Mary Lynne Loftus

India

Commission on the Status of Women

Marianopolis College

Topic 1: Women and Sustainability

Gender equality, goal 5 of the sustainable development goals, has been highlighted as essential to ensuring greener practices in our world.1 Women are among those most adversely affected by the consequences of climate change.2 Moreover, they are often perilously dependent on natural resources, as they are tasked with acquiring food, water and shelter for their families.3 During the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio in 1992, UN Women advocated for women at all levels to be more involved in decision-making and for gender mainstreaming to be considered within the context of environmental sustainability.4 Extreme weather conditions and natural disasters cause health-care and energy costs to skyrocket, disproportionately affecting women.5 One of the main obstacles of sustainable development is corruption in governments.6 Women make up only 22% of legislative seats in the world, however corruption is seen to noticeably decrease when women are in positions of power.7

The Republic of India, a current executive member of UN Women, is dedicated to working for gender equality within the broader context of sustainability.8 The Indian constitution forbids any form of discrimination on the basis of gender.9 Despite this, India has had an arduous struggle with regards to women’s rights. For this reason, Indian and foreign nongovernmental organizations are actively searching for ways to increase discourse about gender inequalities and solutions.10 Formidable organizations have formed in recent years, which are encouraging women’s participation in sustainability efforts.11 WASH United, for instance, aims to educate women on menstruation, with the hopes of removing the stigma associated with it and helping women receive hygienic products.12

India’s main solution, with regards to including women in sustainability efforts, is education. India’s Barefoot College, one of the nation’s great successes, helps teach illiterate elderly women residing in rural regions engineering skills.13 They learn how to piece together and install solar lamps, which helps create a sustainable future for their grandchildren and also gives them a steady source of income.14 India believes instituting similar practices in more parts of the world would help develop renewable energy and bring more women out of poverty. The stigma associated with menstruation also remains a weighty issue in India, which can be ameliorated by creating awareness campaigns of proper hygiene practices, helping fund the development of low-cost sanitary pads and increasing discourse on the matter.15

Topic 2: Elimination of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence has been commonly defined as: “Violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”16 In 1993, the UN General Assembly drafted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women.17 Despite this framework for action, one in three women will still tragically suffer from a form of sexual or physical abuse within her lifetime.18 Victims of gender-based violence face varying sexual and reproductive consequences, ranging from rape to forced marriages to female infanticide.19 Societies worldwide are working hard to remove the stigma of marital assault, but much progress is to be made, especially in India.

The Republic of India has been making strides in recent years to combat the numerous cases of honour killings, gang-rapes and sexual harassment incidents.21 India created a new law in 2005, which aims to provide equal provisions for Indian daughters and sons22 and protect women against marital assault.23 This law, however, proved ineffective because it was not well enforced.24 A breakthrough emerged in 2013 when Indian parliament passed new legislation that criminalized sexual harassment, and imposed the death penalty on repeat offenders of rape.25 Legislation, however, can only do so much, with many analysts in the international community saying that cultural norms cannot be changed overnight.26

Much of India’s work to combat gender-based violence has occurred at the grassroots level.27 Organizations such as Apne Aap and Sayfty aim to educate women on self-defence and provide a safe place where women can learn about and discuss their rights.28 These solutions, however, are only temporary. To get to the root of the issue, it will be necessary to educate children in schools on women’s rights. This can be done through a collaboration between national and state governments to devise a teachers training program to make sure subject matter is taught in the most effective way.29 Strict legal action taken against rape offenders has also proved an effective deterrent, and should therefore continue to be developed.30 Women should be more involved in decision making at the local and national level, and men should get involved in raising awareness amongst other men of the damaging effects of gender-based violence.31

Topic 3: Women in Education and Employment

Women are missing out on education and employment opportunities, hindering economic prosperity and placing a large portion of the population at a severe disadvantage.32 Out of 774 million illiterate people worldwide, two-thirds are women - a statistic that has hardly changed for the past 20 years.33 The main obstacles that explain the low statistics of educated women compared to men include rampant poverty, cultural barriers, child marriage and gender-based violence at school.34 Education, however, is one of the main means through which a woman can pull her family out of poverty. If states implemented units in course curriculum focused on gender-based violence and discrimination, both could significantly decrease.35 Wage gaps also hold back women from breaking through the glass ceiling, and gaps can be observed in both developed and developing countries.36

The Republic of India has expressed ardent commitment to providing education for all citizens. Literacy rates in India have been gradually increasing, particularly in urban areas.37 The Indian constitution states that primary education is a fundamental right for both boys and girls.38 Sadly, these rights are not fully reached because of inadequate facilities, a shortage of female teachers and girls leaving school because of familial responsibilities.39 There is hope for the future, however, which can be seen in the 326% increase of female engineers and 157% increase of women receiving degrees in medicine between the years of 2001 and 2011.40 More women are receiving university degrees but female employment rates are only slowly increasing.41

Certain Indian states have created impressive initiatives in recent years. In Bihar, the state government has realized how closely linked education and poverty eradication are and set aside funds for projects like giving girls bicycles to get to school safely.42 Because this is simply one of many temporary solutions, the Indian government must place more focus on increasing the educated female population instead of increasing the country’s GDP. This in turn will have positive effects on the economy.43 India believes, with regards to increasing education and employment opportunities for women, states should focus on making classrooms increasingly gender-sensitive.44 Developing nations can establish satellite schools, which will be closer to girls’ homes, involve local communities and ensure that girls have access to clean water and latrines.45

Footnotes

**Women and Sustainability**

1. “Why Women’s Empowerment is Essential for Sustainable Development”, International Institute for Environment and Development, accessed November 6th, 2016, <http://www.iied.org/why-womens-empowerment-essential-for-sustainable-development>
2. Ramesh, Mahathi, *Background Guide on the Commission on the Status of Women* (SSUNS, 2016), 3.
3. “Why Women’s Empowerment is Essential for Sustainable Development”, International Institute for Environment and Development, accessed November 6th, 2016, <http://www.iied.org/why-womens-empowerment-essential-for-sustainable-development>
4. “The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development: Rio+20”, UN Women, accessed November 6th, 2016, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/the-united-nations-conference-on-sustainable-development-rio-20#sthash.nraNomXX.dpuf>
5. Ramesh, Mahathi, *Background Guide on the Commission on the Status of Women* (SSUNS, 2016), 4.
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. “UN-Women Executive Board Members”, UN Women, accessed November 6th, 2016, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/executive-board/members#asiapacific>
9. “Governance in India: Women’s Rights”, Council on Foreign Relations, accessed November 6th, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/india/governance-india-womens-rights/p30041>
10. Ibid
11. “6 Indian Women’s Rights Organizations That Are Bravely Fighting For Change”, Bustle, accessed November 6th, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/india/governance-india-womens-rights/p30041>
12. Ibid
13. “Sustainable Development and Climate Change”, UN Women, accessed November 6th, 2016, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/sustainable-development-and-climate-change>
14. Ibid
15. “6 Indian Women’s Rights Organizations That Are Bravely Fighting For Change”, Bustle, accessed November 6th, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/india/governance-india-womens-rights/p30041>

**Elimination of Gender-Based Violence**

1. “Violence Against Women”, World Health Organization, accessed November 7th, 2016, <http://www.who.int/topics/gender_based_violence/en/>
2. “Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women”, UN Women, accessed November 7th, 2016, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>
3. “Gender-Based Violence”, United Nations Population Fund, accessed November 7th, 2016, <http://www.unfpa.org/gender-based-violence>
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. “Governance in India: Women’s Rights”, Council on Foreign Relations, accessed November 7th, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/india/governance-india-womens-rights/p30041>
7. “Right of Hindu Women in Undivided Property”, Helpline Law, accessed November 8th, 2016, <http://www.helplinelaw.com/recent-judgments/ROHW/right-of-hindu-women-in-undivided-property.html>
8. Ramesh, Mahathi, *Background Guide on the Commission on the Status of Women* (SSUNS, 2016), 12.
9. “Governance in India: Women’s Rights”, Council on Foreign Relations, accessed November 7th, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/india/governance-india-womens-rights/p30041>
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. “6 Indian Women’s Rights Organizations That Are Bravely Fighting For Change”, Bustle, accessed November 7th, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/india/governance-india-womens-rights/p30041>
13. Ibid
14. “Sexual / Gender-Based Violence in India: Time to Change the Status Quo”, Global Observatory, accessed November 7th, 2016, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2012/09/sexual-gender-based-violence-in-india-time-to-change-the-status-quo/>
15. Ibid
16. Ibid

**Women in Education and Employment**

1. Ramesh, Mahathi, *Background Guide on the Commission on the Status of Women* (SSUNS, 2016), 3.
2. “The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics”, United Nations Statistics Division, accessed November 8th, 2016, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/worldswomen/wwEduc2010.htm>
3. Ramesh, Mahathi, *Background Guide on the Commission on the Status of Women* (SSUNS, 2016), 3.
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. “Women’s Education in India”, Census, accessed November 8th, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/population/international/files/wid-9801.pdf>
7. “Report on Girls’ Education in India”, Jolkona, accessed November 8th, 2016, <http://www.jolkona.org/report-on-girls-education-in-india/>
8. Ibid
9. “Rise in Women Graduates Almost Double that of Men in a Decade”, The Times of India, accessed November 8th, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Rise-in-women-graduates-almost-double-that-of-men-in-a-decade/articleshow/48313138.cms>
10. “Where Are India’s Working Women?”, The Asia Foundation, accessed November 8th, <http://asiafoundation.org/2016/03/09/where-are-indias-working-women/>
11. “India’s Push to Better Educate its Girls”, The Hechinger Report, accessed November 8th, 2016, <http://hechingerreport.org/indias-push-to-better-educate-its-girls/>
12. Ibid
13. “Strategies for Girls’ Education”, UNICEF, accessed November 8th, 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/sowc06/pdfs/sge_English_Version_B.pdf>
14. Ibid