

## Role of Grass root Ecofeminism to overcome social problems and Environment Degradation in an Indian context

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This paper calls for greater integration of women within the field of agriculture as a way to facilitate women empowerment and prevent environmental degradation at Indian grass-roots level. It critically engages with the theory of ecofeminism and attempts to gauge its relevancy within the context of rural India.

It demonstrates the various ways in which patriarchy acts as an obstacle towards preservation and conservation of the environment, and suggests measures that can be adopted by those at the helm of policymaking to overcome these.

The paper begins by highlighting the need for ecofeminism and goes on to discuss how it can help policymaking. It contends that the close link that women share with ecology increases their motivation to preserve it. It goes on to demonstrate the successful ways in which India has applied ecofeminism at the individual and community level.

Finally, it suggests ways in which policymakers can actively involve women while framing policies to curb environmental degradation. Women can be recruited as consultants during the framing of policy is underway. Their knowledge about local agricultural practices can inform the framing of the policy. At a later stage, they can be deployed to ensure the proper implementation of policies. It concludes by contending that policies should be reviewed periodically to ensure their relevance and efficiency.

Even as pollution levels reach critically high rates, India remains lagging in its efforts to battle environmental degradation. The discourse surrounding environmentalism would be incomplete without including an analysis of the role that women can play in ecological conservation. Researchers like Dashe (1991, as cited by Aditya 2016) contended that a gendered analysis was necessary to ensure the success of environmental management programs. This aim of this essay is to analyze the instrumental role that women, primarily those that are rural-based, play in environmental management and conservation. It identifies obstacles that may prevent these women, from adopting adequate measures to conserve the environment and suggests ways in which the relationship between feminism and environmentalism can be taken forward at the grass-roots level.

The concept of ecofeminism is not novel inception. French feminist author, Françoise d'Eaubonne first coined the term in 1974. She contended that the root cause of rapidly degenerating nature was the patriarchal structure of society. Patriarchy led to the domination of women's bodies and the environment by men, leading to overpopulation and denigration of natural resources ("Françoise d'Eaubonne's Le Féminisme ou la Mort | Environment & Society Portal", n.d.). Since she places the entire burden of the environment being destroyed entirely on male shoulders, her position may seem a bit extreme. Nonetheless, the close relationship between the domination of women and the destruction of the environment is undeniable. Since the introduction of her epistemology, significant measures have been taken to integrate the two movements.

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<https://www.gapcritique.in/role-of-grassroot-ecofeminism-to-overcome-social-problems-and-environment-degradation-in-an-indian-context/>

Received 16 March 2019; Received in revised form 26 May 2019; Accepted 11 June 2019, Available online 30 June 2019

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In a panel discussion held by the United Nations, speakers noted the need for a balanced representation of both genders male and female in the formation and implementation of policies aimed at environmental management. Salvano Briceno, Director, United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, noted that women were more likely to get affected in times of natural disasters. Several panellists also proposed that including women in policymaking and framing was economically profitable (United Nations: 2002). The former information can aid rescue operations in times of natural disasters, and the latter provides the government with an added incentive to include women in policy-framing.

Women have traditional knowledge, about the usage of fuelwood, storage of safe drinking water and the types of plants that can be used as indigenous medicine (Owren: 2012). Since women are intimately linked to nature deriving their sustenance from it, they are much more likely to invest in its conservation. The sexual division of labour within patriarchal societies further contributes to women's problems. Women act as resource managers for their family, particularly in the domain of food. They are responsible for feeding all the members of their kin group, including children and the elderly. (ibid.) This means that they are involved in the production and distribution of food. Since climate change adversely affects agriculture, leading to an increase in food insecurity, her autonomy in making decisions pertaining to resource allocation may get compromised.

Patrilineal norms act as a barrier to the complete integration of women in the protection and conservation of the environment. For instance, while women may be involved in agriculture, they do not have direct control over land. This disrupts her course to empowerment. (ibid.) Thus, while she is actively involved in producing resources, unequal access to land renders her subjugated in taking adequate measures to conserve the land. Within the context of India, it was found that owning assets by women led to positive results in child survival, nutrition and health (Agarwal: 2018).

Ecofeminism tends to take women as a generalized category. Stratification of society may require that those women, who are owing to so-called lower caste status or suffering from poverty may need greater attention while planning ecofeminist models. For instance, Bina Agarwal (1972) contended that tribal women who were responsible for fetching fod-

der from the forest and poor women had a higher dependency on rivers, forests to fulfil their basic needs. Also, they lack facilities like tube wells that provide drinking water and aid irrigation. This renders them vulnerable to environmental degradation.

Within India, ecofeminist endeavours have been mostly successful. Women have showcased their ability as active participants in conserving the environment. The most famous of these has been the Chipko movement of 1973. Not only did it manage to secure its aim of protecting and conserving the forests but also improved women's status in society by allowing them to demonstrate their ability to conserve the environment (Indian Express: 2018).

Women have contributed towards environmental protection at an individual level as well. An example is a case of "Kinkari Devi vs State of Himachal Pradesh". She wanted the state to stop its excavation of limestone as it led to environmental degradation by affecting forests, wildlife, and land and water resources. She succeeded, and the court directed that all mining operations within the area needed to be shut down. (Devi: 1994) However, this route is only available to a limited section as legal battles can just be fought by those women who are aware of their legal rights and wield financial resources to hire adept lawyers to fight their case.

Navdanya movement is an excellent example of an inclusive ecofeminist movement that was successful in improving conditions of women at the grass-root level, while simultaneously conserving the environment. These instances bring to light critical lessons for Indian policymakers. Firstly, it showcases the need to include local communities while making decisions about "development." Secondly, to frame and implement policies aimed at environmental conservation successfully, local women's suggestions and support could prove to be an asset.

It is not that women's role in conserving the environment has gone unrecognized. The government allocated 30 per cent of the budget to women beneficiaries in all schemes (Sally 2018). While policies are framed to benefit women, these are only surface-level solutions. They failed to involve women while framing the policy. These are surface-level solutions that ignore the stratification that exists within grass-roots. As mentioned earlier, these societies tend to be highly stratified and therefore a blanket solution may not be a viable option. One way to include women in policy framing would be to employ them as consultants.

Consulting women, while policies are being framed, would facilitate policymakers as they would be adequately informed regarding areas that may require special attention or practical considerations that theoretical knowledge may not adequately inform them about. It would facilitate implementation as the target group would already be aware of what the policy entails. Also, giving women a voice in policy framing would increase their status in society, as they would be viewed as citizens capable of taking critical political decisions. Another would be to use them as agents of the state to carry out measures against environmental degradation. Acting as agents for the state gives them a political voice and increases acceptance of their equality.

Due to the phenomena of seasonal migration, men often move to other places in search of work. Since women are more likely to stay in the village for long, using them as state agents to carry out tasks is more practical.

Ecological conservation can also be facilitated if women are given greater rights, such as landowning. If women own the land that they work on, then, they can exercise autonomy in making environmentally conscious decisions about how the land has to be tilled. Another important way is to increase awareness of rights and laws that benefit women and the environment. The state should put in more significant investment in educating women. Educating women regarding modern methods and sophisticated technology would also aid the conservation of the environment. It should be made part of the curriculum at the local level. Empowerment of women and conservation of environment are intimately linked to each other, and therefore, using an inclusive model of ecofeminism can lead to the creation of an indeed developed society.

In conclusion, it is essential to consistently review policies that are made for the welfare of the population. If policies are reviewed periodically, then they can be modified to overcome contemporary challenges. This would be faster than framing a new policy. While analyzing policies made by the government, it is crucial to research what the policy entails, what it delivers and its process of framing. If this is taken into consideration, then a majority of shortcomings can be easily avoided, and policies can easily implement meaningful development.

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