

Women: A Guardian of Planet Earth A Review

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Abstract

Behind every lush field, clean river, and thriving forest, there's often an invisible yet powerful force tirelessly working to nurture, protect, and preserve the natural world—that force is woman. Whether as farmers, forest dwellers, water gatherers, seed savers, or community leaders, women across the world—especially in rural and indigenous communities—have historically held an intimate relationship with nature (FAO, 2020). This paper explores the multifaceted roles of women as custodians of ecological balance, highlighting their contributions to traditional environmental knowledge systems, biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture, and climate resilience (Agarwal, 2010; Shiva, 1989). It traces women's participation in environmental movements, such as the Chipko Movement and Green Belt Movement, and underscores how their leadership continues to shape sustainability policies (Bahuguna, Collected Interviews). In a world facing ecological crises, women's perspectives are not just relevant—they are essential (UN Women, 2021).

Keywords: Women empowerment; environmental sustainability; ecofeminism; conservation; climate change; biodiversity; sustainable development; green leadership; ecological responsibility; gender and environment

INTRODUCTION

In many cultures, the Earth is revered as **Mother Earth**—a symbol of fertility, patience, and creation. This symbolism resonates deeply with the role of women as nurturers and protectors of life (Agarwal, 2010). From the water carriers of Rajasthan to the herbal healers of the Amazon, women sustain both families and ecosystems. Their traditional ecological knowledge forms an integral part of biodiversity conservation (FAO, 2020).

Amrita Devi Bishnoi's sacrifice in 1730 to save trees from being cut down stands as one of the earliest examples of eco-feminist courage (Bishnoi, Oral Histories). Her act laid the moral foundation for future movements linking women's strength with environmental protection.

To understand the Earth's future, we must recognize the wisdom of its women—they are not only inheritors of the planet's legacy but its guardians.

Traditional Roles and Indigenous Wisdom

The relationship between women and nature has always been one of deep kinship, shaped by inherited wisdom and care. Traditional knowledge systems passed through generations—such as seed preservation, natural farming, and herbal medicine—embody sustainable practices long before modern ecology was formalized (Shiva, 1989).

In tribal and rural India, women act as seed conservers, soil healers, and biodiversity stewards. For instance, women in Odisha and Chhattisgarh are reviving traditional millet varieties resistant to droughts, ensuring food security and climate adaptation (FAO, 2020). Vandana Shiva (1989) emphasizes that women's ecological practices represent an alternative paradigm of sustainability rooted in care, reciprocity, and respect for nature.

“In every seed lies the hope of tomorrow,” as Vandana Shiva aptly states (Shiva, 1989).

Women in Environmental Movements: From Silent Laborers to Vocal Leaders

Women have long stood at the frontline of environmental resistance.

The Chipko Movement

In the 1970s, under the leadership of **Gaura Devi**, women of Uttarakhand hugged trees to prevent commercial logging, declaring, “*What do we get from the forest? Soil, water, and pure air—these give us life.*” This movement exemplified women's non-violent ecological activism (Bahuguna, Collected Interviews).

The Green Belt Movement

In Kenya, **Wangari Maathai** mobilized thousands of women to plant trees, linking environmental restoration with women's empowerment. Through the **Green Belt Movement**, over 51 million trees were planted, and local women regained agency and income (Maathai, 2006).

Narmada Bachao Andolan

Medha Patkar's leadership in the movement against large dams on the Narmada River highlighted the intersection of environmental justice, displacement, and women's rights. Her assertion that “true development must sustain both nature and humanity” continues to influence India's environmental discourse (Patkar, PUCL Writings).

These movements, spanning continents, share a common thread—women's instinctive protection of nature as an extension of life itself.

Women and Climate Resilience

Climate change impacts women disproportionately—especially those in agrarian and coastal regions (UNDP, 2022). As rainfall patterns shift and resources dwindle, women emerge as the first responders, adapting agricultural practices and conserving resources (FAO, 2020).

In **Maharashtra**, self-help groups have revived degraded lands using organic manure and drip irrigation. In **Odisha**, tribal women have preserved flood-resistant paddy varieties. In **Gujarat**, women's cooperatives harness solar energy to pump water, showing the fusion of tradition and technology.

As Sunderlal Bahuguna reminded us, “You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people” (Bahuguna, Collected Interviews). Women embody that empowerment—they are farmers, water managers, and educators sustaining families and ecosystems alike.

Policy Participation and the Way Forward

Despite their ground-level contributions, women are underrepresented in environmental policymaking (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2016). This underrepresentation weakens both gender equality and environmental sustainability.

Amartya Sen rightly stated, “*If development is not engendered, it is endangered.*” (Agarwal, 2010). Integrating women's perspectives in governance, from forest management councils to climate policy

boards, is essential for inclusive growth (UNDP, 2022).

Key Recommendations

1. Secure Land Rights for Women Farmers:

Legal recognition of women's land ownership enhances ecological stewardship (FAO, 2020).

2. Ensure Access to Finance and Clean Technology:

Green funds and microcredit for eco-entrepreneurs can empower women to lead local sustainability initiatives (UN Women, 2021).

3. Promote Women-Centric Environmental Education:

Curriculum reforms should highlight female environmental leaders like Gaura Devi, Vandana Shiva, and Medha Patkar (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2016).

4. Mandate Gender Representation in Environmental Governance:

True sustainability requires women in decision-making roles, ensuring balance between economy and ecology (Agarwal, 2010).

Conclusion

When we view the Earth through the eyes of women, we perceive not merely a planet, but a living entity — a source of life, legacy, and shared responsibility. Women have long embodied the essence of ecological ethics, not as abstract ideology but as a deeply rooted way of life, shaped by their daily interactions with nature and community. Their relationship with the environment is nurtured through empathy, care, and sustainability — principles often overlooked in modern industrial progress. From the selfless sacrifice of the Bishnoi women of Rajasthan, who gave their lives to protect trees, to the far-reaching Green Belt Movement led by Wangari Maathai in Kenya, women have continuously exemplified an ethos of stewardship that seeks coexistence rather than domination. Their actions remind humanity that true progress lies in harmony with nature, not in its exploitation. In this sense, the role of women in environmental preservation is no longer supplementary or symbolic—it is central to humanity's ecological survival. Their leadership bridges tradition with transformation, compassion with activism, and sustenance with sustainability. As Chief Seattle profoundly stated, *"The Earth does not belong to us; we belong to the Earth."* Women, as its guardians, embody this timeless truth through their wisdom, resilience, and unwavering care for all forms of life.

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