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GREEN SOCIAL WORKS: THE ROLE SOCIAL WORKER IN ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE AND COLLECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIONS**Dr. M.T.M.Mahees***Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Colombo*

Abstract: The global population is increasing at alarming rate and it would reach ten billion in another twenty years' time. The changing lifestyle, consumer culture and development projects over utilize all the available natural resources. The collective responsibility of society towards conserving environment and ecological resources are always challenged by individualization, modern lifestyle, political ecological conditions and political economy of development projects. The number of natural and man-made disasters are also going up and millions of people become victims of disaster. The environmental problems and disasters are causing social vulnerability and ecological injustice among people more than ever before in the history. The main objective this paper is to explore the role of green social work in ecological justice and collective environmental actions at contemporary society. This paper is based on the method of critical analysis of related literature of social responsibility of ecological conservation, green social work and environmentalism. The concepts, theories and arguments found in the literature are discussed here based on the

discourse analysis. The ecological or green social works has provided interdisciplinary platform for social workers to freely function in the changing context. Since human and social rights of people are violated through environmental degradation, the environmental social works is emerging as popular sub-discipline within social work. The green or ecological social work is further empowering under the risk and vulnerable conditions of disasters. It is revealed that social work is connected to environmentalism. The modern risk society always seeks the service of green social workers more and more to minimize the environmental vulnerability. Green social workers have to work in collaboration with changing power relationship from local to national level context. The green social work functions as leading and crucial mechanism of making the development activities sustainable and it be making important sub-discipline in the field of ecological democracy in the future.

Key words: ecological justice, environmentalism, disaster, green social works

INTRODUCTION

The harmonious relationship between man and nature known as cultural ecology has changed drastically and its negative impact is causing damage to both humans and nature. The life supporting ecology and all the natural resources unprecedently used for development activities. The construction of highways, mega cities, large dams and power plants have totally changed the equilibrium of ecosystem and created many environmental problems such as deforestation, loss of biodiversity, water pollution, human wildlife conflict and waste disposal. All these problems are not just environmental issues but social problem because they are directly or indirectly well connected today to-day life and livelihood of people. According to Singh et al (2020), an extraordinary global population growth has led to increased demand for food, shelter and energy in the last few decades. At the same time, extraction of natural resources beyond the Earth's resilience capacity has had a devastating effect on ecosystems and environmental health. Furthermore, climate change is having a significant impact in several areas, including the global hydrological cycle, ecosystem functioning, coastal vulnerability, forest ecology, food security, and agricultural sustainability.

In addition to environmental degradation, the increasing patter of natural and man-made disaster is the next biggest challenge that human society face in the contemporary world. The flood, lands slides, droughts, earth quicks, tornadoes, tsunami, nuclear waste disposal, war, terrorism, are epidemics are some leading disasters. The modern or postmodern man is highly exposure to disaster vulnerability more than anything else on the earth. Singh et al (2020), further point out that climate change has arisen as new problem of worldwide. Increase in average mean temperature as precipitation globally are the chief outcome of climate change which are to increase in future. As a result of socio-environmental problems and disaster vulnerability, the contemporary society is under a risk condition. Ulrich Beck at his 'World Risk Society' (1999) how modern society is under the influence of risk and environmental risk is the main challenge to modern man. To protect people from disaster and risk, social works have to be more towards disaster resilience thinking and actions.

The environmental conservation, minimization of vulnerability and promotion of better post disaster management policy and plans are the key areas to save the life of people and nature. It is also important to assure the social equity in these processes. However, impact of environmental issue and disasters are not equally influencing the all the level of society, it could have serious negative impact mostly on vulnerable groups such as women, children, the poor, lower caste and indigenous communities. The water and natural resources are not equally enjoyed by all in the society and when there is a scarcity of natural resources or conflicts over natural resources. These vulnerable groups are further prevented from accessing and enjoying their environmental rights and it leads to a sort of environmental discrimination or racism (Mahees, 2012). The ecological justice is seriously violated in the contemporary world and it is crucial for the sustainable development of any society. Thus, the role of social work is very much needed in safeguarding the ecological democracy of community.

The main objective this paper is to explore the role of social work in field of ecological justice and collective environmental actions. Here, it is attempted to examine the importance of social works in environmental conservation and disaster management. Since the environmental problems and hazards are increasing day by day at the contemporary context, it is far more significant to discover the contribution of social works as the common platform where different stakeholders come together for a collective action to protect nature and people. Moreover, it is also observed how far

social workers can promote the collective environmental actions among the people who experienced these environmental and disaster-based challenges. Under this broader objective, it makes further effort to recognize what 'green social works' is and how can it safeguard the ecological justice and democracy of community.

The methodology of this paper is mainly based on the reviewing of literature related to studies and analysis done on green social works. This literature analysis focused mainly on the themes and concepts of ecological justice, environmental social responsibility and collective environmental actions. The key literature was found in the fields of environmental sociology, deep ecology, disaster management and green social works. The major concepts and themes identified in the literature as the qualitative arguments have been analyzed on thematic and discursive basis considering the critical content of discussion of research and studies already done in the related fields.

Ecological Justice

It is argued that whether development is a reality or myth because it has caused many sustainable challenges about ecological democracy and conflicts over natural resources. Development is criticized based on its social inequality and issue of ecological rights. According to UNDP report (1998), Americans spend more on cosmetics than it would cost to provide basic education to the 2 billion people in the world who go without schools. Europeans spend more on ice cream than it would cost to provide basic water and sanitation services to those most desperately in need. The degree of material development, particularly the standard of living, is completely different from one place to another. For example, the "average" U.S. citizen spends some \$44,000 a year and is responsible for the release of 20 tons of carbon dioxide annually into the local atmosphere (and even more worldwide if exports are considered), while the "average" Rwandan survives on \$230 a year and emits only 0.1 ton of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (World Bank 2007).

The notion of development has increasingly been challenged. As the Mexican social activist Gusta Esteva states, 'In Mexico, you must be either numb or very rich if you fail to notice that "Development "stinks. The damage to persons, the corruption of politics, and the degradation of nature which until recently were only implicit in 'development', can now be seen, touched, and smelled.'" (Peets & Hartwick, 2009). The ongoing development projects all over the world create various forms of violation of ecological justice of people and lead environmental crimes against socially and economically marginalized people. According to Dwivedi (2001) resource demand of development has led to a narrowing of the natural resource base available for the survival of economically poor and powerless either by direct transfer of resource away from basic needs or by destruction of the essential ecological process that ensure renewability of the life supporting natural resources. Vandana Shive (1991) further states that development has formed two different competing and contradictory groups, they are: people who enjoy the benefits of development projects and others who have become the victim of development. Here, Shiva is mainly concerned about ecological rights of people socially marginalized groups and how they destroy the life supporting ecological systems.

Bullard (2000) was amongst the first sociologists to highlight the unequal impact of environmental degradation on poor people and its role in promoting injustice because industrial waste was dumped on poor communities. Focusing on the US, he coined the term 'environmental racism' to expose the

disproportionate burden borne by African American communities and the price they paid for a degraded environment that jeopardized their health and well-being while locking them in low paid jobs associated with industrialization processes. Ungar (2002) introduced the concept of environmental justice as a matter of protecting the environment into social work. He defines environmental injustice as society's failure to ensure the equitable distribution of the Earth's resources in meeting human needs, simultaneously providing for the well-being of people and planet Earth today and in the future. Through this definition, he suggests that the current model of industrial development is 'not fit for purpose' and that social workers have a role to play in formulating alternative models of socio-economic development by promoting environmental justice and organizing and mobilizing communities in meeting human need 'without costing the earth'(Dominelli, 2014).

Social workers, traditionally concerned with the promotion of human rights and social justice, are primed to be strong partners in environmental justice movements. Talking of environmental problems is not a new area for social work but a return to the roots of the profession a focus that was marginalized as the scope of social work education and practice was narrowed following the professionalization of some medical model in the early twentieth century. In the call to action urging social workers to return to their environmental roots. Although social work is optimally positioned to respond to the human implications of environmental change and stress, the profession largely lacks a presence in environmental practice, research, and policy making (Teixeira & Krings, 2015).

There is a growing push for social workers to better understand the interdependence between people and their socio-cultural, economic, and physical environment. These environmentally focused social workers have highlighted the profession's role in simultaneously promoting environmental and social justice. Social workers have to consider a paradigm shift that embraces the role social workers can play in environmental and social justice advocacy.

According to Teixeira & Krings (2015), utilizing the paradigm as laid out by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) it offers practical suggestions for social work educators to weave environmental justice content into traditional social work training by integrating environmental concerns and their consequences for vulnerable populations including individuals, families, and communities across the globe.

Normally social workers attempt to identify the root causes of social problems, rather than to 'blame the victim'. Thus, social work, can be applied to issues including environmental degradation. Instead of blaming the poor for their problems, it can be emphasized the underlying social, political, and economic systems that produce environmental degradation and the role of social workers in intervention. Pillai and Gupta (2012) state that social workers should focus on both social inequality and poverty as the underlying causes of ecological degradation. Today people in many developing countries experience social inequality and become socially marginalized due to environmental poverty or poverty caused by water scarcity. Therefore, role of social workers is much more needed to address ecological injustice and they must able to save the life and livelihood from ecological driven social inequality. For this purpose, social workers must bring their knowledge, attitude and skills to identify environmental problems and protect the life of people from local micro level to

national macro level. Social workers have to understand not only the social environment of any community but also natural environment including built environment and how they are integrated.

Collective Environmental Actions and Environmentalism

The attitude, lifestyle of people and consumption pattern of modern man change very fast and create many socio-environmental problems. The consumer culture itself has created many burning environmental issues. The construction of luxury houses, shopping malls, purchasing super luxury vehicles, enjoying costly leisure and tourism are leading root causes of these social environmental problems. For example, according to World Bank, in 2016, the worlds' cities generated 2.01 billion tons of solid waste, 0.74 kilograms per person per day. With rapid population growth and urbanization, annual waste generation is expected to increase by 70% from 2016 levels to 3.40 billion tones in 2050. The World Bank has committed over \$4.7 billion to more than 340 solid waste management programs. What has happened to the environmental social responsibility of people and how it has gone beyond the control of corporate responsibility? Is there any role that can be played by social workers to protect and promote the environmental social responsibility?

The environmental social responsibility has to be located in the collective environmental actions or environmentalism. The environmental movements or collective environmental action are supposed to be the guardian of sustainable development and they always empower the civil society against politicization of environment and natural resources. Environmental movements are mainly discussed under two concepts known as environmentalism ns conservationism. According to Mertig & Dunlap (2001), the conservationism which has roots going back a century or more, is often depicted as being primarily interested in the preservation of wildlife and aesthetic environments, and particularly in the United States, the conservation and efficient use of resources. Environmentalism, on the other hand is seen as encompassing the broader goal of environmental protection and entailing a more exacting critique of the status quo. Environmentalism is also considered a key "new social movement" (NSM), assumed to share fundamental characteristics with other NSMs such as the women's, antinuclear, and peace movements. A key reason for the success of environmentalism, relative to that of most social movements, is that its goal of environmental protection is widely supported by the general public.

Environmentalism is not merely a theoretical stuff, or something discussed in the academic context alone, but it is very much pragmatic and applied. We can see the real scenario of environmentalism which is related to day to day problems of people. Thus, environmentalism is connected with social work in a broader context. A logical consequence of the exploitation of natural resources is the exploitation of people. Both directly and indirectly, populations have suffered as a result of environmental damage. Coates (2003) says, "When the Earth has been senselessly exploited and polluted, social injustice has been a result and it is followed by many levels of collective environmental action to protect livelihood and other justice of people which generally known as environmentalism.

One good example where social work and environmentalism interact and are recognized is environmental racism. Environmental racism refers to the intentional or unintentional targeting of minority communities or the exclusion of minority groups from public and private boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. It is the racial discrimination in the enactment or enforcement

of any policy, practice, or regulation that negatively affects the environment of low-income or racially homogeneous communities at a rate disparate from affluent communities. Australian and Canadian social work authors have recognized the connection between social work and environmentalism. According to Ungar (2002), a new and dramatically different definition of ecological social work has been outlined. An expansion of the social work model has been proposed that requires a new perspective focused on society and its problems and the values of social work (Dewane, 2011).

Green or Ecological Social Work

The contemporary world and social life have become very much uncertain and risky according to the arguments of Anthony, Giddens Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman. One of the main causes for such risk society is environmental degradations and natural disasters. The role of social work is much more needed for this era.

One of the most influential frames of reference offered in recent years to capture the core challenges facing by people in the twenty-first century is the notion of a world risk society. Associated above all with the work of the sociologists, Ulrich Beck (1999) and Anthony Giddens (2009), a central claim of this model is that contemporary societies across the globe are united in their exposure to (largely unintended) physical threats arising from the far-reaching transformation of material environments and organisms by industrial technologies. According to Beck, a governing logic of the world risk society is 'organized irresponsibility' the difficulties in attributing causes and consequences to actors for catastrophic risks overwhelm conventional risk assessment capacities and regulatory systems.

The theory of risk society by Beck and Giddens and theory of liquid modernity by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) state that modern contemporary society and its systems are challenged by many threats including environmental hazards and leading to vulnerable position. The social relationships and modern life are not solid but liquid and everything is getting individualized and social integration becomes weaken. The social works needs to be incorporated more into environmental protection and disaster resilience.

The concept green social work is also generally known as eco-social work (also referred to as environmental / ecological social work) is a sub-field of social work that focuses on the systemic, symbiotic relationship that exists between all living organisms and ecological systems on the planet Earth. The study done by Gray, Coates, and Hetherington (2012) has described the nature of the field of eco-social work as one where the traditional human-nature dichotomy is rejected, and explicit recognition is given to the interrelatedness and interdependence between humans and the non-human world. An eco-social orientation argues that both the ecological and the social are inextricably related and cannot be considered in isolation from one another.

There are two arguments with regard to green or ecological social work, one argument states that there have been aspects of ecological related social works even in the early 1950s and 1960s and other argument is that ecological social work is new one that recently incorporated into contemporary social work. It is believed that social work has been slow to respond to the challenges posed by environmental crises and deemed the ensuing environmental injustices these perpetrate,

as concerns for the other sciences (Dominelli, 2014). Social work must find the way and the resources to make connections with other professionals who share our commitment and concern for environmental issues. Whether this work is called as the work interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary or multidisciplinary the underpinning ideas are the same (Coates, 2003).

Sometime eco-social work and eco-volunteerism also get mixed up and found rather difficult to separately recognize in some context. According to the research of 'Sociological study of volunteer and social work in post disaster management' by Mahees & Sanjeevani (2015), eco-volunteerism and eco-social work are connected to each other and sometime there is kind contradiction between these two practices specially in terms of carrying out post disaster management works in developing countries like Sri Lanka. These two concepts as well as practices are interwoven and difficult to separately identify. It is also possible to observe many hidden and informal form of green social works in the context of grassroots environmental movements in many developing countries. However, they are yet to be confirm by separate studies (Mahees, 2010).

According to Ungar (2002), social workers still found an ecological perspective, based on a broadened view of systems theory, intriguing and more synchronous with their mission than the individualizing psychoanalytic models of intervention popular in the 1950s and 1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, then there was pioneering efforts to integrate ecology and general systems theory in social work, and the field of ecosystems and ecological practice gained ground. In 1980s, social work drew connections between ecological social work and advances in related fields of ethology (the study of animal behavior), ecological psychology (the study of the effects of the physical environment on human psychology). This evolution further developed in 1990s and it emphasis on contextualization, power and privilege reflects advances in cultural sensitivity, the politics of location, and the understanding of the mutual dependency among all things human and the natural world.

The theory of social ecology proposed by Murray Bookchin is closely related to green social where he emphasizes the connection between environmentalism and social freedom, Bookchin's concept of an ecological society, though more a liberal interpretation of history than a fact-based one, emphasizes just such pluralism within nonhierarchical communities: "Freedom would no longer be placed in opposition to nature, individuality to society, choice to necessity, or personality to the needs of social coherence. The social worker whose practice reflects a deep and social ecology recognizes that development, either in how service delivery systems function, or in how a community promotes its economic and social wellbeing, must provide sustained benefits to the greatest number of community members (Ungar, 485: 2002). The theory and practice of green social work is developing through deep and social ecology and green social work is always nourished and empowered by the environmentalism that take place among people.

CONCLUSION

The practice of social works has been adjusting according to the changing pattern of environmental problems. It is well observed that addressing environmental issues in the context of social work is challenged by the discipline itself due to various contradictory perspective within the scope of social work. However, the ecological social work is much felt and known concept in the recent past based on the arguments of deep and social ecology. The collective environmental action as well as

environmentalism have always been supporting the development of new form of social work. The conflicts arising from the situation of ecological injustice and environmental racism has created favorable platform for social workers to theorize new arguments and carrying out new practices green social work. Different practices and experiences of social works depending on the power relations at local context has led to articulation of new 'green discourse'. Since the contemporary society is experiencing risk condition in term of environmental degradation and disaster, green social works will be much more needed field in future. The ecological or environmental social work remained as liquid and unshaped condition. Therefore, green social workers are still seeking their concrete position theoretically and practically in the changing context of new environmental problems, ecological injustice and natural disasters.

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