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Hamdy A. (ed.), Sagardoy J.A. (ed.), El Kady M. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Bogliotti C. (ed.).

Training of trainers in INtegration of Gender Dimension in water management in the Mediterranean region. INGEDI project

Bari : CIHEAM

Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 64

2004

pages 77-80

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=6002380>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Scapini F. **The women and the environment**. In : Hamdy A. (ed.), Sagardoy J.A. (ed.), El Kady M. (ed.), Quagliariello R. (ed.), Bogliotti C. (ed.). *Training of trainers in INtegration of Gender Dimension in water management in the Mediterranean region. INGEDI project*. Bari : CIHEAM, 2004. p. 77-80 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série A. Séminaires Méditerranéens; n. 64)



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THE WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Women and environment are generally considered powerless elements in the complex global system, which is mainly based on economic laws, taking into account economically quantifiable elements. However, recent anthropogenic challenges to the environment, which threaten our existence, such as hydro-geological disasters, the overexploitation of primary resources, air and water pollution, show the need of new relationships with respect to the environment and of a control of the use of natural resources. Women should play a relevant role in the development of a new sustainable approach to the environment, as they are naturally more interested in relations than in material profit. Women, for their specific nature and the roles they play in the human society, could have a more holistic approach to the environmental issues. Merchant (1980) focused on the fact that a man-centred reductionism and mechanistic paradigm regulated the exploitation of natural resources since the scientific and technological revolutions. The theoretical recognition of the power of man on the nature lead to technological progress but also to exceed the limits of sustainability of development. The economic, scientific and technological progress was based on the perspective of a passive environment, which could be regulated and exploited at request. On the other hand, balanced relationships between human populations and their environment, aiming at the conservation of the links for the conservation of both and disregarding economic profit, still exists (more or less conscious) in traditional cultures. According to Merchant (1980), sustainable relationships between human populations and their environment date back to a classic conception of the nature of the Earth as a Mother. Only recently the Western World has rediscovered these relationships and developed a "new holism", in which all the elements of the system should be taken into account, because each contributes to the existence of the system, included the less powered elements. These ideas are expressed in feminist and ecologist movements. However, such movements are typical, and extreme, products of powerful societies, where the traditional links with the environment have been lost and the process of the exploitation of natural and human resources is well developed. Traditional cultures generally face more basic problems concerning life and the links with the environment. The latter are in some cases dramatic and very different from a general "peaceful" attitude.

Where are we in the Mediterranean regarding the relationships with the environment? Do we have traditional (feminine) or economic (masculine) relationships with the environment, *sensu* Merchant (1980)? Do Mediterranean women have specific roles or a role at all with respect to the environment, or should they still conquer it or gain awareness about it? Would an environmental education really help women in developing countries, or are there other priorities? Concerning environmental education many books were produced, but a specificity of women was rarely taken into account (e.g. El Hattab, 2002).

One of the characteristics of the Mediterranean Region is that the environment was shaped by human activities since the first appearance of humankind in the Region., and a dicothomy between "nature and culture" is not so apparent as in other regions around the World. This feature is well recognisable in the landscapes. The origin and diffusion of some of the typical Mediterranean plant species is still controversial, but they are "characteristics" of the region. Matvejević (1987) claims that there is one particular plant common on each side of the Mediterranean: the olive tree. Interestingly, this plant is one of the most ancient symbols of peace. The ancient wisdom used to say that the Mediterranean consists of the places where olive trees grow. Several names of plants and toponyms derived from the environment are common on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Mountain areas are part of the Mediterranean coastal zone, and, depending on the latitude and exposure, there is a gradual change from the typical Mediterranean maquis to the Alpine flora with increasing altitude. Common features of mountain areas both at the northern and southern sides of the Mediterranean are human settlements and human landscapes. Rural populations living in the

mountains are naturally more conservative with respect to the populations of the plains and the cities. Populations in the mountains often represent marginal cultures, expression of an ancient cultural heritage, common of different areas around the Mediterranean. The typical Mediterranean links between humans and environment, which have shaped the landscapes resulting in a sustainable exploitation of the natural resources, can be found in the mountains, in the Atlas and the Rif, as well as in the Appenini and the Alps.

Both in the North and the South of the Mediterranean Region, the populations living in the mountains have experienced poverty and have difficult links with the harsh environment. The temporal or permanent emigration of young men from these areas has been an obligatory outcome of poverty. Consequently, the links with the local environment for the subsistence of the household in most cases have been maintained by elders and rural women. A special feature of the Arabic society is the clear division of roles between men and women, the former being responsible of all the external relations, the latter of the household and the everyday life of the household (Fargues, 1986). A similar division of roles existed also in traditional societies in Italy and southern Spain. It is not clear who, whether men or women, are responsible of the environment. Concerning agriculture, in traditional societies the roles are clearly defined: men are dedicated to agriculture for production and women to agriculture for subsistence. The role of women in the management of natural resources in developing countries has been stressed several times (Peluso, 1991). This division of roles was common also in rural and mountain societies in the northern side of the Mediterranean, which only recently have experienced a change in favour of an industrial agriculture where possible, and a general abandon of the mountain settlements. The "ghost" villages in the Italian mountain areas are a recent result of emigration, and dramatic impacts thereof are land-slips and floods, due to a loss of the links of the human populations with the environment, which had been maintained for ages, permitting a sustainable exploitation of the natural resources. The abandon of some mountain areas was preceded by an apparent demographic change, where young men had left the mountain settlements, and women and elders remained to take care of the children and houses, maintaining a subsistence agriculture. Women took the role of guardians of the local environment, ensuring sustainability and contributing also in preventing hydro-geological disasters. The system has been working for some time: young men tended to emigrate to gain money, power and knowledge (boys possibly received a scholar education), but women remained at home maintaining the links with the heritage, and received an "environmental" education from the elders. Thus, the traditional cultural heritage passed on from elders to women and from women to women.

This type of cultural transmission was designed by Mead (1970) as "post-figurative": the children learn mainly from the grand parents, who have a consolidated knowledge of their world, and can transmit useful instruments to cope with the difficulties of life. In traditional societies, the environment is conceived as unchangeable. Instead, in the developed societies changes are unpredictable, and the young generations are obliged to discover by themselves novel solutions to problems. The old generations have lost their prestige inside the society, except within the household, which is more traditional. Also women have to rediscover their roles within the society and their "women culture".

Any change in a system, such as the changes above mentioned in the economic and demographic relations, impose new challenges to the elements and they must adapt and re-arrange their relationships. In this process, the weakest elements may undergo a crisis. Concerning the environment, this outcome is dramatic in arid and semiarid areas, where the overall climate change has caused a decrease of fresh water resources, thus interrupting the benefits provided by water bodies to the communities, in terms of food and quality of life. Desertification is an extreme consequence of the loss of ecological links. On the other hand, irregular water fall may have hydro-geological consequences in mountain areas. The major and direct impacts of these outcomes are on less powered and poor elements of the human communities. Women, as responsible of housekeeping and family subsistence through traditional agricultural practices, are particularly threatened by environmental impacts deriving from environmental changes. In the South of the World, and in the mountain areas of southern Europe, such risks have given rise to critical relationships between the women and the environment. The environment is perceived by rural women more as a threat than as a source of benefits: drought, fire and flood are major enemies of a permanent traditional community, and derive from the environment. Also conflicts may arise between women and environmental sustainability (Hajjarabi, F. 1991). However, the cultural heritage of traditional populations includes the means to prevent the threats of the environment, to defeat and master them. As above mentioned, nowadays much of this tradition belongs to women. Common features of an

“environmental culture” are found in different rural populations and cultures across the Mediterranean and would be worth of a thorough analysis.

Only the North of the World, where the threats of environmental origin remain spatially distant or potential, ecological awareness is present (Melograni, 1996). Gender equality and ecosystem’s rights belong to powerful societies, economically and socially buffered against environmental changes. However the South of the World and the southern (traditional and poor components of the society) enclaves in the North have critical relations to the environment.

In the framework of two Euro-Mediterranean projects, “Bases for the integrated sustainable management of Mediterranean sensitive coastal ecosystems” (EU 4th Framework program, INCO-DC, Project MECO: IC18-CT98-0270, 1998-2001) and “From river catchment areas to the sea: a comparative and integrated approach to the ecology of Mediterranean coastal zones for sustainable management” (EU 5th FP, INCO-MED, project MEDCORE: ICA3-2002-10003, 2002-2005), we conducted an ecosystems’ approach at various study sites along the Mediterranean coastal areas, both in southern Europe (Italy, Spain and Malta) and North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt). The research focused the sandy beaches and the influencing zones, from the river to the sea for a sustainable management. The objective was to describe worth and potentialities of the concerned areas, as well as threats and impacts to develop management plans of the areas on a sound scientific basis (Scapini, 2002). The field studies highlighted the importance of the local populations for the environmental management, but also the fragility of the links between local population and environment with respect to any change (Caffyn and Jobbins, 2003). Particularly critical was the relationship between the women and the environment in the poor areas along the southern Mediterranean coasts. In our analysis, women appeared to be more factors of impacts than positive actors, likely because they were using the environment for subsistence. Women collected molluscs in the intertidal zone of the Gulf of Gabès (Tunisia), when this activity was strictly forbidden to save the stocks and later to prevent diseases as the molluscs were sold in European markets. Women collected dune plants and grasses (*Ammophila*) which were protected or had been planted to protect dunes against erosion on the beach of Zouara (Tunisia). The frequentation of woods with consequent risks of fire, the use of fresh water to wash laundries with consequent water pollution, the collection of endemic plants and eggs of protected bird populations, were listed as threats with respect to the environment. All these are women activities. On the other hand, engineering measures to stabilise the dunes, water management such as dams and channels to convey fresh water supply to distant areas, tourist frequentation of the coast, constructions to develop tourism, fishing activities, fish farming, and agricultural practices had quantifiable economically positive impacts, and were thus listed as benefits. All these are activities of men.

A development of our ecosystem’s approach was the involvement of key stakeholders at study sites, to highlight local needs and perception of issues, in order to ensure the sustainability of the proposed management of the area. As was to be expected, the stakeholder analysis regarding fresh and transitional water use and management has not indicate women as key stakeholders, not even in southern Europe, Spain and Italy. However, the field observations have shown specific roles of women both in the uses and in the management of waters, at benefit of local householders, thus economically not quantified. To go a step forward, an action has started to enhance women awareness on their “economic” role and specificity in relation to the environment and fresh water use. Focal points will be established in the rural communities at a number of study areas in the North African coastal areas, to start a dialogue with women about their relationships with water and environment issues. This will be not a training, which is a top-down transfer of knowledge, generally difficult to achieve when has not been specifically requested by the potential receivers. But it will be more an auto-education process to enhance existing potentialities (Illich, 1974), and to rediscover the Mediterranean heritage of traditional environmental management. A down-top approach will be started, from rural women to researcher women of the Mediterranean region. Also scientific research has only recently rediscovered the specificity of the approach of women researchers. Consequently, our action will have a twofold outcome in favour of gender equality and will contribute to rediscover the cultural heritage of ecosystem’s management specific of local populations around the Mediterranean coastal zones: 1) an enhancement of awareness of rural women on the environment, and 2) an enhancement of awareness of women researchers and teachers on the specificity of women concerning the relationships with the environment.

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