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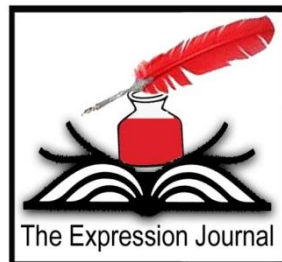
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WOMEN AS ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGERS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Women play a crucial role in environmental management, particularly in developing regions where they are often the primary caregivers and resource managers. Their daily responsibilities, which include gathering water, fuel, and food, position them at the forefront of natural resource use. As environmental managers, women have the potential to contribute significantly to sustainable development by adopting practices that protect and conserve resources. This role is even more vital in rural and marginalized communities where sustainable resource management can alleviate poverty and improve living conditions. However, gender inequality often limits women's participation in formal environmental decision-making processes. Empowering women with education, resources, and decision-making authority can lead to more effective environmental strategies. Their intimate knowledge of local ecosystems and natural cycles makes them valuable contributors to conservation efforts, disaster risk reduction, and climate change mitigation. Integrating women into environmental governance not only promotes sustainability but also enhances gender equity. Policies and programs aimed at involving women in sustainable development initiatives can foster resilient communities and lead to more holistic, inclusive environmental management practices. Women's roles as environmental stewards are essential for achieving long-term sustainability goals.

Keywords

Women's Empowerment, Environmental Management, Sustainable Development,
Natural Resource Management, Rural Communities, Climate Change.

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Introduction

“..... the future of this planet depends on women.” Kofi Annan

The term environment is much used in current times. Its content is defined as variously or as broadly as its user determines. Environment denotes all these resources, which make up the totality of the productive base of a region, which is inhabited by people. These resources include land, forests, water, livestock and people. The real meaning is in the interaction between people who are the users of the environment. While all human beings interact with the environment, the people who are closest to it, both as users and as nurturers are women (Mitra, 1988). *UNICEF* drew attention to the depletion of natural resources and the consequent hardships to women. The important role of women in economic and social development in both their communities and their countries is increasingly being recognized. Numerous formal “events” have helped to enhance recognition of this role. For example, the *United Nations Decade for Women* from 1975 to 1985 drew global attention to women, especially the trying conditions under which many of the poorest live. The *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)* in Rio de Janeiro during 1992 presented a global action plan to institutionalize the role of women in environment and development. The *United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women*, held in Beijing, China, during September 1995, further highlighted important issues if the gap between men and women is to be narrowed. This conference followed earlier major meetings in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). Representatives attended the Beijing Conference from 189 countries, and involved an official conference held in Beijing as well as a parallel conference for non-governmental

organizations in nearby Huaraiou. Together the two conferences attracted some 50,000 people. The *Constitution of India* ensures equal status for both men and women.

"You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women."

- Jawaharlal Nehru

The history of the relationship of rural women to nature's resources has been marked by a struggle to provide subsistence for the family in the face of growing alienation from, and increasing erosion of, the means. Since the early 1970s there has been considerable interest in the relationship between women, particularly low-income rural women in developing countries, and the environment. The poor rural women, the main users of household biomass and providers of subsistence needs, were seen as the main victims of the deepening environmental crisis. But gradually there has been a shift in that perception. Women are no longer viewed as mere victims; it is increasingly recognized that they could have a key role to play in natural resource management as they have the knowledge and experience gained from working closely with their environment. They are seen as the solution to the developing environment crises, as major assets to be harnessed initiatives to conserve resources and fix ecological problems. Rural women constitute an important component of rural development. Economic self-sufficiency of rural women can greatly contribute to the eradication of poverty in rural areas. Economic upliftment of rural women will bring about the desired social change in them. It will provide them social status, a rightful share in the national wealth, a sense of participation in national affairs and will thus bring them in the main - stream of national development. In order to understand the problems of the rural women, it is essential to have a clear idea of its infrastructure with regards to its natural resources, the potentialities of the region and the prospects of the economic upliftment of the rural women. They deserve to be given top priority, if the rural poverty is to be eradicated and the rural households are to be made not only economically viable, but also self-generating economic units. Rural communities will continue to depend heavily on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihood. Environmental degradation will only deepen their poverty, so environmental conservation and poverty alleviation are parallel objectives. In most situations where they enjoy secure tenure, the poor will invest to protect their land and their environment.

Why Gender? Women compose one - half of the world's population and perform 2/3rd of the world's work hours, yet are any where poorer in resources and poorly represented in positions of decision - making power. Women are traditionally associated with child bearing, child rearing, emotional care taking and responsibility for the physical maintenance of the household. In many societies, women's position in the family and in the community is determined by traditional practices and customs of overall constraints of a patriarchal system. Women perform multiple roles such as productive, reproductive, social and community etc. (Figure 1).

The basic purpose of this study will be to highlight the role that women play in the environmental management and development in rural Delhi. It's because

women have more close relationship with their surroundings, are more sensitive and more willing to care for it. Most men who migrated to cities did not make enough money to be the breadwinners for women and children left behind in rural areas, which had to try to survive through marginalised subsistence farming. Often this situation led to men's abandonment of their families, producing a significant rise in the number of poor female-headed households. All human beings have an impact on the natural environment and all are affected by the degradation of the environment by "man - made" pollution.

Denying women any appreciable role in decision - making about use of the environment has led directly to food - fuel - water crises in the rural areas of the Third world. Such crisis results from resource depletion that threatens the survival of people in subsistence economies, but also deforestation and desertification. Women are the main food producers and processors in most of the rural areas of the Third world, and they must have access to clean water and firewood for fuel. As their land is lost of corporate farms and water resources are polluted by agricultural run - off from fertilizers and pesticides, rural women are forced to travel farther and farther in search of clean water. Because the amount they carry is limited, they have to fetch water several times a day, adding more hours to their hard labour to sustain the meager diets of their families. Similarly, as forests are cut down for large - scale agricultural enterprises, women must go further to field in order to look for the firewood needed to cook and boil water, making it safe to drink. When water and fuel sources are being depleted, not only does food become scarce, but also the basis for ecologically sound agricultural practices is eroded. Most women agricultural workers work closely with and on the land and have developed significant informal knowledge about eco-systems and appropriate land use patterns. As farmers, women often know which plants have the most nutritional value and what farms of cultivation lead to the least soil erosion and water consumption. As fuel gatherers, women know they are dependent on forests to provide renewable sources of firewood.

- ***“Major social transformation major social transformations are impossible without ferment among the women.” -Karl Max***

It is important to study women's work because:

- 1) A substantial part of women's time and energy is spent in working.
- 2) Women's work is most of the time invisible and unrecognized, primarily because in the accepted capitalist paradigm any 'economic' activity is synonymous with 'market' activity and much of women's work is done outside the realm of the market. It's also usually undervalued since the unpaid element is not taken into consideration while computing national income.
- 3) A number of issues confronting the women's movement today, particularly in developing countries such as in India, are related to different aspect of women's work.
- 4) In the contest of globalization women's work is probably one of the most important areas that are being affected by the changing situation.

The significance of the present study lies in the fact that it is one of the few empirical attempts to study the actual conditions of women in nature. It brings into focus the systematic pattern of discrimination against women at every level. It also emphasizes the decisive role played by traditional cultural norms in determining the position of women in agrarian society.

Environmental Degradation Affecting Women

Women have the responsibility for managing household resources, but they typically do not have managerial control. Given the variety of women's daily interactions with the environment, they are the most keenly affected by its degradation. For example:

- Deforestation or contamination increases the time women must spend seeking fuel wood or safe, clean water, and increase women's risk of water-borne disease. In the state of Gujarat, India, women now spend four or five hours a day collecting fuel wood, where previously they would have done so once every four to five days.
- Soil erosion, water shortage and crop failures reduce harvest yields; soil exhausted from over-use reduces the productivity of household gardens.
- Toxic chemicals and pesticides in air, water and land are responsible for a variety of women's health risks. They enter body tissues and breast milk, through which they are passed on to infants. In a village in China's Gansu province, discharges from a state-run fertilizer factory have been linked to a high number of stillbirths and miscarriages. Water pollution in three Russian rivers is a factor in the doubling of bladder and kidney disorders in pregnant women, and in Sudan a link has been established between exposure to pesticides and prenatal mortality with the risk higher among women farmers.
- In urban settings in particular, air and water pollution can be extreme, and sanitation and waste treatment poor or non-existent, presenting new threats to health, particularly for women, who have the highest levels of exposure. In the Indian cities of Delhi and Agra, for example, drinking water comes from rivers heavily polluted by DDT and other pesticides.

Degraded environments mean that women must spend more time and effort to find fuel or produce food, but their other responsibilities, for meeting household needs and ensuring family health, do not diminish. Gendered divisions of labour have so far resisted real change. In many countries, women already work 12 hours or more a day in and out of the home; in Africa and Asia, women work an average of 13 hours more each week than do men (Mitchell, 1997).

- *Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.*
- **Rio Declaration Principle 20**

Rural Women and Environment Management

Poor women in rural areas have become increasingly marginalized from control over and access to production and while women hardly exercised ownership rights in land, the access to land under community ownership and family systems.

Forests and common lands were part of common property resources (CPR). With the decline of the traditional system of community based production and existence, women lost their rights to both agricultural land, as well as CPR. This resulted in increased work burdens for women, with a resource / asset base. Poor women in such areas have increasingly been subject to various forms of exploitation. Rural development efforts have passed them by due to their lack of access to the means of production, and to their negligible role in decision - making. They have somewhere in the course of “development” lost the recognition of the value of their work and have come to be regarded either as non-producers, or “supplementary earners”. They have not been considered as of relevance when land reform measures have been implemented.

“Even where agrarian reform measures have led to the redistribution of land to the poor, the household approach has resulted in titles being given in the name of the household head who is nearly always a man. As a result, rural women have been increasingly marginalized and the status gap between men and women has increased.” (International Labour Organisation, 1988)

On the one hand there is therefore, this problem of increasing poverty in terms of loss of the asset base leading to increased survival problems for rural poor women. On the other side, the problem is increasing devastation of the “environment”, the natural resource base.

Women employ methods such as fallowing (leaving fields uncultivated for at least a season), crop rotation (planting a field with different successive crops), intercropping (planting several different crops in a field at one time), mulching (spreading organic material on the soil around plants to avoid water evaporation) and a variety of techniques that promote soil conservation, fertility and enrichment. Planners are now recognizing the value of learning from women's local knowledge to protect and sustain the environment. Rural women are the main producers of the world's staple crops - rice, wheat, maize - which provide up to 90 per cent of the rural poor's food intake. Women sow, weed, apply fertilizer and pesticides, harvest and thresh the crops. Their contribution to secondary crop production, such as legumes and vegetables, is even greater.

Grown mainly in home gardens, these crops provide essential nutrients and are often the only food available during the lean seasons or if the main harvest fails. Women's specialized knowledge about genetic resources for food and agriculture makes them essential custodians of agro-biodiversity. In the livestock sector, women feed and milk the larger animals, while raising poultry and small animals such as sheep, goats, rabbits and guinea pigs. Also, once the harvest is in, rural women provide most of the labour for post-harvest activities, taking responsibility for storage, handling, stocking, processing and marketing.

Women and Environmental Governance

Environmental governance refers to the rules, processes and behavior that affects the way power is exercised at all levels in the field of environmental policy. It also includes other areas that have an impact on the environment, and concepts such as openness participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. Women do not exist in environmental governance. Women are

unreasonably positioned in environmental governance. Women are less involved in environmental decision making. Women have less capacity in participating environmental decision making. The disparity between men and women are hardly addressed in environmental decision making. The impacts of environmental decision making to women are barely assessed (Figure 3).

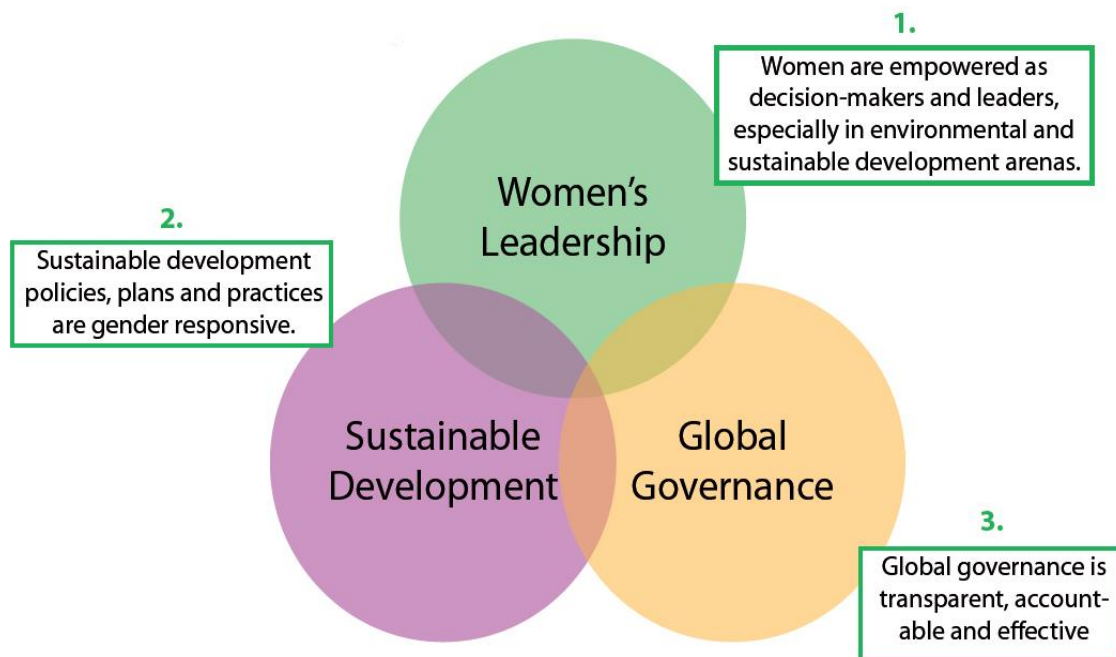


Figure 3 Women and Environmental Governance

Half of the world's population - women has no say in environment and development policies which affect them and their family lives. There is a need to recognize the traditional role of women as natural resource managers and in improvement of environmental conditions. There has been gradual awakening among some planners, officials and experts to the fact that women in rural areas of developing countries like India are often important even key actors in the development process. Enlightened well meant plans for overall increase in production and rural development, for providing primary health care to all people, for expanding domestic food production, for controlling population growth and many more targets, seem unattainable without the cooperation of rural women. But even where its importance is recognised, programmes for their betterment are not easily designed and implemented. The mechanics of cooperation have not evolved very far. And there remain many influential people particularly among planners and policy makers-who are unaware or unconvinced of the need to deal specifically with the roles of women. Successful development cannot be pursued without rural women's participation, condemning them to low productivity menial jobs under utilizes human resources and thus retards the process of growth. Concern for human rights and the dignity of individual's demands great

improvements in their conditions of work, their access to productive resources and their participation in decision making at all levels. In other words, to achieve substantial growth in production depends partly on women and progress towards more just societies must include greater quality for women. The NGO's can take the initiative in this matter and work with governmental agencies to make this a mass movement in rural areas. Participation of women in rural development can help us to accelerate the pace of development. In rural set up, women must get their proper representation in village councils, panchayats and other administrative organizations.

- Are Women the Key to Sustainable Development?
"If women were in more productive and decision-making roles, we could be moving faster and more assuredly towards sustainability in the economic, social and environmental sense. Sustainable development is a political concept because it is about good governance, which will be hard to achieve until we get closer to gender parity."
2012, UN Conference on Sustainability Development.

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