

**Sandhya Venkateswaran.** *Environment, Development, and the Gender Gap*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1994. 234 pages. Hardbound edition. Indian Rupees 250.00. Paperback edition. Indian Rupees 145.00.

Over-application of chemical fertilisers in agriculture, waterlogging resulting from over-irrigation, and deforestation caused by excessive grazing of the common lands have adverse effects on the proportion of population that derives its livelihood from land resources. Declines in common land negatively affect the livestock economy; a reduction in fish production due to water pollution adversely affects the livelihood of many families; deforestation reduces employment opportunities and leads to curtailed income; and, depleting water resources and drought lead to famine.

In a developing country like India, division of labour, responsibilities, and decision-making power at home and outside are usually determined by men. Women are generally considered only good for taking care of children and other household members and performing household chores, such as fetching water, collecting firewood and fodder, purchasing household goods, and providing meals to the male members of the family who work on farms. In addition to this, they may also be responsible for generating some income from the surrounding resource base. As such, they interact with the environment more closely and extensively than men. Because of the negligible perception of the link between women and the environment, the issue of women's role in natural resource management has remained neglected for a long time. Environmental degradation not only affects men and women differently but also varies across economic and social class, caste, and geographical location. The less affluent women of the rural areas have a closer association with natural resources as compared with women belonging to the prosperous class. These women, despite playing a key role in environment-related agricultural activities, have little access to productive resources; and due to social and cultural taboos, they are not able to improve their skills by availing of the benefits of extension services and training. This keeps them far behind men in obtaining technical information regarding agriculture and, therefore, they are also discriminated in wage payments relative to men.

Women who belong to the lower social classes are the main focus of this book. The relationship between women and the environment has been analysed by describing the role played by women in the management of natural resources in a traditional manner. In each chapter, the author picks one specific issue related to the environment and thoroughly examines its impact on human lives and livelihood, but with a special emphasis on women. In this regard, the author describes the sufferings and burdens that women bear. She concludes that environmental degradation is a threat to the survival of the poor in rural society, and women are the main victims. At the end of each chapter, the author evaluates the governmental and non-governmental

organisations' programmes (NGOs) dealing with environmental degradation and finds in them a complete marginalisation of women from all policies and programmes that aim to manage the environment.

However, despite examining women's problems in detail, this book falls short in pointing out the problems at the grassroots level and in presenting the best possible solutions. The author does not offer any concrete suggestions on how women belonging to the lower social classes can improve their standard of living, attain their rightful status, gain control over income and other resources, and minimise the workload within and outside the home. In India, due to the prevailing caste system, people belonging to the lower social classes are considered low-grade and inferior and are not supposed to take a lead in any productive economic and social action. Does the Indian social system allow these women to get a better education and obtain a respectable job to raise their standard of living? It is not enough to say that the presence of a woman representative would help in solving the problems related to women. Is the presence of upper class women among the planners actually helpful in improving the social status of poor women, or would the presence of lower class women be more beneficial? Will such a presence be acceptable to the other members of these programmes? Does the adoption of modern technology help the women in fetching water, collecting firewood and fodder, or doing washing, cooking, and other household chores? The author does not stress on the provision of safe drinking-water at the door-step or on the availability of kerosene oil, natural gas, and electricity, which would not only save time and energy but also help in creating non-farm opportunities of income generation. She does not describe the reasons why the poor households of rural areas have limited access to basic facilities and amenities and what measures have been taken so far by the government and the NGOs towards provision of these services.

Further, no comparison of the relative effects of environmental degradation on men and women has been presented. A consideration of these problems and a comparison of the division of labour between men and women within the same social class would have enhanced the utility of the analysis. Also, greater emphasis on increasing literacy, in order to raise female status at home and strengthen their exposure outside home, would help planners and decision-makers.

Despite these limitations, the author's suggestions about women's involvement in welfare programmes would be well-received by the intended audience not only in India but also in other developing countries where women bear the major adverse effects of any structural change.

Pakistan Institute of  
Development Economics,  
Islamabad.

**Hina Nazli**