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ROLE OF WOMEN AS ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGERS

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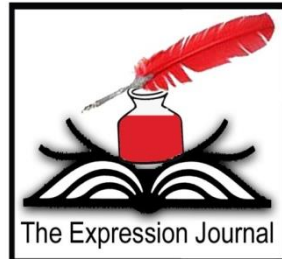
Abstract

Although frequently overlooked, women's contributions as environmental managers are crucial to the global movement for environmental preservation and sustainable development. Throughout history, women have been integral to the conservation of natural resources and the advancement of environmentally conscious behaviors, especially in rural and indigenous communities where they have a close relationship with the land. This study examines the special bond between women and the environment, highlighting their leadership in resource management, sustainable farming methods, and environmental stewardship. In order to mitigate climate change and promote resilience in fragile ecosystems, women's expertise and involvement in fields including water management, forestry, waste reduction, and biodiversity protection are essential. The study also emphasizes how gender and environmental sustainability are intertwined, promoting gender-sensitive policies that enable women to play larger roles in environmental governance decision-making. In addition to preserving ecological balance, women's efforts are crucial to guaranteeing that future generations inherit a planet that is healthy and thriving. The research emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and enhancing the contributions of women in environmental management by looking at case studies and international programs that have effectively integrated them into these roles. In the end, this article advocates for greater female participation in environmental policymaking across the board, making sure that women's perspectives and expertise are essential to strategies for sustainable development.

Keywords

Women, Environmental Management, Sustainability, Natural Resources, Climate Change, Gender-Sensitive Policies, Eco-Friendly Practices, Environmental Governance.

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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 Huaruiou. 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?

Despite their significant contributions, women often face systemic barriers that limit their access to resources and decision-making positions. The traditional association of women with domestic responsibilities can reinforce these inequalities, as societal norms and patriarchal structures often dictate their roles. Addressing these disparities requires comprehensive strategies, including:

Education and Empowerment: Promoting education for women and girls can help break the cycle of poverty and dependency, allowing them to pursue careers and leadership roles.

Policy Changes: Implementing policies that support gender equality in the workplace and in governance is essential. This includes equal pay, parental leave, and representation in leadership positions.

Community Engagement: Engaging men and boys in discussions about gender equality can help challenge and change traditional norms.

Support Systems: Establishing support networks for women, such as mentorship programs and childcare services, can enable them to balance professional and domestic responsibilities.

Advocacy and Awareness: Raising awareness about the contributions of women and the challenges they face is crucial for driving social change.

Fostering gender equality benefits everyone and can lead to more sustainable and equitable societies. Women perform multiple roles such as productive, reproductive, social and community etc. (Figure 1).

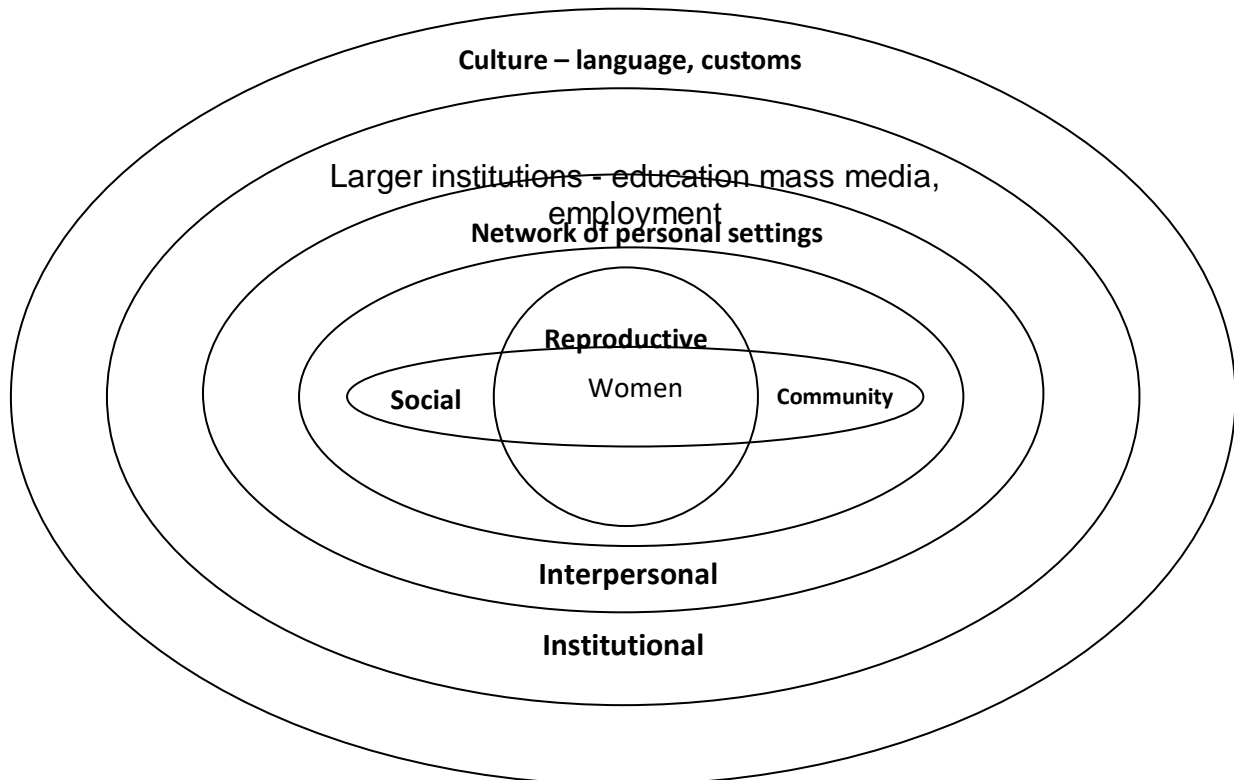


Figure 1 Woman and their Social Relationships

Source: Millican and Smithells, 1992

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 meagre 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 often play a crucial role in managing household resources, such as water, food, and energy, yet they frequently lack decision-making power. This imbalance can exacerbate the effects of environmental degradation, as women are typically the first to feel the impact of resource scarcity.

Their daily interactions with the environment make them vital stakeholders in sustainability efforts. When women are empowered with managerial control and included in environmental decision-making, communities often experience more effective resource management and better outcomes for both the environment and the people living in it. For example:

- Deforestation and contamination significantly impact women's daily lives, especially in regions like Gujarat, India. As natural resources become scarcer, women are forced to spend much more time—up to four or five hours daily—collecting fuel wood, compared to once every few days previously. This not only limits their time for other activities, such as education or income-generating work, but also increases their vulnerability to water-borne diseases due to the increased need to source safe, clean water. The ripple effects of these challenges highlight the intersection of environmental issues and gender inequality, emphasizing the need for sustainable resource management and targeted support for women in affected communities.
- Soil erosion, water shortages, and crop failures are significant challenges that can lead to reduced harvest yields and diminished productivity in household gardens. Over time,

the depletion of soil nutrients from overuse can make it difficult for plants to thrive, ultimately affecting food security and livelihoods.

- The impact of toxic chemicals and pesticides on women's health, especially during pregnancy, is a significant concern. These substances can accumulate in body tissues and breast milk, potentially affecting both maternal and infant health.
- In Gansu province, China, the association between a state-run fertilizer factory's discharges and increased stillbirths and miscarriages highlights the dangers of industrial pollution. Similarly, water pollution in Russian rivers has contributed to a troubling rise in bladder and kidney disorders among pregnant women. In Sudan, research indicates that women farmers exposed to pesticides face a higher risk of prenatal mortality.
- These examples underscore the urgent need for stricter regulations on chemical discharges and better protective measures for vulnerable populations, particularly women in agricultural communities. Addressing these environmental health risks is essential for safeguarding maternal and infant health globally.
- Major issue regarding environmental health, particularly in urban areas where pollution is prevalent. In cities like Delhi and Agra, the contamination of drinking water from rivers poses serious health risks, especially for vulnerable populations such as women and children. The high levels of exposure to harmful substances like DDT can lead to various health problems, underscoring the urgent need for improved sanitation, waste management, and pollution control measures. Addressing these challenges is crucial for protecting public health and ensuring access to safe water.
- When natural resources become scarce, women often bear the brunt of increased workloads, as they are traditionally responsible for tasks like gathering fuel and food. This added burden comes on top of their existing responsibilities, which can lead to exhaustion and limit their opportunities for education and economic advancement.
- The persistence of gendered divisions of labor complicates efforts for change. Despite the long hours women already put in—often more than men—they frequently face systemic barriers that prevent them from accessing resources or support to alleviate their workload. Addressing these disparities is crucial not only for promoting gender equality but also for fostering sustainable development. Strategies that empower women, provide them with resources, and promote equitable labor practices are essential for building resilience in degraded environments.

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 some where 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 play a crucial role in agriculture and environmental sustainability. Their traditional practices, like fallowing and intercropping, not only enhance soil health but also contribute significantly to food security. By recognizing and incorporating women's local knowledge, planners can develop more effective strategies for sustainable farming and resource management. Given that women are key producers of staple crops and play an essential role in secondary crop production, empowering them further can lead to improved outcomes for communities and the environment. Supporting women's contributions in agriculture is vital for achieving broader goals related to food security and environmental conservation.

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 play a crucial role in maintaining agro-biodiversity and ensuring food security. Their specialized knowledge not only helps preserve genetic resources but also fosters sustainable practices in agriculture. In livestock, their responsibilities in feeding, milking, and managing small animals contribute significantly to local economies and nutrition. Moreover, in post-harvest activities, women's involvement in storage, processing, and marketing is vital for minimizing food waste and enhancing food quality. Recognizing and supporting their contributions is essential for promoting sustainable agricultural systems and empowering rural communities.

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).

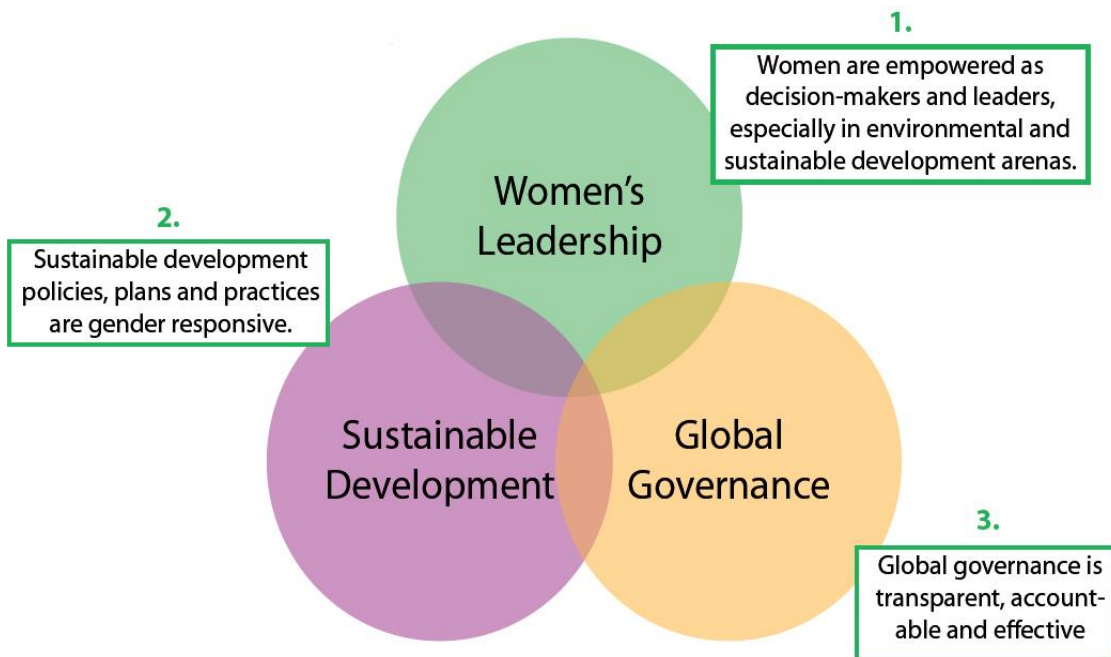


Figure 3 Women and Environmental Governance

Half of the world's population - women has no say in environment and development policies which affect them and their family lives. critical role of women in rural development and natural resource management very well. Recognizing their contributions is essential for effective strategies aimed at improving environmental conditions and overall community welfare.

Despite some progress in acknowledging women's roles, many development programs still fall short in designing and implementing initiatives that fully integrate their perspectives and capabilities. The lack of awareness among policymakers can hinder meaningful cooperation and investment in women's empowerment.

To truly advance rural development, it's vital to enhance women's access to resources, improve their working conditions, and ensure their involvement in decision-making processes. By doing so, we not only promote gender equality but also tap into a significant resource that can drive sustainable growth and development. Ultimately, fostering women's participation is crucial for achieving broader societal progress and addressing issues of justice and equity.

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 organisations.

- 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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