

## **Women: The Guardians of Environment and Weavers of Sustainable Tapestry**

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### **Abstract**

Women and environment are two parallel streams under the theory of eco-feminism standing at the margin of exploitation in the hands of patriarchal dominance and control. The present paper highlights the importance of environment and the influential role of women in protection and conservation of environment since Vedic era. It indicates the close connection of women with environment, their interdependence and the development of indigenous and traditional knowledge system. The paper presents the independent discoveries, and formation of grassroots activism and environmental movements under women's leadership and vision which had set glaring examples and source of inspiration for other women. Women are the better advocates of environment and has been given due recognition in environmental laws and policies. Nowadays, the role of rural women in renewable energy like biogas and solar appliances is crucial. Educational awareness in environmental domain and imparting skill among women is fundamental. The issue of gender equality has scaled down, but it still requires more focused approach, especially in rural and remote regions.

**Keywords:** Women. Environment. Conservation. Sustainable. Ecofeminism.

### **Introduction**

“When women move forward, the family moves, the villages moves and the nation moves” said Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Centuries have witnessed the role and participation of women in different disciplines and their well-known contributions. Societies and their harsh set rules have barred women from participation in various aspects of life. However, the iron ladies of this great motherland did not stop to fight for their emancipation. Since ancient India up to the present, the women of this nation have set glaring examples of their intelligence and excellence. From familial management and upbringing of children to the political participation, scientific innovations, social activism, administrative jobs, entrepreneurship, and what not, they are unbeatable. In the budget session of 2022-23, the finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman quoted “Nari Shakti is the harbinger of India's bright future.”

The burgeoning population and continuous rise in demand for goods and services has caused increasing burden on environment and natural resources. More than often, it led to the exploitation of resources beyond its regenerating capacity. However, a sustainable future requires sustainable use of present resources. Tress, vegetation cover, and other ecosystem services play a significant role in human life. The degradation of environment leads to breakdown of ecosystem and the planet as a whole. In this respect environmental conservation is quite essential. Environment conservation includes practices like preservation, protection, management, or restoration of natural environmental system and the ecological communities which inhabit them.

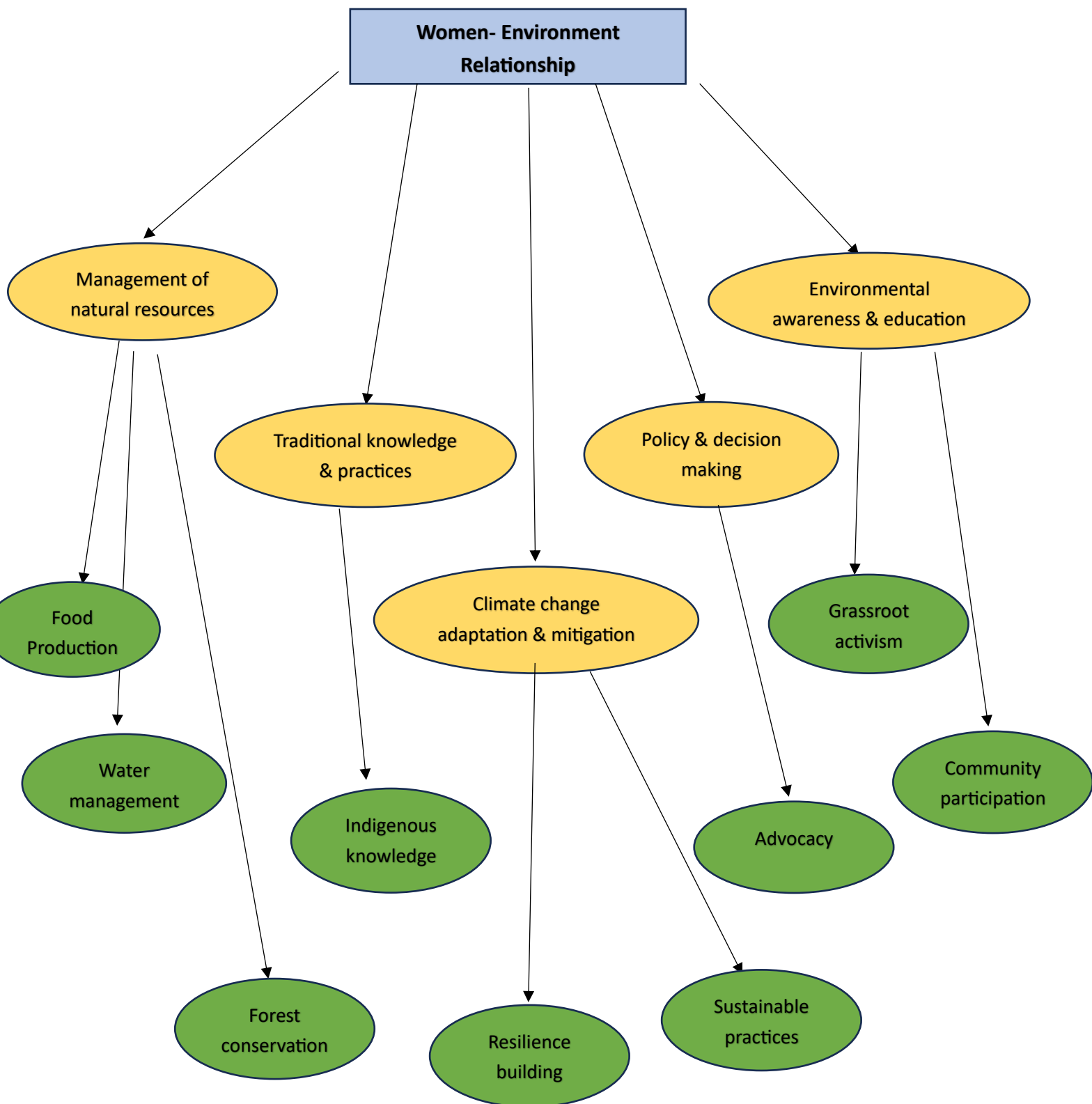
Since Vedic era, Indian women have played an influential role in environmental protection and conservation. They have been very close to nature due to the practice of natural worship including both flora, fauna, and rivers. This practice has inculcated an emotional connection of women with environment and its protection, which has been deeply rooted in Indian culture and passed on from generation to generation.

Women play a vital role in the protection and conservation of environment. In the first World Conference on Women in 1975, the issue women-environment was explicitly brought in the public domain. In 1980s, the developmental organizations have realized the need for inclusion of gender issues for better implementation of environmental policies and natural resource management. The Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), and Millenium Development Goals have highlighted the significance of active women participation and resolving gender issues as critical factors for successful implementation of environmental commitments (Nathaniel, 2022).

### **Why are Women-a better advocate of environment?**

1. **Live in rural areas:** When most of the men migrate to urban and semi-urban areas in search of employment, women are left behind. They develop close connection with the environment and enhance upon their knowledge system about environmental resources.
2. **Environmental proximity:** Women play a crucial role in farming and agricultural activities. As frequent collectors of water and fire-wood, they develop a close emotional connection with local environment which prevent its degradation.
3. **Low employment:** The employment rate among women especially in developing nation is lower which makes them suitable to be engaged in environmental activities and conservation practices.
4. **Better guide for children:** They develop a sound traditional knowledge system which they transfer to generations for environmental betterment and preservation. Mahatma Gandhi said, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate an entire family." A n environmentally educated women can best guide her children and family about conservation practices.

Fig.1. Women-Environment Relationship



5. **Eco-feminism:** A close and intimate bond between women and nature has led to the development of theory of eco-feminism coined by a French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. Ecofeminists value traditionally feminine qualities like empathy, cooperation, and intuition which they believe are essential for sustainable living (Bhutia, 2023). Women and environment, both are dominated by patriarchal exploitation and control.

### **Women's discoveries and environmental movements:**

The emergence of environmental movements in India dates back to Khejrli movement. These movements have highlighted that major participants were women, adivasis and poor people. Some of these movements are described here as under:

1. **Bishnoi movement:** Bishnois were the people of Rajasthan who started a movement traced back to 1730 to prevent the cutting of Khejri trees. This was the first set of environmental movement started in India. The villagers of the region under the leadership of Amrita Devi protested against the royal order of cutting Khejri trees (Das, 2022). They hugged the trees as a sign of dissent of the order. Inspired by this movement, Bachni Devi and Gauri Devi revived it in 1972 in Uttar Pradesh.
2. **Chipko Movement:** The Chipko movement was started in 1973 under the leadership of Sunderlal Bahuguna, Bachni Devi, Gauri Devi and other women of Garhwal region of Uttar Pradesh. Chandi Prasad Bhatt, the organizer of the protest movement, gave the slogan – "Ecology is permanent economy".
3. **Appiko Movement:** The Appiko movement based in Karnataka was initiated in 1983 against the government policy of open forest for industrial development. The men, women, and children along with the tribal women demonstrated against the government order through various acts like embracing trees, awareness programs including foot marches, folk dance, street plays, and dramas.
4. **Silent Valley movement:** Silent Valley in Kerala is one of the significant biodiversity hotspots in Western Ghat. In 1976, when the government of Kerala planned to build a hydropower dam, strong resentment came across. The Malayalam poet and environmentalist, Sugatha Kumari led the mass movement along with other residents of the region, especially women. The government had to take the plan back, and the area was declared as a National Park.
5. **Narmada Bachao Andolan:** The largest among these movements was the Narmada Bachao Andolan against the building of dam along the Narmada River funded by World Bank. The movement was started in 1985 and covered three states of India – Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The movement was led by Medha Patekar, Baba Amte, and Arundhati Roy, which turned into an international protest movement, with immense support from NGOs round the globe. It forced the world bank to withdraw the project in 1993.
6. **Silent Spring:** Rachel Carson, a savior of environment, raised environmental concerns in her Seminal book 'Silent Spring'. She warned about the harmful effect of chemical pesticides, especially DDT. Rachel was a voice so sound which encouraged other women to fight for environmental protection.
7. **Governing the Commons:** In 1990, the book of Elinor Ostrom 'Governing the Commons' provided an alternative to people to govern the resources collectively in order to save it.
8. **Hargila Army (2012):** Dr. Purnima Devi founded an all-female grassroot conservation movement to protect endangered greater adjutant stork in India. Her work became inspiration for other women to actively participate in wildlife conservation.

These were only few popular contributions of women's initiatives in the environmental domain. There are many more glaring examples which have become the voice for environment and its protection.

### Empowering women for sustainable future

In order to further conserve the environment and prevent the depletion of natural resources, initiatives to empower women is important. Women play a crucial multi-dimensional role in society. Educated women can take not only their family forward but the whole society. They are able to set example and become a role model for others. Following is some of the measures to empower women for promoting sustainable environment:

1. **Educational support:** Education is like a turning wheel in bringing about outstanding progressive change in society and economy. Educational support and skilling women are one of the most important steps in preservation of environment (Yadav et al., 2022).
2. **Women leadership:** Women leaderships have often led significant grassroot movements and activism focused on environmental issues. The women leaders are more influential than male counterparts. Encourage women participation in local and national governance, decision-making and leadership in community organization related to environmental conservation is crucial.
3. **Economic empowerment:** To empower women economically, their mainstream inclusion in financial domain is significant to promote women-led business and initiatives in sustainable sector, sustainable agriculture and farming decisions and so on.
4. **Community-based initiatives:** Initiatives and schemes should be rolled out to encourage women to participate and involve in community-based forestry and plantation programs, water management practices through sustainable and equitable usage and other waste management techniques.
5. **Preserve and promote Traditional Knowledge:** To preserve the traditional and indigenous knowledge about environmental practices from early women is important. Further, promotion of traditional knowledge system with modern environmental practices is crucial due to changing climatic scenario.
6. **Policy and legal framework:** Gender related issues need to be addressed properly and equitable participation of women should be encouraged to promote women's empowerment in environmental protection

### Conclusion

Over the years, women have made significant contributions in the field of environment through grassroot movements and independent discoveries. Many a times their work go unnoticed or get dominated by male-driven societal structure. However, India has a long history of women's participation in socio-economic and other causes. The women of this nation fought for environment as their own personal cause. Due to their daily contact and dependence on natural resources like land, water, forest and wildlife, the village women developed an innate connection with environment along with a set of indigenous and traditional knowledge system. The environmental laws and policies of India viz., National Environment Policy (2006), National Forest Policy (1988), Biodiversity Act (2002), and others (Nathaniel, 2022) have recognized the role of women and local communities in conservation of environment. Nowadays, the role of rural women in renewable energy like biogas (Shailaja, 2000) and solar appliances is crucial. Therefore, educational awareness in environmental domain and imparting skill among women is utmost necessary. The issue of gender equality has reduced much, but it still requires more focused approach, especially in rural and remote regions.

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