

Gender Equality and Climate Action: Integrating Women's Empowerment into Environmental Governance

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Abstract

Climate change and environmental degradation present some of the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century. Increasingly, global scholarship and policy discourse recognise that gender equality and women's empowerment are not peripheral concerns but central components of effective and sustainable environmental governance. This research article, developed on the basis of the earlier draft filecite turn file, critically examines the intersection between gender, environment, and climate change. It analyses the role of women in environmental protection, the emergence and significance of environmental movements, and the gendered impacts of climate-related vulnerability and conflict. Using a doctrinal and analytical approach, the paper argues that integrating women into environmental decision-making enhances conservation outcomes, strengthens community resilience, and advances climate justice. The study incorporates recent international and Indian developments and relies on updated literature and policy frameworks up to 2025 to propose a gender-responsive approach to climate action.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Climate Change, Women's Empowerment, Environmental Governance, Sustainable Development, Ecofeminism.

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation and climate change have intensified due to rapid population growth, unsustainable consumerism, and exploitative development models. These challenges disproportionately affect women, particularly in developing countries, where women remain closely dependent on natural resources for water, fuel, food, and livelihoods (Mago & Gunwal, 2020). At the same time, women possess critical knowledge and capacities that can significantly contribute to environmental conservation and sustainable development.

The relationship between women and nature has gained renewed scholarly attention with the recognition that gender-blind environmental policies often fail to address structural inequalities and may even exacerbate ecological and social vulnerabilities. International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly link gender equality (Goal 5) with climate action (Goal 13), underscoring the need for integrated approaches. This paper situates gender equality as a missing but

essential piece of the climate puzzle and examines how women's empowerment can strengthen environmental governance.

2. Conceptual Framework: Gender, Environment and Ecofeminism

Ecofeminist scholarship highlights the interconnected domination of women and nature under patriarchal and exploitative systems (Warren, 2000). While ecofeminism does not claim that women are inherently superior environmental managers, it emphasises that women's social roles and lived experiences position them uniquely within ecological systems. In many societies, women are responsible for household resource management, making them more sensitive to environmental degradation and climate variability.

Gender equality in environmental governance refers not only to equal participation but also to equitable access to resources, decision-making power, and legal rights. Studies demonstrate that conservation initiatives with meaningful participation of women result in improved compliance, transparency, and long-term sustainability (Elwell & Williams, 2016).

3. Women and Environmental Protection

Women play a vital role in environmental protection at household, community, and institutional levels. In rural contexts, women's daily interaction with land, forests, and water resources provides them with deep ecological knowledge of local environments (Singh, 2015). The Chipko Movement in India, led by women such as Gaura Devi, exemplifies grassroots environmental resistance rooted in women's lived realities (Jain, 1994).

Empirical studies from Africa and Asia also indicate that involving women in conservation initiatives-such as forest management and anti-poaching units-enhances effectiveness and community acceptance (Raimi et al., 2019). Moreover, women's empowerment contributes to improved family health, education, and adaptive capacity, thereby reinforcing sustainable development outcomes.

4. Environmental Movements and Women's Leadership in India

Environmental movements in India have played a significant role in shaping public consciousness around ecological protection and social justice. Scholars define environmental movements as organised collective actions aimed at promoting sustainable resource use and preventing environmental degradation (Guha & Gadgil, 1989). Since the 1970s, India has witnessed numerous environmental movements responding to large-scale development projects and ecological crises.

Movements such as Chipko Andolan, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Bishnoi movement reflect key characteristics of Indian environmental activism: mass participation, Gandhian non-violence, and strong involvement of women (Sahu, 2007). Women leaders like Medha Patkar and grassroots participants have been central to articulating environmental concerns as issues of livelihood, rights, and justice rather than mere conservation.

5. Gender Gaps in Environmental Governance

Despite their critical role, women continue to face systemic barriers in environmental governance. Globally, women constitute less than 15% of landholders, limiting their ability to influence land-use decisions and access financial resources for sustainable practices (UNDP, 2023). Legal and cultural norms often restrict women's land rights, even where formal equality exists.

Climate change further intensifies these inequalities. Resource scarcity, displacement, and environmental disasters disproportionately increase women's unpaid labour burdens and exposure to gender-based violence (IPCC, 2022). Addressing these gender gaps is therefore essential for both environmental sustainability and human rights protection.

6. Climate Change, Conflict and Gender-Based Vulnerability

Climate change is increasingly recognised as a 'threat multiplier' that exacerbates social tensions, state fragility, and conflict (IPCC, 2022). Resource scarcity related to water, land, and forests has been linked to intrastate conflicts, with severe consequences for women's security and livelihoods (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, 2015).

In conflict-affected regions, environmental degradation and climate-induced displacement heighten the risk of gender-based violence, including sexual violence used as a tactic of control. The Lake Chad Basin illustrates how ecological decline, armed conflict, and gender insecurity intersect, disproportionately impacting women and girls. Gender-responsive climate adaptation and peacebuilding strategies are therefore critical to breaking cycles of violence and vulnerability.

7. Global Environmental Governance and Gender Perspectives

Since the 1990s, environmental governance has increasingly shifted toward global frameworks addressing transboundary challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and ozone depletion. International agreements-including the Montreal Protocol and the Paris Agreement-acknowledge the importance of inclusive and participatory approaches.

Recent climate governance discourse emphasises gender-responsive climate finance, women's leadership in adaptation strategies, and the integration of gender considerations into national climate policies (UN Women, 2024). These developments highlight the growing recognition that environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without social equity.

8. Conclusion

Gender equality is not an auxiliary concern but a foundational requirement for effective climate action and environmental sustainability. Women's close interaction with natural resources, combined with their social and community roles, positions them as key agents of environmental protection. However, structural inequalities, legal barriers, and socio-cultural norms continue to limit their participation and impact.

This study underscores the need for gender-responsive environmental governance that ensures women's access to resources, decision-making platforms, education, and financial support. Integrating gender equality into climate policies enhances ecological outcomes, strengthens community resilience,

and advances climate justice. As environmental challenges intensify, empowering women must be recognised as both a moral imperative and a pragmatic strategy for sustainable development.

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