

Disempowering women through the “green economy”

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“The Future We Want,” the text being discussed by governments for Rio+20, promotes rhetoric of empowering women but in reality, it not only disempowers them further, it also gives more rights and access to corporations.

The basic step towards achieving women empowerment is for women to have access rights to resources such as land and water, two resources that are rapidly being privatized and corporatized. How can green economy alleviate women and children from poverty situations, if their access to such resources has been curtailed and is currently controlled by transnational corporations and landlords? Green economy can cause prosperity, but definitely not for women who face these realities: less than two percent of lands in the world are owned by women; in Asia, only five percent of agricultural activities performed by women are under their control and ownership; while the number of women employed in the rural sector in Asia decreased significantly—41 percent in 2007 from 51 percent (1998) in East and Southeast Asia; 65 percent in 2007 from a high of 74 percent (1998) in South Asia. (Action Aid, 2010)

The 1992 Rio Declaration recognized the role of women and the need to seriously tackle gender dimensions if sustainable development was to become a reality for the majority of the world’s poor—the women. Principle 20 of the Declaration states: “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to sustainable development.” But 20 years after this declaration, women have instead become the most vulnerable, together with children and indigenous peoples, during natural disasters and other results of environmental destruction, owing to social-economic inequalities that they have had to deal with and struggle against.

“The Future We Want” uses again the same language that only pays lip service and does not address the current realities. But these realities shouldn’t be missed. The World’s Women of 2010 of the United Nation reports that more women have remained poor, continue to receive minimal pay for their labor, if not totally remain unpaid, and rely mostly on natural resources in their immediate environment for food, sustenance and livelihood, while taking on time-consuming and hazardous household labor for their families, such as water and firewood collection. To illustrate, the report has found that in Asia, 75 percent of households, with Cambodia, Laos and Nepal at the top of the list, rely on firewood.

In addition, the UN Women Watch “Women and Climate Change Fact Sheet” also cites women in rural areas of Asia and Africa as the population most dependent on “biomass such as wood, agricultural crops, wastes and forest resources for their energy and livelihood.” And as these continue to dwindle as a consequence of over-exploitation, destruction and degradation, the ability of women to cope with poverty by relying on these resources is further diminished. The impact of climate change on the earth’s biodiversity shall be felt more and more in rural communities of poor and developing countries, including several countries in Asia, where poor people largely depend for food and livelihood on natural resources.

The World's Women of 2010 also reports that 84 percent of the continent's population lack access to drinking water in their homes and even "within a short distance" from their premises; a large portion of this population group reside in the rural areas. Women are assigned the chore of fetching and collecting water, as data in 38 out of 48 countries included in the study show that there are more adult women in households responsible for acquiring the family's drinking water supply than adult men. "Girls under the age of 15 are also more likely than boys of the same age to be in charge of water collection," highlighted the report. This information, the UN report insists, has become more crucial in the context of declining water supplies which is being linked to climate change. These activities, firewood gathering and water collection, on top of chores inside the house remain unpaid while taking most of the time and energies of women, robbing them of opportunity for income-earning work, thereby perpetuating the cycle of women disempowerment.

These cited situations have had impacts on women's health and state of vulnerability even as their lack of access to these basic facilities and resources has been happening in the context of desertification, and of depletion and degradation of forest and water resources.

Furthermore, the weak coping capacities of women as a result of illiteracy and lack of opportunity for sustained education is also a critical issue. Education should enable women to participate in processes that can help alleviate them from conditions of poverty, arrest environmental problems and protect natural resources. But for the past two decades, the UN itself reports, women have accounted for two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults; in the 2010 report, the figure is 774 million. There are also 72 million children belonging to the primary school age group who are out of school, of which 54 percent are girls. In the higher levels of education, there has been an increase in the number of women in scientific researches, but this has not narrowed the disparity between women and men in this field.

These statistics are barely discussed in the climate negotiations where market-oriented mechanisms such as the green economy are taking precedence over mechanisms and policies that address gender-based disparities and vulnerabilities, which are expected to worsen in the context of climate change.

Since Rio in 1992, women's organizations have pushed to the forefront of social movements' struggles its advocacies, primary of which is that development cannot be achieved and sustained if the dominant global economic system continues to fail in addressing gender-based, class-rooted inequities; if economic development will not recognize that the earth's resources are finite and that women, especially those belonging to communities with indigenous knowledge and traditions of caring for and protecting the environment, can contribute greatly to this envisioned change in global economic-social-ecological relations. Only by acknowledging and addressing conditions of vulnerability on an encompassing and wide-ranging level can the participation of women in decision-making processes relating to the use of the earth's resources truly happen. Women are not mere victims of natural hazards and climate change; they can and have been, in fact, contributing to the resolution of these problems.

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P.S.

* Focus on the Global South, Tue, 2012-06-19 :

<http://focusweb.org/content/disempowering-women-through-green-economy>