

RESPONSIBILITY IS OURS INDIVIDUALLY: SERVICE TO ETHNICITY THROUGH REFORESTATION BY WANGARI MAATHAI

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Abstract:

Women play crucial roles in conserving the environment across the world. In poor countries women rely on the forests around them for their livelihood. So it can be concluded that women are suitable to take part as decision makers in issues related to the environment. Women at the grass root level took the lead in the Chipko Movement of India in the 1970s. Another achievement of women is the origin of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya on Earth Day in 1977. It is a conservation and forestry movement. .

Wangari Maathai, the initiator of the Green Belt Movement was the first African woman to win the Nobel Prize .in 2004. Her primary work was fostering peace, human rights, environmental sustainability, and women's empowerment. By planting and revitalizing trees, she has created the space for the earth to breathe.

This article focuses on the noble efforts taken by Maathai in reforestation in Kenya as well as protecting the human and environmental rights of the marginalized women

Key Words: Chipko Movement, Green Belt Movement, Environmental rights, Marginalized

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Women play the major and significant role in utilizing the natural resources for their family and their community. When environmental degradation happens, they are the most affected beings. A survey across the world shows that women take active part in managing water resources, sources of fuel and food, forests and agricultural terrain. In developing countries, major part of food production depends on women. The United Nations Earth Summit held in 1992, India's Chipko Movement and Kenya's Green Belt Movement brought the role of women's voices and perspectives in sustainable development to the lime light. As far as their families are concerned, women are the chief managers of natural resources. So involving women in carrying out remedies for the fast occurring climate change is unavoidable. It is quite evident that the life of women is closely knit with the natural environment, to whatever culture or religion they belong to. To fulfill the basic needs, they lead a dependent life on nature. That drives them to move in close quarters with nature.

The United Nations Earth Summit, held in 1992 produced two key conventions. One is on biodiversity and the other one is on combating desertification. Actually, these conventions give a gender perspective in implementing environmental actions.

It is a note of pride to say that women and women movements have marched out to preserve and protect the resources around them. This is possible because many women prove their capability as leaders,

experts, educators and innovators. In the Chipko Movement of India, women took the lead and they stopped the cruel act of chopping trees, by physically surrounding the trees. Another achievement of women is the origin of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya in 1977. It is a forestry movement, meant for conservation. In Kenya, Wangari Maathai has initiated a successful programme, titled 'The Green Belt Movement' to counteract the destruction of the Africa's forests. This Movement, which is non-profit, non-governmental tree-planting campaign works with two objectives: preserving the wilderness and conserving the places that have been home to people.

Wangari Maathai (1940-2011) was the first African woman to win the Nobel Prize, and the first Eastern African woman to receive a Ph.D. She was the founder of the Green belt Movement. In fact, Maathai had many credentials such as a visionary environmental steward, parliamentarian and scientist. The primary aim of Maathai was to find a way to fulfill the basic needs of rural Kenyan women. Yet, as she was striving to attain this, she proved to the world that preserving and conserving the environment by planting trees could result in a valuable future for the entire human world. Maathai's work is remarkable because she demonstrated that by planting trees, peace, human rights, environmental sustainability, and women's empowerment also could be fostered. Her contribution to the universe is tremendous. She had safeguarded and revitalized the respiratory system of the planet. Next to the Amazon Rain Forest, the Congo Basin Rain Forest in Kenya is the second lung of the earth, as it absorbs volume of carbon dioxide and exhales oxygen.

The Nobel Prize was awarded to Wangari Maathai for her political activism, and initiating the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. The specific aspect of her service is planting saplings around the water sources to prevent erosion and increase the quantity and the quality of water.

Wangari Maathai and Trees:

Maathai learnt about the sacredness of trees from her grandmother. She recollects how the old woman had instructed her not to disturb the large fig tree near their house. Both of them used to collect water from the pools, protected by the roots of the trees. After returning home, she noticed the changes in the environment around her - the drying watersheds, deforestation, increasing desertification and the vanishing streams. She listened to the women in the village talking about the ecological changes and came "to understand the linkage between environmental degradation and the felt needs of the communities". (Mathaai, Nobel Prize Lecture) It struck her that trees were the prime factors to replenish the soil, provide fuel, protect the watersheds and above all provide nutrition.

Wangari Maathai was trained to be a leader by her parents. She was born in a male-dominated society. But her parental care and brought up differed from that of other women. Her father was a truck driver. He made it sure that his daughter got involved in family discussions. He valued her opinions and suggestions. A different lesson was taught to Maathai by her school. It was to shoulder much responsibility for the welfare of their country. Maathai took interest in pursuing her studies in biology at the United States and Germany. Her abundant resource aided her to attain the status as Kenya's first female Ph.D. recipient. She became the first woman to teach and chair a department at the University of Nairobi's Department of Veterinary Anatomy. In 1993, she formed Envirocare, a program that hired the poor to help clean up their districts. Envirocare was once given over 6,000 tree seedlings to distribute. This event

inspired Maathai to proceed on her future course. She decided to introduce to the community tree planting as a way to improve human settlements and avert desertification.

The First Attempt to Plant Trees:

Maathai was in the National Council of Women during 1973 to 1974. She listened to the problems of Kenyan women such as lack of clean drinking water, firewood, food, building materials, fencing materials and protection to their soil. These demands made Maathai get connected to the land. She decided to plant trees with the support of foresters. She approached the Conservator of Forests and got the consent. Later the Conservator changed his mind blaming the rural women collect more free saplings than the allotted limit. So he asked them to pay for those saplings. Eventually, Maathai and her team decided that instead of spending too much time on collecting seedlings from the foresters they would establish their own tree nurseries. The women established tree nurseries, nurtured the seedlings until they were about a foot or two high and then planted them on their own land.

Birth of Greenbelt Movement:

The National Council of Women in Kenya was a powerful organization in Kenya. It represented many national urban and rural women's organizations. Maathai joined this Council in 1977 and became the Head of its Environment and Habitat Committee. This position enabled her to establish her goals and ideas still more. As an outreach activity during the observance of the Earth Day, Maathai organized a rally in 1977. In honour of the legendary men and women who promoted their communities through their selfless service, Maathai planted seven trees. With this noble act, the Green Belt Movement was born. This movement was named so because the campaign was started to protect the land by planting 'green belts'. Initially, the members of the movement initiated tree-planting activities at schools, in national parks and in communities. Their main target group was farmers, among whom 70 percent were women.

The seedlings were distributed by the movement freely to whoever wanted them. The next urgent move must be generating income for the women. This monetary benefit alone could ensure the participation of women in the huge task of protecting the environment. Maathai adopted a strategy diplomatically. It was to give the right to the women to own the trees they planted as well as the products from them. This innovative step brought a positive result because women in Africa were not given the right to possess land in their names.

As the next step, Maathai taught the women the proper ways to rear the plants and market their products. The next initiative taken by Maathai was starting classes on environmental education and thus teaching professional forestry techniques to the women. The various careers undertaken by the graduates were nursery managers, teachers in environmental programs, Green Belt promoters and rangers. The main focus of the Green Belt Movement was on training of the handicapped and school dropouts. The movement believed sincerely that providing such job opportunities will curb the migration of the rural society to urban centers for better prospects.

Monetary Benefit for Planting Trees:

The women had to take care of those trees. Once the trees started their survival, the Green Belt Movement paid the rural women, involved in tree plantation with money, out of the fund collected for that purpose. This became a transformation for the women because the tree-planting became an income-

generating activity. The women could be awarded with money because they had raised several thousand trees. They could make enough to pay school fees, buy clothing and meet their domestic needs.

Benefits of Planting Trees:

Fortunately, in the tropical areas, trees grow fast and become tall within a short span of time. Sensing the communication of the trees is an exclusive experience of those who plant and rear them. As the trees grow they increase hope, self-confidence and transformation of the land. Once the landscape is transformed into greenery, birds and smaller animals come back; dust vanishes; shade of the trees provides shelter. Complacency and happiness fill the heart of those who plant the trees.

Registering Tree Planting Associations:

Maathai realized that she needed to mobilize a lot of women, men and children; she could never really make an impact if she did not have a large number of people involved. She decided to educate people. She set up a Civic and Environmental Education programme. She wanted to make people internalize the reasons for conserving trees.

That definitely was the beginning for Maathai in understanding the role that democracy plays in maintaining, protecting or destroying the environment. So she decided to challenge that law. She decided to say that she must have the freedom to meet, the freedom to move from one place to the other, freedom to associate. Instead of talking about it she acted it out. She met the other women where she had the tree nursery and insisted that they have a right to meet and discuss the possibilities of protecting our environment. Unfortunately, they were beaten, disrupted and refused permission to meet. To avoid it and to help women, so that they are not too disempowered by these disruptions, Maathai advised them to register as societies or as groups. The government allows groups to have a licence to meet.

The Nobel Prize:

The Nobel Prize Committee also noted that through the Green Belt Movement Maathai had aided women in planting more than 20 million trees on their farms and on schools and church compounds. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2009 in recognition of her deep commitment to the environment and her focus on the environment and climate change. Maathai died on 25 September 2011. The Green Belt Movement continues to flourish and the UNEP Billion Tree Campaign, inspired by her work, and now run by Plant for the Planet, grows tremendously.

Maathai feels that the Nobel Prize awarded to her is in recognition of the collective work. The members of the Green Belt work out of commitment and they believe in what they do. Many people wonder at the connection between democracy, the environment and peace. Those people think of these three themes separately. But when they are in the field, they recognize that the work has a long lasting impact.

In the past years, the members of the Green Belt have planted millions of trees that have produced income for tens of thousands of families. Out of the fifteen million seedlings planted, nearly eighty percent have grown and matured. This has been an encouraging factor to the Kenyan government to increase the financial allotment for seedlings. Only then environmental degradation can be reversed. Maathai's secret of success lies in community development and environmental protection at the grass root level. Conservation of forests is not only the responsibility of governments and foresters, she says. "The

responsibility is ours individually.”

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