# Gender and conservation – Some issues

*Jayshree Vencatesan*

Indigenous, traditional and local communities have for ages prudently utilized and conserved a vast diversity of plants, animals and ecosystems. And to this end, they have moulded their environments, unconsciously and deliberately to such an extent that it is often impossible to separate nature from culture[1]. This complex inter-relationship between man and nature in the construction, formation and evolution of landscapes was recognized as 'cultural landscapes'[2]. Two broad components constitute cultural landscapes, viz. ecological and social. Both these components are inter-linked in such a manner that the 'humans-in-nature' is sustainable, and the local social system develops management practices based on ecological knowledge for dealing with the dynamics of the ecosystems with which it interacts[3].

There has been growing recognition since the early nineties on the merit of using traditional knowledge in conservation planning and management, although many a time the actual process remains quixotic. Despite this recognition, women and their role in the conservation debate remains rather superficial, and is often reduced to being figurative. Guha[4] attributes this to the lack of empirical data at least in India, and suggests that careful research be taken up on the following: (a) The division of labour in different peasant and tribal communities, to understand if this leads to attitudinal differences amongst men and women. (b) The role of women in the elaboration of indigenous systems of knowledge and resource management. (c) The effects of environmental degradation on gender relations. The study of gender-based knowledge systems is however often fraught with methodological constraints. In systems that rely largely on oral traditions, articulation of knowledge is not consistent and uniform. It also demands that methodologies and tools that are adopted simulate the form in which the knowledge exists. For instance, in a community that has a rich tradition of folklore, the methods adopted to understand the knowledge should be based on the structure and form of the local folklore tradition. In instances where the knowledge system of women is assimilated through observation and experience, articulation of the same in 'constructed situations' becomes difficult. Further, even in tribal communities, gendered knowledge is further influenced by other social variables such as age, birth-order and position within the household or community (Jayshree Vencatesan, unpublished).

Recognition of the contribution that women make to households and farming systems was largely due to Boserup's[5] seminal work, where she described the female farming systems in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South East Asia. This, in many ways, reoriented the attention of researchers and policy makers to recognize women's productive roles. Tinker[6] suggested the need to rethink 'mythical stereotypes', which led to work-force statistics to be defined only in terms of work performed for money and located in a 9-to-5 set-up. Tinker further identified three planning errors that remained blind to women's contribution and categorized them as: omission, reinforcement and addition. While the first category failed to notice or recognize women's contribution in traditional societies, the second and third categories imposed pre-existing biases or highlighted women's domestic and child-bearing roles to an extent that restricted their participation[7]. The women in development (WID) approach which emerged out of this groundwork therefore premised that women are an untapped resource who can provide economic contribution to development[8]. It hammered home Boserup's message of women as rational economic agents, constrained by discriminatory planning processes[7], and served to highlight the rationale that development processes would be more effective if women were fully incorporated into them.

Concerned with the manner in which the problems of women were perceived in terms of their biological differences from men rather than in terms of the social relationship between men and women, in which women have been systematically subordinated[8], the focus shifted to 'gender' rather than women. A number of studies[9–12] have highlighted the need to refocus attention on studying and understanding the dynamics of gender across a number of disciplines. For, the category of gender not only merely illuminates the unequal relations of power between male and female, but also helps one understand that the unequal male–female relations are extended via metaphors to varied areas of social life so as to signify unequal relations of power in general[13].

Traditional assumptions begin with the tenet that there has always been a particular sexual division of labour based on biological categories, namely women's child-bearing capacity and men's strength. From this basic division, it is assumed that all other sexual divisions of tasks and responsibilities are derived, the sexual dichotomies in temperament and behaviours, and the gender asymmetries in power, knowledge, authority, worth and status. These assumptions construct an evolutionary scenario that sees women as being physically constrained by pregnancy, lactation, to virtual immobility and evolutionary stagnation, and sees men as fundamentally unconstrained and creative, capable of bonding with each other, inventing weapons and bringing home the meat, each to his dependent domestic unit. This point of view interprets society as being characterized by a particular set of dichotomies based on natural oppositions: woman–man, nature–culture, private–public and subordinate–dominant[12]. Evidently, among the numerous stereotypes that exist in planning and development, the most problematic is the one that relates to gender divisions of work and labour. A rigid division of work in rural communities is not always visible; and especially in tribal communities that have evolved over centuries, the presence of a number of 'blinds' may lead to superficial, inadequate or erroneous observations (Jayshree Vencatesan, unpublished). Such a gender segmentation of work has led to the concepts of (a) 'heavy' and 'light' work, and (b) 'routine' and 'superior' work. Light and routine work is done by females[14], and includes activities such as transplanting paddy, or selecting seeds and preserving them for posterity (Jayshree Vencatesan, unpublished). In poverty or subsistence situations, women's work includes not only 'reproductive work' – the child-bearing

**Box 1.** Twenty years of recommendations – from Nairobi to Beijing

**The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, UN 1985**

- Enhance awareness by women of environmental issues, and the capacity of women and men to manage their environment and sustain productive resources. Disseminate information on environmental sustainability, and recognize women as 'active and equal' participants in ecosystem management and the control of environmental degradation (para 226).
- Assess the 'environmental impact of policies, programmes and projects on women's health and activities . . . and (eliminate) negative effects (para 227).
- Agrarian reforms to 'guarantee women's constitutional and legal rights in terms of access to land and other means of production' (para 62).

**World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, UN 1989**

- Need for 'comprehensive, reliable and unbiased statistics on the nature and role of women's contribution to food and agricultural production' (p. 84).
- The earlier Survey in 1986 emphasised on the need to provide women the access to support services to prevent negative consequences in food production.

**Agenda 21, UN 1992**

- Take full account of women's role in data on alternative livelihoods (tree crops, livestock, etc.) (13/17 (b)).
- Promote environmentally sound technology designed and developed consulting women (24.3 (d)).
- Develop research and policy analysis on impact of environmental degradation on women (24.8 (c)).

**Preamble of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992**

- Recognising also the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirming the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation.

**Draft Platform for Action, Beijing 1995**

The Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995 of the United Nations held in Beijing, called for a recognition that '. . . Women's experiences and contributions to an ecologically sound environment must be central to the agenda for the twenty-first century. Sustainable development will be an elusive goal unless women's contribution to environmental management is recognized and supported' (Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995).

Some of the relevant strategic objectives of the Beijing Declaration are:

- 'Encourage, subject to national legislation and consistent with the Convention on Biological Diversity, the effective protection and use of local knowledge, innovations and practices of women of indigenous and local communities, including practices relating to traditional medicines, biodiversity and indigenous technologies, and endeavour to ensure that these are respected, maintained, promoted and preserved in an ecologically sustainable manner . . . ' (Strategic objective K 1, 253c – Action to be taken by National Governments).
- 'Encourage the design of projects in the areas of concern to the Global Environmental Facility that would benefit women and projects managed by women and establish strategies and mechanisms to increase the proportion of women, particularly at grass roots levels, involved as decision makers, planners, managers and scientists . . . ' (Strategic objective K 1, 254c,d – Action to be taken by Governments and International organizations).

Relevant articles in the draft include:

- Article 29: Improve women's access to and control over land and other means of production.
- Article 51: Recognise the daily reality of women's management of natural resources, obtaining fuel and water, managing household consumption.
- Article 53: Include women in decision-making regarding environment.
- Article 54: Include women and their perspectives in environmental policies, recognise effects of environmental degradation on women.
- Article 55: Involve women in environmental management, protection, and conservation programmes.

and rearing responsibility, but also productive work – as income earners and community-managing work in both the urban and rural context[8], and it is often the women's earnings, as wages or raw materials that support the family's food and nutritional needs (Jayshree Vencatesan, unpublished)[15,16].

Womens' role in conservation since the 19th century remained 'hidden from history', largely because women themselves remained invisible in the development process[17], although studies on indigenous communities in Latin America and India[18] highlight the existence of gender-based knowledge systems that entitle men and women to distinct knowledge legacies. This system allows women and men to function in the effective management of their rainforests and also empowers each gender to act as an active and conscious agent in biodiversity conservation[1].

The emergence of eco-feminism in the early 1970s in many ways was the most vociferous articulation of women's connection with nature. Credit for coining the word 'ecofeminism' in 1974 is generally given to the French feminist, Francoise d'Eaubonne, although Janet Biehl stakes a claim on behalf of the feminist movement of the United States[19]. This school of thought, which shares much of its perspective with the Green movement, premises that women have a greater appreciation of humanity's relationship to the natural world, its embeddedness and embodiedness, through their own embodiment as female[19]. Ecofeminism as a movement was spearheaded by Ynestra King[20], who sees domination of men over women as a prototype of all other forms of domination. One of the earliest works in India which connected women and the environment, was that of Shiva[21], who argued that ecological destruction and marginalization of women have been the result of Western science and Western economic development paradigms. Mies *et al.*[22] argued that women suffer disproportionately in social and ecological terms, where patterns of exploitation are based on colonialism, racism or worker exploitation. Agarwal[23], with an alternate perspective, states that men's and women's connections with the environment require a critique grounded in the concrete realities of their lives, and ecofeminism, by remaining at the symbolic level, fails to recognize race, class and ethnic differences.

In view of the fact that in traditional agro-ecosystems the woman plays a central role in ensuring household food security, Abramovitz[24] argues that the recognition of the vital role which women play in understanding and managing the living diversity of their surroundings, and the importance of that diversity to sustaining women and the families they support has to be mainstreamed into development paradigms. The role women play in conservation of agrobiodiversity through seed selection, storage and exchange has been extensively documented in the last decade (Jayshree Vencatesan, unpublished), although the actual process of mainstreaming their contribution into conservation planning continues to remain rather symbolic. Similarly, considerable efforts have been made to understand gender-based knowledge systems amongst forest-dwelling communities, but once again are ignored while developing conservation strategies. This is repeatedly illustrated in all the policy papers and legal instruments that India has developed in the post-CBD phase. A couple of well-phrased lines on the need to 'include women', noble in thought and usually located in the preamble is what characterizes our approach to mainstream gender into conservation. As long as we continue to earmark a separate section or a chapter on 'gender' in our planning documents, we are as distant as ever in achieving equity. This despite a twenty-year plea (Box 1)!


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*Jayshree Vencatesan, No. 5, Shri Nivas, 21st Street, Thillaiganga Nagar, Chennai 600 061, India.*
*e-mail: jvencatesan@gmail.com*