

GENDER INCLUSIVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: TURNING THE VICTIMS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS INTO THE FLAGBEARERS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

* Anuja Padmakar Khadke

* SNTD Arts and Commerce for Women, Pune.

Abstract:

Sustainable development can be defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (UNGA,1987) With aggravation of climate-related crisis, the sustainability principle has got much popularity and significance. This environmental crisis has disproportionate impacts on different sections of the society according to the degree of socio-economic vulnerability. Women who constitute almost half of the population of India, are severely affected victims of this environmental crisis. The existing gender-based inequalities, gender oppression and gender-based violence make women more vulnerable to this environmental crisis. Environment and women both are exploited and commodified in today’s consumerist world. There is an intrinsic relation between women and nature. If provided with proper policy support, women can play a significant role in the process of sustainable development. We need gender sensitive, gender transformative and gender reformative policies for sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Environmental Crisis, Gender inequality, Gender Inclusive Development, Climate change, Socio-economic justice.

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Introduction: Sustainable development as a concept emerged in 1972 UN Conference on Human Environment. It was adopted as an agenda in 1987 Brundtland report followed by 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit. In September 2015, the world leaders adopted the 2020 agenda for Sustainable Development, which officially came into force on 1st January 2016. The agenda enumerates the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets.



Image source: <https://www.undp.org/>

According to the Brundtland report, Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. SDG-5 i.e. Gender Equality underlines the role of gender inclusive sustainable development.

The idea of sustainable development rests on 3 important pillars viz, Economy, Society and Environment. When it comes to the policymakers as well as the civil society in developing countries, they often fail to consider one of the most important pillars of sustainable development i.e. Society. Women being the half of the population of Indian society, are the worst affected victims of ongoing environmental crisis. The sustainable developmental process still lacks a gender-sensitive face.

Aim: In this paper, we shall discuss the link between gender oppression & environmental crisis and how women must turn into the flagbearers of sustainable development from the worst affected victims of environmental crisis and climate change.

Objectives:

- To highlight the link between gender -based oppression and environmental destruction
- To highlight the multidimensional impact of environmental hazards on women
- To establish how women can turn into the flagbearers of sustainable development with the help of case studies from India and the world

Theoretical Perspectives:

1. Mother nature: the Personification

The environment has been regarded as ‘Mother nature’ in many cultures. This personification has its roots in some traits that are considered common to both nature and woman; like life-giving, nurturing, supporting, protecting etc. The intrinsic bond between nature and woman is not new to the world. Many scholars have attempted to further expand this concept by diving deeper into this topic. We shall study two major perspectives put forward in this context. One is the Ecofeminist perspective and other is Feminist Environmentalist perspective.

2. The Ecofeminist perspective – Vandana Shiva

Ecofeminist school of thought emerged in late 1970s. The term was coined by French Feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. Ecofeminism seeks to establish the link between nature and women. It further highlights the ways in which both women and nature are exploited.

In Indian context, Ecofeminist perspective became popular with the work of the famous environmental activist Vandana Shiva. Shiva propounds that western science and technology is a colonial, patriarchal move which stands on the principle of domination of both nature and women. She criticises the western concept of development as maldevelopment. It is the product of patriarchy and capitalism which see both the nature and women as a commodity. In this way, Ecofeminists see the exploitation of nature as an exploitation of women.

3. The Feminist Environmentalist perspective-Bina Agarwal

Bina Agarwal’s Feminist Environmentalism perspective came forward as a critique to the Ecofeminist perspective. While Ecofeminists see women as a monolith, the Feminist Environmentalists take into

consideration the intersectional diversity among women, based on class, caste et cetera and its multidimensional impact on their lives.

The central arguments of Feminist Environmentalism are as follows:

- recognise that women are victims of domination but also repositories of traditional knowledge systems that enable them to resist degradation and exploitation
- recognise that increased degradation of resources and the environment are the result of privatisation and state encroachment or statisation
- recognise that erosion of local knowledge systems by invisibilising women leads to a devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems [1]

Disproportionate impact of Environmental Crisis on Women

Climate change and environmental degradation are advancing at an unprecedented pace, undermining the livelihoods of millions of women and men, particularly in the developing world. Gender inequalities manifest themselves in each and every dimension of sustainable development.[2]

We shall examine the disproportionate impact of climate change and environmental crisis on women in India's context.

1. Feminization of Agriculture and Climate change

The increasing migration of rural men in search of better job opportunities has led to the feminisation of the agriculture sector, with the participation of women in agriculture and allied activities becoming more significant. In India, where subsistence farming is prominent, women constitute 33% of the workforce and nearly half of self-employed farmers.[3]

Climate change has intensified the occurrence of droughts, cyclones, pest attacks, heatwaves which affect the agriculture at large scale and women being the first and major respondents are on the most vulnerable side. Moreover, the landowning pattern in India is skewed in favour of men with only 14% of all landowners being women [4]; it jeopardizes women farmers in the face of the ongoing climate crisis.

2. The Water crisis and Women in India

In India, collecting water is traditionally considered as women's duty. Especially the women in drought prone and arid regions spend much of their time and efforts on water collection which puts their health and safety in danger. The climate change has been altering the rainfall pattern which worsens the problem of water scarcity in many droughts' prone regions of India; this ultimately makes the woman in family more vulnerable.

1. The Water-wives of Maharashtra: the case study of Danganmal

“In a village known as Danganmal (in Maharashtra), where there are no taps and the only drinking water comes from two wells at a hill. The place gets too crowded and people have to wait for hours for their turn. It also takes over 12 hours to go there and return. For the villagers, the only answer is taking in multiple wives who can fetch water for their households. Under the Hindu Marriage Act, polygamy is illegal in India but the drought-stricken region they are living in and lack of water is pushing some of the

men in this village to marry multiple times.” [5]

3. The Gendered dimension of Energy crisis

Linkages between energy supplies, gender roles and climate change are strongest in countries with low availability of basic electricity and modern fuels, as well as high dependence on biomass fuels. In these countries, cultural traditions make women responsible for gathering fuel and providing food, even when this involves long hours performing heavy physical labour or travelling longer distances. With the onslaught of aggravated environmental changes, women are likely to continue spending long (perhaps even longer) hours fetching firewood, drawing water, working the land, and grinding cereal crops.[6]

Also, women who spend most of their time inside the household are the worst affected by indoor pollution caused by unclean fuels used for lighting, cooking purposes.

4. Environmental disasters and women

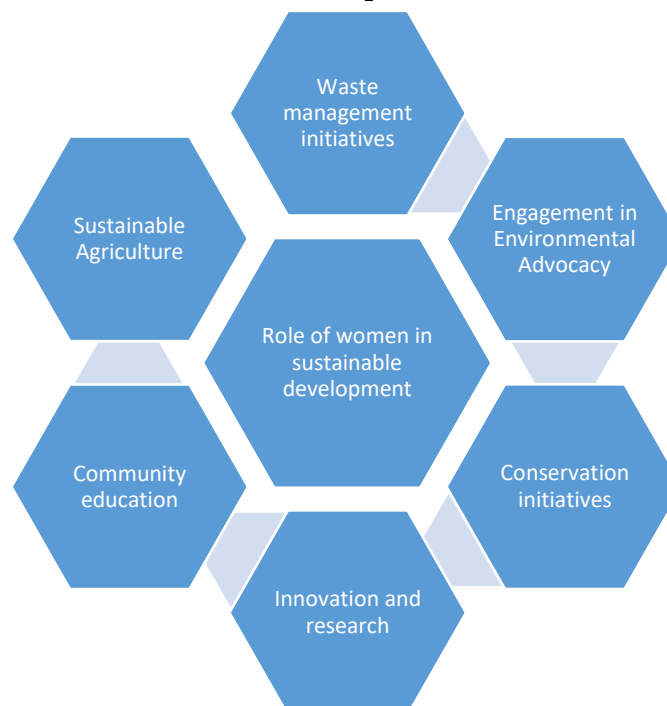
Climate change has aggravated the frequency of natural disasters like cyclones, tsunamis, cloudburst, pest attacks, sea level rise et cetera. Due to the existing socio-economic inequality in Indian society, women are more vulnerable to the ill impacts of such disasters.

Further there can be seen many more such instances where the existing socio-economic inequalities are putting women under a great risk.

Women as the flagbearers of sustainable development:

Women being the repositories of traditional knowledge play a significant role in sustainable development. If the sustainable development process is led by women, then it can be more inclusive, just and holistic.

1. Multidimensional role of women in sustainable development



2. Indian women being the flagbearers of sustainable development:

1. Padmashree Rahibai Soma Popere – Seed Mother

She has worked for conserving hundreds of native varieties and encouraging farmers to grow traditional crops. She leads 5 Self Help groups in Kombhalne village and is creating awareness among women for participation in the Self-Help group movement, village sanitation, clean kitchen, seed conservation, and wild food exhibitions. Her association with BAIF, a national NGO involved in the implementation of pioneering development programs in different parts of the country, is a long one.[7]

2. Licypriya Devi Kangujam

She is the Founder of The Child Movement. She has been championing her cause since six-years-old to protect, preserve and nurture our environment by fighting the climate change. She is one of the youngest climate activists globally and addressed the world leaders in the United Nations Climate Conference 2019 (COP25) in Madrid, Spain calling the world leaders to take immediate climate actions to save their future. [8]

3. Medha Patkar

Medha Patkar is an Indian social activist known chiefly for her work with people displaced by the Narmada Valley Development Project (NVDP), a large-scale plan to dam the Narmada River and its tributaries in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. Patkar also worked with local communities to develop alternatives for energy generation, water harvesting, and education, and she created a system of residential and day schools in villages of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat.[9]

4. Vandana Shiva

Besides being a physicist, ecologist, activist, editor, and author of numerous books, Vandana Shiva is a tireless defender of the environment. She is the founder of Navdanya, a movement for biodiversity conservation and farmers' rights. She is also the founder and director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy. Shiva has also served as an adviser to governments in India and abroad. [10]

5. Padmashree Tulsi Gowda

Padma Shri Tulsi Gowda is an Indian environmentalist known as the "Encyclopaedia of the Forest" and by her tribe as the "tree goddess" because of her knowledge of the forest. She is known for her self-taught ability to identify the mother tree of every species of tree in the forest. She is an expert in seed collection, extraction of seeds from mother trees to regenerate and regrow entire plant species. Over sixty years working at the Karnataka Forest Department she is estimated to have planted and cared for nearly 100,000 trees in Karnataka on her own. [11]

From all the above examples, we can analyse that women are and can be the flagbearers of sustainable development. there is a need of policy support from all levels.

3. Recommendations for gender inclusive sustainable development

- Monitor budget allocations for gender equality policies and programmes.

- Strengthen commitment at the highest political level to an open, inclusive, transparent and gender-sensitive SDG monitoring process
- Work towards the regular collection of data for gender-specific indicators, ensuring quality and comparability.
- Align policies and programmes with the principles of the 2030 Agenda.
- Support women's organizations and other civil society actors to monitor progress and hold governments to account for gender equality commitments.[12]

Conclusion:

Sustainable development model rests on the idea of socio-economic and environmental justice. SDG-5 i.e. Gender Equality underlines the role of gender inclusive sustainable development. Development can be sustained only if the existing gender inequalities are removed. We need to give women a fair representation at all level of governance so that the developmental process can become more gender-sensitive. Women can play a significant role in ensuring socio-economic and environmental justice which will ultimately result into gender inclusive sustainable development.

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