



## EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

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### **Introduction**

Women symbolize 'Prakrati' means 'nature' in Indian Philosophy. She creates and nurtures the creation to bloom. She signifies 'shakti' the power that drives the system. Throughout the history, women have been immortalized as powerful symbols of nature. Mother earth, Earth Goddess women have personified nature and given nature its infinite meaning. Women have direct contact with natural resources like fuel, food and fodder, forest water and land specially in rural areas where 70% of Indian reside and directly dependent upon natural resources. A lot of studies on women and environment have shown that women are significant actors in natural resource management and they are major contributors to environmental rehabilitation and conservation. Women's direct contact with environment has produced them deep-knowledge about the environment. Thus, women have served as agriculturalists, water resource manager, and traditional scientists, among others. Women are not only knowledgeable about the environment, but they are also protective and caring. Women and the environment are closely bound and interconnected. Therefore women as bearers and conservers of life, as those who first guide children, should be foremost in dedication to the environmental cause.

### **Women Empowerment**

Empowerment can be defined as a multidimensional social process that helps gain control over their own lives. Women's empowerment means women gaining more power and control over their own lives. Women empowerment can also be seen as an important process in reaching gender equality, which is understood to mean that the rights responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female. According to the UN population fund an empowered women has a sense of self-worth. She can determine her own choices, and has access to opportunities and resources providing her with an array of options she can pursue. Gender role



expectations are institutionalized through legislative, educational, political and economic systems. Women need to be “empowered” in order to narrow the “gender gap” and to create an equal playing field between women and men before gender equality can be reached and maintained.

### **Gender and Perception of the environment**

Both women and nature have been considered as subordinates entities by men throughout history, which conveys a close relationship between them. Some scholars are of the opinion that men had degraded the physical environment abruptly while they had dominance over women and women’s great investment in sustainability of environment. Recent movements have shown that women are more sensitive to the earth and its problems they have created a special value system about environmental issues. People’s approaches to environmental issues may depend on their relationship with nature. Women in India are playing a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment. Women in our country have brought a different perspective to the environment debate. Because of their different experience base. They understand clearly that economics and environment are compatible. Environmental degradation is related not only to the biosphere alone. But to the social sphere as well. Traditionally, women have been responsible for subsistence and survival for water, food, fuel, fodder and habitat, though they rarely get the credit for nurturing these life support systems. Women have always been the major conservers of bio-diversity. Even today they perform duties such as seed selection, multiplication and conservation, the on-farm conservation traditions of rural and tribal women, with reference to agro-biodiversity are well known. Traditionally, women are responsible for resource mobilization and management. Fuel, fodder and water collections are the accepted responsibilities of women. As the environment degrades, these basic necessities become difficult to collect. The time a women spends on gathering fuel, fodder and water, as well as attending to household work, agricultural work and animal care, reduces her competence. Throughout history men have looked at natural resources as commercial entities or income generating tools, while women have tended to see the environment as a resource supporting their basic needs. Women play a key role in the protection of biological diversity through their varied responsibilities. They have identified the need not only to protect the bio-diversity, but also to recreate it. The 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.

### **Concept of Environmental Conservation**

The sustainable use of the environment by women is the result of their closeness to nature. Most women, especially in rural areas, are involved in household activities like the collection of food, water, fodder and fuel, which enhance their knowledge of the environment, thus enabling them to implement the appropriate conservation practices and technologies. Women in India are considered to be close to nature, both in imagination and practice.

### **Role of Women in conservation of Environment**

Traditionally, women have been responsible for subsistence and survival for water, food, fuel, fodder and habitat, though they rarely get the credit for nurturing these life support systems. Added to these environmental destruction, exacerbates women's problems in a way very difficult from that of men. The challenge is to reestablish the symbiosis between communities. Women and natural resources and reverse the trend of the negative impact of existing developmental paradigms. Women have always been the principal conservers of bio-diversity. Even today they perform duties such as seed selection, multiplication and conservation. The on farm conservation traditions of rural and tribal women with reference to agro-biodiversity are well known. Traditionally, women have dealt with non-monetized biomass based subsistence economy of the household i.e. firewood, cow dung, crop wastes, organic manure, etc. In developing areas of the country women are considered the primary users of natural resources (Land, Forest and water), because they are the ones who are responsible for gathering food, fuel and fodder. Although in these countries, women mostly can't own the land and farms outright. They are the ones who spend most of their time working on the farms to feed the household. Shouldering this responsibility leads them to learn more about soil, plants and trees and not misuse them. Although, technological inputs increase male involvement with land. Many of them leave the farm to go to cities to find jobs. So women become increasingly responsible for an increasing portion of farm tasks. These rural women tend to have a closer



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relationship with land and other natural resources, which promote a new culture of respectful use and preservation of natural resources and the environment, ensuring that the following generations can meet their needs. Women's perspectives and values for the environment are somewhat different than men's. Women give greater priority to protection of and improving the capacity of nature maintaining farming lands, and caring for nature and environment's future. Repeated studies have shown that women have a stake in environment and this stake is reflected in the degree to which they care about natural resources. Ecofeminism refers to women's and feminist perspectives on the environment where the domination and exploitation of women of poorly resourced peoples and of nature is at the heart of the ecofeminist movement. Today women struggle against alarming global trends, but they are working together to effect change. By establishing domestic and international non-governmental organizations, many women have recognized themselves and acknowledge to the world that they have not only the right to participate in environmental dilemmas but they have different relationship with environment including different needs, responsibilities, and knowledge about natural resources. Though the Government of India is working towards an environmentally sound and sustainable quality of life. The problems, challenges and issues are multi-faceted. However, women in India are playing a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment. Women in our country have brought a different perspective to the environment debate, because of their different experience base. The threat of deforestation was enough to rally the local women to civil disobedience to protect the eco-system. They knew very well that their well being their prosperity, their life, all was associated with the forest some commentators have described chipko movement as women's (Bahuguna 1975; Bhau and Kumar 1982, Jain 1983, Mishra & Tripathi 1978).

## (i) Chipko Movement –

The direct concern of Indian women with environment protection can be traced long back to 1731 A D, when Amrita Bai of Khejaralli village of Jodhpur District of Rajasthan sacrificed her life for saving the trees of her village. She is the founder of the modern 'Chipko Movement' in order to save the trees, she embraced the trees and was cut as per the orders of the then Maharaja. Her three daughters and later her husband came forward and one by one 363 People were killed and the trees remained untouched because of villagers strong resistance. This movement started by Amrita Bai in



1731 A D was revived by Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi of Uttar Pradesh in 1972. They snatched the axe from the wood cutters and warned contractors not to cut the trees. They gave a slogan which means forests bear soil, water and air and the three substances are basic requirements of our life.

### (ii) Green Belt Movement –

Another movement which is one of the biggest in women and environment history is the Green Belt movement Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai founded this movement on the World Environment Day in June 1977. The starting ceremony was very simple a few women planted seven trees in Maathai's backyard. By 2005 30 million trees had been planted by participants in the Green Belt movement on public and private lands. The Green Belt movement aims to bring environmental restoration along with society's economic growth. This movement led by Maathai focused on restoration of Kenya's rapidly diminishing forest as well as empowering the rural women through environmental preservation.

### (iii) Women Environmentalist at Global Perspective-

The twentieth century has seen the rise of women's movement. Like environmentalism, the first appeared much earlier, but it was not until the present century, and in particular, until the 1960s, that the women's movement became established as a worldwide influence. It is perceived by all that they have participated and contributed to major environmental movements in many countries. The summary of the contributions of prominent women environmentalists are given below:

**Table 1: Summary of Contributions of Prominent Women Environmentalists**

Name of Environmentalists	Focus	Concern	Contribution
<b>Rachel Carson</b>	Focused on effects of chemicals and pesticides on the environment	Pollution from industrial sector can damage the ecosystem. Natural resources conservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Silent Spring' was famous to introduce modern environmental movement.</li><li>• Advocating for conserving natural resources and calling for new policy to protect</li></ul>



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			human health and environment was her tremendous works.
<b>Marjory Stoneman Douglas</b>	Focused on poor women's suffrage and rights in South Florida	Concerned for preserving the wetland of Everglades.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her book 'Everglades: River of Grass' was made to conserve the South Florida's wetlands.</li> <li>• She founded 'Friends of the Everglades' to accelerate the movement.</li> </ul>
<b>Teresa Heinz</b>	Focused on environment	Advocates for children health and environmental issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She founded the Heinz centre to improve the scientific and economic foundation for environmental policy through multi-sectoral collaboration among industry, government, academia, and environmental organizations.</li> <li>• She is a member of the Environmental Defense Fund.</li> <li>• She was a delegate to the Earth Summit, representing NGOs.</li> <li>• She also founded Heinz award for outstanding</li> </ul>



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			contributions in environment.
<b>Lois Gibbs</b>	Focus on health and chemicals	Advocated for raising awareness about toxic chemicals and their effects on human health particularly children's health through her group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She made an environmental group named 'the centre for Health . Environment and Justice'.</li> </ul>
<b>Jane Jacobs</b>	Focus on urban renewal movement	Advocated for dense-mixed-use, walk able cities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She was well known as hero of urban renewal movement.</li> <li>• Her book 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' was a milestone in 1950s.</li> </ul>
<b>Jane Goodall</b>	Focus on Wildlife Conservation.	Works for raising awareness among people to protect animals and the environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She founded the Jane Goodall institute in 1977 in Africa.</li> <li>• The institute works for raising awareness to protect apes and giving training to care for animals and the environments.</li> </ul>
<b>Wangari Maathai</b>	Focus on environmental restoration in Kenya.	Concern for establishing environmental restoration and empowering poor women along with economic growth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is the founder of Green Belt movement. The movement helped plant more than 40 million trees on community lands.</li> </ul>
<b>Vandana Shiva</b>	Focus on raising awareness about the danger of genetic engineering and	Advocated for bio-diversity and people's food right.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is the founder of Navdanya biodiversity conservation</li> </ul>



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	promoting sustainable agriculture.		<p>program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Navdanya biodiversity conservation program helped to set up 54 community seed-banks in India and trained over 500.000 farmers in seed sovereignty. Food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture.</li> </ul>
<b>Majora Carter</b>	Focus on integrated environmental and economic solution.	Works for environment and social justice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>She founded 'Sustainable South Bronx' to provide integrated economic and environmental solution. It also provides training for innovative jobs and education programs for advocacy.</li> </ul>
<b>Julia Butterfly Hill</b>	Focus on some initiatives that stresses on speaking and teaching folks about community organizing and activism with Circle of Life.	Concern for sustainable environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>She saved a 1500-year old California Red wood tree from being cut down by the Pacific Lumber Company. The Earth First group supported her campaign.</li> </ul>
<b>Betsy Greer</b>	Focus on crafting movement.	To use green crafting techniques.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>She helped the green crafting movement. Her book 'Knitting for</li> </ul>





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			Good? inspired thousands of crafts makers to use green crafting techniques and it makes a difference in crafting movement.
<b>Maria Cherkasova</b>	She recently shifted her focus on children rights protection to establish healthy environment.	Concern for Ecological programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She works for coordinating a 4-years campaign to stop construction of hydroelectric dam on the Katun River.</li> <li>• She researched on rare species.</li> <li>• She also worked in USSR Red Data Book and CIEP.</li> </ul>
<b>Ellen Swallow</b>	Focus on industrial and environmental issue	Advocated for environment by providing education to women about the environment in relation to their homes or home making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is the founder of ecology.</li> </ul>

*Source: UNEP and TERI Report, 1999: Page 3*

It is important to recall the names of Indian women who have fought legal battles in the court of law for environment protection as Mrs. Sarla Tripathi of Indore, Kinkari Devi of Sirmour District, Krishna Devi of Rajasthan etc. today the torchbearers are Meneka Gandhi an environmentalist and Politician, Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, environmental activist and the rock star of the anti GMO movement. Medha Patkar a social worker & environmentalist who are carrying on the crusade of environment protection. But the problem of present day environment protection cannot be solved with the involvement of a few selected groups of women. It requires a global involvement of the entire community of womenfolk.



#### (iv) Women Initiatives-

Women's participation in the any social environmental movement was a very novel aspect of the movement. Women can make several initiatives towards environmental conservation such as Group initiatives – Women can also make tremendous contributions to balancing nature's treasure through group awareness which could leave a great impact. Women can form collective group such as SHG(Self Helping Group) to inculcate the awareness about keeping the household environment clean and tidy. This can be achieved through orientation or training awareness programmes to women in groups. Women can be made to involve themselves in a group discussion about environmental issues. They can make collective leadership towards containing environment pollution.

Individual Initiatives – each woman can help the process of protection of environment individually in different ways such as bifurcating waste soluble and identifying their roles as participants in environment management.

#### Advocacy for Women and Environment –

In developing countries, environmental degradation such as toxic contamination, destruction of natural resources, disappearance of water, food and work, displacement for traditional lands are common sufferings of the people. Environmental movements are centered on these issues. Many organizations focus on the needs of women who are most affected by environmental hazards. UNEP, FAO and IUCN are the active actors for creating awareness of women's crucial role in environment. World Bank (2002) in a study recognized that gender equality is important for sustainable development. An Action program named Ageda-21 has been taken, that recognized the importance of women in preserving the environment. Particularly, women's role in protecting the environment was recognized nationally due to the advocacy of women's groups and NGOs. They motivated the women and emphasized that women had distinct role and voice in advocacy on issues related to environment and environmental health.

**Table 2: UNEP's Work on Women and Environment**

Years	Activities
1980s	UNEP played a pioneering advocacy role in linking women and the environment.
1985	Held a special session on women and environment at the 3 <sup>rd</sup> world conference on women, in Nairobi. Hired senior women advisors on sustainable



	development.
1991	Co-organized the global assembly on women and environment in Miami, Florida, USA.
Since 1992	Focused more on internal functioning and less on external advocacy.
1993/1995/1997	The 17 <sup>th</sup> , 18 <sup>th</sup> and 19 <sup>th</sup> sessions of the UNEP Governing council issued decisions on the organization and the role of women in environment and development.
1995	Issued publication of Gender and Environment: A UNEP perspective.
1996	A policy statement from the executive director set forth guiding principles for interacting gender into UNEP activities.
1997	Included gender sensitivity guidelines within UNEP's project manual.
1999	Appointment of a UNEP gender focal point.
2000	Issuance of the publication success stories: Gender and Environment.
2004-05	UNEP program of work includes a commitment to make gender a cross-cutting priority in all its programs, with an emphasis on the empowerment of women in environmental decision-making. Active participation of women, technical assistance to women's network, a focus on women in reports on environmental links to ill health, development of education and training materials, organization of workshops and gender balance in meeting.

Source: UNEP Report 2004, Page 6

### Strategies for Women Empowerment through conservation

Women empowerment is possible through environmental conservation if women are made a part of the environmental decision making policy formulation when environmental issues are at stake. Following strategies can be considered.

- I. Involvement in decision making- Environmental decision making at all levels should include women. Women can play multi-dimensional role in safeguarding environment.
- II. Providing awareness- women requires complete information, hence capacity building activities of women towards enriching her knowledge about environment needed.
- III. Outreach programs- women's knowledge about biodiversity, climatic changes, pollution, and deforestation should be enhanced through trainings & orientations.
- IV. Community involvement – local communities & their rich experiences of traditional conservative methods can be made useful.
- V. Gender Perspective – women should be made aware of the gender perspective in the designing & implementation of the women should be made to plan & design projects for environmental protection by their experiences.



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- VI. Education support – the impact of environmental degradation should be made known to women through curriculums in schools & colleges, research centers, higher educational institutions etc. hence women need educational support.

## Conclusion

This paper reflects on considering women as a key stake holder in environmental policy formulation & considers strategies towards women's role in environmental conservation. Women can play a vital role in conserving environment. Ecological balance is an important aspect of new approach to nation's development, and women's concern with local ecological stakeholder ship is vital to women empowerment process. Educated women will contribute more significantly to bridging the gap between environment and development. Empowerment of women in sustainable human development and in relation to the protection of the environment must be recognized and sustained. Women should be encouraged to participation committees on environmental protection projects, programmes and policies to address gender imbalance in decision making the government will have to come in this respect to ensure gender equity regarding access to and control of resources. Environmental education is required for the every citizen for sustainable development

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