

WOMEN'S ROLE AS ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS: LEVERAGING THEIR POSITION AS GUARDIANS OF NATURE

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INTRODUCTION

Despite comprising nearly half of the global population and contributing one-third of the labour force, women face significant disparities in income and property ownership, receiving only a minuscule share of both. However, historical evidence consistently underscores the pivotal role women play in societal organization and advancement, often likened to the nurturing essence of soil in fostering innovation and progress.

Women's Role in Environmental Conservation:

Throughout history, women have served as primary food providers, stewards of forests and their resources, and custodians of the water cycle, crucial for water conservation. In some regions, women are responsible for over 80 percent of food production, emphasizing their indispensable role in agriculture and land management.

Impact of Industrialized Agriculture on the Environment:

The longstanding relationship between humanity and the environment has traditionally been one of prudent resource utilization and environmental stewardship. However, the advent of industrialized agriculture, particularly under the 'Green Revolution,' has disrupted this equilibrium, leading to the rapid depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation. Intensive agricultural practices, such as the adoption of hybrid, high-yield seed varieties, extensive mechanization, and the widespread use of agrochemicals, have significantly strained land fertility and contributed to soil and water pollution, with profound implications for human health and biodiversity. Acknowledging and amplifying the pivotal role of women as environmental stewards is paramount in addressing the multifaceted challenges of sustainable development and environmental conservation. By recognizing and empowering women as guardians of nature, societies can leverage their unique perspectives and contributions to foster a more equitable, resilient, and environmentally sustainable future.

The Impact of Industrialized Agriculture on Women:

The ramifications of industrialized agriculture exert a profound influence on the lives of women engaged in food production and resource collection within their environments, as they are primarily responsible for household maintenance. Deforestation, depletion of biomass sources, and water scarcity compel women to undertake arduous journeys to procure water, fuel, and fodder, thereby consuming valuable time and energy. Environmental degradation and pollution significantly exacerbate women's personal work burdens, adversely affecting their health and quality of life while restricting their access to and control over vital resources.

Utilization of Knowledge and Skills in Environmental Management:

Throughout human history, women have been integral to the conservation, utilization, and management of resources, with their role as gatherers crucial for ensuring food security and environmental sustainability. As primary environmental stewards, women traditionally engage in conservation activities, safeguarding soil, water, and trees. Their expertise extends to seed selection and innovative land reclamation techniques, demonstrating their capacity to effectuate environmental rehabilitation through informed resource management practices.

Women's Role in Sustainable Development:

Women worldwide have made significant contributions to sustainable development, leveraging their experiential knowledge and informal learning to uphold natural resource integrity. Their understanding of sustainable development encompasses not only the preservation of biological diversity but also the

maintenance of ecological functions, soil quality, and hydrological cycles, alongside the sustainable provision of essential resources such as fish, fruits, fodder, and fuel wood.

Contribution to Community Development:

The pivotal role of women as environmental managers underscores their indispensable contributions to family and community development, wherein they invest time, energy, skills, and personal insights. Leveraging their extensive experiences, women emerge as reservoirs of environmental knowledge and expertise, catalysing environmental awareness and action within their communities. Consequently, their innate capacity serves as a formidable foundation for sustainable community development and environmental stewardship.

Recent Progress in Women's Environmental Advocacy:

In recent years, there has been a growing acknowledgment of women's roles in environmental conservation on a global scale. Since the 1980s, numerous international, national, and local women's environmental organizations have emerged, providing platforms for women to raise their voices against environmental degradation and advocate for a sustainable and healthy planet. The dedication, bravery, resilience, and multifaceted contributions of millions of individuals, including women scientists, activists, and both rural and urban women, in preserving the environment are truly remarkable. These women diligently carry out both productive and reproductive tasks within their communities while simultaneously raising awareness about the importance of environmental conservation. International organizations such as the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) have closely monitored the international development agenda and actively engaged in advocacy efforts to influence policy decisions. Bella Azbug, a prominent figure in the Gender and Climate Change Network, emphasizes that women aspire not to be integrated into polluted environments but rather advocate for clean and healthy ecosystems. The pioneering efforts of women in spearheading ecological movements, particularly in developing countries, have garnered widespread recognition and appreciation for their invaluable contributions to environmental sustainability.

Illustrative Instances:

Women have prominently led grassroots movements such as the Chipko movement in India during the 1970s, where activists intervened to halt tree felling by physically encircling and embracing the trees, thereby safeguarding them from destruction. They also defended water sources from corporate exploitation. Presently, women in Uttarakhand remain deeply engaged in environmental conservation efforts, undertaking initiatives such as afforesting 25 hectares of degraded land with a diverse array of trees to establish mixed forests. Another notable example of women's enduring commitment to environmental causes is the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya, initiated on Earth Day in 1977 by the National Council of Women. This movement mobilized thousands of women to plant indigenous trees, resulting in the establishment of a national network comprising 6,000 village nurseries. These nurseries aim to combat desertification, enhance soil health, and safeguard water sources within catchment areas. The impactful work of the Greenbelt Movement has transcended national boundaries, inspiring similar initiatives in other countries through the Pan-African Green Network. As articulated by Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Greenbelt Movement, the act of tree planting serves as a form of civic education, empowering individuals and instilling a sense of agency in shaping their destinies while alleviating fear.

In the past decade, India has witnessed a surge in resistance against ecological degradation, with women actively participating in movements opposing direct deforestation, such as the Appiko movement in Karnataka, as well as campaigns against large-scale development projects like the Silent Valley project in Kerala and the Inchanpalli and Bhopalpatham dams in Andhra Pradesh. Women have played integral roles in these protests, notably in their efforts to protect the environment and advocate for sustainable development practices. Prominent environmental activists such as Jane Goodall, Greta Thunberg, Malaika Vaz, Katherine Hayhoe, Julia Lorraine Hill, Rachel Carson, Vandana Shiva, Sunita Narain, Sumaira Abdulali, Kinkari Devi, Medha Patkar, Maneka Gandhi, and numerous others are actively engaged in championing environmental protection efforts. The 42nd Amendment Act of 1976 to the Indian Constitution has enshrined the fundamental duty to safeguard and enhance the natural environment.

CONCLUSION:

It is imperative to acknowledge and affirm the significant role of women in environmental management and ensure their rightful participation in the development process and its associated benefits. Leveraging their profound understanding of nature and its cycles, women's insights can contribute meaningfully to policymaking and planning efforts, recognizing that the survival of humanity is intrinsically linked to the well-being of nature. The examples highlighted above underscore the dedicated and ongoing efforts of women in environmental protection, emphasizing the potential for even greater impact and effectiveness when broader segments of society join forces in support of women's initiatives.

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