



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Social Science**

**WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

**KEY WORDS:** environment management, sustainable development

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**ABSTRACT**

Gender discrimination can undermine economic development of any society. The traditional methods of discrimination are very common like discrimination against women in jobs. The process of development itself will create a number of disadvantages for women. One of the main and growing concerns in the process of development is the issue of sustainable development. This is normally looked at from the point of view of excessive degradation of resources leading to reduced income generation for future generations.

**INTRODUCTION**

Both men and women are equally responsible for the sustainable development and preservation of natural resources. Women have played extremely important roles in ensuring sustainable development by managing and harnessing the rich bio-diversity. Despite all the contribution made by women they are marginalized in decision making for preservation and management of these resources with which they are more acquainted.

Gender discrimination can undermine economic development of any society. The traditional methods of discrimination are very common like discrimination against women in jobs. The process of development itself will create a number of disadvantages for women. One of the main and growing concerns in the process of development is the issue of sustainable development. This is normally looked at from the point of view of excessive degradation of resources leading to reduced income generation for future generations.

The last three decades has seen a significant progress in economic and social development in areas where women have benefitted more than men. They continue to be overrepresented among the worlds most vulnerable groups. The access to natural resources remains largely biased towards men. The role of gender equality becomes a key factor here and a goal in its own right for sustainable economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability. The need for providing equal opportunity for both genders becomes vital which includes decision-making at levels. Only in allowing this the interest of both genders can be considered in the allocation of resources.

Sustainable development is "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Sustainable development encapsulates the needs of both women and men. Intra-generational equity cannot be achieved without addressing the gender relations which underlie prevailing inequity. Nor can inter-generational equity be obtained, or responsibility to pass on a more equitable world to future generations be met, if inequalities continue to be perpetuated. Gender disparity is the foremost form of inequality in the world and without adequate and effective measures to tackle it, sustainable development cannot be achieved.

**What is women's empowerment?**

Empowerment can be defined as a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important".

responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female". The expectation of a man or a woman, a girl or a boy, differs depending on the social and cultural context in which they live. Gender roles are learnt by each individual through a unique socialization process embedded in each of their societies. In other words: what he or she learns from people through social interactions that each of them has with their families, peers and society at large. This also means that the gender roles and expectations are not fixed and can change over time in the same way that they differ across different societies.

On a larger scale, gender role expectations are implemented through legalisation, political and economic systems, education, culture and traditions etc.,. These institutions create gendered norms and practices and structure social and cultural life. The visible division of labour in everyday life establishes the fact that women continue to play a pivotal role in providing unpaid care to family members and take care of domestic chores. They also play a subordinate role in political and economic life. Women tend to dedicate more time to unpaid activities, they more often tend to depend on the man's income and are less protected through financial savings, property in their name and pension entitlements. Without any financial security women are greater risk of poverty and have fewer opportunities the labour market. The conclusion is that women need to be empowered to narrow the gender gap. This also creates an equal playing field between women and men.

But what does it mean for a woman to be empowered? According to the United Nations Population Fund an empowered woman 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. She has control over her own life, both within and outside the home and she can influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, both nationally and internationally (UNDP, 2008).

**What is sustainable development?**

In the late 1980s the report Our Common Future by the World Commission on Environment and Development defined the concept "sustainable development" as development which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The aim is to maximise the well-being of today's generation to do this it is important to access the needs as a long-term perspective, taking into account the consequences of one's actions for their children, their children and grandchildren. This is to ensure that the resources they will require for their well-being are not depleted and that the natural environment that they require to live in will not be depleted or polluted.

Gender equality is generally understood to mean the "rights,

Sustainable development is broadly conceptualised as built

of three inter-related pillars: social development, economic development and environmental protection. The preservation of cultural diversity has also been proposed as a fourth pillar. This categorization may lead to treating each of these areas in isolation without accounting for a whole range of channels through which these pillars complement each other and aid in achieving sustainable development. By taking a holistic and integrated approach to environmentally-friendly economic development, sustainable development can be multifaceted and dynamic process. The promotion of gender equality also requires an integrative approach.

**How can women be empowered in the context of sustainable development?**

Sustainable development depends on equal distribution of resources for the present day and for the future. This cannot be achieved without establishing gender equality. Empowering women is a vital factor to achieve sustainable economic growth, environmental sustainability and social development.

Sustainable may be broadly defined as development that meets the requirements of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. For a society to be created which is based on freedom, democracy and respect for fundamental rights the key principle is to sustainable development. This will help in fostering equality of opportunity and solidarity for the generations to come. The principles of sustainable development should be firmly based on balanced economic growth and price stability. A highly competitive social market economy should be developed which will aim at full term employment and a high level of education which will aid directly in social progress and a very high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment as a whole.

Sustainable development needs to be the key objective for all policies made at the national level and should always aim at the continuous improvement of the quality of the life that people live in the present for the future generations to come. The earth's capacity to support life and all its diversity is to be safeguarded. Sustainable development is based on the principles of democracy and the respect for fundamental rights which include freedom and equal opportunities for all. This helps in building the solidarity between generations. Sustainable development works towards promoting a dynamic economy with a very high level of employment and education of health protection and environmental protection and in creating a peaceful and secure world and ultimately respecting cultural diversity across borders.

Women have always played a key and important role in the global environmental movement. Through the ages women have spoken out for policies and practices that do not threaten the well being and health of future generations. Women across the globe continue to fight improved living standard and protection of the environment. In most countries' women are represented disproportionately among the poor. A number of studies have shown that the poor in urban areas of developed, developing and under developed countries are greatly burdened of environmental degradation and pollution.

Women also share the primary responsibility for child care, household management and nutrition in almost all the countries across the world. In most developing countries women play a main role as farmers, water and fuel collectors, as animal tenders actively contributing to environment management. However, these roles women play are not adequately represented in the decision-making process related to development or issues of environment at all levels, local, national or international.

The expertise, knowledge and perspective of women have been overlooked for years and today women are demanding their voices be heard. Women recognize that a closely knit and integrates approach is required for sustainable

development is necessary as economic, social, political and environmental issues are very closely interconnected.

In almost all developing regions across the world the number of poor people has been on the increase since 1980's. studies also indicate that the gaps between the rich and poor are widening and most of the poor in the world are women. With the increase in the number of people below poverty line it was also noted that the number of rural women who are below the poverty line has increased by 50% in comparison to men.

The income generated and mapped to women is much lesser compared to men even over an entire lifetime for a variety of reason. They are often paid less for the same work that they do and most often they work less to balance their career with child or elder care. The significant gaps that are seen in women's employment history reduce the social security that they may gain otherwise. This also decreased the chances that have of receiving credits or loans. The above points increase the vulnerability of women to poverty especially in their old age. The role of the Government is pivotal in this day and age and it is required that policies, quota systems and programmes which will help in establishing the balance between genders and eventually bridge the gap.

The United Nations Development Programme has defined sustainable development as development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably, that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it, and that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It is development that gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities and providing for their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

Women's groups are mainly concerned with the patterns of globalization and economic growth which is directly responsible for increasing the gap between the rich and poor. This gap is also actively aiding in benefiting men more than women owing to gender disparity. The entire scenario is leading to increased environmental degradation.

Women today have raised and demanded that the Government establish new forms of economic accounting to include women in the unpaid work sector and to promote public policies which will actively reduce the time spent in the unorganised work sector where it is twice as much as men.

**Management of natural resources.**

The managers and primary users of land, forest, water and other natural resources in most developing countries are predominantly women. In the rural areas of most developing and under developed countries women spend a large part of their day in growing food, gathering fuel, carrying, cooking and doing domestic chores which are directly related and are aided by natural resources. Women contribute to and are responsible for most of the local food production in Africa and Asia. They are also largely responsible for selection of fertilizers, pesticides and seeds and to maintain the productivity of the soil thereby nourishing it and aid directly in the growth of seedlings and plans. Women are also major managers, preservers and users of biodiversity.

Native women develop a special relationship to the natural resources in their area. Most cultures in rural areas practice and promote a balances and respectful use of natural resources which actively aids in preservation of natural resources so that generations to come may meet their needs. The development schemes that are implemented and pushed for progress ignore the age-old practices of indigenous people. This directly affects the environment. The need for getting back to the roots is necessary at this point of time.

Women play a very vital role in promoting sustainable development as caretaker of their families, educators and

producers and consumers of natural resources. Their concern has largely been on sustainability of life for the present and future generations. But due to discrimination and gender inequality women are unable to exercise their full potential in protecting natural and environmental resources. Empowerment is greatly required in this area which help them to exercise their rights to their full potential.

**“The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” -Albert Einstein**

To achieve this, the contribution made by women to sustainable development and environmental management should be recognized. Women being primary care givers and teachers have a great responsibility in teaching the future generation towards the use and protection of natural resources. As active players in society we need to empower women to increase their voice in environmental decision make and help them in seizing opportunities in the “green economy”. Capacity building programs need to be increased to meet the needs of women leadership. Trainings need to be tailor made to suit the needs in local communities and nurture new leadership among women. To build and develop role of women as catalysts for sustainable development, their multifaceted roles in the society, community and family needs to free from religious, cultural and social traditions which would prevent active participation of women. Only a change of mindset will actively help in women aiding to sustainable development through environment management.