



## WOMEN AND GLOBAL CONSERVATION: REPAIRING NATURE, EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

With greater responsibility for collecting increasingly scarce natural resources but with fewer rights and entitlements, many women and girls in developing countries are harmed disproportionately by environmental degradation.<sup>1</sup> But women around the world are organizing to protect nature and their rights.

### THE EFFECT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON WOMEN

#### FUELWOOD AND WATER

By 2025, nearly half the world's forests will likely have been destroyed,<sup>2</sup> and two-thirds of the world's population will experience water scarcity.<sup>3</sup> Women and girls in many developing countries are responsible for 90 percent of firewood and water collection for their families<sup>4</sup> and must travel farther and spend larger portions of their day collecting increasingly scarce resources.<sup>5</sup> Women in some parts of India now spend five hours daily collecting firewood.<sup>6</sup> This limits the time women and girls can dedicate to education, childcare, and other economic, community, and even political activities. Traveling longer distances to collect water and fuel also places women and girls at greater risk of violence. In Sudan, 82 percent of rapes occur when women and girls are outside their villages searching for firewood, collecting water, or traveling to the market.<sup>7</sup>





## FOOD

In many impoverished rural areas, men migrate to cities for work, and women remain in the environmentally degraded countryside where they provide as much as 80 percent of the agricultural labor.<sup>8</sup> But agricultural productivity in many developing regions is threatened by rapidly encroaching deserts from the loss of soils and the reduction of water tables. Deforestation has also reduced local rainfall. Nearly one-third of the world's cropland has been abandoned in the past 40 years because erosion and desertification have made it unproductive.<sup>9</sup> Deforestation can also exacerbate malnutrition as fuelwood shortages lead to fewer cooked meals.<sup>10</sup>



## INCOME AND HEALTH

Often unable to own land, millions of rural women in developing countries depend on products from natural areas, such as fruits, nuts, natural oils, and plant fibers, as some of the few sources of cash income.<sup>11</sup> Forest products also provide materials for handicrafts, which are sold to generate

income. In the rainforest region of Cameroon, 94 percent of the total number of traders in non-timber forest products are women.<sup>12</sup> Women also depend on native plants and natural products for traditional medicine, nutritional supplements, and as a seed bank for plant varieties needed to develop alternative crops as environmental conditions change. Nearly 80 percent of women and children in the developing world rely on traditional medicine for their primary health care.<sup>13</sup> But about 15,000 species of traditional medicinal plants are threatened with extinction due to habitat loss.<sup>14</sup>

## NATURAL DISASTERS

An analysis of natural disasters in 141 countries found that women are significantly more likely than men to die in these cataclysmic events due to various factors such as working in less secure environments, wearing clothing that makes it difficult to swim or run, and taking care of children and the elderly.<sup>15</sup> After the 2004 Indonesian tsunami, two-thirds of

**“Natural resource degradation has the potential to undermine many of the gains women have made. What good is increased access to education, for example, if women and girls don't have the time to go to school?”**

**—Mary Mavanza,  
Manager of the TACARE program of the  
Jane Goodall Institute, Tanzania**



those reported dead or missing—and in some villages nearly 80 percent of the dead—were women.<sup>16</sup> The risk to women is intensified in areas where natural resources like upland forests, mangroves, and coral reefs have been degraded or destroyed. Upland deforestation and wetland loss increase the incidence and severity of downstream floods, mudslides, droughts, and famine. According to a study by the World Conservation Union, the intact dense mangroves and forest surrounding a Sri Lankan village hit by the 2004 tsunami resulted in only two deaths, while 6,000 people died in another Sri Lankan village where mangroves and forests had been destroyed.<sup>17</sup>



Women are also routinely forced off of or given only restricted access to fertile land.<sup>19</sup>

## LEGAL RIGHTS

In many regions of the world with the worst environmental degradation, women often lack legal rights and land rights. Worldwide, women own less than two percent of all property.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, women often have no legal recourse to prevent environmental destruction of the lands they depend on for food and income.

## LOCAL WOMEN LEAD: PROTECTING NATURE AND COMMUNITIES

Throughout the developing world, women are leading efforts to protect natural resources and improve the lives of women and girls in their communities. Research shows that forests are better protected when women are involved in their conservation.

When higher numbers of women joined community forest decision-making bodies, forest conditions in Gujarat, India improved significantly.<sup>20</sup> Women's forest protection

**“When the environment is destroyed, plundered, or mismanaged, it is [women’s] quality of life, and that of their children and families, that is ultimately undermined.”**

**—Wangari Maathai,  
Nobel Peace Prize winner  
and Founder of the Green Belt Movement**

committees in the middle hills of Nepal have initiated effective forest management efforts that resulted in increased tree regeneration and better protection against excessive tree cutting.<sup>21</sup> And in the southern Yucatan region of Mexico, local women have brought improved agricultural techniques and environmental management to ecologically important lands.<sup>22</sup>

In Yunnan Province, one of China’s most impoverished regions, ethnic Mosuo women have voluntarily taken on 80 percent of local tree-planting efforts after deforestation exacerbated flooding in their communities.<sup>23</sup> Since 1977, Kenya’s women-led Green Belt Movement has planted over 40 million trees and employed 80,000 people in nurseries to develop sustainable tree stocks for reforestation and to promote livelihoods for women.<sup>24</sup> Other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have launched similar programs patterned on this success.

**These efforts have demonstrated that in the process of working to protect their natural resources, women increasingly participate in political and community life, becoming powerful advocates for their rights as well as for good governance, democracy, and openness.<sup>25</sup>**



## THE U.S. AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY NEED TO HELP

The United States, other wealthy nations, foundations, and nongovernmental organizations provide vital financial and technical assistance to support conservation efforts that benefit or are led by women. But given rapidly accelerating environmental destruction around the world, this assistance must intensify to ensure that natural resource degradation does not undermine the health, educational, and economic gains many women have made around the world.

A strategic focus is key. Currently, the U.S. government has at least six federal agencies engaged in international conservation work around the globe. But there is no overarching vision for how the U.S., together with other nations, can help reverse the most serious environmental degradation trends facing women and their communities.

We must dramatically raise the visibility of the environmental threat to women and develop a much more strategic approach to 1) arrest natural resource destruction that harms women and 2) ensure women are able to lead such efforts around the globe.

Congressional leaders have taken the first step by introducing the Global Conservation Act of 2010. The bill would mandate a comprehensive global conservation strategy for the U.S. government, specifically recognizing the disproportionate impacts of environmental destruction on women and girls.



### ENDNOTES

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