

Integrating Women into Sustainable Development: Key to Equitable Development

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ABSTRACT

The accomplishment of sustainable development necessitates inclusivity, where the integration of women plays a crucial role, as they are stewards of national and global natural resources and biodiversity. Yet, they often face barriers that limit their role in decision-making for the management and preservation of natural resources. Women's participation in the management of natural resources is not only an equity concern but also a pragmatic approach to achieving effective, efficient, and time-tested ways of preserving eco-diversity. Their traditional roles and knowledge in natural resource management and food security are very crucial in realizing sustainable development. They are repositories of collectively and equity. Hence, empowering them would help in building inclusive, resilient societies and achieve equitable development. The objective of this review paper is to examine the role of women in sustainable development, systematic literature search on women and sustainable development was undertaken on Pub Med, Research Gate, Science Direct, and Google Scholar databases. The title search string used for the study includes gender and sustainable development, women and sustainable development, women and sustainability, women and sustainable future, etc. The review paper stresses the need for recognizing and harnessing the potential of women as upholders of sustainable development and therefore emphasizes applying gender-transformative approaches for equitable development.

Key words: *Women, Sustainable, Equitable, Development, Inclusive*

Introduction

The accomplishment of sustainable development necessitates inclusivity, where the integration of women plays a crucial role, as they are stewards of national and global natural resources and biodiversity. Yet, they often face barriers that limit their role in decision-making for the management and preservation of natural resources. Women's participation in the management of natural resources is not only an equity concern but also a pragmatic approach to achieving effective, efficient, and time-tested ways of preserving eco-diversity.

In the developing world, they play pivotal roles as farmers, animal tenders, and water and fuel collectors. Therefore, they are key economic actors and sustainable development and consumption agents. Their traditional roles and knowledge in natural resource management and food security are crucial in realizing sustainable development goals. They are repositories of collectivity and equity. Their active participation and leadership would ensure the achievement of sustainable development. Hence, empowering them would help in building inclusive, resilient societies and achieve equitable development

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Materials and Methods

The objective of this research paper is to conduct a comprehensive review of existing literature on women and sustainable development. The data from various sources such as Research Gate, PubMed, Science Direct, Academia, and Google Scholar was compiled with the help of Mendeley Reference Management Software. The database search was limited to articles published from 1996 to 2023. To maintain accuracy and reliability duplicate entries were identified and removed. The title search string for the study includes gender and sustainable development, women and sustainable development, women and sustainability, women and sustainable future, WASH, Women and Land Rights, and other key terms.

Four levels screening method was adopted for the study. The search resulted in the selection of 81 papers for screening. In the first level duplicates were removed from multiple database searches, in the second level title screening was undertaken for relevancy, at the third level abstract screening was done, and finally full-text reading was undertaken. Overall 38 papers were included in the review.

Results and Discussion

Sustainable development from a gender perspective implies economic, social, and environmental devel-

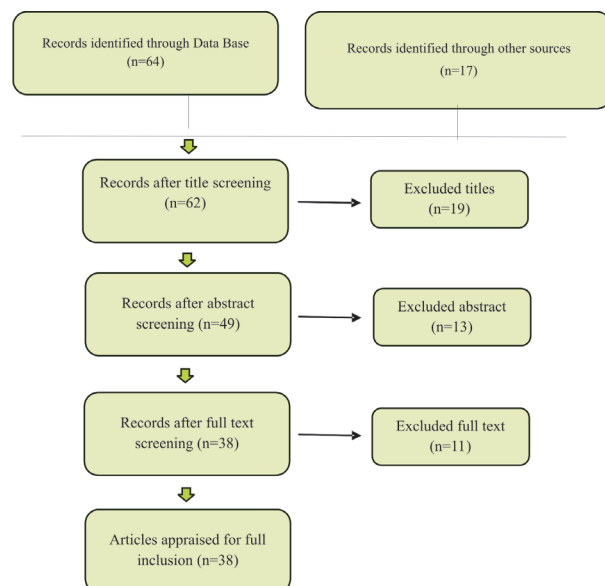


Fig. 1. PRISMA: Process for selecting studies for review

opment that ensures welfare and dignity, ecological integrity, gender equality, and social justice in the present and the future (UN, 2014). The three pillars of sustainable development necessitate an understanding of women's relationship to environmental resources, their rights, and their roles in resource planning and management. It emphasizes acknowledging and incorporating women's knowledge of environmental concerns and developing an understanding of the gender-specific impacts of environmental degradation. It accentuates gender equity and gender-sensitive strategies to achieve social and economic sustainability. Economic sustainability is a challenge if women who constitute half of the world's population remain marginalized and pushed into abject poverty. "Achieving gender equality and realizing the human rights, dignity, and capabilities of diverse women groups is a central requirement of a just and sustainable world" (UN, 2014) therefore engaging women at all levels of the sustainable development process is of paramount importance, for inclusive and equitable development.

Women, Land and Agricultural Resources

For centuries, women have been storehouses of traditional knowledge; they played a significant role in preserving and managing natural resources at the family and community levels. Their role in the food security of their families cannot be undermined. They are the worst affected by environmental degradation (UN, 2012). They are denied access to productive resources such as land, agricultural inputs, credit, training, and extension services. This exclusion is due to biased laws, ineffective implementation of laws at national and local levels, discriminatory cultural practices, attitudes at the institutional and community level, and lack of decision-making power (UN, 2013; UN, 2017).

Patriarchal values and practices are the biggest challenge to gender equality and land rights. In India, daughters give away their land rights in favour of their brothers to maintain cordial relations with their natal family. Thus, even if the law or local customs favour women they are hesitant to demand their rights due to fear of losing social benefits (FAO, 2010).

Women farmers and indigenous women face multiple discrimination (Errico, 2021; Roy, 2010). In India women, farmers contribute to almost 60 to 80 percent of the food production. Despite this, they

have limited access to external inputs such as fertilizers and credit. Rural women's work participation rate is also higher than the urban women's workforce participation. (MoSPI, 2017; Mishra and Maurya, 2022). Their rights to land and other natural resources are vital for livelihood, and it will improve their bargaining power within the household and society, thereby including them in the decision-making process. India's development will not be possible unless rural and indigenous women are empowered and brought into mainstream economic activities. This will increase food production, ensure nutrition security, and alleviate poverty and hunger. Thus, issues of rights, access to and control over natural resources, and services, and incorporating women in the decision-making process are integral to sustainable development and poverty reduction.

Women, Forest, Water Resources and Sanitation

Sustainable forest management is an essential component of sustainable development. It is environmentally relevant, socially desirable, and economically profitable. Women often use forest resources for subsistence and safety nets. Forests are a crucial livelihood support system for rural and indigenous women globally. Forest produce is the source of food, fodder, grass, fuelwood, income, and medicine (WWF, 2012; Saxena N, 2011, Agarwal, 2009). Patriarchal norms and gender-blind laws prevent women from having easy access to forest resources and land. It restricts their ownership rights and participation in decision-making and thus limits income-generating opportunities for women (Kiptot, 2015).

Women's expertise in forest products is unique as they interact daily with the environment. Their knowledge of forest products, soil, plants, trees, and other resources is better. Most importantly, they do not exploit the resources. They are repositories of ecological knowledge. Hence, the destruction of forests adversely affects them. (Das, 2022; Boer and Lamxay, 2009). Therefore, women's traditional knowledge and relationship with forests contribute to forest conservation.

There are numerous instances where women from indigenous communities have taken the initiative to conserve forests the Dhanwar women from Bakhai have transformed their village through forest conservation and innovative agroecological food systems. From 2018, they have started cultivating annual crops using no-till and organic techniques

(Marathe and Lahiri). Lehri Bai, a 27-year-old Baigawoman also known as India's millet ambassador from the Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh has created a seed bank of 150 varieties with 50 varieties of millet seeds. Similarly, Raimati Gihuria, a millet farmer from Odisha's Kundura block, Nuapada village has preserved 30 varieties of millets and 72 traditional paddy varieties. She has also trained hundreds of women in millet preservation (Roy *et al.*, 2023).

Gender and water linkages became visible in the international arena in 1992, with the Dublin international conference theme 'Water and the Environment' that drew attention to women's role in the provision, management, and protection of water resources (Garcia, 2019). Women collect water and manage it for household use, ensuring adequate supply, storing and keeping it clean while stored in the house. They also play key community management roles in domestic water supply including maintenance of traditional sources (Singh *et al.*, 2008, Crider and Ray, 2022). However, their perspectives and roles in framing policies and programs are often overlooked (Wahaj and Hartl, 2019).

Water scarcity affects both men and women adversely but women and girls are troubled mostly as they bear the burden of more workload and drudgery. This obstructs their progress they are denied education, income-earning opportunities, health and hygiene, and participation in social and cultural activities (Sharma, 2021, Garcia, 2019). Globally poor quality water and lack of safe toilets are among the top five killers of women (Callister, 2017).

Inadequate access to sanitation hinders achieving human rights and gender equality. Relying on open defecation sites leads to health and safety risks to women and girls. They have to wait until dark to relieve them; this affects not only their health but also exposes them to violence. Moreover, community toilets are in unhygienic conditions, poorly designed with no proper maintenance, and located at inconvenient places (Burt *et al.*, 2016; ADB, 2015).

Menstrual Health and Hygiene management is another big challenge for women and girls due to cultural taboos. Poor sanitation and hygiene facilities exacerbate these challenges at home, educational institutions, public places, and workplaces. Women and girls have to suffer due to a lack of clean water, proper toilets, and lack of disposal mechanisms that influence their health and well-being (Koonan, 2019). Top of Form Consequently,

portable water and safe sanitation are requisite to sustain life, good health, and dignity for all (UN, 2010).

Efforts to integrate women into sustainable development

- **Land Title Ownership:** Women's land ownership is crucial to secure their rights and empower them. It will amplify their agency and confidence and enhance women's participation in various spheres of life (UN, 2013). India's Hindu Succession Amendment Act, 2005 grants women equal rights to ancestral property. Besides various State Governments have taken the initiative to encourage joint ownership and co-ownership. Maharashtra under the aegis of Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal has undertaken a rural woman empowerment program called Tejaswini. A sub-theme of Tejaswini is women's property rights- Ghar Doghanche (NITI AYO, 2015) ensuring that women enjoy legal ownership rights. Similarly, Mahila Kisan Shasaktikaran Pariyojna aims to empower women in agriculture. It assists women farmers in achieving sustainable agriculture production. To empower women, self-help groups are also playing a crucial role. These groups act as support mechanisms and strengthen women's collective bargaining power. The Andhra Pradesh Government's initiative Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture Programme, 2004, promotes sustainable agricultural practices, especially in those regions that heavily use chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The program focuses on women's participation and empowerment (Madan *et al.*, 2020). Despite these efforts patriarchal and cultural norms, poor implementation, and lack of awareness remain challenges. Even capacity-building programs organized at the national and state levels for rural development do not focus on women's land rights. There is a need to collect gender-disaggregated data on women's land ownership, which will give an exact picture of women's ownership and the factors behind women's landlessness.
- **Agriculture:** Women farmers are key for social, economic, and environmental sustainability; they play a significant role in agriculture. Various measures taken for gender mainstreaming include National Policy for Farmers, 2007, National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture, and

Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana per Drop More Crop women beneficiaries of these schemes constitute 30 per cent. The Maharashtra Bamboo Development Board's Gadchiroli Agarbatti project –A Viable Women-Based Rural Enterprise Model sets an example of incorporating women in rural development.

- **WASH:** Jal Jeevan Mission launched in 2019 aims at providing affordable and adequate tapped water supply connections to every rural household by 2024. JJ emphasized the involvement of women in lead roles and participation in various activities. Hence, women constitute 50 per cent of village water and sanitation committees. Furthermore, the Swajal program, which is part of the Women Development initiative, aims at upskilling women and capability building and connecting them to the market with the help of a support organization (Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, 2018). Another program Atal Bahuja Yojana aims to strengthen the institutional framework for participatory groundwater management and promoting behavioural changes at the community level for sustainable management of groundwater resources. The program aimed at empowering women through capacity building, women are part of water security plans and meetings (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2023).

Swachh Bharat Mission, launched in 2014 aimed at achieving universal sanitation coverage and stressed safe sanitation practices. The mission focused on the need for active participation of women as leaders therefore women constitute 50 per cent of the village water and sanitation committees. The mission aimed at adequate safe sanitation and menstrual hygiene management for women's health, privacy, and safety.

Kerala's Kudumbashree Mission's Haritha Karma Sena is the best example of inclusive sanitation where women are involved in solid waste management projects and in the production of sanitary pads that are procured by the Department of Health and Family Welfare, Govt. of Kerala (John A, 2017). The State of Jharkhand trains women as masons to construct toilets in rural areas (Ganguly A, 2018). Ambikapur, a city in Sarjuga, Chhatisgarh has successfully implemented waste management practices with the help of Swachhata Didis. The Swachhata Didis are members of self-help groups, they scientifically process the waste due to which Ambikapur

is now a zero-landfill and bin-free city with 100 percent segregation at source at the same time it employs these Swachhta Didis (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs). However, these efforts will not be fruitful unless women get adequate representation and are involved in the decision-making and implementation process.

Conclusion

Gender-sensitive development is a powerful tool for empowering women and enabling them to contribute towards sustainable development. While legal reforms and gender-sensitive laws are harbingers of social change, their effectiveness in implementation remains a challenge due to patriarchal norms and cultural practices that undermine women's rights. Besides India's approach to WASH initiatives has a crucial deficit. It lacks a holistic approach toward realizing shared goals because it does not integrate and coordinate the efforts of different government departments and agencies (Sharma, 2021). The accomplishment of the three pillars of sustainable development depends upon women's adequate representation, inclusion in the positions of productivity, and decision-making. Since good governance is a prerequisite for sustainable development, it will be a challenge to accomplish it, unless measures to achieve gender parity are undertaken. Thus, mainstreaming gender equality into policymaking should embrace transformative changes to ensure women's right to information, training, representation, governance, access to resources, and most importantly respect for their human rights. Governments, civil society organizations, and all the stakeholders must collectively work to achieve gender equality and empowerment. India's achievement in this direction will foster national development and create a more just, fair world.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest in the study undertaken.

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