



## 8. Gender, Ecological Distress and Climate Change

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### Abstract

*The need to address gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow has become imperative today. Dominant patterns of consumption, production, and distribution have led us to a near ecological disaster. Over-exploitation of natural resources has hastened climate change and led to the loss of ecosystems. This article will look at how women are more vulnerable to the effects of ecological degradation and the effects of climate change. Women activists have raised their voices to create an awareness about the damage that humanity has done to our common planet. Youth all over the world have become competent actors in this movement. Women are uniquely positioned to act as powerful agents of change. Four areas have been identified as critical building blocks in response to the crisis mitigation, adaptation, technology transfer, and financing. The paper will discuss these issues in detail.*

**Keywords:** Ecological disaster, climate change, effects, activism, human rights, critical building blocks, biodiversity, Ecofeminism.

### Introduction

The need to address gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow has never been more clear. We have seen that dominant patterns of consumption, production and distribution have led us to a near ecological disaster. Overexploitation of natural resources has hastened climate change and led to the loss of ecosystems. The stresses and strains on the environment are evident in the unexpected and frequent droughts, floodings, temperature rises, pollution of the land, rivers and seas.

In an article published in the Indian Express on 23/8/2023, the writer Kalachand Sain points to the deaths and destruction by landslides in Himachal Pradesh. Rock deformation, exhumation, and surface processes such as erosion, weathering and rain/snow precipitation make the ecosystem very fragile. Climate-induced events like avalanches, debris flow, landslides, and floods add to the precariousness of the mountain system.

Rapid and unplanned urbanization has increased the risks of sea water intrusion leading to coastal flooding. Sea level rise and storm surges would lead to saltwater intrusion in the coastal areas, impacting agriculture, degrading groundwater quality and contaminate drinking water through tropical cyclones and riverine flooding.

Rapid climate change and gradual degradation of the environment have already left its mark on infrastructure, agriculture, food security; biodiversity and ecosystems; water resources;



human health; human settlements and migration patterns; energy, transport, and industry.

In an article ``Toll of Air`` published in the Indian Express, Friday, Sept 1, 2023, the writer has drawn attention to the alarm bells raised over our country`s air quality. It`s well known that exposure to unhealthy amounts of particulate matter takes a toll on the lungs and hearts of large sections of the population, leading to various forms of cancer, cognitive disorders and stunted development in children. A Lancet Study estimated that India lost 1.67 million people in 2019, to diseases caused by inhaling hazardous amounts of PM 2.5. In Delhi pollution of air through these fine particles reduces the average Indian`s life expectancy by 12 years. It is true that the geography of North India does impose constraints, especially in winters when pollutants have no escape routes. But there are other man-made factors which have led to a deterioration of the environment.

### **Effects on Women**

In many of these contexts, women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men. This is because women constitute the majority of the world`s poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change. They further face social, economic and political barriers that limit their coping capacity. Women and men are largely dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood. Women who are charged with the responsibility to secure water, food, and fuel for cooking and heating, face the greatest challenges. This is also coupled with unequal access to resources and to decision making processes and limited mobility which place women in rural areas in a position where they are disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental degradation.

In the context of climate change, traditional food sources become more unpredictable and scarce. Women face loss of income as well as harvests which are often their sole sources of food and income. Related increases in food prices make food more inaccessible to poor people, particularly women and girls leading to poor health. Women are often excluded from decision-making and access to and the use of land and resources critical to their livelihood.

According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, climate change has become the dominant driver for the loss of biodiversity. Biodiversity plays an important role in climate change adaptation and mitigation. Deforestation is responsible for an average of 20% of human-induced carbon dioxide emissions. The conservation of natural habitats can reduce the amount of carbon dioxide released in the atmosphere. In the rural areas of Africa and Asia, women and men are highly dependent on biomass, wood, agricultural crops, wastes, and forest resources for their energy and livelihoods. The majority of the biodiversity decline has an impact on women and girls in poor communities. As an effect, women have fewer opportunities to earn money, get education, engage in politics. Girls are mostly kept home from school to help gather fuel, take care of younger siblings, fetch water and cook. This is a



continuous cycle of disempowerment. Indigenous people possess a wealth of knowledge on environment and biodiversity. Indigenous knowledge inculcates an understanding of food, medicinal plants, domestic animals; symbiotic relations with ecosystems, functionality of specific species as well as the geographic ranges of said species. In order to further preserve biodiversity and limit its degradation, indigenous people can and should play a leading role in the global response to climate change. A greater inclusion of indigenous women in mitigation efforts further validates the significance of indigenous knowledge.

Climate change has significant impact on fresh water sources, affecting the availability of water used for domestic and productive work. Women and girls, all over the developing world bear the burden of fetching water for the families, many a times from distant sources. This water may often be contaminated resulting in health problems. In many cases arsenic contamination of groundwater and from other chemicals released from chemical industries is a major health hazard.

The heat waves seen in the recent past have been harmful to women with regards to their gynaecological health. Summers are especially bad leading to urinary tract infections and heavy or irregular menstrual cycles.

Due to climate-driven food insecurities, women do not receive sufficient nutrients for growth, leading to malnutrition and anemia during vital stages of child birth and menstruation. The effect of a malnourished mother is also transferred to her children. Lack of vital food and water resources is an important contributing factor in women's fertility issues.

Climate change adds a new complexity to the areas of human mobility and settlement through environmental degradation leading to increase in the flows both of internal and cross border human migration. The consequent results in higher death rates for women in less developed countries, are a direct link to their socioeconomic status, to behavioral restrictions and poor access to information. Migration entails vast changes in land use, the loss of coral reefs, modification in river and sea flows among other things. The limitations of adequate housing, the loss of livelihoods as a result of permanent displacement affects the economic, social, human, rights of people, which includes their right to food, health and shelter.

### **Farmers` Suicides**

Across India, lakhs of farmers are taking the desperate step of ending their lives, because of new pressures building up on them as a result of globalization. A decade of trade liberalization has had an adverse effect on the lives and livelihoods of farmers. International corporates have taken over seed supply leading to the spread of capital-intensive agriculture and the propagation of non-sustainable agriculture practices. The lure of huge profits linked with clever advertising strategies evolved by the seed, pesticides and chemical industries and easy credit for the purchase of costly inputs is forcing farmers into a deathtrap.

Activists and scholars cite different reasons for the large scale farmer's suicides like anti-farm laws, high debt burdens, poor government policies, corruption in subsidies, crop



failure, mental health, personal and family pressures.

Due to inadequate rainfall many a times droughts occur and sometimes there is unprecedented rainfall leading to hail storms, flooding, heavy rains which destroy the crops. The crop yields decline due to increases in temperatures, shifts in rainfall patterns, elevated surface carbon dioxide concentrations from human based green house gas emission. The crop failures due to climate change is a major trigger in the despair of the farmers leading to suicides. But their women folk who are left behind to carry the burden of existence, live life stoically, fighting all battles, rearing their families, trying to clear the debts, and continue to live with many layers of social stigma.

### Women Activists

Women all over the world are raising their voices to demand action to reduce carbon emission, to include youthful and female voices in climate decision making and to raise awareness of the damage humanity has done to our common planet. UNEP Champion of the Earth laureate Katharine Hayhoe dedicates her life to quantifying the effects of climate changes and transforming public attitudes. Joan Carling also a Champions of the Earth Laureate has defended the rights of native and marginalized people for over two decades.

In Brazil, Anna Luisa Beserra is creating innovative and sustainable technologies for water treatment and solid waste management. Nepal's Sonika Manandhar's Green Energy, Mobility platform (GEM) aims to make electric public transportation a quality alternative to private vehicles to combat climate change.

Kenya's Wanjuhi Njoroge founded # Save Our Forests#KE, a campaign that raised awareness about the decimation of forests and led to a nine-month ban on national forest logging in the country.

Children and young people particularly from indigenous communities have long been working to combat change in climate because by the time they reach adulthood, they will be the worst sufferers as the world will then be on the brink of total disaster.

The young seventeen year old climate activist Greta Thunberg made history as a lone protestor outside the Swedish Parliament in 2018. She has since become the figurehead of a global youth activist movement. She vented her moral outrage in the impassioned speech she gave in the UN Summit in 2019, when she asked the assembled gathering of world leaders, "How Dare You?" in relation to their inaction on the climate crisis

Greta Thunberg has woken the world to the seriousness of the climate crisis and has helped to make it a key topic in the 2019 U.K. general elections. Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel credited the youth climate movement with impacting Germany's environment policies.

This rise in youth action has elevated children as competent actors working to push the traditional boundaries of international human rights law. "Climate justice has today become a global justice movement" The wide availability of scientific research, wider internet access,



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greater accessibility of research on pollution, climate harm and environmental degradation have greatly impacted young climate activists. Arjun Marwaha, a high school student from California, engages in various awareness raising activities. He has written a book ``Our Changing Earth`` to inform young people about current research. which is available on digital platforms.

Another environmental activist and conservationist Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, gave a 2015 speech in the UN General Assembly on the creativity and openness of youth to new ideas to combat climate change. Peaceful marches all around the world have increased sympathy for the climate movement. This has led to the use of international human rights framework for efforts to fight the adverse effects of climate change. Litigation activity and the human rights approach has equipped social movements to use the language of protest on a platform for change.

In India Dr. Vandana Shiva has been acknowledged as an internationally renowned author, physicist, ecologist and advocate of biodiversity conservation and protection of farmers and women`s rights. Her trail-blazing work around Earth as a living system, food sovereignty, traditional agriculture and women`s rights created fundamental cultural shifts in how the world views these issues. Her advocacy for many years has been ``the defense of the local through a global alliance.`` In 1993, she won the Alternative Nobel Peace Prize (the Right to Livelihood Award). In 2010, she was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize for her commitment to justice. She addressed the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle 1999, as well as the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000. Writing about her, the Utne Reader describes her as a leading thinker who has eloquently blended her views on the environment, agriculture, spirituality and women`s rights into a powerful philosophy.

Vandana Shiva first took part in the Chipko movement in 1972, which was a non-violent response by women against large scale deforestation in the Himalayan region. The women clung to trees to protect them from being cut. The Chipko movement was self organized and showed the country how to use one`s own resources to build a successful movement. This initiated Vandana Shiva in the larger ecological debate.

According to Shiva, development is not an economic term. It`s a human, ecological term. The word development has been coopted by economists, corporate and governments to justify destroying forests and uprooting people from their land. But this is not true development. Built-in transformation from within is the real meaning of development. It does not mean limitless growth. Shiva followed the Gandhian principles like Truth, Satyagraha, Aparigraha and the need to be aligned to one`s Conscience.

Vandana Shiva plays a major role in the global ecofeminist movement which views gender inequality as the root cause of the current climate crisis. In her 2004 article. ``Empowering Women`` , Shiva writes ---`` a more sustainable and productive approach to agriculture can be achieved by reinstating the system of farming in India that is more centred on engaging women.



Ecofeminism is a worldview that recognizes that all human beings are a part of Nature, and cannot be separated from Her. In their interconnectedness through Life and Nature, women are alive and autonomous, not dead or passive objects to be exploited and violated by masculine power. Shiva's book ``Ecofeminism`` views climate change as a feminist issue. The philosophy draws important connections between the treatment of women, the poor, marginalized communities on the one hand and the earth on the other. According to her philosophy, the absence of indigenous knowledge, local communities and female representation deteriorate our relationship with the earth. Biodiversity must be preserved and conserved. Biodiversity is ecologically and culturally embedded. It not only involves complex systems of forestry, agriculture and animal husbandry but also female labor.

The Ecofeminist Movement reclaims the narrative around women`s involvement in agriculture related forestry, alongside women`s agency over the biodiversity of plants, seeds and natural resources. To female farmers biodiversity has always been a matter of spirituality, rather than a mere tool for the biotechnology industry. Multinational corporations impose their corporate frameworks on the conservation of nature. Depleting soil nutrients, monoculture based agriculture poses significant risks to biodiversity from the use of pesticides, to the susceptibility of diseases, planting the same species of crops which harm their surrounding ecosystems. Shiva looks upon women as custodians of biodiversity. She argues that the marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. She describes the commonality of gendered and environmental oppression as well as the specific location of women as vulnerable to monoculture.

### **Solutions**

While women are especially vulnerable in this climate change crisis, they are also uniquely positioned to act as powerful agents of change. On average, women have small carbon footprints than men, have more responsible attitudes towards climate and greater interest in protecting the environment. Many notable examples have been cited in this article of female leaders who are already tackling the climate crisis from the grassroots up to the top levels of the corporate world. Organizations with more female leadership advantage, have better performance in terms of both environmental impact and broad corporate social responsibility.

Four areas have been identified as critical building blocks in response to climate change-mitigation, adaptation, technology transfer and financing. The first two are related to climate and the last two to development goals. Mitigation involves a process of curbing green house gas emissions from human activities, for example emission from fossil fuels as well as deforestation.

Adaptation involves many activities to reduce vulnerability and build resilience in key sectors such as water, agriculture and human settlements. Mitigation and adaptation efforts, should address gender-specific impacts of climate change in the areas of food security,



agriculture and fisheries, biodiversity, water, health, human rights, peace and security to life and property.

Financing mechanisms must be flexible enough to reflect women`s priorities and needs. The active participation of women in funding, allocation of resources for climate change initiatives is critical, particularly at the local level. Gender analysis of all budget lines and financial instruments for climate change is needed to ensure gender-sensitive investments in adaptation, mitigation, technology transfer and capacity building.

Technological development related to climate change should take into account women`s specific priorities, needs and roles, and make full use of their knowledge and expertise, including indigenous knowledge and traditional practices. Women`s involvement will ensure that these are user-friendly, affordable, effective and sustainable. Gender inequalities in access to resources, must be taken into account. Women should have equal access to training, credit and skills development programs to ensure their full participation in climate change initiatives.

Governments should be encouraged to include gender perspectives in their national policies, action plans, and other sustainable development measures. There should be systematic gender analysis, collection and utilizing sex- disaggregated data, establish gender sensitive benchmarks and indicators. Practical tools to support increased attention to gender perspectives should be developed. Women`s consultation and participation in climate change must be ensured. The role of women`s groups and networks be strengthened. Women must be equally represented in decision making structures. This will allow them to contribute their unique and valuable perspectives on climate change. Women can help through their knowledge and experience to manage natural resources.

In many developing countries, women have less access to information and communication technology. They face many social and cultural biases, have lower education levels especially in the fields of science and technology. Targeted efforts must be taken by governments so that women who are most in need have full access to knowledge, and information technology. More training programs based on the latest technology as well as leadership skills need to be organized.

Leaders of the world must develop a conversation guide to help male leaders to acknowledge and redefine masculinity norms, giving them the tools to become more active participants in driving equality and sustainability solutions. Schools, colleges and university syllabi must include ecological intelligence and environment awareness so that young minds may grow up with a more mature attitude to the preservation and conservation of the environment.

Gender is just one social category and it is not just a binary. It must include all those individuals who do not fall in the traditional categories of ``women`` and ``men. There are also factors such as age, race, location, socio-economic status religion caste and more. Leaders must acknowledge the complexity and interconnectedness of these

issues. They must work to develop integrated solutions that will improve them all.

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