

## **WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION: AN INTERCONNECTED JOURNEY TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY**

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### **Abstract:**

Rapid population growth combined with ongoing technological advancements is exerting significant pressure on the environment and the finite natural resources available to nations. The excessive and unsustainable exploitation of essential resources—such as land, water, and fuel—has led to serious environmental degradation. This includes industrial pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, and the expansion of urban areas. In light of these challenges, the urgent need to preserve and sustain natural resources and the environment has become increasingly evident. The intersection of women and environmental conservation has emerged as a crucial area of global concern. Historically, women have played an intrinsic role in interacting with and protecting the environment. Particularly in rural areas—where a large segment of the population depends directly on natural resources—women engage daily with elements like water, forests, land, fuel, food, and fodder. Given this close connection, this paper explores the evolving role of women in environmental preservation in the face of global change. It also presents targeted recommendations to strengthen women's participation in ecological protection and resource management

**Keywords:** women, environmental conservation, environmental policies, recommendations.

### **1. Introduction**

The environment serves as the foundation and life-support system for all living beings (UNESCO & ICSU, 1999). As concerns about the quality of life have grown globally, environmental health has emerged as a vital component in assessing human well-being. The relationship between women and nature is profound and deeply rooted.

Historically, women have symbolized the essence of nature—represented as Mother Earth, the Earth Goddess, Artemis in Greek mythology, and Mother River (Yellow River) in Chinese culture. They have often embodied the nurturing and sustaining power of nature. As life-givers and caretakers, women have naturally assumed leading roles in protecting and nurturing the environment. Research shows that women are key participants in managing natural resources and are instrumental in environmental restoration and preservation.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) highlight both gender equality and environmental sustainability. Encouraging women's participation in ecological protection can foster a collective sense of responsibility necessary for maintaining a healthy balance between human needs and natural resources.

### **2. Women in Global Environmental Movements**

The nature of women's environmental roles varies across regions. In developed countries, women primarily address urban issues like pollution, while in developing countries, environmental concerns often relate to rural livelihoods and natural resource access.

Women from diverse backgrounds—from homemakers to scientists—have actively contributed to global environmental efforts. Rachel Carson from Pennsylvania was one of the

earliest environmental pioneers. Her groundbreaking work on the effects of pesticides awakened public awareness and spurred the modern environmental movement.

In Africa, Wangari Maathai launched the Green Belt Movement, encouraging women to plant trees to combat soil erosion, conserve water, and provide sustainable resources. In 2004, she became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her work.

### **3. Women's Role in Environmental Conservation in India**

India has seen a surge in environmental consciousness in recent decades, with women taking a front seat in resisting deforestation and conserving water. One of the earliest known instances of women's environmental activism dates back to 1731 in Rajasthan, where Amrita Devi of the Bishnoi community sacrificed her life to protect sacred Khejri trees. This act of bravery laid the foundation for later movements like the Chipko Movement in the 1970s, led by women like Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi in Uttar Pradesh.

Indian women have also addressed land degradation, water scarcity, and declining agricultural productivity. Through collective efforts, such as reviving barren lands using traditional agricultural practices, they restored hundreds of acres to productivity (Ress, 1992). Their holistic understanding of the link between ecology and livelihood makes them invaluable in environmental preservation.

### **4. Objectives of the Study**

1. Highlight women's roles in environmental protection.
2. Examine challenges women face in environmental activism.
3. Propose strategies to enhance women's participation in ecological conservation.

### **5. Ecofeminism: Understanding the Link**

Ecofeminism emerged from the interconnectedness of women and nature. Alongside Deep Ecology and Eco-theology, Ecofeminism emphasizes community-based activism, grassroots involvement, and the inclusion of local knowledge in environmental decision-making. It advocates for women's active roles in environmental governance and acknowledges their unique contributions toward ecological balance.

### **6. Unique Contributions of Women**

Historically, men have viewed nature primarily through a commercial lens, while women have seen it as a source of sustenance and survival. The Rio Declaration recognizes women's essential role in environmental management and asserts that sustainable development is not possible without their full participation.

Indian women, in particular, have significantly advanced environmental awareness. They have educated children, communities, and played leading roles in environmental literacy campaigns. Poor women, especially, view environmental issues through a broad and practical lens, understanding that sustainability of soil, water, and vegetation is vital for survival.

Indian women have made considerable sacrifices in environmental defense, driven by a sense of duty, devotion, and care. Their involvement stems not only from necessity but from a deep-rooted desire to protect the planet.

### **7. Enhancing Women's Role in Conservation: Key Recommendations**

To maximize women's impact on environmental conservation, the following strategies are essential:

- A. **Inclusive Decision-Making:** Women must be represented in all levels of environmental policy-making—as planners, managers, and evaluators.
- B. **Training & Outreach:** Women's understanding of biodiversity, climate change, and

pollution should be enhanced through targeted education programs.

- C. **Community Engagement:** Leveraging traditional ecological knowledge through community initiatives fosters shared responsibility.
- D. **Technology Awareness:** Promoting safe, sustainable technology and warning against harmful practices can empower women to adopt eco-friendly innovations.
- E. **Educational Support:** Environmental topics must be integrated into educational institutions and women's organizations like SHGs to enhance knowledge and participation.
- F. **Policy Framework Supporting Women in Environment**
- G. Environmental policies in India have increasingly adopted participatory approaches, recognizing the pivotal role of women. Key policies include:
- H. **National Environment Policy (2006):** Encourages integrating environmental concerns in development with livelihoods for local communities.
- I. **National Forest Policy (1988) and Joint Forest Management (JFM):** Mandate 33% women representation in forest protection committees, contributing to its success.
- J. **Biodiversity Act (2002):** Acknowledges women as custodians of traditional knowledge, especially in agriculture.
- K. **Water Harvesting Initiatives:** Projects like those in Sukhomajri village demonstrate the impact of women's involvement in water management.
- L. **Renewable Energy Programs:** Promote women's access to sustainable energy solutions such as biogas and solar panels.

### 8. Legal Safeguards and Constitutional Provisions

Beyond activism, Indian women have sought legal recourse for environmental justice. The 42nd Amendment (1976) to the Indian Constitution emphasizes environmental protection as a Fundamental Duty. Article 51(A) urges every citizen to protect nature and show compassion for living beings, while Article 21 ensures the right to a dignified life in a healthy environment.

Supportive legislations include:

1. The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981
2. The Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974
3. The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972
4. The Indian Forest Act, 1927
5. The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980
6. The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986

### 9. Conclusion

Women are critical allies in safeguarding the environment. Their involvement leads to sustainable practices, community empowerment, and a deeper understanding of ecological balance. From traditional knowledge keepers to policy influencers, women continue to shape a future rooted in sustainability. Their role in environmental protection is not just complementary—it is essential to achieving lasting ecological harmony and national progress.

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