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**GENDER, ENVIRONMENT AND
POVERTY INTERLINKS IN
RURAL INDIA**

**REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND
TEMPORAL SHIFTS, 1971-1991**

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Preface

This paper analyses the interrelationships between gender, poverty and environmental change in rural India, focusing especially on variations across regions and shifts over time during the past two decades. After briefly identifying the major factors leading to environmental degradation, it traces why and how this degradation and the appropriation of natural resources by the state (statization), and by a minority of individuals (privatization), tend to have particularly adverse implications for the female members of poor rural households. Regional variations and temporal shifts in the intensity of these effects are traced both descriptively and through the specification of an index, termed by the author the GEP index, for measuring gender-environment-poverty vulnerability. Governmental and community-initiated responses to environmental degradation and natural resource appropriation are also examined, and the necessity of gender-directed policies highlighted.

Among the adverse class-gender effects noted in the paper are an increase among poor rural households in women's and female children's time and energy spent in fuel, fodder, and water collection; a decrease in women's incomes from non-timber forest products and agriculture; an adverse effect on the health and nutrition of household members in general, and female members in particular; an erosion of social support networks built by women to tide the household over economic crises; and a marginalization and decline in peasant women's traditional knowledge of plants and species.

The gender specificity of these effects is seen to arise from pre-existing gender inequalities in, especially, the division of labour; the intra-household distribution of subsistence resources; access to productive resources, other assets, and income-earning opportunities; and participation in public decision-making forums.

However, the noted effects vary in form and intensity across India, due to geographic differences in gender bias, in environmental risk, and in poverty incidence. Rural women are worst-off in regions where all three forms of disadvantage are strong and reinforce each other, as in many parts of northern India, and especially Bihar. They are best-off where all three types of disadvantage are weak, as in southern and northeast India, and especially Kerala. Other regions fall in between.

The author asserts that regions of high gender-environment-poverty vulnerability warrant special attention in terms of schemes which give poor women greater control over economic resources in general, and common property resources in particular. Women's active participation in forest protection and wasteland development schemes is especially important not only for improving family welfare, but also for ensuring scheme success, promoting gender equity, enlarging local knowledge systems, increasing women's participation in public decision making bodies, enhancing women's bargaining power both within and outside the household, and contributing to their overall empowerment.

April 1995

Dharam Ghai
Director

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◆ Abbreviations and Acronyms

FSI	Forest Survey of India
J & K	Jammu and Kashmir
NGO	non-governmental organization
NRSA	National Remote Sensing Agency
NTFP	non-timber forest produce
RFLFPR	rural female labour force participation rate
RFLR	rural female literacy rate
RLFPR	rural labour force participation rate
RLR	rural literacy rate
RTFR	rural total fertility rate
UP	Uttar Pradesh
VC	village commons

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