

# **Marginalized Women and their Contribution to Environment**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Women of marginalized communities at the forefront of their respective communities often face challenges such as discrimination in decision-making, mobilization of resources, and coordinating with community-based organizations in the process of maintaining sustainable environmental activities at local levels. However, the process is led by women's local-level mobilization and activities for environmental degradation and mitigation (Clark, 1996). Additionally, when it comes to environmental resilience, women from underprivileged areas frequently display extraordinary flexibility because they find themselves in the position to adapt to changes in weather patterns, shifts in agricultural activities, and water scarcity (Harper, 2017).

**Keywords:** Challenges, Conservation, Empowerment, Environment, Process, Women

## **INTRODUCTION**

Marginalized women play a vital, often overlooked, role in environmental conservation, drawing on their intimate knowledge of natural resources and facing disproportionate impacts from environmental degradation. They are often at the forefront of environmental movements and resource management, and their empowerment is crucial for sustainable development.

Here's a more detailed look at their contributions and challenges:

### **Environmental Knowledge and Practices:**

- Marginalized women often possess deep, traditional knowledge about local ecosystems, resource management, and sustainable practices.
- They are frequently the primary managers of water, fuel, and food resources within their communities, making them keenly aware of environmental changes and their impacts.
- Examples include women's knowledge of indigenous seeds and their role in biodiversity conservation.

### **Environmental Activism and Leadership:**

- Marginalized women have been instrumental in various environmental movements, including the Chipko movement in India, where women protested against deforestation by hugging trees.
- They have also played a key role in movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and the Green Belt Movement, demonstrating their capacity for leadership and collective action.

### **Vulnerability to Environmental Degradation:**

- Marginalized women are often disproportionately affected by environmental degradation due to their reliance on natural resources for livelihoods and their limited access to resources and decision-making power.
- Climate change, for instance, can exacerbate existing inequalities, impacting women's food security, water access, and health.

### **Empowerment and Sustainable Development:**

- Empowering marginalized women through access to education, resources, and decision-making processes is crucial for achieving sustainable development.
- When women are empowered, they can become powerful advocates for environmental policies and practices that prioritize sustainability.
- Their knowledge and practices can be leveraged to develop more effective and equitable solutions to environmental challenges.

### **Examples of Marginalized Women's Environmental Contributions:**

- **Amrita Devi:** A woman who protested against the felling of trees in Rajasthan, India, to build a palace for the Maharaja.
- **Gaura Devi:** Led the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand, India, to protect forests from commercial logging.
- **Medha Patkar:** A prominent environmentalist and activist known for her role in the Narmada Bachao Andolan.
- **Khalida Bibi:** A woman who established a village seed bank and is active in biodiversity conservation.
- **Wangari Maathai:** Founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which aimed to restore forests and empower rural women.

In the early 1960s, an interest in women and their connection with the environment was sparked largely by Ester Boserup's book *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. Starting in the 1980s, policy makers and governments became more mindful of the connection between the environment and gender issues. Changes regarding natural resource and environmental management were made with the specific role of women in mind. According to the World Bank in 1991, "Women play an essential role in the management of natural resources, including soil, water, forests and energy...and often have a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them". Whereas women were previously neglected or ignored, there was increasing attention to the impact of women on the natural environment and, in return, the effects the environment has on the health and well-being of women. The gender-environment relations have ramifications in regard to the understanding of nature between men and women, the management and distribution of resources and responsibilities, and the day-to-day life and well-being of people.

Today, more than half the world's population (55 per cent) live in urban areas, a share projected to reach 68 per cent by 2050. The rate and scale of urban growth presents daunting challenges, including the need for investments in transportation, housing, sanitation, energy, and social and physical infrastructure. Where these investments are lacking, a greater number of individuals will be forced to live in areas that lack durable and secure housing, and that are cut off from essential services, such as clean water and sanitation. Globally, the number of people living in slums – neglected parts of cities characterized by poverty and substandard living conditions – is growing. The latest estimates put the number of slum dwellers worldwide at over 1 billion people – one sixth of humanity.

Women face multiple forms of discrimination in their everyday lives; they have an increased risk of poverty and limited negotiating power and access to resources. They also endure the greatest hardships resulting from the proliferation of under-resourced and often spatially segregated urban areas.

Women's voices are crucial in environmental policy and action because they often have deep knowledge of their local ecosystems and are habitually the primary caregivers and providers for their families. Empowering women and ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making processes is crucial for achieving sustainable development and addressing environmental challenges, contributing to a more just and sustainable future for all.

The role of women in environmental management and conservation has long been recognized by many scholars and practitioners. Women often have deep knowledge of their local ecosystems, and are habitually the primary caregivers and providers for their families. They are more likely to be directly impacted by environmental degradation, particularly in developing countries where they may rely heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods. Yet, women are still excluded from decision-making processes, especially at the national and international levels where environmental policies are made. According to data from the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 by the World Economic Forum, women remain underrepresented in political leadership positions around the world. The report found that only 25.5% of parliamentary seats globally are held by women, as well as only 22.5% of ministerial positions. These disparities are particularly acute in the environmental sector, where women are often excluded from decision-making processes and leadership positions, despite being disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change. For example, a study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that women account for only 12% of negotiators in climate change decision-making processes and only 27% of national delegations to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conferences. These statistics demonstrate that

women are still excluded from decision-making processes at the national and international levels where environmental policies are made, and highlight the urgent need to address gender inequality in environmental policy and action.

One of the reasons for this exclusion is the historical and ongoing gender inequalities that exist in many societies. Women are often relegated to subordinate roles, and their voices and perspectives are often dismissed or overlooked. As a result, policies and programs that are developed and implemented without considering women's needs and interests can fail to achieve their intended goals, and even worsen existing inequalities.

Women's participation in environmental policy and action is not only a matter of equity and justice, but also essential for achieving sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment in achieving its 17 sustainable development goals. It states that "gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world."

In the context of environmental policy and action, empowering women means ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making processes and providing them with the necessary resources and opportunities to take action. This includes recognizing their knowledge and expertise, and supporting their leadership and entrepreneurship. Women-led initiatives have been shown to be effective in promoting sustainable resource management, improving livelihoods, and reducing poverty. For example, in many parts of India, women have been leading efforts to restore degraded land through the planting of trees and other vegetation. This has not only improved the environment, but also provided them with additional sources of income.

Another area where women's participation is crucial is in climate change adaptation and mitigation. Climate change impacts women and men differently, and women are often more vulnerable due to their lower socio-economic status, gender roles, and limited access to resources. However, women are also important agents of change in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainable lifestyles. For instance, women are often responsible for household energy use, and promoting energy-efficient technologies and practices can help reduce emissions and improve their health and well-being.

Gender inequality coupled with the climate crisis is one of the greatest challenges of our time. It poses threats to ways of life, livelihoods, health, safety and security for women and girls around the world.

Historically, climate change scientists, researchers and policymakers have struggled with how to make the vital connections between gender, social equity, and climate change. As more and more data and research reveal their clear correlation, it's time to talk about the disparate impacts of climate change and the crisis. The climate crisis is not "gender neutral". Women and girls experience the greatest impacts of climate change, which amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety.

Across the world, women depend more on, yet have less access to, natural resources. In many regions, women bear a disproportionate responsibility for securing food, water, and fuel. Agriculture is the most important employment sector for women in low- and lower-middle income countries, during periods of drought and erratic rainfall, women, as agricultural workers and primary procurers, work harder to secure income and resources for their families. This puts added pressure on girls, who often have to leave school to help their mothers manage the increased burden.

Climate change is a "threat multiplier", meaning it escalates social, political and economic tensions in fragile and conflict-affected settings. As climate change drives conflict across the world, women and girls face increased vulnerabilities to all forms of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking, child marriage, and other forms of violence.

When disasters strike, women are less likely to survive and more likely to be injured due to long standing gender inequalities that have created disparities in information, mobility, decision-making, and access to resources and training. In the aftermath, women and girls are less able to access relief and assistance, further threatening their livelihoods, wellbeing and recovery, and creating a vicious cycle of vulnerability to future disasters.

Women's and girls' health is endangered by climate change and disasters by limiting access to services and health care, as well as increasing risks related to maternal and child health.

Research indicates that extreme heat increases incidence of stillbirth, and climate change is increasing the spread of vector-borne illnesses such as malaria, dengue fever, and Zika virus, which are linked to worse maternal and neonatal outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, empowering women and amplifying their voices in environmental policy and action is crucial to achieve sustainable development and address the urgent environmental challenges facing the world today. It requires recognizing the gender inequalities that exist, and working to overcome them through inclusive and gender-responsive policies and programs. It also requires valuing women's knowledge and expertise, and supporting their leadership and entrepreneurship. Only by doing so can we ensure that the environmental policies and actions we take are effective, equitable, and sustainable for all.

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