ROLE OF MOUNTAIN WOMEN IN THE MANAGEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE ECO-SYSTEM

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I will start my presentation with a statement from the Rio Declaration of 1992-

"Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore is essential to achieving sustainable development".

If we talk of natural resource management from a global perspective, whom do we find in the forefront of the race for protection and preservation of the resources. The answer comes very naturally, it is the women. Women particularly those living in rural areas or mountain areas have special relationship with the environment. They are more close to the nature than men and this very close relationship makes them perfect managers of an eco-system. The life of mountain women is so much interwined with the environment that whole ecosystem revolves around her and she can't even think of her survival without it. For her forest is her mother's home as she is entirely dependent on the forest to meet her daily needs such as - water, fodder, fuels, minor forest produce etc. We can understand the profound and unique relationship of a mountain women with the forest by the following example- A women from Chamoli District who gave birth to a baby girl in the forest when she was collecting fodder and fuel wood , named her baby as **Boni Devi (Goddess of the Forest)** as she was born in the forest. Here we can see the emotional relationship of mountain women with their forest. We can also understand that in the mountain areas women are overburdened with work and most of the women has to go to the forest to collect fodder and fuel till the last day of their pregnancy.

Impact of Environmental Degradation On Mountain Women

Environmental degradation and distruction has increased the problems of woman who is known as the backbone of mountain economy and the main subsistence provider in the hills. Due to fast depletion of forest cover she has to walk 8 to 10 Kms. every day in search of water, fuel, fodder and minor forest produce etc. And if we calculate the distance covered by her in a year , we will find that she covers 3000 to 4000 Kms distance in a year only in search of fodder, fuel and water. The principal victims of this environmental degradation are women whose lives are intrinsically related to land, water, forest which are the main components and integral parts of an Eco-system. Adverse effect on any one of these components will definitely disturb the other components due to the strong linkages and inter-relationship with each other and create a havoc on the life of people, especially women, living in and around the Mountains.

Mountain Women And Eco-system Management

Women have vital role in conservation and management of sustainable eco-system. Since time immemorial women are traditionally involved in protecting and conserving their natural resources in mountain areas. With their extraordinary skills and traditional knowledge women have proved how land, water, forest and other natural resources can be used and managed. They have their own devised system and ways to sustain and manage the resources which are the basis of survival for their families and communities. Through their practical experiences and managerial skills they have acquired immense knowledge of the various types of plants, grass , medicinal plants, kind of fuel wood and various species of fodder plants. They know better than any scientist that what grass, hurbs, shrubs, trees are best for them and should be planted to maintain a balanced eco-system and well being of their families and communities. They always prefer a mixed forest which can meet their demands of fuel, fodder fruits and food as well as maintains the bio-diversity of the mountains. They are perfect in making an optimum use and conservation of natural resources.

Village Level Women Groups And Institutions

There are plenty of examples in India especially in the mountain areas where women have actively been involved in maintaining and managing their eco-system. Inspite of being illiterate they have become environmental educator. Their traditional knowledge, practical experiences and managerial skill has proved the fact that sustainable development cannot be achieved without full integration of women in resource management. The world famous Forest movement **"Chipko Andolan"** of the hill women, against the destruction of forest in Himalayas has proved that it is the women only who can protect, conserve and manage their environment. After Chipko Movement in many villages of the central Himalayas Mahila Mangal Dals (village level women groups) have taken initiative to regenerate the forest by planting trees and protecting them. All Women Forest Panchayat (authorised community institution for the management of forest) of Bachhair village has set an example of successful management of forest. .

Here is an example of the collective strength of Mahila Mangle Dal of Bachhair village who is involved in conservation of their forest and natural wealth. The women of Bachhair were concerned about their dwindling forest because they know that once the forest were destroyed they would be the worst sufferers. The Sarpanch (Head of the forest) was a corrupt man who would encourage outsiders to fell trees in the forest. One day the sarpanch sold off a large tract of forest to outside contractor who lost no time in felling trees. Now women were firm determined to remove the sarpanch and filed a complaint against the sarpanch with the Sub-Divisional Magistrate. The village women created so much of pressure that the sarpanch had to give resignation . Women elected a women sarpanch and it was the first time in the history of Uttrakhand that a women was the head of the forest panchayat. Now the M.M.D. of Bachhair was determined to protect their forest . They framed their own rules and regulations to protect the forest and also for sharing of benefits among their members. A guard was also hired to keep vigil over the forest. Even women themselves also stay up the whole night keeping watch over the forest to save it from illegal tree fellers. An afforestation drive was launched every year and soon the whole area was covered with dense forest. In addition to protecting their community forest the women of Bachhair also protected Govt. owned forest. On a summer day when a fire broke out in the Govt. own forest the women rushed to the spot and fearlessly brought the fires under control. Due to the remarkable work done by Mahila Mangal Dal of Bachhair in the field of Natural Resource Management, this **Mahila Mangal Dal was one of the recipients of Indira Priya Darshini Vriksh Mitra Award from the late Prime Minister Shri Rajiv Gandhi in 1984.** Inspired by the Mahila Mangal Dal of Bachhair women in other villages have also began to follow-in their foot steps.

These groups are the best example of community based institutions who are involved in natural resource management. Here is another glaring example of Mahila Mangal Dal of Dang village in Tehri Garhwal.

It was the hardships faced by the women of village Dang in Tehri Garhwal which motivated them to join hands for the endeavor which yielded results after a gestation period of twenty years. They used to sneak into the forest of nearby villages to fulfill their needs, but this had no secure future for them, so they raised their own forest on a big patch of land which bore fruit after twenty years against all odds. They framed there own rules and regulations to not only protect the forest but also for sharing of benefits among their members. There are numerous examples where such non-formal groups have fought against severe odds to save their forests and resources.

Legal Recognition To Women Groups Involved In Resource Management - An Urgent Need Of Today

Now the the question is that when there are M.M.Ds. or village level institutions of mountain women, who are already involved in the management of their eco-system, protecting and conserving their forest wealth, water resources, livestock, fertility of land etc., **why these groups are not given due recognition which are born out of the need and necessity of the people and are evolved from the process rather than thrusted upon them by outsiders. Why the stress is being given to create another institutions or forest committees instead of empowering already existing women groups or M.M.Ds.** Whenever there is a talk on formulation of policy or time to take any important decision related to natural resource management, the contribution made by these village women is always forgotten.

Why these village level institutions who have come up in their own process of evolution are not being given legal status to manage their natural resources. At policy level these women have not been recognized as equal partners in the policy framing or program implementation. Though women are very active at grass root level, but the representation of women both at national and international level is very low and policies are still being decided by men without consulting women. **Through this International congress I would like to request all the women groups of different countries present here in the congress to raise this issue in all national and international platform. So that a pressure can be created to give a Legal status to these village level women group, whose marvellous contribution towards the conservation of natural resources has proved that mountain women have specific skills and knowledge that is essential for the care of the eco-system**.

Mountain Women's Traditional Knowledge , Practical Experiences and her Own Devised Systems to Conserve the Natural Wealth Must be Incorporated In Development Programs -

We have plenty of examples from mountain areas , and it has also been my own experience that whenever women has taken initiative in conservation and protection of their natural wealth they always incorporated their traditional knowledge, practical experiences, religious sentiments, code of social conduct, cultural practices and their own devised systems in it. Because of this women have been tremendously successful in conserving their natural wealth in a more constructive manner.

It was the urge to conserve the forest wealth which gave birth to the idea of Maiti forest, in Chamoli District of Uttrakhand region. Maiti means mothers home. since this movement

starts from mother's home so it has been given the name of Maiti Movement. The young maids of village joined and are still joining hands to build Maiti Forest, it starts with nursery raising and formation of Maiti group of village girls. Because of the involvement of young girls in it this movement is also named as **The Movement of the Daughters of Himalaya.** On the occasion of marriage of any Maiti girl, the plantation of saplings from the nursery is the responsibility of other girls. The needed pits are dug near the bride's house and this plantation program is an essential component of every marriage ceremony. The bride presents the sapling to her bridegroom and the groom plants it under the auspicious chanting of mantras by the Brahmin. The other maiti girls also plant their saplings in the village. The responsibility to take care of the plant rests with the Maiti girls. The parents of the bride too have a special attachment to care for the tree as it is an embodiment of their girl. Today the region flourishes with these Maiti trees, also fulfilling their other essential needs.

Maiti Movement today has spread to five hundred villages bringing to the fore the same idea. The movement blended with the ongoing cultural practices of the people, imbibed within itself the emotional sentiments of the people. There were no heavy inputs of resources or funds to build the system and today the movement finds it's roots in nearly five hundred villages without any investment. It has replicated on it's own. women of Uttrakhand has taken the leading role to carry on this cultural movement in order to preserve the diversity and natural heritage of the Himalayas. The fact behind this successful management of natural resources by women is that there exist an unbreakable bond between forest and women. Her relationship with the forest is very emotional and natural, that is why the forest is called as *Mayka (parental home)* of the hill women.

Here is another example of how cultural practices are mingled with the conservation activities to save the diversity of the Himalayas. This cultural aspect of conserving and saving the forest wealth have far reaching effect on the people.

The idea of **RAKSHA SUTRA MOVEMENT TO SAVE THE NATURAL WEALTH OF HIMALAYA** was totally a new thought that came up in August 94 before Raksha Bandhan, an Indian festival. The philosophy behind such a movement is similar to Rakshabandhan. On the occasion of the Raksha Bandhan the sister ties a thread of protection around the wrist of her brother and wishes a long , safe and happy life for him. This festival is symbol of love and affection between brother and sister. Women from different villages, fully prepared them selves, Under the leadership of Basanti Negi and Gayatri Semwal, who belong to and environmental conservation committees, tied Raksha Sutra on trees of their forest that was 15 km high. The beginning of Raksha Sutra from Reyala forest in Uttrakhand have provided the motivational, aspect to another various areas in Uttrakhand. This created awareness in people to stop forest from getting destroyed in future. The hill women of Mukhem village kept forward such an example that stopped the people from doing forest business by tying Raksha Sutra. The women made resolution that they will raise their voice if any kind of destruction or cutting of trees will be done in their forests. They also were determined to fight against such an act. On the other side it is very clear that the preservation of natural resources is totally in hands of women.

I think only these cost effective means of preserving and protecting our natural resources, we can go for in developing countries where we can't afford big development projects with high level of investment of funds. We still have to learn from the people's experiences. We still don't give recognition to these initiatives inspite of the fact that they have proved their sustainability and applicability since time immemorial.

It has been our own experiences that whenever there are big projects with high level of investment of funds they raised the expectations of the local people beyond limit. These programs, formulated without consulting the people , have a specific set of framework to involve community and that is the reason why people's participation is not to the tune desired in these programs. **I think the most important point which these programs should consider is the involvement of the cost effective means and methods, which mountain or rural women practicing since time immemorial to save their environment, into the software of any programs or models prepared for the management of natural resources.** These big programs need to incorporate the experiences of those local people who are already have been successful in this venture. Otherwise such models become island of development only to be seen not to be learned from.

Mountain Women Should be Given the Status of Main Worker

In mountain eco- system women have very important role to play. They meet their daily household needs through bio-mass or biomass related products, which are mostly collected freely from the immediate environment. In short they live within nothing other than a bio-mass based subsistence economy. The bio-mass based economy has a delicately woven net of different components of eco- system. But due to the globalisation we are moving fast towards the cash economy which recognizes as a main worker only to those who are working in organized sector and earning their livelihood in cash. Mountain women who is the main subsistence provider in the mountain and known as the back bone of the hill economy works for 15-16 hours a day , yet she has not been recognized or given the status of main worker, like other organized sector, as she is not getting the returns in the form of cash. Here **I request all the countries to raise the issue of Mountain Woman in all the big conferences and build a pressure to get her the status of main worker in every mountain region of the world.**

One more and very important point which I would like to stress upon is that in the mountain economy women have very significant role to play, but the economic condition of the women in developing countries is very grim as they do not have the control of cash in their hands. **Through this conference we demand that the collecting of all the minor forest produce should be the right of women and mountain women, who are associated with resource management all over the world, should be given priority in all economic activities related to M.F.P.** On one hand it will raise the economic status of women on the other it will inculcate the feeling of ownership within the women groups and they will take enough interest to protect and conserve them.

Strategies to Empower and Enhance the Leadership Qualities of Mountain Women in the Management of Eco-system

The role of Mountain women in all environmental protection activities has been the strongest because it was only they who could perceive and feel it. Gradually the contribution of women in natural resource management is being recognized but there is still a need to give special attention to making them an equal partner in the policy framing or in program implementation. Our efforts should be focused on empowering and strengthening these institutions who have come up in their own process of evolution. These Women Groups should be empowered to get an access to and control over the natural resources. Women's knowledge, skill, their traditional values and experiences must be recognized. Today various major forest act and environment policies are being formulated but hardly any attention and recognition has been

given to these women groups who are engaged in forest protection and created a worldwide awareness.

We should accelerate our efforts not only at policy level to pressurize the Government to include women's participation in decision making but also promote environmental education and activism at local level. Environmental education and activism are the priority areas where women should be given opportunities to enhance their capabilities. Women have less opportunities of exposure to new ideas and technologies , thus a movement to empower women must become a major focus of any policy and development program every where. Women's views, opinion, their needs, problems and priorities must be addressed in the national and international agenda. The successful and innovative efforts of women in every region must be high lighted to sensitize the planners and policy makers. The learnings of these successful case studies, indigenous knowledge of women must be incorporated in the sustainable development. As women have deep relationship with all the components of eco-system they should be given opportunity to participate in the **VILLAGE ECO-SYSTEM PLANNING** trainings. The perfect eco-system can be maintained only when women will be recognized as the best manager of eco-system. The inter-relationship of land, water, forest, animals with each other can be understood only by women in a broader and more holistic way than any one else.

Especial efforts are needed to strengthen and promotion of women groups at grassroot level. Women have potential of taking leadership, so their capacities must be enhanced by providing them education , training, new technologies to reduce their work load and exposure to outside world. Lack of access to legal, technical, developmental and financial information is the major stumbling block in the path of women development and in achieving sustainable development. A cadre of women motivators should be developed who will act as a resource person, awareness generator facilitator in the village. This trained group of women will create awareness among other women of village. This program will help in development of local leadership among women and develop self reliant and self sustaining women. This trained group of women will educate, inspire, motivate and encourage the other women of their area to come into mainstream. HARC has also created a cadre of women motivators who are organizing women involved in the use, protection, conservation and management of their natural resources.

There is also a need to establish a Mountain Women Forum at International Level which will provide a common platform to women from every region of the world to exchange and share their views, ideas, issues, problems, priorities and learn from others experiences.

MOUNTAIN WOMEN 'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ECO-SYSTEM

- **Women living in rural areas or mountain areas have special relationship with the environment.**

- **They are more close to the nature than men and this very close relationship makes them perfect managers of an eco-system.**

- **The life of mountain women is so much interwined with the environment that whole eco-system revolves around her and she can't even think of her survival without it.**

- **For mountain women forest is her mother's home as she is entirely dependent on the forest to meet her needs such as - water, fodder, fuels, minor forest produce etc.**

IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON MOUNTAIN WOMEN

- **The principal victims of this environmental degradation are women whose lives are intrinsically related to land, water, forest, the main components and integral parts of an Eco-system.**

- **Adverse effect on any one of these components will definitely disturb the other components due to the strong linkages and inter-relationship with each other and create a havoc on the life of people, especially women, living in and around the Mountains.**

- **Environmental degradation and destruction has increased the problems of women.**

- **Due to fast depletion of forest cover and drying water resources women has to walk 8 to 10 Kms. every day and on the whole she covers 3000 to 4000 Kms distance in a year only in search of fodder, fuel and water.**

MOUNTAIN WOMEN AND ECO-SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

- **Women have vital role in conservation and management of sustainable eco-system.**

- **With their extraordinary skills and traditional knowledge women have proved how land, water, forest and other natural resources can be used and managed.**

- **They have their own devised system and ways to sustain and manage the resources which are the basis of survival for their families and communities.**

- **They know better than any scientist that what grass, herbs, shrubs, trees are best for them and should be planted to maintain a balanced eco-system and well being of their families and communities.**

- **Sustainable development cannot be achieved without full integration of women in resource management.**

VILLAGE LEVEL WOMEN GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

- Village level women groups are the best example of community based institutions who are involved in natural resource management.

- The world famous Forest movement **"Chipko Andolan"** of the hill women, against the destruction of forest in Himalayas has proved that it is the women groups only who can protect, conserve and manage their environment.

- Legal Recognition To Women Groups Involved In Resource Management is an urgent need of today. At policy level these women have not been recognized as equal partners in the policy framing or program implementation.

- Marvellous contribution of women towards the conservation of natural resources has proved that they have specific skills and knowledge which is essential for the care of the eco-system.

- Mountain women's traditional knowledge, practical experiences and her own devised systems to conserve the natural wealth must be incorporated in development programs .

- The cost effective means of preserving and protecting our natural resources, we can go for in developing countries where we can't afford big development projects with high level of investment of funds.

- We still don't give recognition to these initiatives inspite of the fact that they have proved their sustainability and applicability since time immemorial.

MOUNTAIN WOMEN SHOULD BE GIVEN THE STATUS OF MAIN WORKER

- **In the mountain economy women have very significant role to play as she is the main subsistence provider in the mountain.**

- **The economic condition of the women in developing countries is very grim as they do not have the control of cash in their hands.**

- **Through this conference we demand that the collecting of all the minor forest produce should be the right of women .**

- **Mountain women, who are associated with resource management all over the world, should be given priority in all economic activities related to M.F.P.**

STRATEGIES TO EMPOWER AND ENHANCE THE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES OF MOUNTAIN WOMEN IN THE MANAGEMENT OF ECO-SYSTEM

- There is a need to give special attention to making women an equal partner in the policy framing or in program implementation.

- Our efforts should be focused on empowering and strengthening village level women institutions who have come up in their own process of evolution to get them an access to and control over the natural resources.

- We should accelerate our efforts not only at policy level to pressurize the Government to include women's participation in decision making but also promote environmental education and activism at local level.

- Women have less opportunities of exposure to new ideas and technologies, thus a movement to empower women must become a major focus of any policy and development program .

- Women's views, opinion, their needs, problems and priorities must be addressed in the national and international agenda.

- The successful and innovative efforts of women in every region must be high lighted to sensitize the planners and policy makers. The learnings of these successful case studies, indigenous knowledge of women must be incorporated in the sustainable development.

- As women have deep relationship with all the components of eco-system they should be given opportunity to participate in the **VILLAGE ECO-SYSTEM PLANNING** trainings.

- The perfect eco-system can be maintained only when women will be recognized as the best manager of eco-system.

- Women have potential of taking leadership, so their capacities must be enhanced by providing them education , training, new technologies to reduce their work load and exposure to outside world.

- A cadre of women motivators should be developed who will act as a resource person, awareness generator facilitator in the village. This trained group of women will create awareness among other women of village.

- HARC has also created a cadre of women motivators who are organising women involved in the use, protection, conservation and management of their natural resources.

- There is also a need to establish a Mountain Women Forum at International Level which will provide a common platform to women from every region of the world to exchange and share their views, ideas, issues, problems, priorities and learn from others experiences.