

Spring 5-31-1998

## Response to Agarwal

Denis Mzembe

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl>

---

### Recommended Citation

Mzembe, Denis (1998) "Response to Agarwal," *Macalester International*: Vol. 6, Article 18.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol6/iss1/18>

This Response is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Global Citizenship at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester International by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

# Response

Denis Mzembe

The world seems to be at a crossroads. Populations have grown at unprecedented rates and continue to increase, while land and natural resources are highly limited. And in failing to seek lasting solutions to the problems that confront us, human beings are advancing various justifications for why the task is getting harder. Some of the reasons being put forth serve only to deepen our predicament. Nonetheless, it is inescapable, since we depend on natural resources for our survival, to seek plausible means of reversing the rate at which the natural world is being degraded.

\* \* \* \* \*

In her contribution to this Roundtable, Dr. Bina Agarwal highlights one of the major reasons for environmental deterioration and subsequent threats to our livelihood: the dominance of man over both woman and nature. While I do not necessarily agree with her notion that environmental degradation is related to gender inequalities, I concur, to some extent, with her suggestion that the most effective way of protecting our resources is to allow local communities to take charge of protecting their own environments.

Dr. Agarwal knows that in South Asia, as in many other Third World countries, including Africa, more than 75 percent of the population depends on fuel wood for their daily energy needs. They cannot afford gas or electricity, which are taken for granted in the First World.

It is common knowledge that thousands of trees are cut down on a daily basis, which means that entire forests disappear every single day. That women play a leading role in the destruction of these forests in South Asia and most other countries cannot be disputed as they use firewood several times every day to sustain their families. But men, too, play a significant role in this destruction. In Malawi, men cut fully grown, indigenous trees to turn them into charcoal for sale, defying laws prohibiting this practice. Men seem more willing to circumvent the law than do women. Although it has never been ascertained whether it is men or women who use up most of Malawi's resources, the charcoal is essential to women's work at home.<sup>1</sup>

While the Indian scenario projects women as being the best agents for social change, it is difficult for me to appreciate the idea of mixing gender inequality with issues concerning environmental regeneration. The two obviously have some relationship, but I find the strategies for solving gender inequality and ecological decline to be diverse. The environmental problem is a deciding factor in how much longer this planet will be habitable, while gender issues are typically social.

In Malawi today, there are various women's organizations that fight for women's rights.<sup>2</sup> While they are making advances, they have not yet linked gender issues to environmental concerns. The Society for the Advancement of Women (SAW) has actively campaigned for women's rights since 1993 and has covered a lot of ground. The effect of the campaign against inequality has yet to drive men and women to pull together in a collective response against environmental degradation.

\* \* \* \* \*

My concern with Dr. Agarwal's arguments is that she seems to focus on the premise that men are primarily to blame for the worsening of the environmental situation in South Asia. The arguments she presents put to question the male's ability to contend with problems that threaten his livelihood. In this context, I am reminded of the old saying that the fox, when he cannot reach the grapes, says they are not ripe.

It is reasonable to conclude that in the face of environmental depletion and degradation, it is women who will face the most hardships because their day-to-day domestic chores depend on the availability of natural resources. Dr. Agarwal points out that a decline in village commons and local forests increases the energy women have to spend collecting firewood and fodder. With fewer items to gather, and less time for cultivation (especially in cases where women's labor is critical for the crops grown), incomes decline.<sup>3</sup>

This is true for Malawi, too. Because adjacent forests have been depleted, a woman must wake up before dawn to walk a long distance in order to fetch firewood for her home. The same woman must return home early enough to prepare the children for school and the husband for work. Later, she must work on the small family farm. The husband and children can help her only on Saturdays when they do not attend work or school. The woman is also largely responsible for the children's upbringing. And if the children develop any serious problems, she is usually blamed.

It seems clear, then, that a woman has to surmount many barriers and daily pressures to actively engage and participate meaningfully in community-related issues. This helps to explain why men usually dominate in community-based forums.

\* \* \* \* \*

The division of labor between men and women in most of Africa is not difficult to discern. Although the arrangements vary from region to region, the most common standard is that a man is not expected to touch women's chores: He does not cook, fetch firewood in the bush, or draw water from the well unless his wife is incapacitated. A man who does otherwise is subject to ridicule and becomes the laughing-stock of not only his fellow men but women, too.

Customary law, when it comes to property rights, varies regionally as well, but there are similarities between Malawi law and Indian law. In northern Malawi and parts of the central region, for example, a man pays a dowry to a woman's parents at marriage. A wife is socialized to submit to her husband as head of the family, and children and property belong to him. In the majority of the cases in which there are no children and the husband dies, a woman returns to her parents empty-handed. Property, in most cases, is claimed by the husband's relations.

The situation is a bit different, however, in southern Malawi, where a husband usually leaves his home to settle in his wife's village and, if divorced, loses property to the woman or her relatives. This is also true of women's legal rights. A typical example might be that of a family dispute. If husband and wife cannot settle their differences, a panel of family members assembles to resolve the issues at hand. Although such a panel usually aims to resolve issues rather than break up marriages, women's full involvement in such situations is encumbered by traditional and customary beliefs. This situation confirms Dr. Agarwal's proposition that women's vulnerabilities predate colonialism.

Insofar as environmental issues are concerned, I think, women should engage themselves positively, do what they possibly can, and play their part as much as they can afford to. They cannot wait until the battle against gender inequality is won. They must become active agents on a broad front of social concerns.

Activities in Emanyaleni, a small village in the Mzimba District of northern Malawi, provide a good example of how women are participating in community endeavors, including environmental protection,

through a village association. It is women who are leading men in reforestation programs and ecological farming. Government involvement in their programs is so far nonexistent.

The village association is also involved in other forms of development projects in the community, such as molding bricks for building schools. The association is led by a woman named Lindizga Buliani, and men follow.

Contrary to Dr. Agarwal's argument that women have participated and continue to participate in environmental movements and are often in the forefront of those movements (as demonstrated in the 1940s' Tehbaga and Telangana movements in India, and Emanyaleni), there is no guarantee that this will address women's concerns or change gender relations. I would like to believe that with positive engagement, such as in Emanyaleni, noteworthy changes can be effected.

\* \* \* \* \*

Let me also comment on an important aspect of Dr. Agarwal's contribution to the International Roundtable on South Asian governments' recognition of the environmental crisis within the region. Some governments initiated tree-planting programs in the 1970s, taking the top-down approach. Much of what the state recommended for planting were fast-growing commercial species, such as eucalyptus, that communities said were not suitable for fuel, fodder, or the small timber needs of local people. Because they had not been consulted about the programs, the villagers resisted it, even uprooting saplings.

Although it is acknowledged that the eucalyptus is limited in its value, it is probably one of the most successful projects where environmental regeneration or reforestation is concerned. It grows fast and can be replanted several times, whereas local trees take many years to reach a usable stage. In Malawi, most rural communities have planted eucalyptus wood lots for timber and poles for building houses. Where indigenous trees have been cut down, the eucalyptus has been the most readily available replacement. And, where it has been planted, even the means to collect domestic resources that support and sustain families has been enhanced because of its byproducts: timber and poles.

It would be most gratifying if communities around the world, especially where environmental degradation has reached critical levels, adopted and developed cheaper but economical ways to sustain their

livelihoods, such as planting fast-growing tree species rather than depending on natural trees. The Malawi government has introduced new ways of making charcoal from eucalyptus, and most communities are already benefiting from the trees in various ways.

It is not uncommon in Malawi today to see men, women, and children waiting in line at forestry nurseries to collect eucalyptus saplings to plant in their family woodlots. The eucalyptus is playing a small role in overcoming some of the inequalities that exist between men and women. If accepted, will trees like the eucalyptus play such a role in South Asia?

---

### Notes

1. References to the Malawian environmental situation are based on personal experience and participation in the country's environmental movement.
2. Other women's organizations include Women's Voice (*liwu la amayi*) and Association for the Empowerment of Professional Women.
3. Bina Agarwal, "Gender and Environmental Management in South Asia: Can Romantized Pasts Help Model Desirable Futures?" *Macalester International* 6 (Spring 1998): 139.