Lanka needs to create two million jobs over the next decade to match the population increases and relieve pressure on land.



Like many Asian nations, Shri Lanka's economic development is dependent on activities that deplete its finite natural resources. While exploitation of the resource base has contributed to significant economic growth in recent years, it has also led to environmental degradation. In the short term, the economic livelihood and physical health of the people are at risk. In the long term, if the present rate of resource depletion and environmental deterioration continue, the finite resource base and delicate environmental balance will eventually be unable to support further economic growth.

Shri Lanka and other developing countries face difficult choices in achieving a proper balance between the closely linked objectives of economic development and environmental conservation. The decisions and choices made today will determine how natural resources can propel the nation's advancement into the 21st century and when that is achieved, whether the physical quality of life of the people will be enhanced through the preservation of a livable environment.

3. Administrative and Legal Structure:

Management of natural resources has increasingly depended on national administrative and legal structures. Shri Lanka is a unitary state whose legal and administrative structure is based on its republican constitution.

The present Constitution, adopted in 1978, states in Article 28 that "it is the duty of every person in Shri Lanka to protect nature and conserve its riches."

Compared with most developing countries, Shri Lanka has a long history of natural resource legislation. Laws supplement village traditions of resource use that operate in many parts of the island and may be most significant in coastal fisheries. Some of the statutes date back to the middle of the 19th century.

Over the past ten years, the Government of Shri Lanka has taken many positive steps to develop resource management and environmental conservation policies. The National Environ-



It is her future too

mental Act of 1980 established the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) as the primary decision-making and co-ordinating agency with regard to the environment. In 1984, Sri Lanka became one of the first developing nations to introduce a mandatory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure for reviewing all development projects. A sophisticated legislative and administrative infrastructure has been established that includes more than 90 statutes and a number of environment-related state agencies.

In 1990, His Excellency President Ranasinghe Premadasa established, for the first time, a Cabinet Ministry and a Project Ministry charged with the subject of environment. This signified the high priority afforded by the Government to the conservation of the environment.

Sri Lanka consists of 25 administrative districts and nine provinces. The hierarchy of regional administrative divisions that supports the central government now consists of Provinces, Districts, Divisions and Grama Niladhari units, in descending order and area.

The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1987 provided for devolution of power to the provinces, and this process, potentially significant for natural resources management, is still taking root. Provinces are now the fundamental administrative units of regional governance, and they have concurrent jurisdiction with the central government over the protection of the environment, soils, coastal fisheries and wildlife, among other resources. It offers an interesting case study as to how the centre-periphery co-operation can safeguard the environment and manage natural resources better.

4. Major Environmental Problems

The Chinese have a saying that there is no such thing as waste; what we call waste is, in fact, a resource for which we have not been able to imagine a proper use. The dilemma in natural resources management is to find effective and creative ways of using these resources without eroding the resource base and optimizing the available options.

Sri Lanka explicitly recognizes that rapid economic development is essential for the upliftment of the poor and the disadvantaged sectors of the community. There is no substitute to development. The challenge before us is to pursue economic development without compromising the environment or depleting natural resources to a point where they cannot be

regenerated. In order to provide better living conditions and prospects for the majority of the underprivileged and disadvantaged sections of the populations, Shri Lanka has embarked on a number of social and economic development programmes since independence. Although the policy approaches and emphasis of these programmes varied from time to time, depending on the policies of the respective governments, the overall thrust for development has been fairly consistent for over four decades.

Environment and development are very closely inter-linked. Sustained development cannot be achieved if the very base of development namely the natural resources and the environment, are undermined by such development efforts. Up to the early part of this century, traditional practices of agriculture, forest harvesting, fishing and mining were carried out in Shri Lanka to a degree that was well within the absorptive capacities of the different ecosystems, thus giving no cause for concern as to their sustainability.



In more recent times, with sharp increases in population (Shri Lanka's population almost doubled between 1946 and 1971), these practices imposed increased environmental stresses which soon began to exceed the recuperative capacities of the respective ecosystems. The result was continuing and growing environmental degradation. The trends in the past few decades have shown that, if the increasing demands of a growing population are to be met in a sustainable manner, traditional practices have to blend with innovative and modern approaches. What is observed in Shri Lanka is a microcosm of what is seen in the entire Third World.

The dilemma is a familiar one: Shri Lanka faces the choice of giving more (resources, opportunities, social benefits) to less people, or less (resources, opportunities, social benefits) to more people. While population policies adopted by Shri Lanka have enabled her to contain her population growth rate at reasonable limits, the growth patterns will still continue well into the next century before they stabilize. This poses a major challenge for the country's policy makers, administrators, social workers and the public at large to take all possible measure to maximize the efficiency of resource utilization and minimize the damage to the natural environment and resources.

In terms of specific issues and problems, development efforts and population growth in the past few decades have resulted in a number of environmental stresses which can be identified as follows:

- * Excessive deforestation (in the sense of total forest clearing in an area) for the purpose of shifting cultivation
- * Timber exploitation from natural forests, far in excess of incremental growth rates
- * Excessive fuelwood removal from the wet, high-elevation, montane forests
- * Extensive agricultural expansion on erosive land (sloping land, river and stream reservations) without proper land management
- * Cultivation extending into forests (as encroachments) and into river and reservoir catchments
- * Excessive coral mining in the reefs and coastal deposits
- * Over-fishing in lagoons and estuaries

The development activities that are causing environmental degradation either directly or indirectly through sub-optimal utilization of natural resources are as follows:

- * Tea and rubber growing, where the average yields are low due to a variety of reasons: neglect of maintenance, inadequate inputs, poor extension services, weak research and development
- * Poor management of natural forests, forest plantations and non-forest resources of wood supply due to inadequate investment on forest management, silviculture, forest plantation and timber utilization
- * Weak water management and supporting services in settlements under irrigation schemes
- * Unplanned growth of the tourist industry in the coastal zone
- * The setting up of industries without pollution abatement technology and the discharge of pollutants to the environment
- * Urban expansion without concomitant infrastructural growth, resulting in proliferation of slums and shanties

Excessive natural resource use and the carrying out of development activities of severe resource constraints have caused environmental degradation. The main areas of environmental degradation are as follows:

- * Conversion of large areas of natural forest into sparsely used, low-productive cropland (known as chena)
- * Soil erosion from neglected or poorly maintained tea lands and from cultivations on sloping land and river and stream reservations



Coast conservation efforts in progress



Slash-and-burn cultivation also destroys the forest

- * Siltation of irrigation and power reservoirs, river beds, lagoons and estuaries, causing long-term effects: loss of reservoir capacity, increased incidence and gravity of floods, and adverse impacts on important and sensitive coastal ecosystems
- * Deforestation in the wet zone causing disturbances in the soil-water regime and an increase in the incidence of floods, earthslips and landslides
- * Poor water management in irrigated areas that may lead to salinization of the land
- * Increased coastal erosion due to excessive sand and coral mining and unplanned coastal development
- * Pollution of water bodies, coastal ecosystems and beaches caused by the discharge of industrial pollutants and raw sewage
- * Atmospheric pollution caused by emissions from vehicle exhausts and industries

II. WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

1. Women's crucial role in development:

There can be no real development without women's active involvement. This has become the stark reality in many parts of the Third World, where declining per capita food production and debt adjustment crises have underlined the importance of women's participation in development.

Of course, women have **always** been an integral part of the socio-economic process. Unfortunately, however, their role has never been recognized, highlighted or appreciated adequately, and the opportunities for women to make a full and meaningful contribution to their own development, as well as that of their communities, have been very limited.

The development experiences of the recent past overwhelmingly indicate that neither development planning nor strategies for environmentally sustainable development can fully succeed without the total and equal participation of women in these efforts.

Let us for a moment take a look at what women are already doing, largely unsung and unseen, as part of their routine work.

Survival tasks are those essential for daily life, and it is for these that women are largely responsible. They grow the food crops, provide water, gather fuel and perform most of the



other work which sustains the family, such as looking after health and nutrition needs. A 1985 survey conducted by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) indicated that in some Third World regions, especially in Africa, women account for 80 per cent of agricultural production. Yet, until recently, women's contributions had been taken for granted, and never quantified for their true value.

For instance women farmers, though they play a critical role in food production, are often ignored by programmes meant to improve production. In many parts of Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, women form a large agricultural labour force, while most of Sub-Saharan Africa's food is actually grown by women. Yet, almost all agricultural programmes tend to neglect the special needs of women farmers.

Appreciating the role of women in development is, however, only the first step. Women need proper information, skills and opportunities to perform their role in development. Poor access to information, as well as technical and financial resources, have often thwarted efforts aimed at getting women involved in development.

2. Women and Environment :

Women, particularly those living in rural areas of Third World countries such as Sri Lanka, play a major role in managing natural resources – which include soil, water, forests and sources of energy. Their tasks in agriculture and animal husbandry, as well as their central role in the household, make them daily managers of the living environment. By virtue of this dual role, women possess a profound knowledge of the plants, animals and ecological processes in their surroundings.

Women also participate in the commercial sectors of society in more ways than has ever been accounted for, or taken note of. The raw materials they use in rural enterprises are vulnerable to environmental degradation and contamination. Both as farmers and traders, women experience environmental degradation as a problem directly undermining the basis of their daily lives.

All over the Third World, the principal victims of environmental degradation are the most underprivileged people (which includes the poor) and women constitute the majority of these people. Their problems, and those of the environment, are very much inter-related. Both are marginalized by certain ill-conceived and poorly implemented development policies practised in many parts of the Third World. And because of the



Sri Lanka's tea industry depends largely on female labour



complex cycles of poverty, inappropriate development and environmental degradation, poor people have been forced into ways of living which induce further destruction. Third World women often have no choice but to exploit natural resources in order to survive, even though they may have the knowledge to promote sustainability.

It is the responsibility of national governments, international and inter-governmental bodies and all of us to enable women all over the world to have that choice. If they have that choice, and their survival is no longer a primary concern and a daily struggle, then women can become a mighty force assisting in the global drive towards sustainable development.

In other words, as long as women are overlooked or neglected in conservation plans and initiatives, these efforts will be only partially successful. It is no surprise that such efforts cannot succeed without the full participation of half of mankind!



In search of firewood

3. Empowerment of women: the Shri Lankan experience

What we mentioned above for the Third World in general also applies to Shri Lanka, but there are notable – and promising – exceptions.

In Shri Lanka, women have had a distinct place in the traditional village both as mothers and housewives. Although their contributions to agriculture have gone largely unnoticed, they can be considered important food producers and natural resource managers. Fetching water and fuelwood are tasks done almost exclusively by women, sometimes with the help of children. It is the same with the preparation of food and other household work.

In many villages, women contribute to the household income by working for wages on plantations or fields or even by quarrying stones. Although many rural women lead hard lives owing to their conditions of poverty, their overall quality of life is often better than that of many other Asian women.

Unlike in some societies, women in Shri Lanka have a right to land and property; they can own land and need not give it up to the man upon marriage. Likewise, they also have equal access and opportunities to education, health facilities and employment. This has enabled women in Shri Lanka to be generally more advanced in socio-economic terms than many of their counterparts in other parts of the Asia-Pacific region and the rest of the Third World.



During the past four decades after independence, a large number governmental and non-governmental programmes and initiatives have been launched in Sri Lanka to help develop the human resource potential of women. Free education, without a bias on gender and accessible to all children, was by far the most vital of the delivery mechanisms through which empowerment of women was achieved during the early stages of the post-independence period.

Among the concurrent schemes implemented by successive governments to improve women's access to information, skills and opportunities are:

- * educating women on basic sanitation and family health,
- * transfer of basic technology to exploit rural resources,
- * expansion of the co-operation movement, and
- * rural development schemes.

At the same time, some pragmatic non-governmental programmes were also launched for women-centred development. Schemes extended by the Lanka Mahila Samiti, an NGO working for the welfare of women, to train rural women to improve their skills in local crafts, agriculture and livestock development have achieved noteworthy results.

As stated earlier, more than 78.5% of the population in Sri Lanka live in rural areas, and 49.3% of this number are women. Rural women by nature have a larger degree of access to natural resources, and also are the prime users of freely-accessible environmental resources.

Sri Lanka has a historical tradition in natural resources conservation, which continues to this date in some rural settings. Throughout history, natural resources were decreed by ancient rulers of Sri Lanka as being the common property of all humanity, and were utilized and managed in a judicious manner.

Due to their multiple roles in the survival process, women have always had an important responsibility in the utilization and conservation of the natural environment. Women, more specifically those in the rural sector, contribute a substantial portion of the family income, principally through taking part in agriculture. In many cases, they have to engage in unirrigated dryland agriculture, which produce relatively lower yields. They also have to tend to the flock, gather fuelwood and water.

All these roles have a great bearing on the environment, on soil conservation, water resources, vegetation and forestry,





etc. Therefore, providing women with the appropriate skills and knowledge on environmental issues becomes invaluable.

However, this has not always happened that way. Although several women-centred programmes have been successfully implemented in Sri Lanka, government extension services have been directed largely towards men, women therefore did not have the wider access to information and technologies that their male counterparts had. This was compounded by a lack of women extension workers.

There was also the reluctance of government extension workers, and those engaged in technology transfer, to introduce and implement environmentally-friendly modern technologies through women. This was due to their doubts about women's capacity to absorb and adapt these technologies. Women have therefore been the lesser recipients of information and technology despite the fact that they are the most appropriate category to channel environmental conservation methodologies.

Being appreciative of the drawbacks in traditional approaches to the empowerment of women, the Sri Lankan government is now in the process of implementing a novel process to educate and train women, improve their access to information, skills, training, credit and resources. This is being attempted through the Sri Lankan model of poverty alleviation, the Janasaviya Programme, which is now entering its fourth year of successful implementation.

Janasaviya is the most ambitious, people-centred programme ever to be undertaken, with the objective of reaching 7 million people and to progressively uplift them to a better standard of living.

Janasaviya is an integrated process of human development, a process of building people up and assisting them to live productive lives in their own environment, by making better use of resources. The empowerment process of women under the Janasaviya Programme involves identifying the poor, reaching them through group formation and effective social mobilization. The identification process itself is a participatory exercise where the poor themselves join together to identify who the real beneficiaries should be.

The Janasaviya Programme thereafter reaches the beneficiaries through their own groups to involve them in a close dialogue to identify the degree and the causes of poverty,

the ways and means of alleviating it, and the resources and the support services which are available at their disposal. The social mobilization process motivates the poor to identify the resources themselves and appreciate them for their proper utilization.

The empowerment process contained in the Janasaviya Programme provides the village level "barefoot consultancy" service directed at reaching every beneficiary on the individual basis to provide them with access, technical know-how, simple management techniques, ideas for investment, production and marketing. Since invariably most rural women depend largely on natural resources for their survival and development, a major focus is on the use and conservation of natural resources.



The Janasaviya Programme also has a substantial component to develop rural infrastructure including water and forest resources, soil and energy sources, promotion of effective and energy-saving domestic cooking fuels and reusable energy sources. Through group formation and getting the communities directly involved in infrastructure development and environment conservation efforts, the Janasaviya Programme develops a close link between the environment and the community and makes the communities feel that they are not only the beneficiaries of the environment, but also the owners and the people responsible for its conservation. Group formation and social mobilization have been so successful that, there has been a spontaneous awakening of the communities to safeguard the resources of the villages for their own future long-term benefit.

The Janasaviya Programme does not end with empowering the women. It goes further to provide them with technical and technological skills to properly utilize the resources for sustainable economic development. It also provides credit and other inputs to make their desires a reality. Empowerment of women and organizing them at the rural level therefore are intended to be a major thrust in Sri Lankan initiatives to conserve the environment.

I would also like to mention briefly that several initiatives have been started as the "First Lady's Special Projects" to uplift the quality of life of poor rural women.

These initiatives include the following:

- * A project to construct 2,500 houses during the current year, at the rate of 100 houses in each administrative district. Disadvantaged women will be the prime beneficiaries.

- * Under the "Future of Today's Child" Programme, bank accounts are opened in the name of poor children who can benefit from the deposits which grow with interest over the years.
- * A special credit scheme for women has been started, and this provides loans for women to start economic ventures of their own.
- * Another project has been started to provide spectacles to the rural poor, with special emphasis on women.



These First Lady's Special Projects are being assisted by the Seva Vanitha Movement, a women's service organization of which the First Lady is the Chairperson, and comprises of wives of Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament, wives of judicial officers, service chiefs, civil servants and women public servants. Many service projects which benefit women have been launched by the Seva Vanitha Movement, including the introduction of a low cost infant milk powder, setting up creches for children of working mothers, providing equipment and drugs to hospitals, implementing training courses for destitute children, donating sewing machines to poor rural women, etc. All these projects have been launched through voluntary contributions from various sections of the society, including service organizations and NGOs. The Seva Vanitha Movement also has a special fund to help poor women in their specific needs.

4. Women in Development: A regional thrust

The Janasaviya initiative of Sri Lanka has now gone beyond our shores to the neighbouring countries. It is being cited as a model, and studied with a view to replicating its approaches in other countries.

The Sixth Heads of State Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in December 1991 dealt with the Poverty Alleviation Programme (Janasaviya) at considerable length. Under the guidance of President Premadasa who is the current Chairman of SAARC, a South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation was established.



This regional co-operation of poverty alleviation would, among others, assess the studies that are available on the dynamics of poverty creation and causes of poverty reproductions in South Asia, examine positive and negative experiences in the past, learn lessons from successful experiences, identify the role of Governments and other

support institutions and indicate implementation strategies. Millions of poor rural women are going to benefit by such an expanded programme. The regional studies and programmes are likely to address access to land, access to credit, technology extension and access to information. In doing so, they will be automatically addressing issues pertaining to environmental conservation as well. This will be of particular significance in view of the current year 1992 being declared as the SAARC Year of the Environment, which calls on all member states to reiterate their commitment to the cause of environment and conservation.



5. Conclusion

The Earth Summit, or the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) is being held at a very crucial time in the history of mankind. The well-being of our species, and that of the entire planet and all other beings who share it with us, depends on the far-reaching decisions we take at the Earth Summit.

I am happy to note that the Earth Summit will be discussing the issues of development and poverty from the point of view of developing countries such as Sri Lanka. I am particularly pleased that the agenda will address the crucial issue of involving women in environment and development, for that is the only way to ensure the long-term sustainability of any initiatives that evolve out of this landmark conference.

On behalf of all women in my country, and women all over the world, I would like to urge the delegates and others participating in this conference to bear in mind that, for developing countries, there is no substitute for socio-economic development. We cannot ask poor people to live in situations of stark poverty forever. It is our moral and social responsibility that we make available the means, opportunities and the technologies for poor people to develop themselves and uplift their families to more acceptable standards of living. The conservation of the environment and natural resources will be rendered meaningless if it is pursued without taking due note of this extremely important human dimension.

It is my fervent hope that this conference will address not only the issues of environment, but also the key issues of development. The long-term conservation of the environment will only be a practical reality if the immediate development needs of over three billion poor people of this world are addressed as a priority task.



MADAM HEMA PREMADASA

First Lady of the
Democratic Socialist Republic of
Shri Lanka

I wish to reiterate the firm and continued commitment of Shri Lanka, and my own personal involvement, towards the cause of environmental conservation on the one hand, and towards socio-economic advancement and development of women on the other hand. I also wish to reiterate that Shri Lanka will be willing to join in regional and international efforts and initiatives to safeguard the environment and uplift the living standards and social status of women.

I wish the Earth Summit every success, and convey my personal greetings and good wishes to all the delegates.

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