

**Full Length Research**

# **Role of Women in Environmental Conservation**

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Before 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was considered that women have no role in environmental conservation and promotion, as well as they were avoided in all major sphere of social life. But after spreading awareness about their rights and duties and taking cognizance of their surrounding they consciously tried to raise voice against environment degradation. Women had launched numbers of movement in demanding of better protection of natural resources and environment conservation. Like in India, Amrita Devi had sacrificed their life for protection of the trees that was going to fell down by commercial logger in Uttarakhand. Other women like Vandana Shiva have also contributed in environment conservation and protection. They had organized women and people through the Navdanya movement of 1982. Growing population and technological advancement are continuously putting a strain on the environment and on country's natural resources. Over-exploitation of the country's resources like land, water, fuel etc. has resulted in degradation of resources mainly due to industrial pollution, soil erosion, deforestation and urbanization. Therefore, conservation of natural resources and promotion of environment cannot be done without involving the women in planning and training for promoting the values for conservation and promotion of environment. Hence, attempt has been made to assess the role of women in conservation and promotion of environment along with suitable strategy for the same.

**Keyword:** Growing population, Strain, Degradation, Enhancement, Conservation.

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## INTRODUCTION

A lot of studies on women and environment have shown that women are significant actors in natural resource management and they are major contributors to environmental rehabilitation and conservation. In addressing some key environmental problems, women play a dominant role. Women, through their roles as farmers and as collectors of water and firewood, have a close connection with their local environment and often suffer most directly from environmental problems.

Women's direct contact with environment has produced them deep- knowledge about the environment. Thus, women have served as agriculturalists, water resource manager, and traditional scientists, among others. Women are not only knowledgeable about the environment, but they are also protective and caring.

Women, being primarily responsible for domestic and household management, interact more intensively with the natural environment and build the environment more than men. Consequently, they are more likely to suffer from a degraded home, neighborhood, and city environment and to shoulder more of the burden that goes with living in poor housing and communities with inadequate residential and health infrastructure, since they spend more time at home and its immediate vicinity (Etta, 1999). Governments are now seeing the global dimension of a number of environmental problems, such as climate change, ozone depletion, dumping of hazardous wastes, destruction of biological resources and of forests, and the impact of desertification (Tolba, 1992). Therefore, the need to protect the environment becomes imperative. Women have recorded successes in solving environmental problems all over the world. In India, the women realized that degradation of productive land has led to the erosion of top soil; the choking of water drainage was causing salinity and loss of food crops. They collectively lease degraded land and revived them through traditional farming. In three years, 700 acres of land were restored to productive use (Ress, 1992). They are more concerned about environmental protection and ecological preservation. A lot has been said about women activities in environment improvement and protection. Moser (1991) distinguishes between three roles for women:

- i. As managers or maintainers of the natural environment,
- ii. Rehabilitators of the natural environment in the sense of sustainable development, and
- iii. As innovators in the use of appropriate technology in the creation of new environments.

Dankelman and Davidson (1998) observed that women play a key role in managing their natural surroundings and adopt several mechanisms to deal with the kinds of

environmental crisis they face. They, however, observe that the responses of governments have not been significant and as a result women, men, and children continue to face problems including pollution, poor services, human waste pollution, fumes from household fuel, and the consequences of soil erosion and flooding.

As rightly noted by Dashe (1991), without the enhanced perception of a gendered analysis to guide into the future environmental management programs, a crash is inevitable. Therefore, there is the need to understand the various ways women have actively participated in environmental protection and management with a view to integrate them into environmental management programs.

Women and the environment are closely bound and interconnected. Throughout history, women have been immortalized as powerful symbols of nature: Mother Earth, Earth Goddess, and Artemis in the Greek mythology, and Mother River (the Yellow River) in Chinese history. Women have personified nature and given nature its infinite meaning. Therefore, women as bearers and conservers of life, as those who first guide children, should be foremost in dedication to the environmental cause.

### Role of Women in Conservation of Environment

More than 70% of the Indian population is rural based. Biomass plays a crucial role in meeting daily survival needs of the vast majority of the rural households. Water is essential for survival and its availability is related to biomass. The biomass-based subsistence economy is mostly non-monetized. Production and processing of biomass agriculture, forestry, and minor forest produce and village crafts based on biomass as raw materials are also the biggest sources of employment. Development imperatives have inevitably led to some destruction of the biomass through deforestation and environmental degradation.

Traditionally, women have been responsible for subsistence and survival for water, food, fuel, fodder and habitat, though they rarely get the credit for nurturing these life support systems. Added to these environmental destruction, exacerbates women's problems in a way very difficult from that of men. The challenge is to re-establish the symbiosis between communities, women and natural resources and reverse the trend of the negative impact of existing developmental paradigms.

Women have always been the principal conservers of bio-diversity. Even today they perform duties such as seed selection, multiplication and conservation. The on-farm conservation traditions of rural and tribal women, with reference to agro-biodiversity are well known.

Unfortunately, current food security systems depend on too few crops. It is important to expand the basis of food security by including large numbers of species and varieties of food plants still maintained by tribal and rural families.

Traditionally, women have dealt with non-monetized biomass based subsistence economy of the household i.e. firewood, cow dung, crop wastes, organic manure, etc. In comparison men tend to destroy nature to earn cash even if it means creating hardship in their own families for their womenfolk to collect fuel and fodder e.g. sale of herbs and wood. The up host is that women work as unpaid laborers on family farms with a greater role than men in operational decision making. The population pressure has increased male migration, which in turn adds to the women's work load. In effect this means that women's responsibilities extend from the household duties to working in the fields as well.

In developing areas of the world, women are considered the primary users of natural resources (Land, Forest and water), because they are the ones who are responsible for gathering food, fuel and fodder. Although in these countries, women mostly can't own the land and farms outright, they are the ones who spend most of their time working on the farms to feed the household. Shouldering this responsibility leads them to learn more about soil, plants, and trees and not misuse them. Although, technological inputs increase male involvement with land, many of them leave the farm to go to cities to find jobs; so women become increasingly responsible for an increasing portion of farm tasks. These rural women

Tend to have a closer relationship with land and other natural resources, which promote a new culture of respectful use and preservation of natural resources and the environment, ensuring that the following generations can meet their needs.

Besides considering how to achieve appropriate agricultural production and human nutrition, women want to secure access to the land. Women's perspectives and values for the environment are somewhat different than men's. Women give greater priority to protection of and improving the capacity of nature, maintaining farming lands, and caring for nature and environment's future. Repeated studies have shown that women have a stake in environment and this stake is reflected in the degree to which they care about natural resources. Ecofeminism refers to women's and feminist perspectives on the environment - where the domination and exploitation of women, of poorly resourced peoples and of nature is at the heart of the ecofeminist movement.

Today, women struggle against alarming global trends, but they are working together to effect change. By establishing domestic and international non-governmental organizations, many women have recognized themselves and acknowledge to the world that they have not only the right to participate in

environmental dilemmas but they have different relationship with environment including different needs, responsibilities, and knowledge about natural resources. This is why women are affected differently than men by environmental degradation, deforestation, pollution and over pollution. Women are often the most directly affected by environmental issues, so they become more concerned about environmental problems. Studies have shown the direct effects of chemicals and pesticides on human health. According to United Nations Chronicle journal researchers have found an association between breast cancer and the pesticide DDT and its derivative DDE; and also one study by the World Health Organization has found that women who are exposed to pesticides face a higher risk of abortion. These kinds of health problems cause women to feel more responsible regarding environmental issues.

The environmental degradation caused while men have had dominance over women, and women's large investment in environmental sustainability, some have theorized that women would protect the Earth better than men if they will be in power. Although there is no evidence for this hypothesis, recent movements have shown that women are more sensitive to the earth and its problems. They have created a special value system about environmental issues. People's approaches to environmental issues may depend on their relationship beliefs with nature ex. Pipal, Awala, Tulsi, Bargad are considered as Holistic plants & tree. Both women and nature have been considered as subordinates entities by men throughout history, which conveys a close affiliation between them.

While it is true that poor women continue to suffer various kinds of deprivation, discrimination and atrocities, the country has mounted a concert on against these problems through various development/empowering strategies to include confidence among women, bring an awareness of their own potential and to ensure their participation in their own development, an empowering strategy has been advocated by the Government based on promotion of literacy and education, credit, employment and income generation.

Though the Government of India is working towards an environmentally sound and sustainable quality of life, the problems, challenges and issues are multi-faceted. However, women in India are playing a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment. Women in our country have brought a different perspective to the environment debate, because of their different experience base. Poor women in our country have brought a different perspective to the environment debate, because of their different experience base. Poor women's lives are not compartmentalized and they see the issues in a broad and holistic perspective. They understand clearly that economics and environment are compatible. Their experience reveals to them that soil

water and vegetation, necessary for their day-to-day living, requires, care and good management. Environmental degradation is related not only to the biosphere alone, but to the social sphere as well. Keeping in view the inherent capabilities of women in various spheres like management as well as the need for women entrepreneurship, development, educational and vocational training, communication skills, creativity and innovation, quality of management and control, inventory and production management need to be strengthened throughout the length and breadth of the country. To achieve this, resources and strength of women need to be channelized to develop their full potential so as to take their rightful place as equal partners in all sphere.

Further, there are opportunities for value addition in all agricultural commodities at the post harvest phase. Often developing countries sell their primary produce without value addition. Also, there is a mismatch between production and post-harvest technologies they benefit neither the producer nor the consumer. The demand for processed and semi processed food is also growing. This is also an area where training and entrepreneurship development will be very helpful, particularly, for overcoming micronutrient deficiencies in diets.

As the world moves forward at a phenomenal speed with scientists and technological advances, there is a growing feeling that biotechnological empowerment of women is absolutely essential for progress. With this in view and taking note of the potential of Biotechnology, the Department of Biotechnology has initiated programs since 1998 to empower women and rural population by imparting skills for additional income generation. The program has been designed to train the human resources in absorbing the technology to be adopted and practiced by them and finally how the product can be developed and sold in the market. Therefore the marketing skill has been considered as one of the major aspects. The program also envisages training for the entrepreneurship so that it can attract women and rural youth to start their small enterprises for their livelihood. While designing such programs adequate emphasis has been given on managerial aspects including financial management. The Department supported projects mainly in three different modes, namely, field demonstration, extension oriented activities and development of entrepreneurs in the proven biotechnologies and R & D programs specially addressed to specific problems to the women.

Throughout history men have looked at natural resources as commercial entities or income generating tools, while women have tended to see the environment as a resource support their basic needs. As an example, rural Indian women collect the dead branches which are cut by storm for fuel wood to use rather than cutting the live trees. Since African, Asian and Latin American women use the land to produce food for their family; they acquire the knowledge of the land / soil conditions, water,

and other environmental features. Any changes in the environment on these areas, like deforestation, have the most effect on women of that area, and cause them to suffer until they can cope with these changes. An example of female predominance in the defense of natural forests comes from India in 1906. As forest clearing was expanding conflict between loggers and government and peasant communities increased. To thwart resistance to the forest cleaning, the men were diverted from their villages to a fictional payment compensation site and loggers were sending to the forests. The women left in the villages; however, protested by physically hugging themselves to the trees to prevent their being cut down, giving rise to what is now called the Chipko movement, an environmentalist.

### **Chipko movement**

One of the first environmentalist movements which were inspired by women was the Chipko movement (Women tree-huggers in India). "Its name comes from a Hindi word meaning to stick" (as in glue). The movement was an act of defiance against the state government's permission given to a corporation for commercial logging. Women of the village resisted, embracing trees to prevent their felling, to safeguard their lifestyles which were dependent on the forests. Deforestation could qualitatively change the lives of all village residents but it was the women who agitated for saving the forests. Organized by a non-governmental organization that Chandi Prasad led, The Chipko movement adopted the slogan "ecology is permanent economy." The women embracing the trees did not tag their action as feminist activism; however as a movement that demonstrated resistance against oppression, it had all the markings of such. It began when Maharaja of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace in Rajasthan which is India's Himalayan foot hills. While the axemen were cutting the trees, martyr Amrita Devi hugged one of the trees. This is because in Jodhpur each child had a tree that could talk to it. The axe men ignored Devi and after taking she off they cut down the tree.

### **Green Belt movement**

Another movement, which is one of the biggest in women and environment history, is the Green Belt movement. Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai founded this movement on the World Environment Day in June 1977. The starting ceremony was very simple a few women planted seven trees in Maathai's backyard. By 2005 30 million trees had been planted by participants in the Green Belt movement on public and private lands. The Green Belt movement aims to bring environmental

restoration along with society's economic growth. This movement led by Maathai focused on restoration of Kenya's rapidly diminishing forests as well as empowering the rural women through environmental preservation. This conflict started because men wanted to cut the trees to use them for industrial purposes while women wanted to keep them since it was their food resource and deforestation was a survival matter for local people.

### **Rachel Carson**

One of the outstanding women environmentalists is Rachel Carson. Rachel Carson (1907-1964) was a scientist, writer, and ecologist. Rachel Carson went to the Pennsylvania College for Women, majoring in English, but she was inspired by her biology teacher so she switched her major to biology. She became more interested and focused on the sea while she was working at the Marine Biological Laboratories in Massachusetts. Her eloquent prose led to the publication of her first book, *Under the Sea-Wind: a Naturalists' Picture of Ocean Life*, in 1941. In 1949 she became chief editor of the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Her second book, *The Sea Around us*, won the National Book Award and sold more than 200,000 copies. After that she retired from FWS and became a full time writer. After her third book about the sea 'The Edge of the Sea' Carson focused on effects of chemicals and pesticides on the environment. That is when she wrote her book about environment, *Silent Spring*. The book was about what man has done to the nature and eventually to him and started a modern environmental movement. Carson believed that human and nature are mutually dependent on each other. She argued that industrial activities such as pesticides use can damage the earth ecosystem and will have far-reaching ecological consequences such as future human health problems. Today, scientific studies have demonstrated these consequences.

### **Maria Cherkasova**

Maria Cherkasova (1938) is a journalist, ecologist, and director of Centre for Independent Ecological Programs (CIEP). She is famous because of coordinating a 4-year campaign to stop construction of hydro-electric dam on the Katun River. After Cherkasova involvement in the student movement on environmental protection in 1960's, she began to work for the Red Data Book for the Department of Environmental Protection in 1960's. She began to work for the Red Data Book for the Department of Environmental Protection Institute. She researched and preserved rare species until she became the editor of USSR Red Data Book. Sheco- founded the Socio-

Ecological Union which has become the largest ecological NGO in the former Soviet Union. In 1990, she became director of CIEP which arrange and drives activities in an extensive range of ecologically related areas on both domestic and international fronts.

It is common knowledge throughout the world that the growth of technology and the processes of commercialization, industrialization, and globalization affect men and women differently. The world realizes, clearly today that real development cannot take roots if it by-passes women. Therefore, India embarks on bold and sweeping economic reforms, concern for women and efforts to bring them in main stream occupying the Centre stage. India has been a relentless champion of the success of women at all spheres in international and national forums. The women's movement in India continuously interacts with and informs public opinion. The Indian Parliament has been a front-runner in progressive legislation upholding the status of women. India has the distinction of running one of the world's largest primary health care systems and the largest child development program. India has set up a National Commission for Women through an Act of Parliament to serve as a kind of ombudsman for women's issues in the country and the day is not far off when the Parliament opens its doors for one third of its strength to women.

### **Relevant legal provision on environment**

India is one of the few countries of the world that have made a specific reference in the constitution of to the need for environmental protection, control and preservation.

The constitution (42nd Amendment) Act of 1976 has made it a Fundamental duty to protect and improve the natural environment.

Article 51 (a) provides that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life and have compassion for living creatures.

Article 21 of Constitution guarantee the right to life; a life of dignity, to be lived in a proper environment, free from danger of disease and infection.

Besides there are number of Directive Principles which give indirect emphasis for protection of environment.

In addition to Indian Constitutional aspect, certain special legislations are also available in India for Environmental protection such as

- The Air (Prevention and control of pollution) Act-1981
- The Water (Prevention and control of Pollution) Act, 1974.
- The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.
- The India Forest Act, 1927.

- The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 and the comprehensive legislation.
- Environmental protection Act, 1986

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance women's participation in environmental management for sustainable development the following recommendations are proffered:

Women should be encouraged to participate in committees on environmental protection projects, programs, and policies to address gender imbalances in decision making. Women's access to land and other resources should be ensured and not undermined. The government will have to come in, in this respect, to ensure gender equity regarding access to and control of resources. Environmental education is required for the every citizen for sustainable development

Environmental education will produce change in attitude of the people, as well as impart specific knowledge on the every citizen. Separation of plastic from municipal solid wastes and recycling of plastic will help to reduce the contribution of plastic to the solid waste problem, as well as eliminate the unsightly littering. "Biodegradable plastic" could also be used (Pryde 1973). These will eventually decompose. Women education and access to education for girls should be seen as a policy priority.

Educated women will contribute more significantly to bridging the gap between environment and development. Empowerment of women in sustainable human development and in relation to the protection of the environment must be recognized and sustained.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the various ways women have participated actively in environmental protection and natural resource management in order to ensure sustainable use of environmental resources. Recommendations are proffered, especially those that can help the goal of women empowerment. The critical role of women, as resource managers, as community activists, as environmental advocates, must be recognized when strategies for the protection of the environment are being developed. Women should be allowed to participate at the local, regional, national, and international levels on environmental issues. In the words

of Maye (1994), this participation, to be meaningful, should go beyond tokenism. To make a significant impact on decision making, women should be present in equal numbers to men (or at least on a 40:60 proportional split of genders). As resource managers, women should be consulted and supported in what they are already doing to protect the environment. Specifically, more women should be involved in decision making with regard to policies programs, or funding of environment.

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