

# The Role of Women in Environmental Conservation: Empowerment, Rights, and Sustainable Development

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## Abstract

The world's population has been continuously on the rise which is putting a severe strain on our environment and its already limited natural resources to add to this problem our technological advancements is proving to be a bane for our environment, with the advancement of technology our human greed for economic growth has increased manifold which has led to overexploitation of the natural resources leading to severe environmental degradation, as Gandhi once said "There is enough for everyone's needs, but not everyone's greed". The need of the hour right now is to conserve the remaining natural resources and try and restore those which have already been degraded. Women can play a very vital role towards achieving the goal of environmental conservation. Women since time immemorial have played a very essential role towards management of natural resources on family and at a community level. Women are often deeply dependent on available resources for food, fuel and shelter hence they can be vulnerable to environmental change and threats. Women have played a key role in many watershed movements related to environmental protection be it at a grass root level like the Chipko movement in the 1970's or a high level movement like the Green belt movement which originated in Kenya on the Earth day in 1977 all this movement highlights the role of women towards sustainable development. However despite playing such an important role towards environmental conservation they are often ignored while framing important environmental related laws, the inheritance laws and local customs prevent them from having an ownership rights of the lands which mostly lies with the males. Women in many countries especially developing ones are actively involved in management of small-scale agriculture, they are not given an equal role when it comes to decision-making related to land use, nor are they given an equal access to much needed resources. Therefore, conservation of natural resources and promotion of environment cannot be done without involving the women in every phase of planning.

Keywords: Women, Law, Environment, Conservation, Natural resources, Gender inequality

## Introduction

The term environment is derived from the French word “Environer/Environner” which refers to neighbourhood. Environment is a natural component in which biotic(living) and abiotic(non living) factors interact among themselves and with each other, these interactions shape the habitat and ecosystem of an organism. Increasing population and technological improvement are continuously putting a burden on the environment and its resources, which calls for support of more methods relating to sustainable development. Gender is a key component in shaping our view of thinking about conservation, and lack of attention to gender differences in judgement can work against the aims of community-based conservation actions. Women play a vital role in conservation, with numerous pioneering female environmentalist working globally to save endangered flora and fauna. Women needs to be actively involved in exercises related to conservation and sustainably utilisation of biodiversity because they have played and continue to play vital roles as primary land managers and resource utilisers therefore they face higher negative impacts both from biodiversity degradation and gender-blind environmental conservation measures. Women are the foundation of the society. Though their role towards the political, social and economical plethora is not given importance, their contribution to the household activities cannot be ignored by anyone. When it comes to gender roles it is expected that women should take care of the household and men should go out and earn hence women are always expected to be within the boundary of their own homes. Perhaps, this results in more leaning of women towards the environment. Because women reliance towards the environment is more ranging from activities such as a simple household chores to higher level activities such as collection of forest produce for generation of income they are highly depended on their surrounding environment. Hence, the degradation of environment has more severe impact the lives of women in comparison to males.

It has come into view that women have come out as better advocate of environment as compared to men.

Which can be attributed to following reasons:

- In search of a job, men from rural areas migrate to cities and women are left behind to take care of the agriculture activities, this increases their knowledge about the environment thereby making them more cautious about natural resources availability, this is specially true in the case of India.
- The unemployment rate among women especially among the developing countries are relatively higher, which makes them suitable for indulging in environmental conservation related works.
- According to Eco-feminism, women are considered to be more closer and have a stronger emotional connection with the nature in comparison to men.

- Women are mostly close to their children during their growing years hence they can teach their children importance of environmental conservation.
- Various studies points to the fact that women are more negatively affected during an environmental degradation because women reliance towards the environment is more ranging from activities such as a simple household chores to higher level activities such as collection of forest produce for generation of income.
- Family preferences depend upon women. So women can well counter the culture of consumption, which is majorly responsible for environment degradation.

### **Issues related to women and environmental conservation**

“Advancing gender equality, through reversing the various social and economic handicaps that make women voiceless and powerless, may also be one of the best ways of saving the environment.”

—Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics

Rural women’s role as farmers or collectors of various forest produce place them in the forefront in terms of their knowledge of the physical environment and its biotic and abiotic resources and the possible future threats to their ecological sustainability. For example, while women in many countries especially developing countries are actively involved in management of small-scale agriculture, they are not given an equal role when it comes to decision-making related to land use, nor are they given an equal access to much needed resources. Biodiversity loss also poses a negative burden for women and girls by adding to the time required to obtain essential resources such as water, medicinal plants, and fuel wood, and which in-turn reduces the time they can spend on other activities which can generate them some income and most importantly it hampers their education.

Today, women around the globe are altering the course of conservation. As the destiny of so many flora and fauna hangs in the balance, women are coming forward to meet this global challenges through cooperation, care and bravery. Research points to the fact that projects targeting conservation achieve better results when they involve women in all the decision-making process. Yet, bottlenecks such as gender discrimination, harassment, inequality in pay, cultural restrictions, and violence remain prevalent. The comprehensive and harmful impacts of these gender-related issues are only recently being considered and more openly spoken about.

Although women are professionally widening their existence in conservation, they are often not given representation in higher post of leadership across the conservation realm. In local communities, women usually have only restricted role around management of biotic resources and protected areas. And in science, less than 30 percent of the world's researchers are women, and those women are publishing less and getting paid less.

Women across the world are under-represented in decision-making positions related to environmental and sustainable development issues. Women also fall well behind men in achieving paid employment in natural resource management sectors – notably agriculture, fisheries, and forestry – in both developing and developed countries. Furthermore, according to the OECD's Social Institutions & Gender Index, laws or customary practices of around 102 countries still restrict women's rights to access land. Without equal access to land and other key resources, women's opportunities and capacity to play an active role in environmental conservation is severely restricted.

Beyond justice, enabling women's active engagement in biodiversity related decisions is crucial to ensure that biodiversity conservation and its sustainable use initiatives are triumphant in the long run. Without the benefaction of girls and women, all these initiatives will risk overlooking the most significant causes of biodiversity loss, as well as their potential solutions, and may continue to promote gender inequalities and other severe form of inequalities.

### **The role of women in various environmental conservation movements-**

Environmental movements which are emerging due to growing environmental awareness among the people are slowly extending in regions like India where most natural resources are already being over exploited to fulfill the basic needs of ever growing population. Women and environment share a close emotional relationship which paved way for the birth of theory of eco-feminism which is a branch of feminism that sees environmentalism as a relationship between women and the earth, as foundational to its analysis and practice. Women through their role as caretakers of agriculture and collectors of water and forest produce share a close bond with their surrounding environment. Many studies points to the fact that women and children as well as some marginalised sections of the society face higher risk from environmental degradation especially during the times of natural calamities.

Women have played a key role in many watershed movement related to conservation and protection of an environment and they have also been actively involved in various environmental programs initiated by the government at grass root, national and international level. Some of the important watershed events related to environmental conservation which happened in India where women played a key role are as follows are as follows.

1. Chipko movement
2. Appiko movement
3. Silent valley movement
4. Narmada Bachao Andolan
5. Navdanya movement

The importance of women in the conservation and restoration of flora and fauna can be well observed through their role in various environmental movements. Some of the movements are as follows:

#### 1. Chipko Movement-

The name of the movement 'Chipko' comes from the word 'embrace', as the villagers hugged the trees and encircled them to prevent being cut down. It was a non-violent agitation which originated in Uttar Pradesh's Chamoli district (now Uttarakhand) in 1973. It is best remembered for the collective mobilisation of women for the cause of preserving forests, which also brought about a change in attitude regarding their own status in society. This movement very well shows the connection between women and environment, how loss of environment can enhance the degrading status of women and hence make women more conscious of their rights. The impact of Chipko movement did not remain confined within the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. The movement impacted other movements across the globe to save forests.

#### 2. Appiko Movement-

The Appiko movement is also an important social movement started in Karnataka in 1983 which was inspired by Chipko movement. The Appiko Andolan brought out a new awareness of environmental conservation in southern India and saw a large number of rural women participating. This movement was launched against the government policy to open forest for industrial development which resulted in the

overexploitation of forest resources. The role played by the Mahila Mandal and Adivasi women is quite relevant here.

### 3. Silent Valley Movement-

Silent Valley is one of the important biodiversity hotspot in Southern end of Western Ghats in Kerala in 1976. This silent valley movement was against the decision of the government to construct a dam for hydroelectric power project in silent valley forest led by Sugatha Kumari. In account of several protests and the active role played by women, the forest was declared as a National Park.

### 4.Narmada Bachao Andolan-

The Narmada Bachao Andolan which started in 1985 in areas around the Narmada River is perhaps India's longest living Gandhian non violent movement related to environmental conservation. The river is witness to a great struggle of ordinary people using forgotten Gandhian means to protest. Nari Shakti Ka Sanman was the most significant slogan of the movement. Even women were ready to compromise their life for the sake of the river and to prohibit the construction of dam. Medha Patkar played a very essential role it was with her inclusion the movement reached great height she formed the NBA in the year 1989. The NBA questions India's track record on resettlement of displaced people since independence. Displacement is gendered and women are the worst hit in such situations. Any displacement reinforces the existing situation of women's lack of ownership of land and property.

### 5.Navdanya Movement-

Navadanya which means 'nine seeds 'focuses on biodiversity and traditional seed banks. Navdanya is the largest organic movement in 1984 as a program of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology a participatory research initiative to provide direction and support to environmental activism.The main aim of this movement was to save seeds from biopiracy. Mostly the members of Navdanya movement were women farmers from various part of the country.

## Conclusion

Now in the current era as women are slowly given their due recognition in every field so their role in ecology management must also be recognised to accelerate the active participation of women. Women in rural areas are more linked with natural resources and conservation than men. Their traditional gender roles bring them in daily contact with natural resources such as land, water, forest and wildlife. It is seen that women's contribution lead to better following of rules and a greater transparency in the working in any field which eventually leads to better results. The present indirect and voluntary approach can be bettered, so as to provide women with a clear path to conserve environment, by giving secure land rights to women, creation of talent pool in a locality, incentives to women groups doing their part well, etc. Women are the pillars of the society. Though their contribution to the social, political and economical plethora is not given priorities, their contribution to the household activities can't be denied by anyone. Due to the existing gender roles in the society, women are always expected to be within the four walls of their own homes. Perhaps, this results in more inclination of women towards the environment. Women have a stake in conserving environment as they depend on it not just for livelihood but also for daily needs of the household (water, fuelwood and fodder). Gender inequality exists quite sharply in India, as evident from the fact that ownership of land and property is largely with men. The exclusion of women in policies is related to the gender politics that privilege men and make women invisible. Women can be key players in the move towards a more sustainable future and policy makers need to realise this. There needs to be shift from a mere focus on women as an object of policy, to a more nuanced engagement with gender in the framing of any policy.

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