

Gender and Environment: A Campaign for Women's Rights

Background:

It has been accepted as an undisputed fact that women, rural and tribal, have a very intimate and symbiotic relationship with the ecology around them as they are untenably linked to the natural resources. India has a predominantly agrarian population which is dependent on land and forests for its sustenance and livelihood, socially, culturally and economically. Women constitute fifty percent of this population and contribute substantially to this system of livelihood. They are equal partners, or often times, the majority players in economic and domestic sustenance of rural communities. They are the primary actors in agriculture, collection of forest produce, in livestock management apart from nurturing their families. It is important that this link between women and environment is strongly established and understood when development paradigms are visualised by governments and societies to improve socio-economic situations.

Women and Development:

In India, people adversely affected by development have been mainly dalits and tribals and among them women, who suffer even severe forms of discrimination. Repeated displacement, migration and drastic changes in livelihood patterns have socially and culturally denuded the status of women increasing violence and abuse against them. However, it is also a reality that women have been most often alienated from conceptions of development and their close association with their environment is even further ignored. Environment degradation has proved to have a direct impact on the lives and health of women.

Development projects have had a counter effect on the lives of women living in these areas. Projects varying from multi-purpose dams, reservoirs, power plants or any other industries have led to large-scale displacement, destruction of livelihoods, cultures and also the physical environment. While local communities were adversely affected, the issue of women in such situations has never been considered as a focal problem despite the fact that they are the worst affected and further marginalised as a result of these changes.

Women and Development: An Issue of right over natural resources:

In India, as in most Asia-Pacific countries, exploitation of land and other natural resources has a long history of abuse and plunder. Impoverishment and alienation from lands of certain communities was considered inevitable in India's economic planning. Demanding people's forfeiture of their lands for 'national prosperity' was considered as natural.

Impact of Development on Women's Work:

Legally women have no rights over lands or natural resources in our patriarchal system when they are displaced. Whenever their villages have been displaced or affected, women have been forced out of their land based work and pushed into menial and marginalised forms of labour as maids and servants, as construction labourers or into prostitution, which are highly unorganised and socially humiliating.

It has always been the men who receive any form of rehabilitation either in cash or as employment while women are completely alienated from their strong economic role. They are forced to depend solely on the wages of the male members as the new economic situation does not provide space for women to participate. If employed, it is mostly in the small private or un-organised sector where women are the first to be retrenched, have no work safety measures, are susceptible to serious health hazards which also affects their reproductivity, and exposes them to sexual exploitation.

Women's Dependence Land and Forests:

In the changing context of development which is affecting agriculture and forestry, women are losing their right to cultivate their traditional crops which in the present day are considered obsolete systems and are they are forced into market-oriented agricultural practices. When forests are cut down in the name of development, they are unable to collect forest produce for consumption or for livelihood. This loss of accessibility to forest resources has serious negative impacts on women's lives. In rural and tribal areas women are the principal food gatherers from forests, they collect water, firewood and fodder, forest is their first source of meeting their health needs due to their invaluable knowledge of medical plants and in the lean seasons, the main source of nutrition. Tribal women are dependent on the forest for earning their livelihood through sale of forest produce.

Impact on Women's Domestic Lives:

The living conditions of women displaced - their private and cultural spaces, infrastructure facilities, protection from social customs, etc - have serious negative impacts reducing them into helpless situations. Hitherto non-existent social evils like wife-battering, alcoholism, indebtedness, physical and sexual harassment, prostitution, polygamy, desertion, etc have emerged in many places. Criminal offences against women are alarmingly on the rise and they are rarely brought to the attention of the authorities or is there any punitive action taken.

Particularly in tribal areas women have become concubines for non tribal contractors, traders, truck drivers, etc leading to severe social, health and economic problems which have never been addressed by the government.

Human rights abuses on rural and tribal women have shockingly increased and any form of democratic protest or resistance is violently being suppressed. Today, in many places women are also not spared from these forms of abuses, physically and mentally.

Women and Mining:

The Impact of development as experienced in many of the spheres is seen among women displaced or affected by mining operations. In India most of the mining towns and villages have the prevalence of all the negative impacts explained above. There are many small women's struggles fighting the evils of mining related exploitation in different parts of the country. There are people's movements in Rajasthan where migrant and dalit women work in humanly disgraceful conditions in small private mines. Women fighting against the hazards of radiation due to uranium mining in Jharkhand. Invasion of multinational mining companies are opposed by tribal women in Raigada district of Orissa where they are even facing false criminal charges. In Andhra Pradesh, adivasi women are resisting the amendments to land transfer regulations in the scheduled area where the government is trying to lease out their lands to private bauxite mining companies. In Karnataka the unions are fighting closure of gold mines in Kolar. Women living in the midst of coal mines in Hazaribagh in Bihar are asserting their rights for better living and working conditions. These are but a few examples of women fighting for their rights and that of the environment around them.

The Need for a Collective Voice:

Given this background of women's exploitation and their alienation from their environment, all these small struggles to protect and campaign for the rights of women as communities, workers, protectors and nurturers of natural resources and ecology around them are articulating for a gender sensitive development policies. We as women, today find the need to come together and raise a collective voice and work on specific problems of women in mining. Some of us have realised that we should have a National Network of Women and Mining to address the issues of women mine-workers and women in communities displaced/affected by mining.

Mines, Minerals & PEOPLE:

In 1999 some of us mining struggle groups came together to form a national alliance called mines, minerals & PEOPLE". Mm&P has been networking with local mining struggles in different states to confront the destructive impacts of mining. It has over 100 grass-roots struggle groups and more than 20 support/resource organisations as members besides having links with international organisations working on mining. The first National Convention on Mining was held in April 2000 where most of the members felt the need for greater emphasis on women's problems in mining. Thus this network of

women and mining in India is part of the national alliance, mm&P and will work on specific issues related to women.

International Network of Women and Mining:

Some members have been participating in women's networks within and outside India. We (mm&P) are a member of the International Women and Mining Network (RIMM) and have been participating in the international conferences held in Philippines and Bolivia. We have started building up contacts and support from other members of the network like in South Africa, South America, Canada, Indonesia, Philippines, Belgium and others. We have participated in preparing the resolutions for this network and have been nominated to coordinate the Regional Coordination Office for Asia-Pacific. We have also been requested to host the next International Women and Mining Conference in 2004 in India.

Our Focus:

In spite of these small struggles in different parts of India, we still do not understand the extent and nature of problems of women in mining in India, status of women mine workers, women in mining villages, their health, social and economic levels, their needs within mining and alternative choices available.

Thus, the primary objective of a women and mining network in India would focus on:

1. Understanding the status of women in mining and affected by mining
2. Work for the rights of women mine-workers and women displaced/affected by mining
3. Work towards a collective struggle in order to advocate for a gender sensitive mining policy for the country
4. Network with women's struggles and campaigns nationally and internationally in order to gain strength and solidarity for our struggles.

The Proposed Nature of Activities:

The Women and Mining Network will up strong association and membership with grass-roots and support organisations. We shall work together with our coordination office at Hyderabad with Samata taking the responsibility to develop the resource centre. The regional level work will be coordinated with the working committee and the member organisations who are part of this network. The important tasks that will be taken up by the network are:

- provide and exchange information,
- to build and strengthen the women and mining network,
- take up media and legal advocacy,

- undertake research and documentation,
- make site visits to strengthen the network with women from the mining communities.
- communication and campaign support to local struggles and network with struggles outside India
- work for better policies on mining in relation to women,
- organise regional and national level skill-share and exposure visits
- fight for new legal rights for women to gain control over land and other natural resources which were the domain of men alone.
- campaign for protection of human rights of women displaced, working or living in mining areas
- fight against employment of girl-child labourers in mines
- understand the health problems and hazards of women in mining areas and address these problems.
- participate in international campaigns, networks on the rights of women in mining, especially as a member of RIMM (Red Internacional Mujeres y Minería, an international network of women and mining),
- organise and participate in workshops, conferences and fact finding visits to fight for the rights of women in mining,
- organise the Third International Women and Mining Conference

Some of the activities of women and mining like networking, research and documentation, information collection and dissemination to local struggle groups, etc can be taken up by other groups who are members and who have specific skills/outreach.