
Editorial

Gender Perspectives in Sustainable Use of Earth Resources

It is well known that good health and well being manifest primarily from the serenity of the living environment, the quality of life and the recreational facilities available, all of which in ancient Sri Lanka stemmed from the cultural backdrop of the village tank, the temple, the paddy fields, and the forest fringe. It is also recognized that the emphasis of the vast storehouse of indigenous knowledge and practices had been largely on natural resource management, agriculture, climate, food security, conservation of genetic resources, and consequently of biodiversity as well as ethno-botany, ethno-forestry etc. But the most significant feature of this traditional way of life was the assurance of the sustainability of the home economy, domestic healthcare, nutrition, spiritual manifestations and the gender contribution to a holistic lifestyle.

Women in ancient times displayed their own capabilities, and played a significant role, not only in bringing up their families, but also in community welfare. It had also been shown that women played a central role in sustainably procuring and producing materials of practical domestic needs for sustenance of family health, nutrition and livelihoods. Their indigenous knowledge related to naturally occurring nutritional foods and medicinal plants in regular use and consequently of ecosystem diversity, as well as its utility value for maintenance of family health, nutrition and general well being for a sustainable lifestyle, were distinctly prominent.

Unfortunately in modern times, this cultural advantage had been overrun, and women are no longer in a position to concentrate on family health due to exigencies of a competitive commercially oriented economic scenario, where they are compelled to supplement family incomes through white collar

employment. This sad situation is exemplified by the inability of modern day housewives to utilize advantageously the wealth of indigenous knowledge on maintenance of good health, nutrition, wellbeing and happiness in their families, through not only the sustainable use of floral and faunal species, as well as specific mineral resources, but more importantly maintaining a healthy living environment.

Traditionally, mothers with their generational knowledge could instinctively diagnose simple health problems of children, and treat them with simple home remedies. Take for example the use of the carminative, and anthelmintic decoction prepared with *Embelia ribes* (Walangasal in Sinh.) for the treatment of intestinal worms in children. Likewise, a decoction made out of *Phyllanthus embelica* (Nelli in Sinh.) and *Tinospora cordifolia* (Rasakinda in Sinh.), a medication popularly known in Sinhala as Nelli-rasakinda, was used as a common treatment for rheumatic pains, urinary disorders and for blood purification. These traditional home remedies for which the raw materials were either grown in home gardens, or sustainably extracted from forests, have now been largely replaced with Western pain-killers and antibiotics, which needs no domestic effort for preparation, and are also freely available in pharmacies. Apart from good health and well being, responsible production and consumption were hallmarks of traditional lifestyles. Such an organized community based livelihood and agrarian lifestyle, where the intrinsic value of earth resources, such as floral and faunal biodiversity was also recognized, would have been intuitively conditioned by the Buddhist philosophy of Sabbe Saththa Bhavanthu Sukhithahtā, which literally implies the “Dedication of oneself for the cause of his own well being and that of all living beings”.

M. Asoka T. De Silva