

MARCHING TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY - ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Population explosion and technological progression are continuously putting a strain on the Environment and on countries available natural resources. Countries over-exploitation of the resources like land, water, fuel etc. has resulted in degradation of resources mainly due to industrial pollution, soil erosion, deforestation and urbanization. Hence, there is urgent need to conserve and promote the natural resources and environment. Women & environment conservation is a vital issue which is being debated today. Since time immemorial, women have been a part of this environment & its conservation. Women have direct contact with natural resources like fuel, food and fodder, forest, water and land specially in rural areas where majority of population reside and directly dependent upon natural resources. Hence, attempt has been made in this paper to assess the role of women in conservation and promotion of environment in the changing global scenario. Appropriate recommendations were put forth to enhance women involvement in environmental protection and conservation.

Keywords : women, environmental conservation, environmental policies, recommendations

Introduction

Environment is the source of all forms and support system of life (UNESCO & ICSU, 1999). As it is aware that quality of life has become an important concern of all people, environmental quality is considered as an important factor in assessing the quality of life. Women and the environment are closely related and interconnected.

Throughout history, women have been immortalized as powerful symbols of nature: Mother Earth, Earth Goddess, and Artemis in the Greek mythology, and Mother River (the Yellow River) in Chinese history. Women have personified nature and gave

nature an infinite meaning .Therefore, women as bearers and conservers of life, who first guide their children, play primary role in dedicating themselves for environmental cause. A lot of studies on women and environment have shown that women are significant actors in natural resources management and they are major contributors to environment rehabilitation and conservation.

The Millennium Development Goals include both, gender equality and environmental sustainability. Involving women in protecting the environment would help societies develop the sense of responsibility needed to maintain a good balance between humans and the earth's resources.

Women in Global Environmental Conservation

Women's role in environmental Conservation differs from the developed to the developing world. In the developed countries the issues which women are concerned is largely related to pollution in the urban context, while in the developing countries the issues are linked to livelihood concerns in rural areas.

Attempts to save the environment have been made by a wide range of women, from 'housewives' to 'scientists'. Globally, there are many examples of women direct involvement to save the environment. One of the first well known environmentalists was Rachel Carson from Springdale, Pennsylvania who alerted the world to the impact of fertilizers and pesticides on environment and paved the way for women to come together to protect the environment. Many see Carson as the mother of the environmental movement.

One of the most well known environmental conservation movements globally and in Africa is the Green Belt movement by Wangari Maathai. The movement encouraged the women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood. In 2004 she became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Women's and Environmental Conservation in India

Environmental conservation in India though of recent origin, have gained large prominence in the last few decades. Women in India are largely against deforestation and in conserving water. One of the earliest recorded of women involvement in protecting the environment can be traced back to 1731 among the Bishnois, who lived in the scrub forests of Rajasthan, near Jodhpur. Amrita Bai of Khejaralli village sacrificed her life for saving the Khejri trees of her village that the Bishnois treat sacred. Amrita Bai and her band of women Bishnois can be considered the first women environmentalists of the world. This initial step on environmental conservation started by Amrita Bai in 1731 provided the inspiration for Bachni Devi and Gauri Devi of Uttar Pradesh in the Chipko movement of the 1972.

In India, the women realized that degradation of productive land has led to the erosion of top soil; the choking of water drainage was causing salinity and loss of food crops. They collectively leased degraded land and revived them through traditional farming. In three years 700 acres of land were restored to productive use (Ress,1992) they are more concerned about environmental protection and ecological preservation.

Objectives

This paper aims to focus on various conceptualities related to women and environment with the following objectives.

- Role of women in environmental protection.
- To understand the challenges faced by women in environment protection.
- To understand the recommendation on behalf of women to improve their participation in environmental protection and conservation.

Ecofeminism – Origin and Development

The relation between human and nature led to the emergence of many theories such as Theory of Deep Ecology, Eco-theology and Eco-feminism. The bounded relation between women and nature paved the way to the emergence of theory of ecofeminism.

Women and environment are closely bounded. Ecofeminism gives importance to local values. Ecofeminists supports the work of community activists and grassroots movements and changes advocated by such groups in environment protection along with global efforts . Thus Ecofeminism provides more importance to participation of women in environmental decision making and there by conservation.

Role of women in Environmental Conservation

Throughout history evidences show that men have looked at natural resources as commercial entities or income generating tools, while women have tended to see the environment as a resource support their basic needs.

The Rio declaration on general rights and obligations says that women have a vital role in environmental management and development. The declaration finds that full participation of women is essential to achieve sustainable development in an economy .

Women have the advantage of increasing the awareness about environmental protection. They can educate their children and the neighbors. It is interesting to note that Indian women have contributed largely in spreading environmental literacy and awareness.

Women in India are playing a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment. Women in India have brought a different perspective to the environment debate, because of their different experience base. Poor women's lives are not compartmentalized and they see the issues in a broad and holistic perspective. They understand clearly that economics and environment are compatible. Their experience reveals to them that soil, water and vegetation, necessary for their day-to-day living, requires care and good management. Environmental degradation is related not only to the biosphere alone, but to the social sphere as well.

Indian women were always ahead in the matter of prevention of pollution and protection, preservation, conservation, promotion and enhancement of the environment. They have made greater sacrifices, have exhibited greater love than man in the area of environment protection. The strong desire, devotion and dedication towards better environment made Indian women a crusader against environment pollution.

Recommendations to attain Environmental Conservation from women's perspective

Environmental conservation is made easy if women are involved in environmental decision making policy formulation when environmental issues are at stake. To enhance women's participation in environmental conservation the following recommendations are suggested:

‡ Involvement in decision making

Environmental decision making at all levels should include women. Women can be policy managers, policymakers, policy implementers, policy evaluators, policy planners, policy designers, policy promulgators etc. Women are capable to play multi-dimensional role in safeguarding environment.

‡ Outreach programs

Women's knowledge about bio diversity, climatic changes, pollution, and deforestation should be enhanced through trainings & orientations.

‡ Community Involvement

Local communities bestowed with rich experiences of traditional conservative methods can be made useful. Community as a whole should be involved in sharing the environmental issues.

‡ Local technological Support

Indigenous methods of herbal living along with local technological support are needed. Women should be made aware of having a clean & clear technology and the backdrops about wrong use of technology & irrational application of technology. The

harm created by impractical application of technical inputs should be shared among women of all classes & groups .These programs will give supportive aid for women to rethink about women's role in adding to environmental conservation.

‡ Education support

The impact of environmental degradation should be made known to women through curriculums in schools & colleges , research centers , higher educational institutions etc, SHG's hence women need educational support.

Environmental Policies and Women

There is growing realization that for policies to do better in the developing world they need to adopt a participatory approach. Most of the environmental policies encourage participation by local women as they firmly believed the importance of women in successful implementation of the policies put forth . Some major policies and programs on environment and their implications for women are briefly outlined.

○ The National Environment Policy (2006) The National Environment Policy (NEP) by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) aims at mainstreaming environmental concerns into all developmental activities. It emphasises conservation of resources, and points that the best way to aid conservation is to ensure that people dependent on resources obtain better livelihoods from conservation, than from degradation of the resources.

○ National Forest Policy 1988 and Joint Forest Management (JFM) program of the 1990s mandated that women comprise 33% of the membership of the Vana Samarakshana Samitis. This inclusion of women to a large extent explains the success of the program in different states. The logic behind its creation was that the problem of deforestation could be better handled if the state Forest Departments worked out joint management agreements with local communities to reforest degraded forest.

○ Biodiversity Act 2002 – sees important role for women as stakeholders and custodians of traditional knowledge. Historically, women have been the seed keepers in farming communities.

○ Water harvesting programs across India see more women participants working in partnership with the state and NGOs. Women were active participants in the Sukhomajri village in Shivalik range of the Himalaya in Haryana that earned nation-wide acclaim for the way in which they had utilised their forests and water to their benefit. When women are involved in water management decisions the community benefits.

○ Renewable energy policies in rural areas address women in households with biogas plants and solar cookers / panels. Poor women need to benefit from clean and green cooking energy. Policymakers need to recognize the importance of women in the energy sector and to engage them directly in policy making and project design. Energy policies and programmes that recognize women's work and roles in the energy sector, can be effective in promoting access to sustainable energy solutions.

Relevant legal provision on environment

Women in India were not satisfied with mass movements against environmental degradation. They also knocked at the doors of legal courts for justice to protect the environment. India is one of the few countries of the world that have made a specific reference in the constitution of to the need for environmental protection, control and preservation. The constitution (42nd Amendment) Act of 1976 has made it a Fundamental duty to protect and improve the natural environment. Article 51 (a) provides that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life and have compassion for living creatures. Article 21 of Constitution guarantee the right to life; a life of dignity, to be lived in a proper environment, free from danger of disease and infection. In addition there are number of Directive Principles which give indirect emphasis for protection of environment. In addition to Indian Constitutional aspect, certain special legislations are also available in India for Environmental protection and conservation such as

- † The Air (Prevention and control of pollution) Act-1981 † The Water (Prevention and control of Pollution) Act, 1974.
- † The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

- ‡ The India Forest Act, 1927.
- ‡ The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 and the comprehensive legislation.
- ‡ Environmental protection Act, 1986.

Conclusion

Women can play a vital role in conserving environment. Ecological balance is an important aspect of new approach to nation's development .This paper has discussed the various ways women have participated actively in environmental protection and natural resource management in order to ensure sustainable use of environmental resources.

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WEB RESOURCES

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- http://iced.cag.gov.in/?page_id=256