

Gender and the Environment: A Nexus for Sustainable Development Goals

***Dr. Prem Sonwal**

Abstract

The intersection of gender and the environment forms a critical nexus for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the unique impacts of environmental issues on women and men and the pivotal role of gender equality in sustainable development. Women, particularly in developing countries, often bear the brunt of environmental degradation due to their dependence on natural resources for livelihoods and their primary roles in agriculture, water, and fuel collection. Yet, despite their vulnerability, women also possess invaluable knowledge and skills in resource management and conservation, making their participation crucial to environmental sustainability and resilience. Integrating gender considerations into environmental actions not only advances SDGs focused on gender equality (SDG 5) and environmental sustainability (SDGs 13, 14, and 15) but also contributes to poverty reduction (SDG 1), health (SDG 3), and economic growth (SDG 8). Thus, recognizing and strengthening the gender-environment nexus is essential for holistic and sustainable development.

Keywords: Feminist Environmentalism, Herbal Knowledge, Chipko Movement, TEK, Solar Sister.

Introduction

In the evolving discourse on sustainable development, the intricate nexus between gender and the environment has emerged as a critical area of focus. This intersectionality underscores the reality that environmental issues and gender inequality are not isolated challenges but are deeply interconnected, each influencing the outcomes of the other. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015 provide a comprehensive framework for addressing these global challenges, aiming to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. However, achieving these goals necessitates an integrated approach that recognizes the pivotal role of gender dynamics in environmental sustainability efforts.

The gender-environment nexus is further complicated by the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation and climate change on women and girls. These impacts are not merely a result of biological differences but are primarily shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and political factors that exacerbate existing inequalities. For instance, in the context of climate-induced disasters, women and girls often face higher risks and burdens, including increased violence, loss of livelihoods,

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and reduced access to emergency services and support. Such disparities highlight the urgent need to address gender-specific vulnerabilities and harness the potential of women as agents of change in environmental sustainability.

Recognizing the critical link between gender equality and environmental sustainability, this paper aims to shed light on how integrating gender perspectives can enhance the effectiveness of conservation efforts and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. It is premised on the understanding that sustainable development cannot be realized without addressing gender inequality and that environmental conservation efforts are more effective and sustainable when they involve and empower women. By examining key areas of intersection, including women's roles in natural resource management, the gender-specific impacts of environmental issues, and the opportunities for women's leadership in environmental sustainability, this paper seeks to provide insights into how gender considerations can be integrated into environmental policies and practices.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for exploring the nexus between gender and the environment within the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is rooted in two interconnected bodies of scholarship: feminist environmentalism and the theory of sustainable development.

Feminist Environmentalism: Feminist environmentalism emerges from the intersection of feminist theory and environmental studies, highlighting the critical role that gender plays in shaping human interactions with the natural world. It posits that environmental issues cannot be disentangled from the social structures and power dynamics that define gender relations. This perspective emphasizes that women, particularly those in marginalized communities, often bear a disproportionate burden of environmental degradation due to their roles as primary caregivers and their dependency on natural resources for household and subsistence needs.

Theory of Sustainable Development: The theory of sustainable development is predicated on the integration of environmental, economic, and social considerations to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This theory underscores the importance of balancing ecological preservation with human development objectives, advocating for policies and practices that ensure economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Within this framework, gender equality is both a goal in its own right (SDG 5) and a means to achieve broader sustainable development outcomes. Recognizing gender differences in vulnerability and capacity in relation to environmental changes is crucial for formulating effective and equitable sustainability strategies.

Gender and Environmental Sustainability: Key Areas of Intersection

The key areas of intersection between gender and environmental sustainability include vulnerability to environmental changes, roles in natural resource management, impacts of environmental

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degradation, and leadership in environmental initiatives. Exploring these areas sheds light on the critical importance of integrating gender perspectives into environmental sustainability efforts.

Vulnerability to Environmental Changes: Gender differences in vulnerability to environmental changes, such as climate change, natural disasters, and resource depletion, are stark. Women and girls, especially those in marginalized communities and developing countries, often face higher risks and greater burdens from environmental degradation due to socio-economic factors, cultural norms, and their roles and responsibilities. For instance, women's primary role in water and fuel collection in many societies makes them more susceptible to the impacts of water scarcity and deforestation. Similarly, their limited access to resources, information, and decision-making processes exacerbates their vulnerability to climate-induced disasters. Understanding these gender-specific vulnerabilities is crucial for developing targeted interventions that enhance resilience and adaptive capacity among women and communities.

Roles in Natural Resource Management: Women play a vital role in the management and conservation of natural resources. Their knowledge of biodiversity, ecosystems, and sustainable practices is invaluable for environmental sustainability. In agricultural communities, women are often the custodians of seed diversity, herbal knowledge, and traditional farming practices that contribute to agrobiodiversity and food security. However, despite their significant contributions, women frequently encounter barriers to participating fully in environmental governance and natural resource management. Recognizing and leveraging women's roles and knowledge in natural resource management can enhance conservation efforts and promote sustainable development.

Impacts of Environmental Degradation: Environmental degradation, including pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity, disproportionately affects women and girls, exacerbating gender inequalities. The health impacts of pollution and unsafe water, for instance, have severe implications for women's health, particularly during pregnancy and childbirth. The loss of biodiversity and natural habitats can also diminish women's livelihood options, increasing their economic vulnerability and reinforcing gender disparities. Addressing the gender-specific impacts of environmental degradation requires targeted policies and programs that mitigate these effects and support women's empowerment and livelihood diversification.

Leadership in Environmental Initiatives: Women's leadership and participation in environmental initiatives are critical for achieving sustainable outcomes. Women leaders in environmental movements, community-based conservation projects, and policy-making bring unique perspectives and solutions to the table. Their involvement ensures that environmental policies and programs are more inclusive, equitable, and effective. Empowering women as environmental leaders not only advances gender equality (SDG 5) but also contributes to broader environmental goals, such as climate action (SDG 13), life below water (SDG 14), and life on land (SDG 15).

Moreover, empowering women through education, access to resources, and participation in decision-

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making not only strengthens environmental conservation efforts but also promotes economic development and social equity.

Gender-Specific Impacts of Environmental Issues

Environmental issues, from climate change to pollution and deforestation, have profound implications for communities worldwide. However, the impact of these environmental challenges is not gender-neutral. Gender-specific impacts are evident across various environmental issues, reflecting the intersectionality of gender, environment, and social vulnerability.

Climate Change: Climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Women, particularly those in rural and indigenous communities, often depend directly on natural resources for their livelihoods. Climate-induced phenomena such as droughts, floods, and erratic rainfall patterns can devastate these resources, disproportionately impacting women's income, food security, and overall well-being. The aftermath of climate disasters also exposes women to higher risks of violence, exploitation, and loss of shelter, given their often limited access to resources and decision-making processes.

Water Scarcity and Pollution: Water scarcity and pollution significantly impact women and girls, who are primarily responsible for water collection in many parts of the world. The increasing scarcity of clean water sources, often exacerbated by environmental degradation and climate change, forces women to spend more time and travel longer distances to collect water. This not only increases their physical burden but also exposes them to greater risks of violence and reduces their time available for education, economic activities, or leisure.

Deforestation and Land Degradation: Deforestation and land degradation threaten the livelihoods of millions who depend on forest resources, with women often bearing the brunt of these environmental changes. The loss of biodiversity and natural habitats can diminish women's access to medicinal plants, firewood, and other forest products essential for their families' well-being. As these resources become scarcer, women's workload increases, further limiting their opportunities for education and participation in community decision-making. Land degradation also impacts agricultural productivity, affecting food security and exacerbating malnutrition, with women and children being the most vulnerable to these outcomes.

Pollution and Environmental Health Risks: Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to environmental health risks associated with pollution. Exposure to hazardous substances, such as pesticides in agricultural settings or indoor air pollution from cooking with biomass fuels, can have severe health implications, including respiratory diseases, cancers, and reproductive health issues. Pregnant women exposed to pollutants are at higher risk of giving birth to infants with health problems, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive approaches to managing and mitigating pollution.

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Biodiversity Loss: Biodiversity loss affects women's livelihoods, food security, and traditional knowledge systems. Women, particularly those in indigenous and rural communities, often possess unique knowledge about local ecosystems, plant species, and sustainable resource management practices. The loss of biodiversity undermines this knowledge base, eroding cultural identity and diminishing women's ability to contribute to conservation and sustainable development efforts. It also impacts nutritional diversity, as women play a crucial role in gathering and preparing a variety of foods that are dependent on local biodiversity.

The gender-specific impacts of environmental issues highlight the intertwined nature of gender equality, environmental sustainability, and social justice.

Women as Agents of Environmental Change

Despite facing systemic barriers and gender-specific vulnerabilities, women around the world are leading efforts to conserve natural resources, mitigate climate change, and foster community resilience. This recognition aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), which emphasizes the importance of empowering women and girls as key to advancing all dimensions of sustainable development, including environmental sustainability.

Leadership in Grassroots Environmental Movements: Women have been at the forefront of grassroots movements aimed at protecting the environment. From the Chipko Movement in India, where women hugged trees to prevent deforestation, to the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, founded by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai, women have mobilized communities to conserve natural habitats, plant trees, and advocate for sustainable land use practices. These movements not only contribute to environmental conservation but also empower women, giving them a voice in local governance and decision-making processes.

Traditional Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation: Women, particularly those in indigenous and rural communities, possess invaluable traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) related to biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture, and natural resource management. This knowledge, passed down through generations, includes practices such as seed preservation, medicinal use of plants, and agroforestry techniques that enhance ecosystem resilience and biodiversity. Recognizing and integrating women's TEK into conservation strategies can lead to more effective and culturally appropriate environmental solutions.

Innovators in Sustainable Practices: Women are innovators in adopting and spreading sustainable practices within their communities. In agriculture, women are pioneering sustainable farming techniques that reduce environmental footprints, such as organic farming, water-saving irrigation methods, and integrated pest management. In urban areas, women entrepreneurs are leading initiatives in recycling, renewable energy, and green technology, contributing to the reduction of carbon emissions and pollution.

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Advocates for Climate Action: Women are powerful advocates for climate action, often bringing attention to the gendered impacts of climate change and advocating for inclusive policies that address these disparities. Through their participation in international forums, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), women leaders have been instrumental in ensuring that climate policies incorporate gender considerations. They advocate for measures that not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions but also enhance the adaptive capacities of vulnerable communities, with a particular focus on the needs and contributions of women.

Community Organizers in Disaster Risk Reduction: In the face of natural disasters and climate-induced events, women often emerge as community organizers, playing critical roles in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. Their understanding of community needs and social networks enables them to effectively mobilize resources, disseminate information, and support community resilience-building activities. By involving women in disaster risk reduction planning and implementation, communities can leverage their unique perspectives and skills to enhance overall resilience to environmental shocks.

Empowerment through Education and Capacity Building: Empowering women as agents of environmental change also involves investing in their education and capacity building. Providing women and girls with access to education, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), can equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to lead and innovate in environmental conservation. Capacity-building programs that focus on leadership development, sustainable practices, and climate resilience further enhance women's abilities to contribute effectively to environmental sustainability efforts.

By leveraging women's leadership, traditional knowledge, innovative capacities, and advocacy, societies can develop more inclusive, effective, and resilient environmental solutions.

Challenges and Opportunities for Gender-Inclusive Environmental Sustainability

The pursuit of gender-inclusive environmental sustainability presents a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities.

Challenges

Structural Inequalities: Deep-rooted societal norms and structures often marginalize women and limit their access to resources, decision-making processes, and opportunities for leadership in environmental sustainability. Overcoming these entrenched inequalities requires transformative changes in policy, practice, and societal attitudes.

Data and Knowledge Gaps: A significant challenge is the lack of disaggregated data and gender-specific research on environmental issues. This gap hampers the development of targeted interventions and policies that address the distinct needs and contributions of different genders in

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environmental sustainability.

Limited Participation in Decision-Making: Despite their vital roles in natural resource management and vulnerability to environmental challenges, women are frequently underrepresented in environmental decision-making forums, from local conservation committees to international climate negotiations. Ensuring meaningful participation requires not just token representation but empowering women as equal partners in these processes.

Economic Barriers: Economic constraints, including limited access to credit, land, and other productive resources, disproportionately affect women, hindering their ability to engage in and benefit from sustainable environmental practices and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Opportunities

Leveraging Women's Knowledge and Leadership: Women possess unique knowledge and perspectives on natural resource management and sustainable practices, derived from their roles in households and communities. Recognizing and harnessing this knowledge can lead to more sustainable and effective environmental solutions.

Fostering Resilience and Adaptive Capacities: Gender-inclusive approaches to environmental sustainability can enhance community resilience to climate change and other environmental shocks. By addressing the specific vulnerabilities of women and involving them in resilience planning, communities can develop more robust adaptive strategies.

Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods: Empowering women through access to education, resources, and economic opportunities in the green economy can drive sustainable development. Initiatives that support women's entrepreneurship in sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and conservation can create livelihoods that are both economically viable and environmentally sound.

Strengthening Environmental Governance: Gender-inclusive policies and programs can improve the governance of natural resources. By ensuring that environmental policies reflect the needs, rights, and contributions of all genders, governance systems can become more equitable and effective.

Building Partnerships and Networks: Collaborations between women's groups, environmental organizations, governments, and the private sector can amplify efforts towards gender-inclusive environmental sustainability. These partnerships can facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building, and the scaling of successful initiatives.

In conclusion, integrating gender considerations into environmental sustainability efforts presents a pathway to more resilient, equitable, and sustainable futures.

Case Studies: Successful Integration of Gender and Environment in SDG Efforts

The integration of gender considerations into environmental sustainability efforts is crucial for

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achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Several case studies from around the world highlight how successful integration of gender and environmental initiatives can lead to transformative outcomes, not only advancing gender equality (SDG 5) but also promoting sustainable practices that benefit the environment and communities at large.

Case Study 1: Solar Sister – Empowering Women with Renewable Energy in Africa

Solar Sister is an innovative social enterprise operating in several African countries, including Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda. It combines women’s empowerment with renewable energy solutions by recruiting, training, and supporting women entrepreneurs to sell solar lamps, mobile phone chargers, and clean cookstoves within their communities. This initiative addresses SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) by promoting access to renewable energy sources and SDG 5 by empowering women economically and enhancing their status within the community. Solar Sister demonstrates how women can be pivotal in driving the transition to sustainable energy, improving household health, and reducing carbon emissions.

Case Study 2: Seaweed Farming by Women in Zanzibar

In Zanzibar, seaweed farming has emerged as a sustainable livelihood that predominantly involves women. Seaweed farming is environmentally friendly and provides a critical source of income for many families. The activity supports SDG 14 (Life Below Water) through the sustainable use of ocean resources. Furthermore, it empowers women by providing them with financial independence and greater agency, contributing to SDG 5. The initiative also highlights the importance of considering climate change impacts in gender-responsive planning, as rising sea temperatures and changing ocean conditions affect seaweed productivity.

Case Study 3: Women’s Leadership in Climate-Resilient Farming in India

In India, women farmers are leading the way in adopting climate-resilient agricultural practices, such as drought-tolerant crops, rainwater harvesting, and organic farming. Through capacity-building programs, women have become champions of sustainable agriculture, improving food security (SDG 2) and adapting to climate change (SDG 13). Their leadership not only enhances agricultural productivity and ecosystem health but also strengthens women’s roles in their communities, contributing to SDG 5.

These case studies underscore the significant benefits of integrating gender considerations into environmental sustainability efforts.

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research

Drawing from successful case studies and current best practices, the following recommendations offer guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers aiming to incorporate gender perspectives into environmental policies, practices, and research.

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For Policymakers

1. Develop Gender-Inclusive Policies: Enact and enforce policies that explicitly include gender considerations in environmental planning and governance. Ensure that environmental legislation and policies recognize and address the different impacts of environmental degradation on women and men, and promote women's participation and leadership in environmental decision-making processes.

2. Mainstream Gender in Environmental Agencies: Incorporate gender mainstreaming strategies within environmental ministries and agencies to ensure that all programs and projects consider gender differences and aim to reduce gender disparities.

3. Support Gender-Responsive Budgeting: Allocate specific resources for integrating gender considerations into environmental projects and programs. This includes funding for gender-sensitive research, women's empowerment initiatives, and capacity-building programs focused on environmental sustainability.

For Practitioners

4. Engage Women in Project Design and Implementation: Actively involve women at all stages of environmental projects, from planning to implementation and evaluation. This participatory approach ensures that interventions are responsive to the needs of all community members and leverage the unique insights and contributions of women.

5. Promote Women's Leadership in Sustainability: Identify and support women leaders in environmental conservation and sustainability initiatives. Provide platforms for women to share their knowledge and experiences and to influence policy and practice at local, national, and international levels.

6. Implement Gender-Sensitive Projects: Design and execute projects that specifically aim to reduce gender inequalities through environmental sustainability efforts. This could include projects focusing on women's access to clean energy, water, and sustainable livelihoods.

For Researchers

7. Conduct Gender-Disaggregated Research: Collect and analyze data that is disaggregated by gender to better understand the different ways in which environmental issues affect women and men. This research should inform the development of targeted interventions that address these disparities.

8. Explore Gender Dimensions of Environmental Issues: Investigate the complex interplay between gender and the environment, including how gender roles and relations influence environmental sustainability and how environmental changes impact gender equality. This research

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can provide a deeper understanding of the gender-environment nexus.

9. Disseminate Findings Widely: Share research findings with policymakers, practitioners, and the broader community to raise awareness about the importance of integrating gender considerations into environmental sustainability efforts. This can facilitate evidence-based policy-making and the adoption of best practices.

The recommendations outlined above highlight the multifaceted approach needed to integrate gender considerations into environmental sustainability efforts effectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating gender considerations into environmental sustainability efforts is not just a strategic imperative for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but a fundamental requirement for crafting equitable and effective solutions to the planet's most pressing environmental challenges. Empowering women and integrating gender perspectives into environmental sustainability efforts can unlock transformative potential, driving progress across multiple SDGs and fostering a more resilient and equitable world. The journey towards gender-inclusive environmental sustainability demands collective action, innovative solutions, and a steadfast commitment to equity and justice, laying the groundwork for a sustainable future where both people and the planet can thrive.

***Assistant Professor
Department of Geography
SCRS Rajkiya Mahavidyalaya,
Sawai Madhopur (Raj.)**

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