

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION- Rashi Sunder¹**ABSTRACT**

Environment, which provides us the mean to subsistence for not only human beings, but for animals and plants is being used lavishly for the selfish motives of the men. Modern era has an adverse effect on the environment. A woman, who is considered as the weaker section of the society have taken significant role in protection of the environment. They have made a huge example for every individual as the great leaders.

Numerous movements and organizations are established by women for the conservation of the environment and obtain sustainability. Therefore, it is imperative that protection, promotion and maintenance of environment cannot be done without involving women in the core departments.

The importance is also observed by the authorities and this resulted in making of several policies and agreements that help them to achieve their status and empowering them to make the change. Several steps can be done at an individual level to protect the environment and uplift he status of women in the society. Overall, the much needed change that has been achieved and is still to be realised in future. Hence, in this paper endeavour has been taken to measure the role of women in protection of environment.

KEYWORDS

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Women, Environment, movements, Environment policies, Women Environmentalists.

INTRODUCTION

“Advancing gender equality, through reversing the various social and economic handicaps that make women voiceless and powerless, may also be one of the best ways of saving the environment.”²

The word environment in most obvious sense means the surroundings of a person and it comprises of various biotic that is the living components and various abiotic, comprising of non- living components. In Indian Philosophy, women represents nature, which is ordinarily known as prakriti and is referred as mother as it provides life to various species in very form. However, they were considered as the weaker gender. The roles were confined to kitchen and other household activities. But, looking into the broad prospective of their work, wherein the concept of sustainable development is involved, there is no par to them.

With the advent of time, the role of women are time and now progressed dramatically to broaden the concept of education, social reforms, feminism and there role to protect the environment and take steps had proven to be a major role in bringing revolution in India and around the world. They have done considerable amount of work, when given the power and means to do so and bought a positive change, not just in their condition but to the environment as well. There is a close relation between both the concepts relating to equality of both, women and protection of environment.

According to the statement given by World Bank in the year 1991,

“Women play an essential role in the management of natural resources,

²AmartyaSen, “Population and Gender equity”, 31 *IJHS* 474 (2001).

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including soil, water, forests and energy and often has a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them.”

The environment is undergoing serious changes and now, due to sensitization of the issue, it is required to put light on the issue of gender and various types of environmental problems. Therefore, the duties and power of women cannot be undermined and the role played by them for protection of environment have to be appreciated in every way possible.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE FIRST DEBATE

The first debate relating to women, environment and development took place in 1970s because of the major reason of oil spill conference that has to take place in Mexico City. Vandana Shiva, who is India's one of the top female conservationists introduced the issue of women and environment there. The main concern of the conference related to use of limited forest resources that had to be used in infinite number of ways, thereby focusing on scarcity.

The focus, then shifted towards the role of women in agricultural lands and using of these fuels for household chores. This is how, the connection between the two: women and environment came to picture. This debate came to be known as WED Debate that is Women, Environment and Development Debate. The debate still goes on every now and then, but the main focus is on sustainability.

The Debate was also able to find the correlation between the subordination of women and degradation of environment. Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant supported this view firmly. In words of Vandana Shiva,

"The rupture within nature and between man and nature, and its associated transformation from a life-force that sustains to an

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exploitable resource characterizes the Cartesian view which has displaced more ecological worldviews and created a development paradigm which cripples nature and woman simultaneously"

The same holds a very great value as the exploitation of women labour and that of nature are done so lavishly and are marginalized within the economic framework. Both women and environment are deemed to be exploitable resources and as a result, are undervalued. The argument also supported the concept of eco- feminism, which is the combination of feminism that is women's right to equal stand in society as men and environmentalism (to protect the environment).

CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

The debate helped in a great way to prescribe the gender roles and human perspective towards the same. With increase in number of environmental problems, and the control of women to carry on the work in sustainable manner, it has been proved that if women are given the power to control the environment then they would protect the earth better. As recent cases relating to environment arose, it has been proved that women are most sensitive towards the issues as compared to men. Throughout the centuries, men have seen the nature and its resources as the source of earning livelihood, whereas women have been considerate towards the same. To illustrate, in most of the rural India, women collect branches from the woods that are fallen down or are dead to cook food and for the fulfilment of other basic necessities, unlike men who consider to cut the tree to sell.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND WOMEN

The gender incorporating the dominance of attitudes, value and behaviour, which refers to masculinity influence the problems and policies relating to

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environment and their benefit in the most significant ways. A deep understanding of this gender difference, including the linkages is important in order to achieve framework that would help to achieve sustainability.

Recently, a tool for measurement namely Environment Gender Index (EDI) is used to measure the rank of various countries on the way they are translating gender and environment into national policies. Scandinavian nations perform very well in this context. India ranks 46th out of 72 nations. It was around the time of 1980s when the authorities became more vigilant towards the issue concerning genders and the environment. After that period of time, the legislature recognised the vital role played by the women in management of the resources and their profound knowledge about the use of natural resources present in the environment.

Probing ahead, here's the list of some important policies that are framed keeping in mind the protection of environment as well as benefit of women-

I. National Environment Policy, 2006³

This policy encompasses the diverse needs of the developing nations for dealing with the challenges relating to socio-economic, culture, politics and environmental issues. These areas help to eradicate poverty in relation to health, security, empowering the weaker section, education and removal of gender bias.

II. National Forest Policy, 1988⁴ and Joint Forest Management Program

These policies together formulated the existence of reservation of seats of women to at least 33 percent in VanaSamarakshan Samitis. This much of seats to be taken by the women itself shows the success of the established

³ National Environment Policy 2006, India, available at: <https://www.india.gov.in/national-environment-policy-2006> (Visited on February 02, 2021)

⁴ National Forest Policy 1988, India, available at: https://mpforest.gov.in/img/files/Policy_NFP.pdf (Visited on February 02, 2021)

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programs in different states. The main purpose of this program was to combat solutions of deforestation by working hand in hands with local communities.

III. Biodiversity Act, 2002⁵

This act incorporates the significant role played by women as the stakeholders as well as the custodian of vibrant traditional knowledge. It is believed that historically, women were the seed keepers in farming sector households.

IV. Water Harvesting Program

This program seek to establish the more partnership of women with various BGOs and the state all over India. It is believed that the use of water has gender dimensions attached to it. Men and women can derive distinguished benefits from the same. In Sukhomajri village situated in the Shivalik range of the Himalaya, women have earned acclamation from all over the country because of the way they have made use of water and forests. It is made obvious that when women are included in preservation and management of water, then the whole community gets the benefit.

Gujarat Water Policy, 2011⁶ also mentions the fact that females are majorly interested users of the water supply in rural areas, agriculture, health and sanitation related issues and the policy observed the major roles that women could play in grass roots level to manage the water.

FEMALE CONSERVATIONISTS

There are a large number of women that worked for the protection of environment. It is a myth to hold the theory that female in western countries,

⁵Biological Diversity Act 2002 (Act 18 of 2003).

⁶ Gujarat State Policy 2011, India, *available at*: https://guj-nwrws.gujarat.gov.in/downloads/draft_state_water_policy_eng_2015.pdf (Visited on February 02, 2021)

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that is, the developed countries started the conservation movements, but in reality these movements were the result of outrageous efforts of women in the developing countries. However, there is an appreciable role played by them at their respective places and the role changed according to the extent and need of the hour.

Here is the list of few prominent female conservationists and their contribution to bring a small change in this large world-

- **Amrita Bai**

The roots of environment protection in India could be traced back to 1731 AD, when Amrita Bai of small village named Khejaralli, Jodhpur, Rajasthan sacrificed her life to protect the trees of her area. She embraced trees in her arms and despite all the efforts made by then king, her family and other 363 people also joined hands and were consequently killed but helped to preserve the trees with firm resistance, this is the reason why, she is regarded as the founder of modern Chipko Movement.

- **Bachani Devi and Gaura Devi**

Following Ambika Bai's embarked steps, in 1972, Bachani Devi and Gaura Devi of Uttar Pradesh did something similar, where they snatched axe from the hands of wood cutters. These steps were taken under the ambit of Chipko Movement. They warned contractors to not to destroy the nature and hug the trees till the authorities surrendered. They preached slogans that meant water, air and soil are the main requirements to live the life.

- **Medha Patkar**

Medha Patkar is well known environmental activist of India and the world. She is famous for her campaign – Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), which was initiated in 1989 as there was huge scale of rehabilitation that took place and which resulted in loss of large habitat of not only human beings, but all

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flora and fauna. She protested in a very peaceful way and is carrying on her work since then. Moreover, Supreme Court case relating to his issue by the name of MedhaPatkar vs. Union of India⁷ is still going on. She underwent many hunger strikes and has shown astounding participation in campaign with Anna Hazare.

- **Maneka Gandhi**

Maneka Gandhi does not only belongs to politically strong background family, but is also a huge fan of saving the environment. She understands the need of protecting animals, which are a vital part of our environment and thus, in the year 1994 founded 'People for Animals'⁸ organisation that focused on animal welfare and due to her efforts, she has been awarded with many national and international awards.

- **Vandana Shiva**

Vandana Shiva is one of the prominent environmentalists and has taken many steps to protect and preserve the environment. She is also the director of policy- Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource in Dehradun city. In 1991, she created a national movement named 'Navdanya'⁹ that focused on diversity of living resources and with the help of this regime, she has been able to protect over 2000 varieties of rice. Also, 34 seed banks are established in 13 states of the country, which is a huge success. In 1993, she was awarded the Right Livelihood Award, which is considered quite equivalent to the Nobel Prize.

- **Sunita Narain**

⁷Writ Petition (Civil) No.1432/2018.

⁸ People for Animals, India, available at: <https://www.peopleforanimalsindia.org/> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

⁹Navdanya, India, available at: <https://www.navdanya.org/site/> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

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Sunita Narain is the Director General of CSE- Centre for Science and Environment. She began her work in 1980s. She is also the member of Prime Minister's Council relating to Climate Change and National Ganga River Basin Authority. After the decline of tigers in India, in 2005, she also chaired the project- 'Tiger Task Force'¹⁰. Due to extreme hard work and affirmative nature, she was awarded Padma Shri. Also, she is enlisted amongst world's Top 100 intellectuals list.

The contribution of women in foreign nations cannot be undermined at all. They worked for the protection of environment in a very astounding way- here's the list of women, who worked to protect the planet in their own respective ways:

- **Wangari Maathai**

When it comes to land and protection of rights of women, no one can forget her name. Wangari Maathai is the founder of the famous Green Belt Movement¹¹, in her native country, Kenya, that focus on conservation of women rights as well as environment. The movement grabbed a lot of much needed attention worldwide. She is an environmental, political and social activist. Her efforts lead to her winning of Nobel Prize in the year 2004 and she is the first African women to win this prize.

- **Isatou Ceesay**

Belonging to Gambian lands, she is regarded as the 'Queen of Recycling'. She started a movement named One Plastic Bag in her area, which not only reduced the amount of wastage and created mass awareness, but also resulted in creation of large number of jobs for West African women and thus, generating income.

¹⁰ National Tiger Conservation Authority, India, available at: <https://ntca.gov.in/> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

¹¹ Green Belt Movement, Kenya, available at: <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

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- **Greta Thunberg**

Age is not a bar when it comes to standing for the right. Born in Sweden, Greta Thunberg is a 17 years old environmentalist who started the movement named 'Fridays for Future'. She is known profoundly for the speech given at World Economic Forum, United Nations Climate Conference and at the US House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis, which focused on motivating and creating awareness to protect the environment. Her efforts bought climate protection as a global concern.

- **Sylvia Earle**

She is amongst a few environmentalists that worked on the protection of oceans. Earle was also amongst one of the few underwater explorers who used scuba gear. She won TED Prize in 2009 and after that launched mission 'Blue'¹² that focused on saving the underwater biodiversity. Her research has helped to know many things about in depth study of marine world.

- **Marina Silva**

Marina Silva is better known for her tremendous work in Amazon Rainforest in Brazil. She worked with Chico Mendes, Brazilian trade union leader and environmentalist and died protecting rainforest in 1988. After this incidence, she came into politics and helped in decreasing the deforestation by 59 percent during her lead that is from 2004 to 2007. She preach the values of sustainable development, social justice and protection of environment.

MOVEMENTS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Due to globalization, trade and connectivity have expanded so far and same goes with the concerns relating to environmental protection. International agreements enable countries to address the matter in question together which

¹² Mission Blue, *available at*: <https://mission-blue.org/> (Visited on: February 02, 2021).

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is a global concern and therefore, aiming to find solutions for the same. Such agreements have made a very significant link in between environment and women. Following are some of the facets:

I. Un Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women¹³

This convention, abbreviated as CEDAW, was agreed in the year 1979 and provides for the foundation to achieve gender equality. This is the binding document, therefore, the nations have to report on regular basis describing the measures they took for improvement and require proper implementation of the convention. Originally, CEDAW does not include provisions relating to violence against women but the same were added via **Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women¹⁴ in 1993** and the committee also enlisted various 'general recommendations' on the same subject.

II. Beijing Declaration and Platform For Action¹⁵

It was adopted in 1995 while US Fourth World Conference on women. This declaration contains an entire chapter relating to women and the environment, Chapter K, which includes 12 Articles that says that women have integral role to play and protect the environment. It ask states to pay due attention to women, who live in rural areas and others who work in agricultural sector, whereby they can learn more about sustainable development. More participation of women in formulation of policies and decisions for betterment of environment. It also ensures that women should take more active participation in planning the infrastructure. The declaration

¹³The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), *available at*: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/> Visited on: February 02, 2021).

¹⁴ Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, United Nations, *available at*: <https://www.who.int/gender/violence/v4.pdf> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

¹⁵ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, China, *available at*: https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf (Visited on February 02, 2021).

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also lays down various steps that can be taken by governmental and non-governmental organizations.

III. United Nation Convention on Earth Summit (UNCED)¹⁶

This convention lays down the need for participation of women in sustainability and provides a gender perspective. Agenda 21¹⁷, which is one of the document of UNCED includes a complete chapter on gender that highlighted the significant role of women in labour intensive countries as well as called them, sustainable consumers. It laid down rules relating to conservation of biodiversity. The vital role played by women in communities are discussed.

IV. United Nation Security Council Resolution 1325¹⁸

This resolution was agreed upon in the year 2000. It mandates the role of women in building peace and the impact that armed conflicts have on them. It promotes participation of women at all grades of decision making, protection of women and integration of gender perspective at large. This resolution form part of the women, peace and security agenda and supports women organisation all over the world.

V. Sustainable Development Goals¹⁹

¹⁶ United Nation Convention on Earth Summit, *available at:*
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/milestones/unced> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

¹⁷ Agenda 21, *available at:*
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/outcomedocuments/agenda21> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

¹⁸ UN Security Council Resolution, *available at:*
<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

¹⁹Sustainable Development Goals, *available at:*
<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

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UN Members adopted these goals in 2015, which included 17 goals on social, economic and environmental issues. Under Goal 5, gender equality and empowerment of women is promoted combining it with main goals. The goal emphasis on ending discrimination and providing for a legal framework for ending all the malpractices and issues such as child marriage, domestic work, unpaid care, leading in public arena, reproductive and sexual health, et- cetera.

MOVEMENTS INITIATED BY FEMALE CONSERVATIONISTS

Besides, agreements that were agreed on at various instances. Following are some of the movements that were either initiated by women activists or they had a major part played in the same:

I. Chipko Movement

The movement started at a grass root level in 1970s' India, which had its wide reach throughout the world in a short span of time. The movement was led by SunderlalBahuguna, but the women in this movement had a major role to play. The activists hugged the trees in order to save them from felling down. They also worked for the conservation of water from industrialists.

II. Green Belt Movement²⁰

This movement originated in Nairobi, Kenya in 1977 by WangariMaathai, who herself is a Nobel Prize winner. The women, who initiated and took part in this movement fought against the climate control, motivating others to make good choices and improving access and control for conservation of resources at large. The movement has successfully established around 51 million trees in Kenya.

III. Narmada BachaoAndolan

²⁰ Green Belt Movement, Kenya, *available at*: <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

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This is India's one of the largest environmental protest. It started in the year 1985 and is still continuing till date. It has taken place for the protection of river Narmada which is the largest flowing river in Arabian Sea. The issue related to building of dam over it which would displace around 2, 50,000 people and submerge 25 villages in water. The movement started with small farmers and adivasi group taking part into the same, which hiked up when MedhaPatkar, a well-known environmentalist, took part in the same. The Andolan uses non-violent ways to protest and raise voice against harmful effects of urbanisation. Currently, a case named MedhaPatkar vs. Union of India²¹ is going on in the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India.

IV. Navdanya Movement²²

This movement was initiated by Vandana Shiva, who is a renowned environmentalist. This movement is also known as nine seed movement. It calls out farmers to reduce the use of Genetically Modified Seeds (GMS) that are harmful in nature and encourage using organic and chemical free practices. This movement has created 65 seed banks throughout the country and at the same time takes active participation in global issues such as fair trade practices, misapplication of technology, et-cetera. This is a very successful movement that has accomplished establishing a learning center named 'BijaVidyapeeth' in collaboration with the UK's Schumacher College.

V. Dakota Access Pipeline Protest

This protest related to construction that could lead to pollution of water in Lake Oahe from where the pipeline passed from North Dakota to South Dakota. The Standing Rock Reservation claimed that it will lead to harmful

²¹Writ Petition (Civil) No.1432/2018.

²²Navdanya, India, *available at*: <https://www.navdanya.org/site/> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

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effects if pipes were to be burst and they believed that the water was sacred and contained their buried ancestors. However, the U.S Army Corps of Engineers did not resist. The main concern that related to involvement of women was that the construction could lead to increase in sexual violence against women and girls living on the reservation. This was well observed in the documentary named Rise: Standing Rock.

SUGGESTIONS

By the time has passed, women has gained quite a powerful role in development as well as protection of environment. However, each and every person apart from gender disparity could take part in protection of environment as each and every drop forms part of the ocean at large. Keeping this in mind, here are some of the suggestions that could lead to change-

I. Use of Lights

Mostly, people are unaware of the fact the lights that are used in daily basis includes sodium that produces harmful arrays for the eyes. It is believed that in the future, light pollution will be increased by a significant rate. It is best that one should use the same only when it is required to minimise the harm. Natural sources should be given more importance. Women play a huge role in households by saving large quantity of electricity.

II. Planting Trees

These days the concept of nuclear families and well as nuclear is much into trend. So, the families could together develop the habit of gardening that would not only save them from being the part of environment protectors but also, sparing the television time, thus ensuring good health. The plantation of trees in open areas will not only purify the air, but would also protect the future generation sustenance, provide shelter to animals as well.

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III. Use of Non- Conventional Resources

In most if the rural areas, females depend on woods from the forest, thereby, unknowingly depleting the forest resources and disturbing the ecological balance. According to survey conducted by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)²³, it has been found that the burning of woods in developing countries like India, the efficiency of the fuel is wasted up to 82 percent. Therefore, there is dire need to change the focus on renewability and non- conventional sources like solar energy, which is taking its way in many big cities in huge quantity.

IV. Creating Awareness

As we all live on the same planet, the disparities amongst each other should be minimised the greater extent possible. Most of the rural population are unaware of the ways in which they are exhausting the resources. They must be made aware of the various problems and the major concern of population should be dealt together and understood by all the masses like clean fuel, scarcity, population outburst et- cetera as such activities result in dividing the resources among many and would at the end, result in complete depletion. Therefore, sustainability in each and every corner should be created.

V. Education of Ethics and Morals to Children

Home is considered as the first school, whereby mother is regarded as the first teacher. So, children from the very tender age should be made empathetic towards all the living creatures and good habits such as proper utilisation of their material can be taught to them easily which would result earth in the hands of good people.

²³ The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, United States, *available at*: <https://www.unicef.org/> (Visited on February 02, 2021).

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Moreover, for uplifting women, certain steps can be taken. Such as-

- Elimination of cultural and gender disparities,
- Supporting initiatives that are taken by women,
- Mainstreaming the role of women and sustainability in the nation,
- More NGOs should be opened empowering women to protect the environment,
- Protection of women managers relating to environment issue should be increased, thus ensuring their security,
- Government should remove hurdles (legal, socio- economic, et-cetera) to ensure active participation of women in sustainable development,
- Initiatives that support women's financial independence should be supported.

CONCLUSION

Women have always played exquisite role in protection of environment. Their participation has resulted in changing the environment to a greater extent and increases the chance of sustainability.

At earlier times, women were not allowed to take any sort of decisions. They were not provided with the position to have authority under or with them. It resulted in huge loss of health, sanitation, income and domestic knowledge. However, being close to nature, due to the work allotted, they have always been able to understand the issues of environment in better ways. Due to this reason, their participation is necessary and the same has been observed by the various environmentalists that helped to protect the environment in a way or the other.

Various policies and agreements have emphasized and empowered them to take steps to protect the environment. The authorities are working to make

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equity, but the challenges that are being faced are multi- dimensional. Women, throughout the world, have brought revolutionized change in the conservation of nature due to their experience and deep understanding of the issues that economy and environment can go parallel.

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